

The business of God's people is to give the world a foretaste of the Kingdom of God. The Lord tried with Israel, choosing Abraham and creating a people, his own chosen people, from scratch. But Israel failed to live out its calling. Thus the Lord brought forth a single man from this nation—his son, Jesus—to bring into existence a new kingdom people, the Christian church. In this morning's lesson, Paul taught the church in Philippi that they should strive to succeed where Israel failed. This is what he's teaching us as a church today. This morning we're going to talk about what this means for our walk with God and with each other as the people of God.

OPENING PRAYER

PHILIPPIANS 2:14-18

Do all things without grumbling or questioning, 15 that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, 16 holding fast to the Word of Life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. 17 Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you. 18 Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

Paul wrote, **"Do all things without grumbling or complaining" (v.14)**. But the nation of Israel did nothing but grumble and complain! A favorite illustration of this is when after fleeing Egypt, the people stood on the edge of the Red Sea. Pharaoh and his army were coming up on them fast, and they cried out to Moses, **"Is it because there are no graves in Egypt you brought us into the desert to die?" (Exodus 14:11)** This was the first successful use of sarcasm as humor by a Jew. But God wasn't laughing. Even so, he parted the Red Sea for them, and they safely crossed on dry ground, escaping Pharaoh.

Paul wrote that if the church did not grumble or complain, it would be **"blameless and innocent" (v.15)**. That was God's command to Israel, to be **"blameless and innocent,"** but the people couldn't do it. The grumbling and complaining became almost a badge of honor!

But grumbling and complaining is a disease. Whining about things we have no control over is a sickness. For like a virus it eats away at our sense of gratitude for God's gifts, which is the ultimate expression of our love for God.

And what does it do to our witness? We can spend all day telling people about Christ's death on the Cross for their sins and his resurrection from the grave and eternal life, but if all we do is complain, worry, grumble and whine, who'll take to heart a single word we say?

Paul wrote that the people should strive to be **"children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation" (v.15)**. Incidentally, we can't pin our condition as a country on the Millennials! Every **"generation"** is a **"crooked and twisted generation."** No generation is any better than another. Paul was writing about our challenge to live amongst persons who are not redeemed, a generation that would steal away our joy and confidence in the Lord.

Now, just as the weight of Paul's words in this passage are becoming overwhelming—even for us who've been steeped in God's grace from childhood—he provides some relief. He wrote that we should strive to live without blemish in this twisted generation **"among whom you shine as lights in the world, ¹⁶ holding fast to the Word of life" (vv.15-16)**.

Jesus is **"the Word of life,"** our very sustenance. He said, **"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 6:51)**. The Lord gave himself to you and me in so many ways, first on the Cross and then in Baptism. And we continue to receive him in his Supper, and through the Absolution, and through the study of his Word, the Holy Bible.

When we receive all these things as nourishment for our souls, when we believe the Lord's promises he attaches to these things, when we let our sense of thankfulness pour forth in our songs and prayers and good deeds, then we **"shine as lights in the world."** This is how we reflect Christ's own light.

Jesus said, **"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; ¹⁵ nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. ¹⁶ Let your light shine**

before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

I’ve talked before about testing our actions for whether or not they are aligned with God’s will. Here’s a tool for doing that: Whenever we prepare to do or say something, we ask ourselves, “Is this light?” Simple. Easy. Clear. “Is this light?”

Community outreach is light. But overt racism is not. Teaching children about Jesus is light. But arguing is not. Braille ministry is light. But gossip is not. Hospitality and Christian fellowship are light, and so too are worship, Bible study, and acts of community service.

Paul wrote that he instructed the church in this way **“so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain” (v.16)**. That’s the crux of his whole crusade, that is, **“the day of Christ,”** the End Times, the Second Coming of the Messiah. As I said in the beginning, what we’re doing here is just a foretaste of the Kingdom of God. The church on earth is like a dress rehearsal for heaven. BUT, more importantly, it is the hand of God bringing redemption to a fallen creation. The Lord has blessed us with his Spirit and the means of grace to be his people, a people **“without blemish,”** indeed.

Paul finished this lesson, writing, **“Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you. ¹⁸ Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me” (vv.17-18)**. Again, he alludes to Israel, using the imagery of sacrifices and offerings to describe his relationship to the church. Israel’s priests used these things as symbols of God’s promise to forgive sins. But despite God’s graciousness, Israel failed. However, now, because the Spirit of the Living God dwells among and in his people, the church will succeed. But it will be with suffering. That’s what Paul was talking about: We ourselves are like a sacrificial offering to the Lord when we suffer for his name’s sake, when we go the extra mile to shine light where there would only be darkness, when we risk our reputation by speaking truth to power, when we expend our time and wealth to make a difference in the lives of other people.

I heard the actress, Pauley Perrette, who plays Abby on NCIS, give her testimony last week. Sometime ago she got Romans 12:21 tattooed on one of her fingers. She admitted that the struggles in Hollywood are great, that the darkness can

overwhelm. But she said this verse gave her power to overcome. **Romans 12:21** reads, **“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”**

Brothers and sisters in Christ, there is much evil in the world. But it shall not destroy us. For the Lord is with us. He is light, he is life, and he is love. He is our GOOD. And he has blessed us **“to shine as lights in the world.”**

This week let us be filled with gratitude for the **“Word of Life”** which has raised us from the dead, filling our hearts with hope and giving us a vision for a future as God’s chosen people.

This week let us put all complaining aside, and let us be an encouragement to our neighbors. Let us think of ourselves as a sacrificial offering that the Lord is using in order to bring salvation to them.

And this week let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.