

# SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

## Colonists of Christ Second Sunday of Advent December 6, 2009

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Philippians 1:3-11

**I** thank my God every time I remember you, 4 constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, 5 because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. 7 It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. 8 For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. 9 And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight 10 to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, 11 having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Last Sunday we looked at the impact Jesus' coming had on the church at Thessalonica. This morning I'd like us to focus on Paul's very special relationship with the Christians in Philippi. Philippi was actually the first city in Macedonia Paul and his companions Luke, Silas and Timothy visited. You may recall that they had been traveling in Asia Minor, but God gave Paul a vision of a man in Macedonian costume pleading with him to come over to Macedonia and help them. Philippi was their first stop. It was the leading city of the district of Macedonia and a colony of Rome. But Philippi enjoyed a special status that only a handful of other cities outside of Italy enjoyed. It was a status that made it an outpost of Rome itself. If you became a resident of Philippi, you were

automatically given Roman citizenship. You were exempt from the local taxes. The city was autonomous from the local Macedonian governor.

The people in Philippi were mostly gentile Romans who worshiped the usual Roman deities. Worship of the emperor, the “savior” was also very popular, since Philippi considered itself what one commentator called “a little Rome”. Apparently there were very few Jews because there was no synagogue. In Acts 16, Luke tells us that on their first Sabbath in the city, Paul and his companions found a place where Jewish people gathered for prayer near a river west of the city. This is where Paul’s very special relationship with the people who became the Philippian Christians began. Luke describes what happened: **“A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. 15 When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.’ And she prevailed upon us.” (Acts 16:14-15 NRSV)**

Lydia was the first person in Europe to become a Christian. By directing Paul and his companions to Philippi, he was moving the gospel towards the center of the Roman Empire. But I’d like us to focus on Lydia’s words to Paul. They are the seed of Paul’s special relationship with the Christians in Philippi: **“If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.”** Lydia’s desire was to be judged faithful. Her faith in the Lord Jesus Christ compelled her to open her home to Paul and his group. As Luke says, **“she urged us”** and **“she prevailed upon us.”** Lydia had a resolute desire to help in the spread of the gospel in whatever way possible. This was the attitude that built the church in Philippi. Paul and his companions used Lydia’s home as a base of operations. Through her generosity, they didn’t have to work to support themselves financially, but were able to devote themselves completely to evangelism and teaching. This support of Paul and his companions didn’t stop when they left Philippi later. Though they were not a wealthy church, they continued to support them financially.

The desire of people in Philippi to work for the spread of the gospel is what gave them a special place in Paul’s heart. He describes their special relationship in our second reading this morning when he says he prays constantly with joy for them **“because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now”**. By “sharing in the gospel” Paul means not simply giving him and his companions financial support and a place to live. He means they actually entered into the ministry of evangelism, teaching and strategizing for the spread of the gospel with them. Later in the letter, he calls the Philippians his “co-workers” in the gospel. This is not simply a figure of speech.

Paul writes to them from prison that **“It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.”** We don't know exactly where Paul was imprisoned, but the Philippians did, because later in the letter we learn that they sent Epaphroditus, one of their members, to him with gifts and news. Epaphroditus dropped his life in Philippi to go to Paul and be there with him during his confinement. He's sharing in God's grace with Paul in his imprisonment.

They also shared with Paul in **“the defense and confirmation of the gospel”**. These words have very specific legal meanings. **“Defense”** is the verbal proclamation and argumentation for what God is doing in the coming of Christ, and in his death for sin and resurrection to eternal life, and the coming of his kingdom of perfect righteousness and peace. The Philippians are telling friends and neighbors the good news of God in Christ, just as Paul had done with them. **“Confirmation”** is a legal term for “providing evidence”. In the case of the gospel, it is the supernatural experience of Christ which exactly confirms the verbal message: Christ confirms the verbal proclamation of the gospel by revealing himself to people through faith, as he did when he **“opened [Lydia's] heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.”** Undoubtedly Paul has Lydia's coming to faith in mind when he writes in this morning's reading, **“because of your sharing in the gospel from the *first day* until now. 6 I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.”** He makes it clear that Lydia didn't begin the work—God began it supernaturally by opening her heart to the Lord Jesus. **“Confirmation”** also means miraculous signs, one of which eventually caused such an uproar in Philippi that Paul and his group were asked by the city fathers to leave.

