**Joyful Growth**

Philippians 1:24-30

Let me first say what a ***privilege and blessing*** it is to be a pastor here at Oakwood! Our whole family has felt so warmly welcomed and you have all been so gracious as we get settled in. I am especially thankful for **the leadership at Oakwood** – this church is very blessed with godly, encouraging and supportive men and women. And I wish all of you could have experienced the last Elder and Deacon meetings we’ve had (which probably isn’t a very common thing to hear at a church). There is such a tone of gratitude and excitement over what God is doing in our midst.

***Your generosity***, for one thing, is a tribute to the grace of God in each of you. I understand that finances have been a bit of a challenge through the senior pastor transition. But it speaks a lot to me and my family how the leaders led the way with their giving and how the rest of the church family responded to the appeal from the elders and deacons. Not only did commitments come in to meet the new monthly budget but also to wipe out the deficit from the year! And August giving reflected that sacrificial generosity.

We so clearly see that ***this is God’s hand at work!*** And just as Paul experienced the generous and sacrificial partnership of the Philippian church in his ministry, so the elders of Oakwood praise God for the gospel partnership we have together here!

Our series is called **Rejoice in the Lord** and if you have missed any sermons in the series, including the Friday night devotional before Irma came breezing in, all of those are on the church website on the updated Messages page – available both to read and to listen to.

Today we finish chapter one and look in detail at the verse that we have been working to memorize for the last two weeks. Let’s say it together again:

***“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.”***

Philippians 1:27

This gives us **a snapshot of a growing believer** – one who is living a life worthy of the gospel that saved him, who is standing in loving unity with other believers and laboring together with them to bring that life-changing Good News to others.

There are two parts to the message today – first we will discuss **what it MEANS** to be a growing believer and then we will see **what it LOOKS LIKE to be** living, loving and laboring together.

First, let’s define Christian growth: ***working to make progress toward maturity in Christ by applying the Gospel to our hearts and living in the power of the Holy Spirit.*** Another word for Christian growth is SANCTIFICATION. The key is in those first four words: working to make progress.

Here is a visual to help us distinguish among the four key parts of salvation.

***God accomplishes every part of the salvation process*** – all of it depends entirely on His grace, from His sovereign choice in election to how he opens our blind eyes and enlivens our dead hearts to hear and respond to the Gospel and thereby be justified. At that moment of justification when the believing sinner is declared righteous, the process of sanctification begins and the Christ-follower grows over time to increasingly become like Jesus. Finally, when the believer dies or when Jesus returns the whole process is completed and the Christian is glorified – all sin is removed and holiness perfected forever. You can see these definitions in your worship program:

**Election**

**Sanctification**

**Glorification**

**Justification**

* **Election** – before creation began, God chose believers to be adopted as His sons or daughters based entirely on His grace, not anything virtuous in us (Eph. 1:4-5)
* **Justification** – at the moment of saving faith, God declares believing sinners righteous – not only forgiving their sins but also giving them credit for the perfect righteousness of Jesus (Rom. 3:23-25)
* **Sanctification** – believers work throughout their lives to make progress toward maturity in Christ by applying the Gospel to their hearts and living in the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:3-5)
* **Glorification** – when a believer dies or when Christ returns the believer is eternally perfected with all sin removed and the virtue of Christ finally and fully realized in him or her (1 Jn. 3:2; Rom. 8:30)

Understanding those definitions, here is a more accurate visual, showing how election took place in eternity past, how justification happens at a moment in time, how sanctification is a life-long process and how glorification is the final step that completes God’s work of grace in us.

**Election**

**Justification**

**Sanctification**

**Glorification**

**Faith**

**S A L V A T I O N**

**By Grace Alone, through Faith Alone, in Christ Alone**

Our focus today is on Sanctification or ***Christian growth*** throughout our lives – and you can see it is ***an upward progression***, even though it is not clean or simple or perfectly linear. Growth is messy and hard and, as we saw last week, sometimes we grow the most when we suffer the most or as we emerge from a season of trial or loss.

