

Philippians 1:27 - 2:2

"The Marks of Discipleship"

Last week, we concluded our series of sermons where we were looking at the Gospel of Luke and asking the question: Who is this man, Jesus? What were the major emphases and passions of Jesus' ministry? And we learned how Jesus calls us to a life of authenticity in our Christian discipleship. Last week, we ended with Jesus' question to us: Hypocrite or authentic follower of Jesus Christ?

Today, we turn to Paul's words, where he seems to be taking up that same challenge. Listening to Paul's words, I am reminded of what Marine Drill Sergeants say to new enlistees: *"Men you're Marines now. Better start acting like Marines."* I think that the Apostle Paul is saying something like this to the Christians at Philippi in our text for this morning..

In similar fashion, the Apostle Paul is attempting to inspire and motivate the believers at the Church in Philippi. And he does so, by challenging them to live lives worthy of the name by which they are called. In verse 27 he says: *"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 want to know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel."*

In other words, *"You claim to be followers of Jesus Christ. You've put on his uniform. Therefore, live accordingly. Live a life worthy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ."*

Now, why is Paul issuing this challenge to the Church at Philippi? It's because he understands that the Church's mission is to reach this world with the Good News of Jesus Christ and to make disciples. And Paul knows that we have our greatest impact for Christ when we live for Christ in our particular arena of influence.

So, Paul is saying, if you really want to impact your world for Jesus Christ ...if you want to draw others to a relationship with Jesus, then live with integrity, ethically and morally, as Jesus did. You love as deeply as Jesus loved. You serve others as humbly as Jesus served. Show compassion to others as Jesus did. If you want to reach people for Jesus Christ, then you confront hypocrisy as aggressively as Jesus did. Stand up for the truth the way Jesus did. Defend and come to the aid of the disadvantaged, the poor, and the needy as Jesus did. If you want to make a difference for Jesus Christ in this world, then wear the uniform proudly. Become so acquainted with the Jesus of the Gospels that it becomes second nature for you to act like he would have acted in all of your daily situations.

That's what Paul is saying here. Because, Paul wanted those who claimed to be followers of Jesus to know. that there is no more serious business in this life, than the business of being a Christian.

This challenge comes just after Paul has declared in verse 21, *"For me to live is Christ!"* Paul says that my whole reason for being is to glorify Christ and to advance the cause of Christ. *"For me to live is Christ!"* And then, here in verse 27, Paul is asking the question: What about you? Are you going to live for Christ? Are you going to start risking, growing, and taking this business of being a follower of Jesus seriously? Paul says, *"I hope so. I really hope so. Because never forget, that you bear his name."*

And the reason that this is so important to Paul, is that Paul understood that people outside the church form their conclusions about Jesus Christ primarily on the basis of how believers live their lives. Paul recognized that people outside the Church are watching every

move that we as Christians make. And it's not how knowledgeable we are about the faith. It's not how well we know our Bibles or how astute we are in doctrinal matters. It's how we live our lives that has the greatest impact. It's whether our behavior matches up to our beliefs and what we profess about God.

And so, the heart of what Paul is driving at in this passage, is that he's trying to help us identify: What are the Marks of Discipleship that will enable us to reach people for Christ in our arena of influence? What kind of Christian behavior will best communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those outside the family of God?

And in this passage, I think Paul identifies three crucial "Marks of Discipleship". At the top of his list, in verse 27, is the mark of *Consistency*. Paul uses the phrase, "*standing firm*." He says: "*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.*" – 1:27

Let me ask you a question. How do most people respond, when they hear about someone who claims they've have had a life-changing conversion to the Christian faith? When someone you know comes up, all excited, and says, "*I have just given my life to Jesus Christ, and it's like a whole new thing has happened to me!*" How do people respond virtually 100% of the time?

Well, to their face, they will often say, "*Oh that's wonderful. I'm so excited for you!*" But inside, they're thinking: "*Sure ... yeah right. So, you're going to be like one of those born again types now, huh? Didn't Bob Dylan do that for a couple of months?*" Sorry, I'm dating myself. The young people out there are asking, "*Who is Bob Dylan?*"

You see, we have to understand that almost every non-Christian we know can give you the names of at least five people they know who have claimed to have had a conversion experience of some sort, where they gave their lives to Jesus Christ and became a Christian, only to revert back to their previous lifestyle in a month or two.

Most non-Christians, when they learn of someone who suddenly professes to be a Christian, will view that announcement with the same level of cynicism they would if someone told they were going on a diet or going to stop smoking. They say, "*Right ... sure.*" But they'd be willing to bet their mortgage that things will be back to usual in a very short time.

