

Series: “‘Valuable’ Wisdom for a Church on the ‘Move’”

Sermon: “Sacrifice”

Text: Philippians 1:12-30

RGJR/FBCCS/9-20-20 UNEDITED

- The IRS has had some problems defining a “church” consistently for tax-exempt purposes. Some court cases suggest a church is a “denomination or sect.” Another requires it to be defined as “an otherwise qualified organization that brings people together as the principle means of accomplishing its exempt purposes.” And, a third definition sometimes used says, “to be a “church” a religious organization must engage in the administration of sacerdotal functions and the conduct of religious worship in accordance with the tenets and practices of a particular religious body.”
- Through the years, some have defined a gathering group as a church by the requirements that the Word is preached and the sacraments, of course as they define them, are “properly” administered.
- One historian summarizes that the Reformer, Martin Luther, taught there are 7 characteristics of a “church.” As I was researching this, I was surprised how much in agreement I found myself with #7 which no one else seemed to emphasize or even list. Here are Luther’s 7 characteristics: The Word, Baptism, The Lord’s Supper, Discipline Biblical Offices, Worship and (BINGO!) **#7 SUFFERING!**
- Let’s recognize that it can be difficult to write a perfect definition of “church” especially when we are working with an English word standing for words in another language.
- This attempt to define church is further complicated when biblical theology comes into view. Is church a *local* thing or a *universal* body of all believers from all ages—or both?
- As difficult as it is to write a legal or theological definition of church, “church” is one of those things most of us think we know when we see it. What this means is we each tend to define “church” because of some concrete and abstract ideas we sometimes hold without even knowing we hold them explicitly.

Series: “‘Valuable’ Wisdom for a Church on the ‘Move’”

Sermon: “Sacrifice”

Text: Philippians 1:12-30

RGJR/FBCCS/9-20-20 UNEDITED

- That’s OK. There are many true things we truly know this way. As scientist and philosopher, Michael Polanyi convinces me while arguing with fellow scientists often, “***We know more than we can say.***” There is real truth we know *tacitly* rather than explicitly.
- Let’s make the exercise even more difficult. Granting most of us define “church” implicitly, and sometimes not even being aware of what constitutes our implicit definition, (you’ll have to go with me on this for a minute)—assuming this is true, how much more difficult would it then be to define a “**GOOD**” church???
- Maybe the 1<sup>st</sup> Church of Jerusalem would have defined it as a church that takes care of its widows—that is until it can’t do that because it is scattered.
- Maybe the Ephesians would have defined it by what the Apostle Paul wrote in the fourth chapter of their letter—gifts in operation, preparing people for service—so the body is built up—until there is unity in faith—maturity and the measure of the fullness of Christ. But what about the widows? They were, other than the proclamation of the Gospel, maybe the next most important thing the Jerusalem believers took care of. Maybe Paul wrote Timothy to take care of that oversight in being a good church in Ephesus????
- When I was growing up in Gilead Baptist Church on Fort Street in Detroit, the lesson I caught about what makes a “good church” had to do with having an outstanding building. I remember most the efforts to raise funds to have the most magnificent edifice around town. I remember my parents trying to participate in what the pastor said would make that church a good church by buying church-backed bonds on a not to big income. To this day, the double height marble walls remain pristine at the front of the Auditorium and in the foyer. The solid oak pews and joinery are still there as well.

Series: “‘Valuable’ Wisdom for a Church on the ‘Move’”

Sermon: “Sacrifice”

Text: Philippians 1:12-30

RGGJR/FBCCS/9-20-20 UNEDITED

There are very different people using those pews now. Was it a “good” church? It certainly lasted architecturally—almost like a Baptist cathedral might.

- At Temple Baptist church—my next church and the church I grew up in “good” was measured differently. Good was doing what the revered “Dr. Vick” said we should do not because he was a dictator at all but because that’s what a “good” church did. “Good” was behaving as teenagers so that head deacon “Bernie,” who hadn’t been inside the auditorium to hear a sermon for years, didn’t catch you by the scruff of your neck and blast you with the fear of losing your salvation because as a teen you were skipping church. Yes, as I remember it a *good* church for Temple was mostly *good* people who behaved in good ways.
- And you know what? People have heard the Gospel and trusted Jesus in all three of the types of churches defined by the IRS. People have been saved in Lutheran churches. People have believed for eternal life in Gilead Baptist Church and Temple Baptist church—I am living proof of that!
- I have been part of Southern Baptist churches Fundamentalist Baptist churches, a Church of God church for a bit in KY, an Episcopal church, a wonderful Anglican charismatic church in Oxford, non-denominational churches, and in some sense also Methodist churches and Presbyterian churches while studying at different schools even Roman Catholic churches while growing up and a Jewish Temple.
- In all of these I list, I heard enough of the Scriptures—even was sent of the right course unwittingly by the Jewish Rabbi talking about “Meshiach”—that I could have come to know Jesus if I had pursued the truth. Did this make them all “good churches?”