Our definition of growth starts out: **working to make progress**. Yes, there is work involved. Dallas Willard wrote, ***“Grace is opposed to EARNING it is not opposed to EFFORT.”*** But to be clear, let me tell you what I am NOT saying, with another visual.

**SAVED**

I work in order to be

Self-Reliant Religion

**Because I am**

**SAVED**

I work

Gospel-motivated Sanctification

Here are two totally opposite motivations. The first one I call **self-reliant religion**. This is the person who is genuinely nice, is faithful to his wife, plays with his kids, works hard at his job, goes to church, says his prayers, gives to charity, serves in various ways – all in the very misguided hope that these efforts will get him saved; that in the end, he will live a “good enough” life. That is the religious motivation. I work IN ORDER TO BE SAVED.

The other one is **Gospel-motivated sanctification**. BECAUSE I AM SAVED – I WORK. This is the person who has experienced the life-changing mercy and forgiveness of Christ, who knows full well that her salvation has no connection to her efforts or achievements but is entirely a gift of God’s grace. Out of gratitude for all God has done for her in Christ, the believer works hard to grow in her faith – she disciplines herself to grow closer to God by reading and studying His Word, she nourishes her passion for Jesus by coming to church, singing her heart out, connecting with other believers to encourage them and be encouraged by them, she finds a ministry that fits her personality and gifting and devotes herself to it, body and soul, rejoicing to see how the Lord uses her to touch the lives of others with the Gospel.

Self-reliant religion is ***motivated by guilt, fear, obligation, selfishness and pride***. The Christian believer is **motivated by the Gospel**. The religious-type person has little or no joy, which is why I picture it as an uphill climb.

But the Gospel makes the Christian life feel like a downhill stroll. Not that it’s easy all the time, but this image reminds us that ***Jesus did the hard work*** and whatever he calls us to do or to endure is nothing next to the cross. The Gospel fills the believer with gratitude and joy over all Jesus has done for us. The Gospel is the power of God – not only to save us but also to help us grow. The Gospel nourishes the believer and motivates us to give our lives to Jesus as a living sacrifice. The Gospel empowers us to work hard, to labor diligently, to serve sacrificially and to preach the Gospel boldly, without fear. Because, as we saw last week, “to live is Christ and to die is gain.” That is the mindset of the Gospel-motivated believer.

And that is what Paul is talking about in v. 27 when he exhorts the church in Philippi – ***“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.”***

He is **NOT** saying MAKE YOURSELF WORTHY OF the Gospel. He is NOT preaching a different Gospel than he did in Romans. He is not saying get to work earning your salvation. Nor is he even saying “God will do His part and you better do yours,” or to quote from a religious-minded movement in our culture “Do your best and God will take care of the rest.”

No. Paul is not preaching a works-based salvation calling people to good works IN ORDER TO BE SAVED. Rather, he is saying ***“The gospel of Christ is what saved you – so now live a life worthy of that great salvation.”*** Because you are saved, let your gratitude motivate you to live up to that salvation, to live in line with who you now are in Christ.

As Paul writes in Ephesians 4, “Live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” Or in Colossians 1:10 “Walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in every way.” Or in 1 Thes. 2:12 “Walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.”

“Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Is this true of us? Do our lives match our beliefs? Do you live like you have a great and wonderful Savior who loved you and gave himself up for you? Do you conduct yourself throughout the day as one who has been brought from death to life, from slavery to freedom – as one who has been bought with the precious blood of Christ?

***We always treat objects in accordance with their cost.*** In our house we buy sunglasses that are $5 or less and we treat them accordingly. We lose them, sit on them, drop them, scratch them – and then replace them. Not a great system, but that’s how it goes at Chez Anderson.

That is not how we treat our computers and it is certainly not how the boys treat their gaming systems… or cell phones. Those we take care of, protect, bring with us when we evacuate from the state, constantly know their whereabouts and charge status. Why? Why do we treat cheap sunglasses differently than we treat our precious electronics?

Because of what they COST. And all the more so if it’s what it cost ME. Then I really know the worth of something. “That was four birthdays, two Christmases and seven teeth invested in that device – I’m taking care of that!”

