

The Rev. Michael J. Bridge
Sermon- Philippians 1:21-27
Sunday, September 24, 2017

To live is Christ

1. There is a verse of scripture that I have always found intriguing, yet have trouble wrapping my mind around if I am just catching the verse in passing. That verse comes up in our passage today, so I thought I would talk about it in order to work through it myself. It comes from Philippians, which I think has a ton of great stuff, but can be difficult to wade through.
2. Paul is writing Philippians from prison, and every time I remind myself of that, it really helps me to appreciate the message of hope in this epistle all the more.
3. In verse 21, Paul says, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” The thing that always gets me about this verse is that Paul is writing from prison, from a position of great turmoil, yet his two options, life and death, are both positives for him.
4. Paul spends a few verses saying that he is truly struggling between which of these would be better- continuing in life, or dying to be with the Lord.
5. In verse 22 he says, “If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me.” As he considers that he may yet live, he knows that this means more work. Fruitful labor. That work is something he clearly enjoys, even though it is the reason for all of his hardship. It helps that he recognizes it as *fruitful* labor. Paul doesn’t believe that his work for the gospel is in vain.
6. We may be tempted to think that Paul can easily call his work for the Lord fruitful, because there are some measurable results we see in the scriptures. But it would be unfortunate to believe that without viewing all that the scriptures tell us that he endured for his labor.
7. Furthermore, the fruit of labor isn’t always visible, or what we expect it to be. One may not “see” any results of laboring for the kingdom. However, that has no bearing on whether that labor is fruitful. Obedience is always fruitful. Sowing seeds and trusting that God will grow them is fruitful. And the work of refining that God does in us as we are faithful to serve him is fruitful.
8. For Paul, to live is Christ. To live, is to serve. That isn’t just a part of what his life is about. It *is* what his life is about.
 - a. Can you say with an honest heart, “To live is Christ”?

To die is gain: A proper view of Christian death

1. The second part of the verse is, “To die is gain.” He explains that statement with this statement a few verses later, “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.”
2. Almost universally, when someone dies, we say, “They are in a better place now.” Do we honestly mean that? Is it just the polite thing to say? Has it become a tired cliché that rings hollow when we say it?
 - a. To be sure, many who die are *not* going to a better place. That is a significant reason why Paul says that despite his desire to be with Christ, he knows he needs to stay. He has an urgency to spread the gospel and to see people meet Christ.
3. Moving beyond the cliché, do we really believe that, as a Christian, to die is gain? Think about it for a moment. We spend our lives trying to avoid death- and I do plan to continue

that practice- but we always talk about a heavenly reward; an eternal inheritance and dwelling with the Father. If we truly take part in Christ's resurrection, then to die truly is gain. It is gaining everything we have hoped for in Christ; everything to which the promises of God have pointed.

4. I titled this section of my outline as "A proper view of Christian death." As Christians, we have nothing to fear of our future in another world. It has been secured in Christ, and applied into our lives by the Holy Spirit. We *are* going to heaven. And the way Paul speaks, he suggests that dying as a Christian takes us right to Jesus. We don't have to wait for the final resurrection to be with him spiritually in heaven. He even says in elsewhere that absence from the body is presence with the Lord.
5. When you search your heart, if you are honest, do you believe that to die is gain?

Struggling for the gospel

1. Intermingled in these verses, as Paul talks about life and death, is the understanding that living will be a struggle if that life is one of commitment to the gospel. In verses 28 and 29, which immediately follow our printed reading, Paul encourages his Christian readers, "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have."
2. Two important things are *granted* in these verses. It has been granted that you, the Christian should believe. God granted your belief. He supplied it.
3. Second, it has been granted that you should suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict as Paul. What was the conflict of Paul? Imprisonment, mistreatment, beatings, stonings, and all other sorts of jolly things.
4. It has been granted that you should suffer for his sake. Paul speaks of this as if it is the same honorable gift as the faith which God has granted to his people. And I believe that it actually is. To suffer for Christ is to suffer with Christ. It is to truly walk in the ways of the Lord.
 - a. This is the context of what Paul is torn between. The gift of dying and being with the Lord, and the gift of living and suffering with the Lord.
 - b. What happens if we believe as Paul does, and if we commit our lives to that? All of a sudden, we aren't afraid to share our faith. We aren't afraid of going to potentially dangerous places in order to share the gospel. We aren't afraid to live in this world as citizens of another world. We aren't afraid to suffer for Christ, because we know it is our privilege to suffer with him and for him.
 - c. And then, in the end, whether soon, or at an appointed time far from now, having lived for the Lord, you will die, and it will all be to your gain.