

Let us take a moment to pray before we think about God's Word.

Come Holy Spirit, draw near in this time wherever we may be. Come in power. Come, take the word of God and change our hearts and minds. Come Holy Spirit and make Jesus real to us help us to hear His voice today for we ask this in His name, Amen.

I've appreciated the way in which Gordon and Ian have helped us start our new series in Philippians, this very special letter within the New Testament, for they've helped us see its relevance for our lives today. We've seen how crucial it is to know that we, "you", are a good work, to remember that God has done – and is doing – something within us and among us, such that we are to pray for one another and live with a perspective shaped by Jesus and the gospel, even in hard times.

Before the Christmas break, I was contacted by the Communications Department for the Church of Scotland because they are doing a series of articles this year about people coming into ministry. The questions they asked made me think about my faith journey and other events, moments that defined, shaped, my life. To help us get into today's passage, I've a question for you to think about at home: what have been the defining moments of your life? Has there even been a defining moment? I'll give you 30 seconds to think about that at home. (PAUSE)

I wonder what you came up with – feel free to share it in the Live Chat. The man who authored this letter was the apostle Paul and before he became a Christian he persecuted the early church, dragging those early disciples of Jesus to prison and even to death.

But then we know from his story, recorded in the book of Acts, that he had a powerful conversion – an event that radically redefined his life, such that he put his trust in Jesus and gave his life away for the sake of Jesus, the sake of the gospel and the well-being of the church. His coming to faith, his coming into relationship with Jesus, defined Paul's life because in that process of coming to trust Jesus Paul met with the love and grace of God and as such he sought to live his life in light of that.

Now, not all of us will have had Paul's experience, but what he received, is what every person who calls themselves a "Christian" has received as well: the grace, the love, the welcome and invitation of Jesus; your sin has been forgiven, you no longer stand in condemnation, you will no longer pay the penalty of your sin – you are free,... you are redeemed, you stand in right relationship with God and He adores you. All this and so much more is the inheritance of every person who claims to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus. As such, what Paul says in verse 27 applies to one and all of us: 'Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...' This verse shapes Paul's life and his letter, and it is there in his other letters as well: if you claim faith in Jesus, then live in a manner worthy of the love and grace you have received from God.

In our portion today, what does it mean to live in a worthy manner? I want to give us two points to take away and put into practice. Firstly, being 'worthy of the gospel through unity'.

Paul says, 'Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then...I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel...Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.' (1:27; 2:1-2)

Paul's not calling into question their status as followers of Jesus here – the "if" is more like a "since": 'since you have been united with Christ...since you have known His love...since you share in the Spirit' then be worthy of the gospel, and for any group of Christians, being worthy of the gospel includes a concrete expression of unity. Now unity is much more than acquiescence, it is more than mere consent or approval, it is more than turning up to church or having the status of a member – unity involves the heart, such that there is an overflow of love, the love of God nonetheless, through us to others, and so it must involve action, it must involve the weaving of our lives together. This unity also involves the mind, not that we have uniformity in all things, but there must still be a shared understanding, a shared understanding of the gospel, such that we are collectively motivated with a deep conviction to be worthy of the gospel, so that our lives together might point to Jesus. In both heart and mind, in word and in deed, Paul longs for these dear followers of Jesus to be worthy of the grace and love they have experienced from God.

What this looks like in concrete actions is spelled out for us by Paul: 'Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.' (2:3-4)

When we know the love and grace of God, then our motives change and so our lives change as well: we look beyond ourselves, we look beyond self. So, when Paul speaks of 'vain conceit', literally in the Greek this means 'empty glory', a chasing after ambitions that are unworthy of anyone who has tasted God's love and grace.

In some ways, our recently adopted values seek to remind us of this and prompt us to live this out: that we are 'family', a community who journey together, and... we seek to share 'share', to share our lives and share the good news of God's love in word and deed. Last Tuesday's video, about hopes for 2021, gives some ideas of what this could look like, and I'd encourage you to go listen.

Yet even just now, let us each ask ourselves: do we look beyond our own interests to those within our church family? Could it be said that the love of God is seen in and through us? Do we seek to serve others – are you serving in some way within and through this congregation? As one person said on Tuesday evening – it's easy to sit back, to keep to ourselves, but as Paul says here, we need to intentionally look out for 'the other', and demonstrating love in that way will help us move towards a way of life that is increasingly worthy of the gospel, worthy of what we have received from God.

But this is a tall order, is it not? An impossible calling, surely? Well of course, it is; it is beyond our own human ability – the human soul is so broken, fractured, sinful, that more often than not we look out for self than for others, we are more prone to factions and division than unity, and we clamour for status, wealth, comfort, power – the empty glory of such things – much more than the way of self-sacrifice and humility. How can Paul call us to such a way of life? Well, he also says that we are to be worthy of the gospel through trust.

He began by saying: 'Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you...

For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.' (1:27-30)

Let's be clear, Paul is not talking about all suffering in these verses. The suffering in mind here is that of persecution, of suffering because of your faith. So, let's not jump to conclusions. But let us also admit there are many ways that our believing, or in the literal Greek, our 'trusting' may bring suffering into our lives. Believing here, is not intellectual assent to some doctrines; to believe, is to entrust ourselves to Jesus, to commit ourselves to Him. Paul is saying, that to be worthy of the gospel also includes trust; trusting in the hard times, trusting through sacrificial choices.