Series: “‘Valuable’ Wisdom for a Church on the ‘Move’”

Sermon: “Sacrifice”

Text: Philippians 1:12-30

RGJR/FBCCS/9-20-20 UNEDITED

- They all believed at least tacitly—at least implicitly that they were working toward the metrics of being a “good” church. Were they?
- What is a church? What is a good church? Could we say it in short indicative, declarative, concrete statements? Would we all agree? If not, who should say what will be a **good** FBC?
- I am asking these questions to make more explicit that we hold implicit metrics and expectations for a “good” church that may differ.
- We are potentially embarking on an exciting journey catalyzed by the ON-PURPOSE sale of what has been the most concrete symbol of “church” for many of us in FBC for years.
- Last week the questions I raised might have made you wonder if there is some big hidden problem you don’t know about. A few of you asked me about that.
- Let me clarify. We are walking through the letter to the *Philippians* together mainly as an inoculation of truth against problems that can come when we realize **“Hey! I’m not even sure we define what a church is the same way! Hey! I’m not sure we all agree on what constitutes a ‘good’ church that we ought to pursue being like in the days ahead.”**
- Talking with some of us, I can tell you we don’t all agree. BUT! That is to be expected! That is the norm for things that you can, “know more about that you can talk about.”
- That is why I believe God has given us this wonderful opportunity in a wonderfully liminal time to be alive as believers to think through, once again, what we believe a church to be and what makes it a “good” church—TOGETHER!
- We reached verse 11 of *Philippians* 1 last week. In that opening section I emphasized that the **discernment** we need for this exciting

journey together isn't human discernment. It doesn't derive from personal smarts, individual accomplishments and worldly accolades. It doesn't come from ministerial titles or degrees.

- Look at verse 9, 10 and 11 again. **READ Philippians 1:9-11**
- Paul prays that this church will have **discernment** it needs because of loving each other in truth and below the veneer of surface appearances. I suggested that churches often stay in existence by maintaining a surface appearance of unity rather than the depth of unity Paul has in mind for the Gospel mission he knows has been given by God to this church in Philippi. A mission they wholeheartedly share with him—Paul.
- They need real *discernment*. They need it NOT because they are a BAD church but because they are a “**GOOD**” church. They are a good church, at least by the metric that they have heard the call to the MISSION of God in the world and have joined it as much as they know how.
- Being on God's mission is not everything that defines a “good” church. However, a church that exists for its own sake (as a human temple monument to human beings) and does not exist for the sake of the world God loves and is on a redemptive mission since Genesis 3 to save—is not going to fit the bill of being a “good” church.
- Philippi is a “good” church by this measure. I picked it to study at this time in our church life together because I think we are a “good” church by this measure. At least, we are as “good” a church by the measure of being on God's mission as any I have known.
- We are not a perfect church by the measure of missionality. I bet Philippi wasn't either. That is partly why Paul wrote what he wrote to them in this letter and why I am walking through it with you these days.

Series: “‘Valuable’ Wisdom for a Church on the ‘Move’”

Sermon: “Sacrifice”

Text: Philippians 1:12-30

RGJR/FBCCS/9-20-20 UNEDITED

- Another reason he wrote it was because “good” churches on God’s mission always risk being attacked. Stick your head up and be different and someone—in this case, the Evil One, will want to chop off your head.
- How will Satan attack? Sometimes by polluting the teaching of God’s truth from God’s Word. We must be diligently on guard against that as we move forward.
- Other times, he will attack, as he was in the Philippian church. He will work to create conflict and division between people in the body that is supposed to be united on the mission. The Philippian church would not be able to be a “good” church on mission if conflict and division were allowed to continue.
- There is almost nothing that produces conflict in human beings more easily and more quickly than trying to nail down explicitly important ideas and values that are held implicitly.
- This is why the Philippians and the FBCers both needed and need LOVING DISCERNMENT now more than ever. That may still sound like I am saying that they and we need concrete, explicit answers now more than ever. I am not. Paul is not either. We will see an example of what he has in mind in Philippians 2, Lord willing. But, for now, please keep the word HUMILITY in mind and you won’t go wrong while waiting to get to chapter 2.
- Today’s verses—the rest of chapter 1 in *Philippians*—is where I surprisingly but joyfully connect with Luther’s 7<sup>th</sup> characteristic of a church—I would even say of a “good” church. Do you remember what it was? (***Suffering!***) I will break these verses into 4 sections by paragraphs and very quickly summarize each.
- Look at the first paragraph in verse 12-14 please **READ Philippians 1:12-14**