**How often do we reflect on the COST of our salvation?** Hopefully every day and even throughout the day we remember the depths of our indwelling sin and the infinite price Jesus had to pay to redeem us from it. This is what Paul is getting at here: if we understand what our salvation cost it will give us strong and enduring motivation to live in a manner worthy of the price that was paid for us. We will be motivated to WORK, to grow, to make progress.

That is a definition of Christian growth: ***working to make progress*** toward maturity in Christ by applying the Gospel to our hearts and living in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now let’s see what it looks like. **Three characteristics of a growing believer – living, loving and laboring.**

**First, the Gospel-motivated believer should be living with an increasing commitment to holiness.** You’ll find that all of these descriptions are INCREASING because the goal is PROGRESS. This is the very reason Paul is eager to get back to see the Philippians as we read in v. 25, ***“I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith.”***

The first sign of progress Paul is praying for and challenging them toward is in v. 27, ***“Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.”*** Our conduct, our behavior, our manner of life should reflect the character of the Lord we follow, the Savior who died for us. How we live as Christians matters.

We can LIVE in ways that are worthy of Christ or in ways that are unworthy of Him. We can honor him with our lives or we can dishonor Him. We can live up to the price that was paid for our salvation or we can spit on the blood that was shed for us.

Paul uses a military metaphor here in v. 27 as he exhorts them to live worthy of the gospel ***“so that whether I come and see you or am absent I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit.”***

He uses the same phrase in Ephesian 6 when he exhorts the believers to put on the full armor of God so that they may take their stand against the devil’s schemes. We must stand our ground and stand firm together to withstand the concentrated and continual onslaughts of the enemy of our souls – to live with increasing holiness in a culture of increasing depravity.

One of my favorite books is called *Killer Angels*. That is the book that gave me a love for history. In it Michael Shaara tells the story of the battle of Gettysburg – the turning point of the Civil War. He follows ***Joshua Chamberlain*** from his start as a professor of artillery leading a small company of soldiers from Maine to that momentous moment on Little Round Top at Gettysburg. Throughout the second day of the battle Robert E. Lee threw everything he had at the Union Army on the hill, concentrating especially on the extreme left flank occupied by 101 men from Maine.

Time after time, thanks to their elevated position on the hill and the rocky ground protecting them, ***Chamberlain and his men were able to hold their ground***, though they were taking heavy casualties. As the day wore on, they started to run out of ammunition. Chamberlain knew another attack was coming, so he shouted across the lines to fix bayonets. The men obeyed and as the Confederates charged up the hill, suddenly Union soldiers leapt from behind their rocky defenses and charged down hill, those on the end swinging down and to their right making a sweeping hinge movement that resulted in the surrender and capture of over 100 Confederates and the end of hostilities in that sector that day.

It could be that that single moment in which **the 20th Maine stood their ground** on Little Round Top is what turned the tide in the Civil War. Chamberlain understood the importance of their position, protecting the flank of the entire Union Army at Gettysburg. If they collapsed and ran, the whole army would have been exposed. So they determined to stand firm at all costs. And stand firm they did.

Brothers and sisters, **so must we**. And as ferocious as the Confederates were in the Civil War with their maniacal yell, ***our enemy is all the more fierce and terrible***. He wages war with the lusts of the eyes, the lusts of the flesh and the pride of life. He deceives and enslaves, he tricks and he traps. So we must not let down our guards. We must not give way. We must stand firm and we must stand together in the fight for holy lives.

Our culture is saturated with self-indulgence and self-exaltation. The false promises and temptations around us will erode even the best intentions if we are not actively cultivating a heart and life of holiness – fighting for purity in a sickeningly defiled world. We must stand firm. And one key to standing firm, is standing together.

