

Philippians 1:12-18

Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Is it ever wrong to preach Christ?

Over the last few weeks, Kim Davis has become a household name. Ever since the Kentucky county clerk began refusing to issue marriage licenses to any couples and her subsequent imprisonment for contempt of court, she has become one of the most divisive figures in the media right now. Some see her as a hero defending her beliefs, like Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat to a white man. Others see her as a villain blocking the path of freedom, like Alabama governor George Wallace blocking black students from entering the University of Alabama. Everyone has an opinion.

I'm not here to share my opinions, or even really to talk about Kim Davis. But her imprisonment has caused many Christians to wonder what it means to preach Christ, and to do it courageously and fearlessly. Jesus promises that we will often face consequences for defending the faith, but with so many souls at stake, we cannot help but speak about the things we have seen and heard.

At the same time, if we take preaching Christ seriously, then we ought to ask ourselves some important questions. What's the best way to spread the gospel? Is there a right way or a wrong way? And is there ever a time when it's *wrong* to preach Christ? Those are the questions we ask whenever we come to those believers who are imprisoned for Christ. The prophet Jeremiah, John the Baptist, and the Apostle Paul, especially as he writes to the Christians in the city of Philippi.

Philippi was a prosperous city in Macedonia, the northern part of Greece. Located on the northern shore of the Aegean Sea, it was an important center of trade and culture. It was also an important place in Paul's missionary work, because it was the first place where Paul had preached on European soil. And now, many years later, after a church had been established there, Paul writes his letter to the Christians in Philippi. The letter to the Philippians is known as one of Paul's *prison epistles*, because it was a letter that Paul wrote from prison. He had been imprisoned because of his testimony about Jesus. His future was uncertain. We don't know exactly when he wrote Philippians, but it's possible he wrote it shortly before his execution.

But all of that serves to make Philippians all the more encouraging! Because in the middle of Paul's imprisonment and his uncertain future, his letter is filled with certain and surprising joy. Imprisoned and bound in chains, Paul is still able to say, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" Why? Because imprisoned as he is, he is no longer imprisoned by his sin. He rejoices because Jesus has freed him from the devil's chains.

And he has still more reason to rejoice because of the good that God has worked in his imprisonment. What's the result of his imprisonment? We might have expected the message of Jesus to stop spreading, or at least to be dramatically slowed. After all, Paul wasn't free to travel anymore. He was confined to a prison cell. He repeatedly references the chains that bind him. What good can the world's greatest missionary do from there?

And yet Paul rejoices! Paul rejoices because as he says in 2 Timothy, "I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's Word is not chained." Paul was in chains, but he was in chains for Christ. And so what happened to Paul really served to advance the gospel. The whole palace guard had come to know who he was and what he was there for—his gospel had distinguished him from the mass of other prisoners. Everyone else knew him too: undoubtedly the other prisoners, whatever servants may have been working there, likely the various officials and dignitaries of the court too. Paul's fellow workers were finding encouragement in his imprisonment to speak the Word of God more courageously and fearlessly. Paul was imprisoned, but the Word of God spread all the further *because* of his imprisonment.

But not everything was perfect. Every blessing also brings a challenge, and the blessing of the gospel's spread brought with it a challenge in some of those who were spreading it. Paul wrote, "It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry...they preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that

they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.” There were some preachers of the gospel whose hearts were not in the right place. They were likely rabble-rousers, peddling the message of the gospel for their own ends or for some imagined benefit to Paul. Paul doesn't go into any great detail about who these troublemakers were or what exactly they were doing.

But he doesn't really need to. We've got Jesus-peddlers too. The message of the gospel is a powerful thing, and so there will always be those who seek to twist that power to suit their own desires. The televangelist who promises earthly success or miraculous healing in exchange for an appropriate donation. The activist who empties the message of Jesus in order to fulfill whatever cause seems best. The politician who cares nothing for God or his Word, but who needs a convenient voter base.

That is the problem with a lot of the Christian preaching you might see on TV—and in particular, Christian protesting. Too often, there isn't much of Christ there. You see the people on the street with their signs, shouting, proclaiming that God hates this or that and has fire and brimstone stored up for judgment. Too often, they're not interested in preaching *Christ*. They're only interested in outward morality, which won't actually help anyone. If every sinner in the country suddenly decided to take the Ten Commandments to heart and give up their lives of sin, they wouldn't be any better in God's eyes.

So yes, there are wrong ways to preach Christ. Now it's true, Paul says, “What does it matter? The important thing is that Christ is preached.” And that might lead us to say, “Well, there you go. What's so important about motives? Christ is being preached, isn't he? So our motives for preaching him don't really matter.” That's true in the big picture. God in his grace is able to turn even the worst motives for good. The Holy Spirit works through the God's Word, even when it is spoken by the most corrupt of lips.

And yet that doesn't mean that this isn't a problem. If it wasn't a problem, Paul wouldn't have bothered mentioning it in the first place. God's ability to bring good out of evil doesn't mean that God approves of evil—it just means his goodness is greater than our wickedness. God is always concerned about our motives, and even the most selfless of actions can be ruined by selfish motives.

So that's the question we ought to ask ourselves as we spread the gospel. We'd all agree that outreach is something a congregation should be doing. But *why* are we doing it? Is this really out of love and goodwill? Or is it out of selfish ambition? Are we really out to bring souls to Christ? Or are we out to bring back the glory days of the church? Are we wanting to instill in others a love for the truth that makes them free? Or are we wanting to enforce on others the proper way to live? Do we desire to call all people into the kingdom of God? Or do we desire to make sure that America remains a Christian nation? Are we opening the gates of heaven to all sinners? Or are we closing ranks for our own protection? Do we want our hearers to know God's goodness? Or do we want God to know how good we are toward our hearers? Are we winning sinners over? Or are we only winning arguments?

We can never be perfectly certain that we have perfect motives. Even something as simple, as pure as sharing Jesus is tainted by our sin. But still we rejoice, just as Paul rejoiced, because with him we can say, “What does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached.” In Jesus, our false motives are forgiven. Jesus was true. He's Truth itself. His motives were always true. Whenever he preached God's Word, there was never anything false about him. He always preached and taught for the sole benefit of his hearers. It was never about glory or honor or pride. It was only about what his love and goodwill were leading him to do to take their sins away. Jesus dies on the cross, and he rises, and he lives, so that the whole world would be forgiven, so that the whole world would know of God's infinite love and goodwill.

And if that's what we preach, if that's the story we tell, how can we ever expect to preach it in anger or envy or ambition?

So yes! Is it ever wrong to preach Christ? Not at all! Peter wrote, “*Always* be prepared to give the reason for the hope that you have.” There are right ways and wrong ways to preach Christ. Paul wrote in Colossians, another of his prison epistles, “Let your conversation always be full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” God grant our lips the grace to speak in love and goodwill, even as he uses all motives to spread the Word of his Son. Amen.