Series: “‘Valuable’ Wisdom for a Church on the ‘Move’”

Sermon: “Sacrifice”

Text: Philippians 1:12-30

RGJR/FBCCS/9-20-20 UNEDITED

- The world tells us “bad circumstances” equals a sign of bad karma, bad, juju, bad choices, bad person—something bad, right? Bad circumstances means something has gone wrong that needs to be fixed and smart, capable humans can fix it!
- What does James in his letter tell us about such things? **“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trial of many kinds...”** He goes on to explain the joy is because you know God is at work developing your faith for his glory when bad things come along.
- Paul, here in this letter agrees wholeheartedly with James and wants the Philippians to know the truth about “bad circumstances” as well.
- God has used the bad circumstance of arrest and imprisonment for Paul to advance the Gospel mission in places in could otherwise never have reached.
- Watching this, the brothers around Paul have been emboldened by seeing the power of the Gospel at work when courageously preached under bad circumstances. The Gospel army is stronger because of God’s work in things that may appear to have gone absolutely wrong.
- Loving discernment will be required to see this reality of how God works in “good” ways not just in Apostles but also in a “good” church, through what appear to be difficult—even bad—circumstances.
- Why is “loving discernment” so necessary? Well, one reason is that in difficult times there will inevitable be confusion—especially RELATIONAL confusion. Look at verses 15-18 please. **READ**  
**Philippians 1:15-18a**
- Did you catch that? There is relational confusion in Philippi—even in the “good” Philippian Church. There is *envy* that Paul is listened to

more than others are and *rivalry* created by factions triangulating to build power alliances.

- There are those that are ostensibly part of the Gospel mission of God but are really on their own mission to build their own towers and raise their own names for personal significance. They preach Christ not out of love but rather selfish ambition. Yikes! How will one know? It will take a great deal of *loving discernment*.
- But, the funny thing is this doesn't even bug Paul all that much. Why? Because even some preaching out of selfishness preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ and people can believe it and receive the gift of eternal life. Just as when I heard a Jewish Rabbi speak of Messiah people listening might have been moved to seek that Messiah—God can work through the most “messed up” of human means. We will see that again so clearly, when we return to *Genesis*, Lord willing.
- I don't spend my time trying to correct all the other churches who think they are doing “good” church even when it seems obvious to me they are doing it for selfish ambition. I have more important things to focus on—the Gospel mission!
- I do spend my time digging below the surface in love to discern what the truth is when confused, even sinful human relationships are causing conflict in this body that divides us and hurts that Gospel Mission.
- One side not here is that it will often be very difficult to know “why” someone is doing what they are doing in the name of Jesus. Motives can be hidden and confusing. It is not our main assignment to try to figure them out. It is our assignment to instead to do whatever it takes—to give whatever it requires—to stay on mission with God.
- This is a source of Joy for Paul as he suffers bad circumstances and ministers in the midst of confusing relationships. Just how far he



takes this principle of suffering and sacrifice is what he emphasizes next in verses 18b-26. **READ Philippians 1:18b-26**

- Note carefully that even though the Philippians are nowhere near Paul geographically their prayers for Paul make them partners in what matters most the Gospel Mission of Jesus Christ. We will find out later that their money also makes them partners.
- Paul knows one thing for sure here. He will be delivered from these sacrificial circumstances of suffering. He will be delivered either by being set free or by being executed—either way he is free. The preferred release because it would mean being in the presence of the One who means absolutely everything to him, is to be martyred.
- In our world—a culture like ours that tries to claw out every last moment of physical life. The inconsistent, often unscientific and nonsensical Covid response of people without eternal life once again brings this absolute value out in the open. Do we really think we can make it so no one dies??!! These verses would have doctors sending Paul for a psych evaluation! Paul is not suicidal. Paul simply knows reality and lives life by what is real.
- Of course, this raises a question every time I read it. What about me? Do I have this perception of reality? Would I rather die and go be with Jesus than go on living? Would I be willing to sacrifice my life for the Gospel Mission? Am I willing to sacrifice much at all—comfort, preferences, control, power, significance, the riches and stuff of this world for the Gospel Mission?
- That is a critical question we often may not like to face. However, God sometimes puts whole “good” churches in circumstances where they are made to face that question explicitly. There can be big disagreement—far from one mind and purpose—over the answer.