In our culture today, the generation that is the most un-churched segment of our society is our young adults ... those between the ages of 18-25. And studies upon studies have been done to try to figure out why churches of all denominations are failing to reach the young people of our culture today. And you want to know what they're discovering. It's not the lack of programs, or facilities, or resources, or the lack of ministries provided. It's the lack of *consistency* in the faith of those who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ.

The reason young people say that they are not connecting with the church today, is that they have watched the lack of a consistent witness lived out by their parents and by others who claim to be Christians. They see us behaving one way on Sunday morning and then they see us behaving another way at work or at home. And they say, "*If that's what being a Christian is all about, I don't want any part of it, because it's not real.*"

Do you see what Paul is driving at here? Paul says, "*Listen, if you want to make a difference for Christ in this world ... if you really want to reach people and point them to Jesus Christ, then live consistently before them. Stand firm!*" Live for Jesus Christ day in and day out. Live for Christ in the good times, as well as in the bad times. Live for Christ when you're passed over for the promotion. Live for Christ when unexpected tragedy takes your breath away. Live for Christ not just when you're at church, but in all areas of your life. Live for Christ over the long haul. Paul says, *your mere consistency* will have a profound influence on the people's

lives you're trying to impact.

When you ask people, about how they came to know Jesus Christ, they'll often tell you something like, *"Someone at my work became a Christian and I was suspicious when I first heard that, because I knew him. So, I watched him. First, for a month; then for 6 months; then for a year; maybe two. And over time, I saw in their life what I needed in mine ... an inner strength; a peace; and a purpose that was missing in my life."*

You see, consistency in the faith is a powerful influence. It's a powerful witness to the reality of Christ in our lives. Therefore, Paul says to the believers at Philippi, *"Stand firm! Be consistent in your faith!"* because it's one of the greatest witnesses you can have for reaching others for Jesus Christ.

And if Paul were writing this message to us, I think he would ask us the same thing: Are we leading steadfast lives? Are we being consistent in our faith? Or, have we lost that passion for Christ that once gripped our souls?

As we talk about this, here's something we need to recognize: Consistency in our behavior before the world hinges on how consistent we are in our time alone, humbled before God each day. Which is why I will challenge you as long as I am here as your pastor, to make time to meet with the Lord every day. We cannot become consistent in our faith before the world, until we learn how to become consistent in our brokenness before the Lord each day.

To be faithful witnesses in the world, we have to take the time daily to yield our lives to him, praying, *"Help me, Lord, to live my life for you today."* This daily time of submitting and reordering our lives, leads to a consistency in our behavior that can make a difference in the lives of others.

So, the first Mark of Discipleship is consistency. The next Mark of Discipleship that Paul emphasizes is: *Christian unity* or *Christian community*. In verse 27, he says, *"I want to know that you're standing firm (How?) in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel."*

You want to know what really destroys people's interest in spiritual matters? You want to know what really turns people off to the Christian faith and to the Church? Christian hostility and Christian in-fighting.

People outside the faith observe political infighting and ugly power struggles all the time. They see it in government, their places at work, and in organizations, and when they see it in the church, it just grieves them! Many have been victimized by those kinds of infightings and struggles in organizations. And many have come out of families that have been destroyed by fighting and unresolved conflict. We've all been wounded by others who have tried to tear us down and spoken hurtful words.

So, people outside the Church are saying, *"If that's what being a follower of Jesus Christ or being a part of the church is like, I don't want any part of it. I have to deal with that enough already."*

What people today are looking for is: Will I ever be able to find a place where people come together and relate authentically, living out what they claim to believe? Will I ever be able to find a setting where people's diversity is respected, yet they are *unified* under a higher purpose and working together to make a real difference in this world?

That sounds like what the Church ought to be, doesn't it? Clearly, this is what Jesus hoped his church would be. But, often we are not. Therefore, we have to continually guard against allowing our Christian unity and witness to be destroyed by destructive behaviors, such as gossip; divisive talk; and un-Christian behavior toward each other. Nobody wants to be a part

of a community where that exists! Especially not those who come here looking for hope and healing in their lives.

Paul reminds us that, as a Church representing Jesus Christ, we are to live in such a way and relate to each other in such a way, that it says to all who are surrounding us, *“If you’re looking for an authentically, unified community of people, then come join us!”* We don't claim to be perfect, but we are striving to be authentic. We don't claim to see eye-to-eye on everything in this church, but we seek to disagree with respect and grace. We don't claim to be without friction and misunderstanding, but we are committed to Matthew 18:15 and the other texts on conflict resolution, that lead us to go to one another with humility and love, seeking to restore wounded relationships. Because we recognize that in order to fulfill our mission, which is, to help people *come to know, love and serve God as his disciples*, we must be committed both to our mission and to one another.

Paul is saying, show those outside the Family of God by how you live, love, and work together, that the Church is the only hope for a high-integrity, relational community that really loves one another and where people are finding true purpose.

