

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Epistle, Year A

TO LIVE IS CHRIST

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Philippians 1:21-30

Analysis by Timothy Hoyer

1For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. 22If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. 23I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; 24but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. 25Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, 26so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

27Only, 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, 28and 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. 29For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— 30since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

DIAGNOSIS: It Is Demanded of Us to Be Righteous

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): A Disagreement on How to Be Righteous

The people in the city of Philippi have the same struggle that

Paul has. Paul was in prison because Jews from Asia stirred up a crowd in Jerusalem, where Paul had been, saying that Paul was teaching against their law and that Paul had brought Greeks into the Jerusalem temple (Acts 21:27-31). When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, he had met with James and the elders. Their fear was that Paul was known for teaching all the Jews living among the Gentiles to forsake Moses (their law), and that he told them not to circumcise their male children (Act 21:21). Paul was taken into custody to save him from the crowd beating him to death. While in custody, the tribune who had rescued Paul from the crowd was informed of a plot to kill Paul. So Claudius Lysias, the tribune, sent Paul to Felix the Governor with the message, "I found that he was accused concerning questions of their law, but was charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment" (Acts 23:29). When Paul gave his side of the story to Felix, his reason for being arrested was, "It is about the resurrection that I am on trial before you today" (Acts 24:21). Was the struggle of the Philippians that they were in prison like Paul, or was their struggle about how to tell others of the righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God in the face of all the other ways people have to make themselves righteous?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Many Things Are Trusted to Make Us Righteous

How to be righteous is the daily, constant, ever present, nagging pressure everyone has. Little children, when they want something, will promise their parent, "Let me, let me; I'll be good!" Everyone who works is evaluated daily by those who work with them and by those who oversee them. To keep their job, people want to hear, "You're a good worker. Come back tomorrow." People want to have a good weekend of fun. People want to be able to be proud of how good their family is because of their behavior, or their participation in sports, or their helping the

family earn enough money to buy food for that day. It is very hard work to be good. As one granddaughter said to her father when her grandparents came to visit, "How long are Granddad and Grandmom going to be here? It is so hard being good!" People depend on what they do for their goodness. They trust that what they do makes them good, and gives them a good life. They get scared, very scared, and so very angry, if anyone challenges them on the way they work to get their goodness, or their righteousness, as Paul called it. Every Christian faces this daily struggle for themselves—what do they trust for their goodness; and they face the struggle of how to give Jesus' righteousness to others in a way that will be accepted.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): We Do Not Trust God's Way of Righteousness

The struggle for righteousness exists because it is the struggle to be righteous before God, the one who created the law that all people live by, the law that demands that people be good. Even when people do not acknowledge God, their struggle for goodness is a struggle with God. This struggle always comes to an end, an end called Death. Death is the verdict of God on all people that they are not good. Their trust in the law, in themselves, in what they did, is opposed to simply trust God to give them goodness. The law prevents that trust. Our struggle is useless. What can be done?

PROGNOSIS: Jesus Gives Us a Harvest of Righteousness

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): By His Death and Resurrection Jesus Is Righteousness

Jesus has done it for us. By his death and his resurrection he has produced for all the harvest of righteousness (Phil. 1:11). As Jesus was humbled on a cross, that is, all righteousness taken away from him, God therefore highly exalted Jesus and gave him the name that is above every name (Phil. 2:9). There God gave

all righteousness to Jesus, for that is what “exalt” means. That was done for us. The resurrection of Jesus is the harvest of righteousness for all people.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): The Privilege of Believing in Jesus Is Given to Us

That harvest of Jesus’ righteousness is promised to us, so that all may confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:11). To confess Jesus is Lord is to trust Jesus to be our righteousness, that he owns us, not the law, not demands, not expectations, not the need to impress or to be better than others or to make one’s race or creed or color supreme over others. No, Jesus is above all other names, whether the name is racism or nationalism or sexism or sports or entertainment or inequality of wealth and income. Whatever we depend on for our righteousness is to bend its knee at the name of Jesus.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): There May Be a Disagreement, But We Offer Jesus’ Way to Be Righteous

That is the struggle, to bend the knee to Jesus instead of to other more glorious ways. Paul’s struggle was being hard pressed between his desire to depart and be with Christ or to remain in the flesh. For him, to die was gain, but living was to be in Christ, that is, trusting him for righteousness in the face of all the people who trusted in other ways of righteousness that certainly look more easy and fun than the way of Jesus on a cross as our righteousness. That is why he urged the Philippians to live in Christ. The Philippians had the same struggle as Paul did—whether to live in Christ or to die and gain the harvest of righteousness. Paul exhorted the Philippians to trust Jesus, to live their lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, not worthy of glory or power or supremacy or winning. They were to strive side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel (Phil. 1:25) and not be intimidated by their opponents, that is, who trust the law, who trust in doing what is commanded by God,

yet totally forgetting the command to trust God more than anything else. To trust in Jesus is a privilege granted to them by God the Father, for he wants Jesus his son to be honored, and not have Jesus' death go to waste and be for nothing. To trust in Jesus means to suffer for him as well (no promise of prosperity here as some falsely preach their other gospel). We suffer not only the struggle of whether to live in Christ or die, not only the struggle of feeling the law say we have to be good even though we are not, but the struggle of daring to speak the word of God to others with greater boldness and without fear (Phil. 1:14).