Series: “‘Valuable’ Wisdom for a Church on the ‘Move’”

Sermon: “Sacrifice”

Text: Philippians 1:12-30

RGJR/FBCCS/9-20-20 UNEDITED

- Look, is it just those we call “missionaries” who are supposed to sacrifice for the Gospel Mission? You guys have shown you know that is not the case. We are all called to that mission and to sacrifices of different kinds for it. I believe we are now being given the JOYFUL opportunity to sacrifice—give up even more for that mission as a “good” church.
- Being part of a church can be enjoyable. Being part of a “good” church called to sacrifice can still be enjoyable.
- It may mean not being together in the way we like but still being partners in the Gospel mission. It may mean actually being together in wonderful fellowship where we can hug and meet each other’s needs in tangible ways. Paul liked that as well according to these verses. But being a “good” church together does not require this.
- I can never forget my young, sometimes theological friend—Bonhoeffer’s statement, “*It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God’s Word and sacrament. Not all Christians receive this blessing. The imprisoned, the sick, the scattered lonely, the proclaimers of the Gospel in heathen lands stand alone.*”
- It is only a special grace gift that we get to experience being together. It is not something we are promised by God. It is not something we are meant to create and cling to at all costs. It is a special gift that we can sometimes get used to and begin to **expect**. This expectation can then distract from the Gospel mission if we seek it more than the *sacrifice* that marks a church as “good.”
- So what is to come from this willingness to sacrifice as Paul is doing for the Gospel Mission? Look at the last verses in the chapter 27-30.

**READ Philippians 1:27-30**

- I am always surprised when so many profess to know with absolute certainty that God has shown them detailed plans for their life—and often for mine! Here is an Apostle on the brink of execution and he is limited to a clarity that only allows him to say, “***Whatever happens...***” He doesn’t even have the exact vision of even life or death. Much less has he “heard from God” the explicit details of the next church he will plant—where—when and how!
- What matters most is that the Philippians will, as a “good” church” live in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This often is turned into a moralistic statement that they will be good little boys and girls. In this context, a “manner worthy” is a willingness to sacrifice their lives for it!
- If they will live with this sacrificial value for the Gospel Mission, they will have no problem standing firm in ONE spirit, fighting as ONE man for the mission. This will be a sign—a metric—that they are indeed a “good” church—that is that they will be united in their willingness to sacrifice anything of this life up to their very lives for the Gospel Mission they are on together.
- ***Unity is easy when what matters most to everyone is God’s Gospel mission even at the cost of my life!***
- Look at 29 and 30 again please. Here is one of those “gifts” God gives us that we don’t always see as a gift. God made it a gift that we could have everlasting LIFE by simply believing.
- Along with that gift comes another that has been “granted” to us and that means, “graciously bestowed on us. It is the “gift” of the ***privilege*** to suffer—to sacrifice—for the sake of the Gospel Mission of Jesus Christ.

Series: “‘Valuable’ Wisdom for a Church on the ‘Move’”

Sermon: “Sacrifice”

Text: Philippians 1:12-30

RGJR/FBCCS/9-20-20 UNEDITED

- Look, by normal metrics of this world and I would say by the normal metrics of what most people think of as a “good” church, what Paul is saying here is CRAZY!
- I’m not in prison awaiting possible execution, as was Paul. You likely aren’t either wherever you are listening to this. We aren’t even imminently facing the persecution that seems was coming on that “good” Philippian church. We are just selling a building we are used to and comfortable with, by choice, during a pandemic.
- Will it be difficult to figure out what is next for FBC? Yes
- Will that mean we have made a mistake? No
- Will the choices and process make some of us uncomfortable? Yes
- Will there be confusion? Yes
- Will some people get angry? yes
- Will we be truly unified? Maybe
- There are many potentially uncomfortable questions we could ask for which I don’t have ready answers.
- I do have an answer for one question: Will there be sacrifice? Yes, there will be a call for each of us to sacrifice our lives for the Gospel Mission. Will we do that—walk the promised heir up the mountain not knowing what will happen until we say yes to raising the knife?
- Will we do it? This opportunity to say yes to sacrifice is a glorious gift and a joyful opportunity God has given us according to Paul.
- I can’t tell you everything that defines a church or a “good” church in concrete, simple sentences.
- One thing I can tell you is that a “good” church is a church in which people are united by sacrificing their lives for what matters most, the Gospel Mission of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- If we get this value of sacrifice for the Gospel right, getting the future right will be possible. Without it, to some degree we will play church.