Now, in our society, the degree of persecution we face is minimal whilst many in our world literally face death for their faith. There are 10 Christians a day dying in Nigeria because of persecution against them. Yet even here, there is opposition, that are voices, forces, events that can undermine our trusting in Jesus, they can seek to rob us of our peace and joy. So, as one commentator said, 'where is it important for you and your church to hold your nerve & remain unafraid in the face of opposition?'

It's seen when we trust that God's Word is true, and so that Jesus is alive, that He is Lord and God alone, that He is the way of salvation and the source life in all its fullness. This trusting is seen when we choose to obey God's Word rather than go our own way. This trusting is put to the test in many ways, yes by persecution, but also in the hardships of life, or when God's standards call us to live differently to the world's ways.

Your answer to this question might be quite specific to your circumstances, yet nevertheless, in our day, in our society, one of the greatest fears for most Christians, is the fear of others, of what others might think of us, or how they might respond if we were to share our faith or admit our faith or prioritise our faith. Another kind of fear, that can undermine our trust, is a fear that Jesus seems to ask too much, that we are afraid to give over control of our lives to Him, and allow Him to reign over our choices and our priorities.

These two fears are probably two of the greatest ways we experience a measure of suffering for following Jesus and yet to be worthy of the gospel, we are called to trust –

to trust for the first time and then to keep on trusting, to keep on following Jesus and His way, yielding to His call upon our lives, individually and collectively. And when we do that, when we yield, trust, orientate our lives around Jesus, He then gives us His Spirit individually, and as a community, to help us live in unity and for His glory.

This trusting happens at the beginning of our faith journey, but it's also a daily part of following Jesus. Every day is a new opportunity, a new invitation, to keep trusting Jesus; every Sunday, every message, every time you read your Bible, is another opportunity to trust, by responding to what God is saying in His Word.

So, in light of that, I want to give you an opportunity to respond today. I want to invite you to respond in trust to Jesus, at home, right now. In a moment, I'm going to pray, and there will be a couple of different prayers.

First, I want to give an opportunity for you to trust Jesus for the first time and begin following Him by asking for His forgiveness and yielding to His way in your life.

Secondly, I'll give space for each of us to respond to this message, the call to live lives worthy of the gospel in unity and at personal cost for the sake of Jesus.

Lastly, there will be space to pray a prayer of trust in the midst of trials, of suffering and hard times. So, let us pray.

So, for those that want to invite Jesus into their lives, today, this morning I invite you maybe even just to put out your hands in invitation to Jesus. You don't have to but I find it helpful to embody my prayers and then repeat with me these words of a prayer. Speak them out yourselves, at home, right now if you can.

Lord Jesus Christ I am sorry for the things I've done wrong in my life. I take a few moments now to name this before You, to confess my sin, what I've done wrong. Please forgive me Lord. I choose now to turn from everything that I know is wrong. Thank You that You died on the cross for me so that I could be forgiven and set free. Thank You that You offer me forgiveness and You promise to help change my life, to put it on a different path by the gift of Your Spirit living in me, and so I now receive that gift. Please come into my life by Your Holy Spirit to be with me forever.
Thank You Lord Jesus

To those of us who claim the title Christian, who claimed to follow Jesus, what has been the prompt this morning from the Lord? What has been the challenge?
Is He calling you to give your life away for Him in a new way or to renew that.
Is He maybe bringing someone to mind that you have to show the love of God. So come Holy Spirit. Speak to our hearts. I'm not going to give you words to pray this time just just speak to the Lord in quiet or out loud. Speak to Him about what is upon your heart, what you've been challenged by, how you're going to respond, how you want to live worthy of the Gospel.

Admit your incapacity to do this yourself and invite the Holy Spirit to come and fill you in this time. Come Holy Spirit, fill us to overflowing, fill us with the love of God, fill us with power, fill us with power to walk in Your ways, to choose Your ways over ours. Come Holy Spirit.

And for those of us in the midst of trials of really hard times let me pray for you.

Lord I pray for these precious ones. I pray, Lord, that they would know You close. I pray that they would know that You'll never leave them, nor forsake them. I pray that they know that You know the depth of their pain and their anguish, that You know what it's like to suffer and, yes, there will be the questions and there will be deep anger sometimes Lord, and You're ready to receive them. And there might not be answers this side of heaven but Lord may they know that You weep with them. May they know that You care and may You help them Lord to keep trusting keep trusting You this day in the next day and the next day, be their light in their darkness, be their light for the path ahead. Lord and help us to wrap the love of God around them in real tangible ways even amidst limitations. Lord, may we overflow with love for these dear precious ones. Lord may we be like Paul who, from a distance, sought to encourage and strengthen. May we see the ways that we can do that Lord for them, that they would know that they're not alone in this journey, that You're with them, we are with them. Oh Lord, help them trust You

Help them to keep trusting You Lord hear all our prayers this morning before we ask it in Jesus name, Amen