The truth is, if we are really going to be about making disciples of Jesus Christ, then we need to let people see that much of the thrill of the Christian life is wrapped up in being together with like-minded brothers and sisters, accomplishing together what no one could ever achieve alone. We need to let those around us have a glimpse of what God can do when believers live and work together in unity. And we need to include in our witness to others, a description of the deep fellowship that we enjoy with each other, because, this is what many are desperately searching for.

But if we can't talk about this, because we haven't experienced it enough to talk about it with integrity, then I would challenge you to work together to make it so. Seek out this kind of fellowship with others. Become part of a small group or begin one with like-minded friends. Let's create a quality of community here together that we are excited about inviting others to be a part of! Not only will sharing your spiritual journey with others do an amazing work in your own life, after a while, the effects will become obvious to others. They'll want what you have. And eventually, that will give you a platform to lead them to Christ.

So, Paul says, if you really want to influence the people around you for Christ, demonstrate consistency in your Christian living. And demonstrate Christian unity and community among yourselves. *“Strive side by side, with one mind for the faith of the gospel.”*

And finally, Paul says if you really want to impact the lives of others around you for Christ, then learn how to *Suffer with dignity*. And for us, it would be to *suffer with faith*.

In verse 29 and 30, Paul says, *“For he has graciously granted you the privilege, not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well – since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.”*

Paul is referring here to his own imprisonment. You see, Paul has seen the power that suffering for Christ can have on others. From his own experience, Paul had been beaten and thrown into a dungeon there in Philippi. And instead of questioning God or stewing in self pity, Paul and Silas decide to *suffer with faith*. They sang hymns to God half the night. And in doing so, they so impacted the life of that jailer, that he and his whole family were led to Christ. And you know what caused the softening of that jailer's heart and prepared the soil of his soul? It was how he watched a Christian suffer with dignity and faith.

Please listen. Perhaps more than anything else we can do for the cause of Christ, is to suffer with faith; to suffer with an eye on eternity; to suffer, but to not lose hope. This has

always been the most powerful witness we have for the reality of Christ in our lives.

You've seen it and so have I, when people, who don't have the Lord in their lives go through tragedy, it is at that point, that they realize they don't have anything to hang onto. So, they panic. They do destructive things. They become fatalistic, hopeless, and despairing. But people with a strong faith respond differently

The truth is, most people in our society today don't know how to suffer very well, especially people of my generation and younger. I mean, we haven't gone through a Depression. We didn't lose half our graduating class in World War II. People today in our country really don't know how to suffer. That's why we're having such a difficult time with the current economy.

The scriptures are clear, though, that none of us are going to cruise through this life without suffering. Jesus said, "*While you are in this world, you're going to experience trials and suffering, because it rains on the just and the unjust.*"

And when we encounter those times of suffering, whether it be emotional; relational; physical; or financial suffering; Paul says that very thing may give you the greatest opportunity to make a difference for Christ. Because, if we learn how to suffer well ... if we learn how to endure great hardship with a quiet, courageous, confidence in Christ, people will see the barrenness of their own souls and they will hopefully look to the source of our strength to become theirs. *Suffering with faith may enable us to impact more lives for Christ than anything else we do in this life.*

As I reflect over my own life, I have found that those who God has used to impact me the most are people who have demonstrated these Three Marks of Christian Discipleship that Paul mentions here. The people who have made the deepest impact on my life are those who have demonstrated consistent faithfulness and steadfastness in their Christian behavior. Watching them live through the ups and downs of life, with *a consistent* hope and peace in Christ, has inspired my own journey.

Throughout my life, I find my heart moved deeply when I see people, such as many of you, organized into small groups, ministry teams, and serving ministries ... growing together in the faith and advancing the cause of Christ. You have no idea, what an impact you, as the people of this church, have upon my life, when I see you working together in *unity* for the cause of Christ. I often just stand back and give God praise when I see it. A great example of that are all the bears that have been collected that will touch the lives of children in our area.

And throughout my life, God has used the courage of the sufferers to inspire me. In 29 years of pastoring churches, I have witnessed the suffering of many. When one of our wounded or suffering members just trusts in one more day; just keeps believing; just keeps worshipping; just keeps serving; and hanging on. In spite of their sickness or trial, as homesick for heaven as they may be, they just keep saying, "*Until I get there, I'm going to live for Christ.*"

To witness such suffering with faith, is to hear the Holy Spirit whisper, "*This is what I'm all about. My power is perfected in weakness. My grace is sufficient.*"

So, in the words of Paul: "*If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind ... Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.*" – Philippians 2:1-5

And let us do it, not only for our sake, but for the sake the world around us and for the sake of Christ.