

LIVE A LIFE WORTHY OF THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST

1 ²⁷Live your life only in a way that is worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that if I come and see you—or if I remain absent what I will hear about you is that you are standing firm in one spirit, and with one soul are contending for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸and that you are in no way being intimidated by those who oppose you. [Your firm stand] is a clear indication of their condemnation, but of your salvation. Indeed, this is from God, ²⁹because it has been graciously granted to you, for Christ's sake, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him. ³⁰You are experiencing the same opposition that you saw happening to me and now hear is happening to me. (Phil. 1:27-30)

Introduction

At 7 p.m. on October 20, 1968, only a few thousand spectators were left in the Mexico City Olympic stadium. It was almost dark. The last of the marathon runners were stumbling across the finish line. As the spectators were about to file out of the stadium, they heard the wail of police car sirens. All eyes turned to the gate at the distant end of the stadium: there, accompanied by the police cars, was a lone runner wearing the colors of Tanzania.

His name was John Stephen Akhwari. He was the last competitor to finish the twenty-six mile course. His leg, injured in a fall, was bloodied and crudely bandaged. He hobbled the final lap around the track. The spectators rose, cheering and applauding him as though he was the winner.

After he had crossed the finish line, a reporter asked him why he had not quit the race? He simply replied, "My country did not send me seven thousand miles to start this race. They sent me seven thousand miles to finish it." (*Our Daily Bread*, 11/29/93)

John Stephen Akhwari finished the race because he considered the endeavor to be worthy of his best effort. The time and money his nation had invested in training him and sending him to the Olympics; the honor of representing his nation and wearing its colors; the rare privilege of competing in the Olympic Games; all this he judged to be worthy of his best effort.

In Philippians 1:27 the Apostle Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, exhorts us: "*Live your life only in a way that is worthy of the gospel of Christ.*"

John Stephen Akhwari considered his participation in the Olympic marathon to be worthy of his best effort; how much more should we consider our participation in the life and kingdom of Christ to be worthy of our best effort and highest allegiance. Let us now give our attention to this exhortation from the Word of God: Live a life that is worthy of the gospel.

I. Live a Life Worthy of the Gospel of Christ, ...at All Times (vs.27a)

Paul exhorts us, *“Live your life only in a way that is worthy of the gospel of Christ.”* The word translated by the phrase, “live your life” (πολιτεύομαι), had the literal meaning, “to carry out the public duties incumbent on a man because of his citizenship.” In the ancient Roman world, with his citizenship there came certain civic duties a man was obligated to perform. As citizens of the kingdom of heaven—in Philippians 3:20 the Apostle Paul will remind us that as Christians, *“our citizenship is in heaven”*—and members of the church of Christ, we have spiritual duties and obligations to perform. We are called to develop holiness in our personal lives: *“since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God”* (2 Cor. 7:1.) We are called to maintain the unity of the Christian body, a spiritual unity created by the Holy Spirit: *“make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit by the bond of peace”* (Eph. 4:3.) We are called to live lives that are above reproach before the world: *“Conduct yourselves in a proper way among the Gentiles; so that, though they slander you as evildoers, by observing your good works they must glorify God on the day of his visitation [i.e., the day of judgment].”* (1 Pet. 2:12.)

As Christians, we are exhorted, *“Live your life only in a way that is worthy of the gospel of Christ.”* There is none that is more worthy of our affection, our allegiance, and our greatest endeavor than Christ, consider, for instance, the testimony of Revelation 5:9-10,12,

And they sang a new song: You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. ¹⁰You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth ... ¹²... Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise! (Rev. 5:9-10,12)

Our lives are to be worthy of the gospel of Christ at all times. The Apostle Paul exhorts these Christian people that no matter what may be the outcome of his own personal situation—whether he is, indeed, released and reunited with them again, or whether, in God’s providence, he remains separated from them—let this be true of them, namely, that they are living lives that are worthy of the gospel of Christ. The church’s faithfulness to Christ must not be dependent upon the Apostle Paul’s personal presence or absence. Likewise, our Christian lifestyle and conduct, though ever dependent on grace, must not be continuously dependent on others. Our Christian commitment must not constantly be prompted by, or propped up by, or performed for, Christian parents or the pastor and the elders or the presence of any other Christian. First and foremost, we need to give our allegiance to Christ, not for the sake of other people, but for the sake of Christ Himself.

Live a life worthy of the gospel of Christ at all times; as opposed to behaving like a spiritual chameleon. A chameleon is a little lizard that has the ability to change colors depending on his immediate environmental surroundings.

II. Live a Life Worthy of the Gospel of Christ, ...Under All Circumstances (vs.27b-30)

Christ's desire, as expressed through the Apostle Paul, is that we "*stand firm in one spirit.*" His desire is that we stand our ground for Him and His gospel like soldiers in the face of battle; that there be no retreat or compromise of the gospel before the pressures of the world. His desire is that we stand together "*in one spirit;*" that we, as fellow believers, have one common overarching purpose, namely, to preserve and promote the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. His desire is that we together be found faithful to the gospel, as Paul exhorts the Corinthians:

Now, brothers, I remind you of the gospel that I preached to you, which you also received, on which also you stand, ²and by which you are saved—if you hold firm to the word we preached to you, otherwise you have believed in vain. ³I delivered to you as of first importance that which I also received, [namely,] that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; ⁴and that he was buried; and that he has been raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. (1 Cor. 15:1-4)

It is absolutely essential that we stand united in our faith in the gospel and proclamation of the gospel, because, as the Apostle Peter declares, speaking of the name of Jesus, "*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we can be saved*" (Acts 4:12.)

