

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver St.  
Flagstaff, AZ 86001  
[www.fcfonline.org](http://www.fcfonline.org)

## THE CHRISTIAN MISSION AND HOW TO FULFILL IT

Philippians 1:27-30

By

Steven J. Cole

June 4, 1995

Copyright, 1995

June 4, 1995  
Philippians Lesson 9

## The Christian Mission and How To Fulfill It Philippians 1:27-30

Imagine that we are correspondents sent out to a dangerous battle zone. We expect to see battle-weary soldiers in combat fatigues, dirt on their faces, living in the most difficult conditions, carrying their weapons at all times. But, instead, at the battlefield we're surprised to find the soldiers dressed in civilian clothes, playing volleyball and ping pong, lying around swimming pools, sipping cold drinks, with no weapons anywhere in sight. If such an army was defending our country from a hostile enemy, we'd have good reason to be alarmed!

The problem is, that army has forgotten its mission. It thinks that its mission centers around its own comfort and having a good time. Having forgotten its mission, it would easily fall to a hostile enemy. If that enemy attacked, the members of the army might try to desert, claiming, "I didn't sign up for this! I signed up for all the benefits, but I had no idea I might get shot at!"

I believe the American church is a lot like the army I've just described. We have promoted the Christian life for all its benefits: "Come to Christ and He will give you peace and happiness. He will help you overcome your problems. He will give you a happy marriage and family. He will give you an abundant life." So the recruits sign up, thinking about sitting poolside and enjoying the good life with Jesus. Then, the bullets start ricocheting. Bombs start dropping, shrapnel is flying everywhere. People are getting hurt and dying. And these laid-back recruits turn and run, thinking, "I didn't sign up for this!"

The Bible is clear that the Christian life is not a playground, but a battleground. God has not saved us so that we can live comfortably, happily, and self-centeredly in suburbia. He has conscripted us into His army. We have a mission given to us by our Commander-in-Chief, to take the message of His salvation and Lordship into enemy territory, to win captives from the forces of darkness. As in every war, our mission requires combat and struggle. If

we forget our mission and get caught up with our own comfort, we will be quick to desert the cause when the enemy attacks.

We must both focus on and fulfill the Christian mission.

Paul describes the Christian cause in such combat terms in Philippians 1:27-30. There is a sense in which it would be easier to preach these verses to the church in China or Iran, where believers are threatened with daily persecution. They're quite aware of the cost of being a Christian. They're ready, if need be, to lay down their lives for the sake of the gospel. But few of us American Christians have ever had to endure severe persecution for our faith. We think of Christianity as something that increases the well-being of our daily lives. We focus on the benefits that come from being Christians. But, the danger is, in focusing on our own well-being, we forget our mission. If we forget our mission, there is no way we will fulfill it. And, we become an easy target for the powers of darkness.

1. We must focus on the Christian mission: to proclaim the faith of the gospel.

We've already seen that the gospel was the central focus of Paul's life. In 1 Corinthians 9:23 he says that he does "all things for the sake of the gospel." In Philippians 1, he uses the word "gospel" six times: verses 5, 7, 12, 16, 27 (twice). He alludes to it in other language several more times: "to speak the word of God" (1:14); "preaching Christ" (1:15); "proclaim Christ" (1:17); "Christ is proclaimed" (1:18); "Christ shall even now, as always, be exalted" (1:20); "to live is Christ" (1:21). Paul's focus should be the Philippians' focus, and ours: He charges them to stand firm and strive together "for the faith of the gospel."

To understand this mission, we must be clear on what Paul means by "*the faith of the gospel.*" By "the faith," he means the Christian faith, which points to the *content* of the gospel, that is, certain core doctrines which are essential to the gospel. Without these essential truths, the gospel is no longer the gospel. In 1 Corinthians 15:3, 4, Paul states the content of the gospel (see 15:1), "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."

This brief statement contains a wealth of essential truth. It tells us who Christ is, namely, the Christ revealed in the Scriptures. It is clear from the over 300 prophecies concerning Jesus in the Old Testament that He is both eternal God, who alone can atone for sin; and, fully human, capable of human death, and thus an acceptable substitute for our sin. Paul's statement tells us the central truth about the work of Christ, that He died for our sins, as our substitute. Anyone who denies the essential nature of the substitutionary work of Christ is denying the gospel.

Paul's gospel also affirms the fallen condition of the human race, that we are sinners in need of a Savior. Anyone who teaches the basic goodness of human nature is denying the gospel, because good people don't need a Savior. They just need a good example and a little encouragement to improve themselves. If we don't need a Savior, then Jesus died for no reason. The gospel also affirms the historical, bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. As Paul goes on in that same chapter to state, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:7). The resurrection is proof that God has made Jesus both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36), and that in His death Jesus triumphed over sin, death, and hell. The gospel comes to us by grace through faith apart from any human merit or works (Eph. 2:8, 9).