Believers should be LIVING with increasing commitment to holiness and **second, we should be LOVING with an increasing commitment to unity**. Paul’s desire is to hear a report that the believers in Philippi were ***“standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.”***

Next week we will dive into chapter two which is all about humbly serving one another for the sake of unity – listen to 2:2, ***“Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”***

Paul’s specific concern in chapter 4 is that two women are not getting along so he pleads with them to “agree in the Lord.” Then he exhorts a gospel worker in Philippi to “help these women who have labored side by side with me in the gospel.” We are not only called to ***live in unity with one another but to help each other reach that place of agreeing in the Lord***. We will see next week that the key to that is the same focus we’ve had all along: to fill our minds with Christ – to adopt His mind as our own and take the attitude of a servant.

Unity in the church is not a small issue. It is arguably the central concern of the book of Ephesians and is certainly a prominent theme here in Philippians. There were **many things in the first century that threatened to divide a church** – one of them being the ongoing battle over how much of the Jewish law Christian believers should still obey. Some loved their old traditions related to eating kosher and celebrating momentous milestones like the circumcision of baby boys.

Can we relate to this? Being attached to ***some of our old traditions*** and maybe struggling to get along with those who don’t share our same allegiance to them? It’s not that there is anything wrong with old traditions – some may be wonderful. But the problem comes in when we are more committed to our old traditions than we are to preserving unity in our church. “But we’ve always done it this way!”

Did you know that **Sunday School** is a rather modern invention?

* It was started in the 1780s in England to educate children who had to work all week to help them learn how to read. So originally, Sunday School was an educational outreach to children who otherwise would get no education and it was intentionally reserved for those who could demonstrate that they were poor and thereby “deserving.”
* Many believe that Sunday Schools were the precursor to all public education!
* For most of the history of Sunday School it was on Sunday afternoon or evening or even on weekday evenings. It was not until the 1930s and 40s that the innovation was introduced to do Sunday School on Sunday mornings. But even then it was primarily an outreach.
* The church I grew up at in the suburbs of Chicago was started, like many churches in the early 1950s, by first offering a Sunday School for children in a local park center. They gathered and taught children for two full years before having their first official worship service!

My point in sharing this is that ***what we consider time-honored traditions are actually fairly recent adaptations***. Simply understanding history should make us humble and flexible as it relates to the programs and traditions we choose to fight over. But above all, the Gospel should motivate us to **prize our unity and be willing to make adjustments** to more effectively reach our ever-changing culture.

***Are we loving each other with an increasing commitment to unity?*** Are we willing to adjust “how we’ve always done things” in order to “stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel”? I’m not thinking of any program in particular and I’m not picking on Sunday School – my experience so far at Oakwood has been very encouraging with the flexibility and unified team spirit here among the Ministry Team Leaders. May that continue as we acknowledge that we’re all on the same team, working toward the same end!

In fact, one of my prayerful goals for the next couple of years is to **connect with the other churches in Tampa** that stand on the authority of the Bible and preach the Gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. May the Lord stir the hearts of His people in different denominations and different cultures to come together so that our words and actions will match as we proclaim the Gospel of God’s power to reconcile and unite us! **May we “all be one so that the world may believe that” Jesus is the One sent by God to save sinners.**

Growing believers are living with an increasingly commitment to holiness, loving with an increasing commitment to unity and finally are **laboring with an increasing commitment to Gospel ministry**. ***“Striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.”***

What Paul is referring to here is the repeated theme in Philippians about the advance of the Gospel. It should be our common mission and vision to move forward with the Gospel so that more people can hear and respond to this life-changing good news. We should be striving side by side – laboring together in the harvest fields of the Lord.

I don’t know about you, but I am excited about Fall Fest! From the reports I’ve heard it as already become a fun and fruitful tradition here at Oakwood and in the community. What I am most excited about is the gospel partnership I see happening with this! A community group of young adults laboring alongside our Oakwood Cares team, supported by elders and deacons, prayed for by our faithful prayer warriors. Praise the Lord for the joy of unified ministry!