Paul goes on to exhort the Philippians, "*with one soul*" may they be found "*contending for the faith of the gospel.*" Whereas "*one spirit*" emphasizes unity of mind and purpose, "*one soul*" seems to be emphasizing unity of resolve and commitment. The verb, "*contending,*" connotes exerting vigorous effort in the face of opposition. The same Greek word (συναθλέω) is used to describe competition in the Olympic games: "*if anyone competes [συναθλέω] as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules*" (2 Tim. 2:5.) In writing to the churches under his care, Jude makes the same appeal as does the Paul: "*Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend [συναθλέω] for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints*" (Jude 3.)

Furthermore, Paul expresses his concern "*that you are in no way being intimidated by those who oppose you.*" The word Paul uses here (πτύρω) translated, "frightened" in the NIV, is better rendered by the verb, "to be intimidated," or, "to be terrorized." Intimidation is fear that results in flight,

surrendering to the enemy's will and betraying the cause of Christ. May the testimony of the Apostle Paul also be our own testimony: *"I am ready not only to be imprisoned, but even to die ... for the name of the Lord Jesus"* (Acts 21:13.) Let us remember that the source of faithfulness in the face of pressure to betray the Lord Jesus is nothing other than the power of the Holy Spirit: *"Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness ... ³¹After they had prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly"* (Acts 4:29,31.)

Steadfast allegiance to Christ and His gospel, especially in the face of hostile opposition, is described as being *"a clear indication of [their] condemnation, but of your salvation."* The Apostle Paul is saying that steadfast allegiance to Christ in the face of opposition is *"a clear indication"* of the condemnation of those who oppose Christ's church and His gospel. This is not necessarily a sign that is recognized and acknowledged by the adversaries; but rather it is a sign or evidence that is given by God to the Christian. What Paul means is that steadfast Christian courage in the face of opposition becomes a divinely granted evidence of two things: 1) an evidence that the adversaries of the gospel are opposing the unconquerable Christ, and therefore are doomed to come to ruin and final judgment; and 2) and evidence that the committed Christian belongs to the unconquerable Christ, and therefore will participate in His final triumph. Consider the counsel given by the wise scholar named Gamaliel when speaking before the Sanhedrin, and the bearing of that counsel upon Paul's teaching here in Philippians:

*Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. ²⁸We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, he said. Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood. ²⁹Peter and the other apostles replied, We must obey God rather than men. ³⁰The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. ³²We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him. ³³When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. ³⁴But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin, and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. ³⁵Then he addressed them: Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men ... ³⁸... in the present case I give you this advice: Leave these men alone! Let them go! **If their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. ³⁹But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop them; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.** (Acts 5:27-35,38-39)*

The point the apostle is making is this: When you display Christian courage, God will grant to you a divine evidence, or assurance, of Christ's ultimate victory and

your participation in that victory. Consider the testimony of Georgi Vins, a Russian Christian who has suffered much for his commitment to Christ: "I am convinced that faith is strengthened by trial and that God offers spiritual comfort in proportion to one's physical suffering."

In verses 29-30 the apostle informs the church that the intense opposition and suffering they were presently encountering was a unique privilege granted to them for the sake of Christ. The Philippian Christians were experiencing a unique degree of suffering: *"it has been graciously granted to you [as compared to other Christians], for Christ's sake, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him"* (vs. 29.) The apostle defines such suffering as being a unique privilege: *"it has been graciously granted to you for Christ's sake, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him."* The Greek word, χαρίζομαι, means, "to be given as a gracious gift." Note Acts 5:41, *"They [the apostles] departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the Name [of Jesus]."*

With this unique privilege of suffering for Christ's sake comes a unique blessing; namely, the blessing of being given a greater measure of divine assurance that you truly belong to the victorious Christ and participate in His victory. We may reconstruct Paul's argument as follows: Your refusal to in any way be intimidated by the adversaries is, with regard to them, a clear sign of their doom, but of your salvation. This clear sign is given to you by God, and it is given to you precisely *"because it has been graciously granted to you, for Christ's sake, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him."* Every Christian is made to know Christ, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings. But to some Christians at some times there is granted an intensified experience of these spiritual realities. When this is the case, the faithful endurance of the trial bears with it an intensified experience of Christ's victory and the assurance that we partake of that victory.

Live a life worthy of the gospel, even when you encounter opposition or suffering for the sake of Christ. Indeed, when you encounter such suffering for the sake of Christ, recognize it for what it is: a unique privilege that will carry with it a unique blessing of divine assurance when it is faithfully endured.

Conclusion

John Stephen Akhwari considered his participation in the Olympic marathon to be an undertaking worthy of his best effort. How much more should we as Christians consider our participation in the life and cause of Christ to be a calling that is worthy of our best effort and highest allegiance? Through the Apostle Paul, our Lord Jesus Christ exhorts us to live lives that are worthy of His gospel; and to do so at all times and under all circumstances.