

The Letter to the Philippians you read this morning is a letter Paul wrote to the believers of the church he established in Philippi, the foremost city of Macedonia. He first visited Philippi after hearing the "cry from Macedonia" during his second missionary journey, crossing the Aegean Sea to land in Greece. At the time of writing, he was imprisoned. It is thought he was in Ephesus. However, reading just before today's passage in chapter 1, verse 12, we find that Paul's imprisonment did not become a setback leading to the interruption of his missionary work or a retreat in the proclamation of the gospel. Instead, it served to advance the gospel. This may seem surprising, but considering Paul's life as a believer, it seems entirely possible. Paul had once been imprisoned in this very city of Philippi. Acts 16 records these words: "Around midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening intently." Normally, being imprisoned is hardly a time for singing. Yet, even in the dead of night within their prison cell, Paul and Silas fervently prayed to God and sang hymns of praise in a loud voice. Then, it says, the other prisoners listened intently to their songs of praise. No one told them to be quiet, saying it was bedtime in the middle of the night. These prisoners were confined in a pitch-black, utterly hopeless dungeon. In such a situation, if there were people there sincerely praising God and praying fervently, wouldn't we also find ourselves wanting to listen intently? At last week's hymn singing gathering, one person stepped forward and sang the hymn "Deep Is the Mercy" as a solo. When they finished, applause broke out. For Paul, no matter the time or circumstance, his way of living by faith never changed. He entrusted everything to God, living solely focused on living by God's grace.

But what was perfectly natural to Paul must have seemed astonishing to those around him who lacked faith. Here was a wretched man, yet he seemed possessed by some mysterious power. Imprisoned, he was not crushed in the least—he was praising God. This man was no ordinary person. That must have been their thought. On the other hand, how did those who had faith see it? No matter how great a teacher he was, surely he could do nothing in prison. Some might even have thought our church was finished. Yet, the truth became widely known. Paul's imprisonment made it clear throughout the barracks that it was for Christ's sake, and the soldiers came to hear Paul preach. Many soldiers must have been deeply moved by the gospel Paul proclaimed. Thus, Paul's imprisonment became the talk of the entire barracks. This news reached the believers in the church at Philippi, inspiring them to say, "We too will follow the example of Paul." Paul's imprisonment, in fact, served to advance the gospel.

Zeami Motokiyo, a master of Noh theater during the Muromachi period, once said this: Even the most seasoned Noh dancer, no matter how long they've trained, will occasionally make a mistake during a performance. But a true master, he said, uses that very mistake to make the Noh even more profound and exquisite. Normally, a mistake would mar the dance. Yet, Zeami declared that those called masters turn such mistakes to their advantage, deepening the dance. He insisted that unless one reaches this level, one is not a true master. What Paul writes here is not that he himself is such a master. Rather, it is that God accomplishes this. That is, even when things appear utterly unfavorable to human eyes, God works within them, guiding events toward good for those who seek Him. Is this not the very essence of what it means to believe in God?

Now we turn to the content of the letter you read today. Paul's imprisonment served as a stimulus for the believers at the Philippian church. Unfortunately, however, it seems there were people within the Philippian church who were critical and hostile toward Paul's influence on the church. Paul condemns these people in 3:2 with the very harsh term "those dogs." It is later written that they were Jewish Christians who boasted in circumcision. There was a significant difference between these adversaries and Paul regarding their understanding of the gospel and the proper nature of the church. While Paul's adversaries preached the importance of believing in Christ, they were also seen as spiritually immature people who valued worldly things, status, position, and worldly honor. In the same chapter 3, Paul even calls these people "those who oppose the cross of Christ." While this phrase directly refers to Jewish legalists advocating strict observance of the Law, in modern terms, it describes people like this: those who are not born again, those more concerned with worldly things than with Christ, those who do not live a Christ-centered life. Pointing to such people, Paul says, "They have made their stomachs their god."

They are people who seek to satisfy themselves and fulfill their own desires rather than to please Christ. This is not a problem unique to the Philippian church. The ultimate measure of our faith life is this question: If I do this, will God truly be pleased? To discern what God's will is, we must also be humble before Him.

The church in Philippi had people who cherished and loved Paul. Faced with the reality of Paul's imprisonment, they still sought to view the situation positively. They thought, "The reason Paul is now in prison is that God has given him an opportunity to defend the gospel through this circumstance. Rejoicing in this, we who remain will proclaim the gospel with all our strength in this church." With goodwill and loving hearts, they sought to share the gospel of Christ with those around them. However, within the Philippian church, there were also opponents of Paul. They saw Paul's imprisonment as an opportunity and, with malicious intent, sought to proclaim Christ in order to torment Paul. In other words, they saw Paul's imprisonment as a unique opportunity to strengthen their influence and voice within the church, thinking they could expand their own power through evangelism. To borrow Paul's words from today's letter (1:17), "They proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, wanting to increase the suffering of my imprisonment." Paul says there are regrettable people who are preaching in order to afflict him in prison. Moreover, those who think this way are also believers. The Bible never covers up inconvenient truths or hides them. Instead, it clearly states them, revealing that even within the church, no one is perfect before God.

By the way, the original Greek word here, translated as "impure motives" (*erizeia*), was never inherently a bad term in its original meaning (it was translated as 'partisanship' in an earlier vernacular translation). It was simply "working for wages" or "working for a reward." There was nothing to despise about that. However, those who work solely for wages eventually become willing to push others aside to gain profit. This is how the term came to signify a "base spirit that will stop at nothing to achieve its ends." Simply put, Paul's opponents were preaching the gospel within the church out of jealousy and factionalism, seeking to expand their own influence.

But what is truly astonishing is Paul's attitude upon hearing this. Paul writes in his letter: "But what does it matter? Whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and I rejoice in that." If a pastor heard teachings from someone speaking ill of him, and through that, new believers were raised up in the Philippian church, an ordinary pastor might think, "Give me a break." But Paul says, "I rejoice, and I will continue to rejoice." Why? Because as a missionary working for God, Paul knew that God does not choose flawless, perfect people. Consider Paul himself. He was once an enemy of Christ, a Pharisee who persecuted the church. Having been forgiven and saved despite his own weaknesses and flaws, he couldn't hear about others and say, "They have no right to preach the gospel." Paul says that regardless of their motives, if Christ is being proclaimed, that is good enough. He believed that if people are being saved, who proclaimed the gospel and for what motives is a secondary concern.

Often, we possess a weakness that leads us to choose a person's character and personality over their teaching. We find ourselves drawn more to the human qualities of the teacher than to the teaching itself. Yet choosing based on character risks becoming a choice based solely on what we find agreeable. What Paul states in today's passage is this: no matter who proclaims the gospel, if Christ is rightly proclaimed and the words spoken there save the person, he rejoices in that. If Christ is proclaimed correctly, then indeed, those who are saved will be raised up. Paul says this is the most important thing. Yet, this does not mean he thought the motives were irrelevant as long as people were saved. This is clear from the words at the beginning of Philippians 2: "Do not merely look out for your own interests, but also be concerned for the interests of others."

"Proclaiming Christ" does not mean telling people when and where Jesus Christ was born, what kind of life He lived, or when He died. Rather, it means proclaiming the salvation He has wrought for me. When the Lord Jesus healed the Gerasene demoniac in Mark chapter 5, He said: "Go home to your family and tell them what the Lord has done for you." We need not go out to the whole world. We are to tell those closest to us about Christ. I pray that the journey of our church in the year 2026 will be one of proclaiming Christ's salvation to as many people as possible.

Let us pray.