We should add an important line after these three commitments of a growing Christian: **NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS**. We should be growing in holiness of life, the unity of love and the labor of the gospel no matter what kind of opposition we meet. Look at v. 28 ***“Striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction but of your salvation, and that from God. 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.”***

When Gospel proclamation increases, opposition also increases. This is what Jesus experienced. It is what the apostles experienced. And it has been the common experience of believers throughout history. Great movements of the Holy Spirit tend to be followed by severe seasons of persecution. But imagine the devil’s frustration that those persecutions don’t end up slowing the gospel down at all, but actually multiply gospel workers and fertilize the harvest fields.

So we need not fear persecution and opposition. We ought not seek it out. But we need not fear it when it comes. And we are foolish to think that it will not come for us, even here in America. Dear friends, it is only a matter of time. So let’s get to work, laboring with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength to sow gospel seeds and water the fields while we enjoy the freedom to do so. And let’s encourage and prepare one another to stand firm as bold witnesses for Jesus no matter what happens.

The fearlessness of believers is a sign of God’s hand. It is a sign, according to v. 28, of true faith in a Christian. And it is a sign to those who oppose the gospel of their impending doom. When a believer stands firm in the face of persecution – the joy of the Lord radiating from them even in the face of death – it is a clear sign to the persecutors that they are on the wrong side, the losing side.

Do you know the song, ***“I have decided to follow Jesus”***? Do you know the story behind it? It sounds like a cheerful church song for children, but it did not begin that way. In the late 1800s there was a remarkable **missionary movement in northern India**, the result of an influx of missionaries from Wales, England, Australia and the United States. Northern India was (as some places still are) militantly Hindu and had been closed to the Gospel. But through a partnership of western missionaries and native Indians, hundreds of Gospel workers boldly entered this harvest field, though many faced severe persecution.

**One Welsh missionary** had endured terrible persecution, but then he came to a particularly brutal head-hunting village in the province of Asam in Northeastern India. There he had his first converts as a man named Nokseng along with his wife and two children heard and responded to the Good News of Jesus Christ. Wanting to make an example of this family, the village chief called the tribe together and demanded that the man renounce his faith, threatening to kill his children before him if he refused.

Nokseng stood firm in the face of this terrible decision, saying ***“I have decided to follow Jesus and there is no turning back.”*** His two children were shot with arrows. Again the chief gave Nokseng a choice – deny your faith in Jesus or watch your wife die. Nokseng responded, ***“The world can be behind me but the cross is still before me.”*** And they killed his wife.

Finally, threatened with the loss of his own life, the brave believer said, ***“Though no one is here to go with me, still I will follow Jesus.”*** And Nokseng followed his wife and children into glory. Some versions of the story say that Nokseng actually sang these phrases. Whether or not that is true, his words did inspire what has become the famous song, “I have decided to follow Jesus – no turning back, no turning back.”

There was a man and his family who teach us what it means to stand firm, to stand boldly, no matter what happens, “Not frightened in anything by your opponents.”

As it turned out, when the Welsh missionary returned to this tribe in Assam, he found that most of the village had since become Christians – being so moved by the firm resolution of this man and his family and the way that he died for his new beliefs. The fearlessness and boldness of these believers was a clear sign to the villagers that God was truly at work in them. And it was a sign to them that they were in danger of condemnation from this holy and almighty God.

Brothers and sisters, we need not fear persecution and opposition. Nothing can stop the advance of the Gospel or silence its power.

So. ***Do you see these things increasing in your life?*** Are you living with increasing holiness? Are you growing in love and working for unity in the church here? Are you increasingly committed to the labor of Gospel ministry? May we put our hands to the plow together and WORK together to make progress toward maturity in Christ!

Let’s pray.

- disciples make progress "for your progress"

- joy in Christ fuels our progress "glory in Christ"

- other believers help us make progress "striving side by side"

- the battle is to believe the Gospel – “striving for the faith”

- suffering can help us make progress IF we see it as a gift of fellowship with Christ "for the sake of Christ"

Description of a Growing Follower of Jesus:

* Increasing Holiness – “manner of life worthy of the gospel”
* Increasing Unity – “one spirit, one mind”
* Increasing Ministry – “striving for the faith of the gospel”
* Increasing Boldness – “not frightened in anything”
* Increasing Joy, even in persecution – “granted to you to suffer for his sake”