In other words, "the faith of the gospel" involves certain core truths which must not be compromised. Since these truths are so essential, the enemy is always trying to get us to fudge on them in some way. But, to fulfill the Christian mission we must stand firmly for the faith of the gospel.

But, also, to fulfill our mission we need to get our focus back on the mission itself, namely, to strive together for the faith of the gospel. American Christianity has become too self-focused. We've turned inward--to analyze our feelings, to "recover" from childhood abuses and "codependency," to fixate on having a more enriching marriage, to raise children with healthy self-esteem, etc. In other words, we're caught up with self-fulfillment and feeling good instead of with the mission our Lord gave us, to take the gospel to every people group.

I'm not denying the need to help hurting people deal with problems or to help get fractured families back together. Wounded

people need some healing before they go out to the front lines. But it seems to me that we've shifted our focus onto ourselves to such a degree that, instead of viewing ourselves as God's army, the American church has come to see itself as a branch of the self-help movement. We need to keep the goal in view, that hurting people need healing so that they can be deployed into the battle of reaching lost people with the gospel. Thus, in order to fulfill our mission, first we must focus on it. The church is here to proclaim the faith of the gospel. Then,

2. We fulfill the Christian mission by walking consistently, working cooperatively, and warring confidently.
  - A. We fulfill the Christian mission by walking consistently as citizens of another country.

"Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (1:27a). The Greek word translated "conduct yourselves" is literally, "live as citizens." It was a word that meant a lot to the Philippians. Remember, Philippi was a Roman colony, and the people there took pride in their Roman citizenship. They lived in accordance with Roman customs. Even though they were about 800 miles from Rome, they were not under any regional authority, but answered directly to Rome, governed by Roman laws. They were a Roman outpost. These colonists lived differently than the barbarians surrounding them because they were citizens of a different country.

Paul is saying that Christians, no matter where we live geographically, must view ourselves as citizens of another country, namely, of heaven. Thus we should live differently than those around us who are citizens of this earth. Our lives must be worthy of the gospel of Christ. We seek to please our heavenly "emperor" and to live by His laws as revealed in His Word. We seek to conform our character to Christ. Though we are also citizens of this world, as the Philippian Christians were, we should be distinct because our primary citizenship is in heaven.

If you've ever visited or lived in a foreign country, you can identify with what Paul is saying. When you're there, you may eat some of their unique kinds of food. You may observe some of their customs, so as not to be needlessly offensive to them. When

we visited the Orient, I learned that the way Americans pick their teeth is offensive to the people there, so we adopted the Chinese way of picking our teeth during the trip. But, unless your purpose is to be a missionary who completely blends in with their customs and ways, you probably will stand out as distinct. You're simply different than they are, so you're going to stand out.

As Christians, we want to blend in with the world in matters that do not violate any biblical principles, for the sake of not offending people and of opening the door for the gospel (1 Cor. 9:20-23). But, even so, our heavenly citizenship should mark us as distinct. We live for a different purpose. Instead of living for the things of this world, we live for the kingdom of God. We should be marked by different morals. We should display different character qualities, the fruit of the Spirit. Instead of living for self, as the world does, we live for Jesus Christ. As Paul puts it elsewhere (2 Cor. 5:20), we are ambassadors for Christ, representing His heavenly kingdom here on earth.

It's a sad thing when the church blends in with the world in matters where we should be distinct, and is distinct in matters where we should blend in. Polls show that there is no difference between the evangelical population and the rest of the country in the TV shows we watch or in the amount of time we spend watching them. That's terrible! There's not much difference between the church and the world in the rate of adultery or divorce. If we belong to Christ, it should make a difference in how we treat one another in our homes. There should be a difference in our business practices. Yet often I hear how a person got cheated in business by a professing Christian.

Yet, in matters where we should blend in, we go out of our way to look different. If the world's women are wearing makeup, Christian women don't use any. If the world's women stop using makeup, Christian women gob it on. In seminary, we got a lecture from a veteran pastor on how, as men of the cloth, we should adorn the gospel by always wearing a dark suit when we go out in public. We should always look ministerial. Once a fellow pastor told me at a pastor's luncheon that I didn't look like a pastor. I thanked him for the compliment! Why do we have to look weird to

be Christians? We are supposed to be distinct, but we don't need to be weird!

So the first thing, if we want to fulfill our mission as Christians, is to walk consistently as citizens of heaven.

- B. We fulfill the Christian mission by working cooperatively as contestants on the same team.

"... standing firm in one spirit, with one soul [lit.] striving together for the faith of the gospel" (1:27b). The Greek word translated "striving together" is *sunathleo*, from which we get our word "athletics." The prefix, *sun*, means "with" or "together." The picture is of an athletic team, working in cooperation and coordination toward a common goal. That goal, as we have seen, is "the faith of the gospel."

As Americans, we're prone toward competition and toward individualism. It affects us more than we sometimes realize. The test for me, as a pastor, is when I hear that the attendance is soaring at another church, while attendance at my church is not. I may need to stop and ask why my church isn't growing. But, I should rejoice if people are coming to Christ at the other church and if the other pastor is preaching God's Word, because we're all on the same team. But so often our tendency is to be competitive and jealous.