Paul's joy in praying for and thinking of the Philippians comes from their wholehearted participation in the risks and the rewards of spreading the glories of the gospel of Christ. Though he writes from prison, Paul's letter to the Philippians is sometimes called the “letter of joy” because it's so full of Paul's own joy and his commands to the Philippians to rejoice in Christ. But like all the infant churches in the New Testament, the Philippians face challenges, and Paul warns them about them in chapter 3. On the one hand are Jewish people who will insist that they come under the Old Testament law and become Jews. On the other is the constant pull from the pagan gentile culture to conform by participating in the various cults, engaging in immorality, and worshiping the emperor. The two temptations are empty Jewish religious observance and convenient pagan self-indulgence.

In chapter 3 verses 17-19 Paul offers himself and his companions as examples to strengthen the Philippians against these challenges. He focuses his readers on the central reality of the Christian life, the cross. Life in Christ comes from God-centered obedience and nowhere else: **“Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. 18 For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. 19 Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.”** The alternatives are clear: on the one hand living according to one’s own desires, whether they be rigidly religious or grossly self-indulgent, either of which leads to destruction, and crucifying one’s own desires and living for Christ on the other.

What Paul says next is at the heart of his relationship with the Philippian Christians. It’s the center of Paul’s vision of God’s eternal purpose in the coming of Christ to Philippi and to the world. It’s the key to understanding how the Philippians entered so willingly into the work of the gospel alongside Paul. We’ve just heard how Paul laments **“with tears”** that both religious Jews and pagan gentiles as facing eternal destruction because **“their minds set on earthly things”**, namely their own religious performance or their own desires.

Then he uses the special status of the city of Philippi in the Roman Empire to describe the Philippian Christians’ situation in this world and the next. He says, **“But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”** His point is that **“their minds are set on earthly things, but our citizenship is in heaven.”** Paul’s point would have been crystal clear to his readers because the emperor, who was worshiped as a god, was called “savior”. Residents of Philippi were citizens of Rome, not of Macedonia. Unlike the people who lived in the surrounding territories, the citizens of Philippi enjoyed privileges and culture that were distinctly Roman.

In contrast to the emperor’s merely human authority over the empire, Paul says the universe is ruled by the Lord God who created it. As yet, the universe is in rebellion against him. Each Christian congregation is a colony of heaven, just as Philippi was a colony of Rome. Christians are **“citizens of heaven.”** Christian colonists enjoy privileges and a way of life the surrounding people do not and cannot. They enjoy communion with their creator and savior. He has set them gloriously free from the bondage of their own desires and sinful and destructive rebellion. He shares his truth with them: the reality of the purpose for human life. In his Son, whom he has designated the rightful ruler of the world, he guarantees them an eternity of life with him in his glorious kingdom.

The responsibility of each colony and each colonist is to acknowledge the rightful authority of Christ the Lord over his or her life by daily repenting of our rebellion against his rightful authority. It's to live in obedience to him, which inevitably means the defense and confirmation of the gospel: announcing and demonstrating his authority, his love and his grace to those in the surrounding world. This is what Paul and the Philippians did. Roman colonists didn't look to the surrounding environment for their meaning, identity, character, and purpose. They looked to Rome. In the same way, colonists of Christ don't look to the surrounding environment for their meaning, identity, character or purpose. They look to Christ.

We are colonists of Christ if we have acknowledged that he has the legitimate authority over us, and that our constant drive to throw off his authority and live as we want is sin. We are his colonists if we have repented of our rebellion and invited him to take us over by the power of his Holy Spirit. We are his colonists if we have joyously received his forgiveness and the imprint of his power and love in our hearts that comes from the assurance of eternal life in his future perfect kingdom.

As colonists of Christ, we have been given a happy responsibility. We are to share in the risks and the rewards of sharing Christ with others. We are to proclaim the eternal authority, holiness and love of God in Christ to those around us. When we do, we will share in God's own joy, as Paul and the Philippians did as God opens peoples' hearts to receive the rightful authority of their King and Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is our meaning, our purpose, our character and the determiner of our behavior. We are colonists for Christ.

Let us pray.