

“A Way Worthy”  
Philippians 1:27-30/Matthew 5:13-16  
Presbytery of Shenango Worship/June 22, 2010  
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I. Introduction

In 1947 National Geographic proclaimed him the last rancher in the county to change from draft horses to a tractor. He had moved west from his home in East Tennessee many years earlier, and had brought with him a love of horses. He had grown up with horses. He was familiar with draft horses. Working with horses is what he knew. Horses were a part of his life.

For years he had worked his wheat ranch with his horses. They were more than equipment. They were his partners in the life of ranching. They had names. His horses pulled the plow and disk. They pulled the seeder and combine. The rancher walked with them as they worked, sharing sweat and dust, boom and bust.

But the times were changing. In the post-War economy tractors were needed. Ranch after ranch was going to tractors. National Geographic knew it was a big change, and they came to learn, so to tell the story.

Big changes are rarely easy. They often come with conflict and struggle. So it was with the followers of Jesus in Philippi. Philippi was called “little Rome,” a city of Roman culture, language, politics, religion, and retired army veterans. It was a place that did not welcome other ways of life. It was a place proud to say “Caesar is Lord.”

Of course, followers of Jesus were saying something else.....professing something else.....confessing another Lord: “Jesus is Lord.” In saying that they were saying they were part of another kingdom, another culture, another religion and way of life. They were saying there was another King. Such things could get you into trouble in Philippi. It was a big change for some on these followers of Jesus in Philippi.

Paul himself had gotten into trouble with the Romans for his Christian faith. He was in prison. And it’s from prison that he writes his friends in Philippi. He writes to tell them “thank you” for the gift to him. He writes to tell them he is in prison, and he is well. He writes to encourage them, because he knows in Philippi it’s a big change, and the way is hard.

II. Text

**Read Philippians 1:27-30.**

### III. Brief Exegesis

“Live out your lives as followers of Jesus in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ.” This isn’t about having the right answers. It isn’t about knowing all the stories. It isn’t about knowing the Christian hymns, and having a Christian bumper sticker on your car. But it is about a way of life....choices in life that show “Jesus is Lord.” It’s about a certain way of living.....living the way of Jesus.

“Live out your lives as followers of Jesus in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ.” This isn’t just about a one person’s way of life. This isn’t about “I’m good, how about you?” This isn’t “all about me,” my life, my world, and my interests. But this is about life together. It is about unity; “standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27b) It’s about caring for each other, forgiving, helping, patience, and love. It is about their life together as a witness to the kingdom of God.

“Live out your lives as followers of Jesus in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ.” This isn’t just about private, spiritual life. It isn’t just about “following Jesus in my heart.” It isn’t just about personal devotions and reading Christian books. But this is about living in a Christian way that intersects with the way of life on main street. It is about the courage of the church to live together in a pagan, and at times difficult, culture, and not apologize for its existence. It is going to work, going to the market, going to school..... being neighbors, being friends, being an employer or employee in ways that are informed and disciplined by the gospel of Christ.

“Live out your lives as followers of Jesus in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ.” It isn’t about a dominant Christian culture (that didn’t exist yet). It’s isn’t about old “blue laws,” and protection by the state. It’s isn’t about favored status, or expecting public schools to support particular Christian practices like prayer and Bible reading. Instead, it is about the church as the Christian community. It is about “opponents who will try to intimidate” (Phil. 1:28). It is about the possibility of “suffering and a struggle” (Phil. 1:29-30). It is about real courage and hope.

“Live out your lives as followers of Jesus in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ.” It’s the boldness of Paul in prison. It’s the call to the Philippians. It’s the challenge to Christians throughout the ages.....and to us in this difficult time of change.

### IV. Reflections

The other morning I was looking in the mirror, and I had this revelation.....a light went off. It was staring at me there in the mirror. I’m not 35 anymore. I’m not 40

anymore. I'm not even 45 anymore. There's the gray. There are the wrinkles around my eyes. There's the receding hairline. Yep.....I'm 51. Somehow it just happened. The mirror told the truth. Time had brought change.....a lot of good.....but change.....and some challenge.

Mirrors do that; they tell the truth. They show us who we are....if we have the courage to see. It seems to me that this text invites us to hold up a mirror to our life together as congregations. Not a mirror about my life.....but our life together. If you look, what do you see about your life together? If you have the courage.....what do you see? Is it "living out your lives as followers of Jesus in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ?" Do you see;

- \*Not just knowing the Biblical stories, but living the Biblical stories?
- \*Life together shaped by care, forgiveness, patience and love?
- \*Christian integrity lived out on main street disciplined by the gospel?
- \*The witness of the Gospel lived out together in your church.....lived out in an increasingly non-Christian culture?

"Live your lives as followers of Jesus in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ." Look in the mirror. Look at your life together as a congregation. What do you see?

A few months ago I was in the Presbytery Office, and Executive Presbyter Dave Dawson and I were talking about the changes and challenges in our area. There are economic challenges, demographic challenges, educational challenges, and cultural challenges (here we often feel like we're 'ground zero' for these changes....perhaps you feel the same way in your congregation). There are shrinking church memberships, tighter budgets, higher levels of fear and conflict, and a growing cultural trend that understands church as irrelevant to a good life (I can live life just fine without going to church on Sunday morning). That's the water we swim in today. As Dave and I talked, it became clear that we can't change any of these major trends (not even our Executive Presbyter can change these trends!!).....but we can make sure as pastors, Elders and church leaders that we keep clear what really matters. What really matters?

The Gospel matters. It's the power and grace of God that addresses the brokenness of life. It's the core of who we are and what we believe: The Trinity, the incarnation, the resurrection, the full breadth of the atonement, the life and mission of the church, the second coming. It's standing firm on these few priority beliefs, and leaving room for respectful disagreements on secondary beliefs. The Gospel matters.

Discipleship matters. The culture is not going to shape followers of Jesus Christ. Hear that clearly.....the culture is not going to shape followers of Jesus Christ. That is

the call of congregations and families. We shape followers of Jesus by following the early church pattern of “gather and send.” We gather for worship, education, care and fellowship. We then are sent out to share in God’s mission in the world. “Gather and send.....gather and send.” It’s the rhythm of the church, and it shapes disciples. Discipleship matters.

And, character matters. Challenges and hard things show us who we really are. Difficult times reveal real character. The conflict, brokenness and busy work of the Committee on Ministry tell us we are struggling here. Yes, there are hard things to talk about. And yes, there are difficult decisions to make. But they can be done with honesty, respect and care.....not blaming, finger pointing and gossiping. The fruit of the Spirit, the character of Christ is; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). Certainly the life of a busy congregation is more than that.....but it is never less....it is never less. Christians and non-Christians are watching our life together. Character matters.

Changes are not easy, but they come. In the post-War economy, tractors came. Ranch after ranch went to tractors. National Geographic came to the wheat ranches of Lincoln County in Washington State to take pictures and write a story. Charlie Stubbs was the last rancher in that county to get a tractor. His horses had names.....and his tractors never did. There is a picture of him in National Geographic, 1947, with his horses and combine in the middle of a wheat field. The grain is golden. The sun is setting. It was the end of the day.....and the end of an age. A new day was to begin. I would ride on the combine with Charlie Stubbs, my grandfather, 20 years later, and never knew the difficult, but necessary, change he had made.

Ministry and life together may have been easier in another time. I don’t know. But I do know this is our time. The sun is setting. It is the end of an age. A new day will begin. It is the way and providence of God. And in the years to come those who come after us may never know the difficult changes we made. But we will know.....and Christ will know.....and it will be a way worthy of the Gospel.