

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

The Worthy Life

Philippians 1:21-30

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20)

Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

21 For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. 23 I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; 24 but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. 25 Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, 26 so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

27 Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, 28 and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. 29 For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well- 30 since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

DIAGNOSIS: UNWORTHY LIVING

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Captive to the World*

Paul was in prison and couldn't make any promises to the Philippians about when he might see them again. He didn't even know whether he would live or die (vv. 21-22). And he wasn't sure which was better: Dying had the advantage of being with Christ fully (v. 23); living had the advantage of fruitful labor in the world (v. 22). His imprisonment must have left the Philippians in quite a conundrum: They had relied on Paul for encouragement and a sense of unity-leaned on him even. Now Paul was asking them to stand firm and united on their own (v. 27). But how could they in a hostile, unbelieving Roman community like Philippi?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Captive to Fearful Hearts*

The Philippians had to have been intimidated by their opponents (v. 28)-opponents who had more skeptical unbelievers on their side than the Philippians had believers on theirs. They must have been fearful trying to figure out how to go unnoticed by the Roman citizens around them. Worse, the Philippians were suffering (v. 29) and couldn't make sense of or explain how this could happen with God on their side. Was it possible they had two opponents: the other Philippians and God? So went their struggle. A struggle that was only more confusing because Paul himself was going through it too (v. 30).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *The Heart Opposed and Destroyed*

The Philippians teetered on the same precipice we all do: In a world that fails to fear, love and trust God they were coming precariously close to fearing, loving and trusting their opponents more than God. The danger was that they would find

themselves standing side by side with their opponents. And those who oppose God are destroyed.

PROGNOSIS: THE WORTHY LIFE

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *The Heart of God*
God does not desire the death of sinners, but their salvation (v. 28). That's why God endured his own Son's destruction (counter v. 28) for the Philippians' sake. God gave them his Son to stand by their side. Christ—who was worthy of God's heart—had suffered the worst from God's opponents so that the Philippians would have something firm to rely on (v. 27).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Hearts Captive to Christ*

In Christ the Philippians could confidently strive together with a single-minded faith—in spite of the opposition. Despite a world that shifted around them daily (including Paul's own circumstances), Christ remained constant. That's why Paul commended the Philippians into Christ's care: they could lean on Christ (whether Pastor Paul was available to them or not).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Hearts Boasting in Christ*

When your life is in Christ (v. 21), even living in the world has its upside: It provides time for fruitful labor (v. 22). So, for the Philippians and all who believe, we continue together anticipating our “progress and joy in faith” (v. 25). That is not to say the going will be easy: Struggle and suffering are inevitable in this life (vv. 29, 30). But with Christ's ever-present support we count it a privilege to believe in Christ and even suffer for him.