



The Excellent Way

By Pastor Ken Patterson

Purpose: The following lesson will help students understand why God deserves and requires His church to constantly be striving for excellence. Further, students will consider how a lack of excellence gives room for those who oppose Christ to have a reason to denounce our faith.

Key Scripture: Philippians 1: 1-18

The Context of Philippians

The Philippian church was founded during Paul's second missionary journey. The church began with a woman named Lydia or a woman from a place called Lydia (scholars debate this issue) in a region that was part of Macedonia. The description of the call to the Philippi colony and how the Lord prepared the hearts of Lydia's household are recorded in Acts 16. By the time Paul wrote the epistle to the Philippian church he was in prison in Rome. One would expect the letter to be one of despair and calling for help. This is not the case, however. Paul writes an endearing letter of thanks for financial support, an admonishment to remain committed to the gospel, the importance of thinking and living like Christ, and a reminder to see how the gospel message is furthered even in difficult situations. When put together, one can see that Paul desires his readers to live up to the standard for which we have been called as Christians and that standard is nothing short of excellent.

I. The Excellence of the Gospel's Impact Philippians 1: 1-11

Paul writes his introductory comments of thanks and immediately begins to let the church know that they are to be commended for the way they have conducted themselves since they accepted Christ and organized as a congregation. Their faithfulness to what they believed and support of Paul and other's work in spreading the gospel created a sense of joy and encouragement while Paul sat in a Roman prison. They did not only believe the gospel, but they were also living the gospel and were growing as Christians!

Paul wrote that it was evident in their behaviors and attitudes that the gospel was having an ongoing influence over them. Paul described it as a work that had begun and was continuing. The implication was that they were becoming more like Christ. We should be concerned when Christians do not systematically become more like Christ. In many of Paul's writings he implores believers to surrender to Christ, give themselves over to Christ, get the mind of Christ, be conformed to Christ, and be like Christ. These actions suggest that over time we are supposed to change. The theological term is sanctification which is the process of becoming set apart for special work for the Lord. It is us becoming useable for God's purposes because we are surrendering more to His will and His way. Christian excellence then is not a goal, rather it is the consistent and relentless chasing after God's expectations for us.

- Are you allowing God to change you? If not then why?
- How does chasing after God's standard impact who you are as a Christian?
- What is the most difficult area for you to give over to the Lord and how can you pray that the Lord will continue the "good work that he began in you" even in that area?

II. The Excellence of the Gospel Message Philippians 1: 12-20

Paul transitions to a discussion on his own condition. He highlights that the believers need not fret because of what he faced. In fact, he wanted them to recognize that the gospel is so excellent that even as he was in prison, it continued to be spread. The term Paul used “furtherance of the gospel” or “advancing the gospel” depending on your translation imply the idea of forging fresh territory or trail blazing. The complete thought was that through the challenging times, the gospel was able to go into new territories that it would not have had the opportunity otherwise. For example, the palace, the soldiers, the other prisoners all were able to hear the gospel because Paul was in contact with them. Without the imprisonment or the other difficulties, he faced, he would not be in the presence of the people who had heard the message. This Christ centered focus gives us an example to follow. It teaches that everywhere and in all things we can share the gospel message.

- Do you use the opportunities you have to share the gospel message?

The gospel message was so important and central to everything that even if there were disagreements among ministers, it would not and should not hinder the spread of Jesus Christ. Paul even described that a person’s motivation in ministry will not stop the gospel message. Some were preaching against Paul. Theologians are unclear about the specific issue between Paul and the opposing ministers. Paul never clearly states the problem, but he does show that even contentious motivations cannot stop the gospel. Whether they preached out of selfish motivations, or any other reason, the gospel message was preached. To Paul that was all that mattered.

- Did you know that your attitude is secondary to the gospel message? In other words, you nor I can stop the Lord’s work!

III. The Excellence to the Gospel Work Philippians 1: 21-24

The conclusion of the passages for the current lesson lead one to think about the work of the gospel. Imagine Paul sitting in prison. He believed in the likelihood that he could lose his life because of the work he had done for Christ. On one hand he longed for death as it would deliver him to the reward all believers have in store upon death. Heaven and the presence with Christ is far better and joyous than what we face now. Yet, the Christian seeking to be excellent knows that at times what is best comes after what is most important. Best in terms of this passage was being in the presence of Christ. What was most important at the time was completing and continuing the work put before him.

Each of us must understand that our work must come first. Work first then rest. While we are all working for our reward in heaven, we cannot be so focused on the reward that we forget those who are in our sphere of influence. These people need to hear the gospel message. Some need the encouragement while they do their work for Christ. The gospel work is the most excellent thing we can do. It helps others to be saved and to live the purpose God has for them.

- How are you choosing what is most excellent in your own ministry?
- Who needs you to be excellent in the gospel work the Lord has assigned to you?

Conclusion: The Philippian church was one that had enormous potential and was even realizing its potential. This church serves as an example to us for how to continue in what we have begun and how to strive towards the excellency of Christ which is our purpose and goal.