I read in a recent Wycliffe publication ("In Other Words," May/June, 1995) a story of a Bible translator in Brazil who was trying to paddle his canoe up river along with a group of natives in their canoes, but he just couldn't keep up. Finally, one of the natives, whose legs were disabled from a serious injury, but whose arms were strong, came back and told Steve, the missionary, to hang on to his canoe and he would paddle for both of them. When they caught up with the rest of the group, the others encouraged the missionary to paddle his own canoe, and offered pointers on what he was doing wrong. He would try for a while, and when he fell behind, one of them would tow him again.

Then, just before they got to the final bend in the river, while they were still out of view of the waiting crowd, two men came alongside Steve and pushed his canoe to the front so that he was the first to land. They had gone to get thatch for their huts, and

they shouted out, "We have the thatch! Steve paddled his own canoe!" Those words expressed their philosophy, "Together we have done it." That should be our Christian attitude, of working together as teammates in the great cause of Christ. A united team can win. A team divided against itself, with the teammates bickering or fighting over the glory, will lose.

But a word of caution: There is a strong movement in our day to break down every doctrinal difference between professing Christians and to proclaim our unity in Christ. If this means uniting in gospel efforts with those who truly know Christ and hold firmly to the essential truths of the gospel, that's fine. We should not separate from brothers in Christ over minor doctrinal differences. But, we dare not join forces for evangelism or fellowship with those who deny essential Christian doctrine, or we simply confuse the truth of the gospel.

Some people wonder why I do not promote the "unity" services that are held here in town each year. The reason is that I'm not comfortable proclaiming my "unity" with men who deny essential biblical truth, nor do I wish to proclaim my "unity" with the Roman Catholic Church, as if it were just a different flavor of Christianity. This is not to say that there are not some true Christians in these churches. It is to say that the churches themselves are denying essential biblical truth, and it is wrong to do anything to imply to the world that we are no different than they are. Our cooperation must be limited to those who stand firm for the faith of the gospel.

Thus we fulfill our mission of proclaiming the faith of the gospel by walking consistently and working cooperatively.

- C. We fulfill the Christian mission by warring confidently as combatants in the same army.

"... in no way alarmed by your opponents--" (1:28a). We should not create enemies because we are abrasive or cantankerous people. But, if by your life and words you oppose sin and challenge the illicit ways of the world, especially, the sinful ways people in the world make money, you will have enemies. We don't know for sure who the Philippians' enemies were--perhaps the city magistrates

who opposed Paul; perhaps the Judaizers. But they had enemies, and so will we if we stand for righteousness.

For some reason, Christians are often surprised when people don't like them. The word "alarmed" was used of a startled horse rearing in fright. But Paul says, "Don't be alarmed, because our side is going to win." The same God who granted faith to you has also given you another gift: suffering! Twice Paul emphasizes that we suffer "for Christ's sake" (1:29). If Christ, the Son of God suffered, and if Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles suffered, then we're in good company if we suffer for the sake of the gospel. Someday soon God will save us and will condemn those who persecute His church. Stand confidently for the Lord and rest in Him.

I have never experienced anything close to the persecution Paul went through. But a few years ago, I was being attacked and falsely accused by some people. I was tending toward discouragement until I read Jesus' words, "Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and cast insults at you, and spurn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. Be glad in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets.... Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for in the same way their fathers used to treat the false prophets" (Luke 6:22, 23, 26).

### Conclusion

When I was in boot camp in the Coast Guard, a recruit showed up who was the laughingstock of the entire base. He came to boot camp with his fishing pole and water skis, because the recruiter had explained to him that the base was on an island where you could do those things. That poor guy had been sold a phony bill of goods! They took every personal possession away from us, including our combs. They took every privilege from us. We couldn't watch TV or read the newspaper, except for the front page which they posted on the bulletin board. We were in harsh, difficult conditions. Why? Because they wanted to shape us into a tough, combat-ready unit.

When you trusted Christ, you didn't join a country club. You got drafted into God's army! Your mission is to proclaim the faith of the gospel. You fulfill that mission by walking consistently as a

citizen of heaven; by working cooperatively with your fellow teammates; and, by warring confidently with your fellow soldiers. Are you facing hardship or criticism or ridicule because you're a Christian? Remember, it's for the sake of Christ who someday soon will triumph over all His enemies and reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And, if you endure, you will also reign with Him (2 Tim. 2:12).

### Discussion Questions

1. Agree/disagree: American Christians have lost sight of the mission.
2. How do we know where to draw lines of division over doctrine? Which truths are essential?
3. Where is the balance between focusing on our mission versus dealing with personal emotional problems?
4. Should we cooperate with religious groups (Mormons, Catholics, etc.) on common causes such as pro-life or anti-pornography?

Copyright 1995, Steven J. Cole, All Rights Reserved.