

### Sermon Summary #11

#### Holding Fast to the Word of Life Philippians 2:14-18

I don't know how you feel about this, but there have been times during the course of my life and ministry in the local church when I seriously wondered if it might be the wise thing to do simply to *quit and withdraw into the isolation and seclusion of a monastery*. As boring and outrageous as that may sound to you, at times it has struck me as profoundly appealing.

It shouldn't take a genius to figure out why. We today, no less so than the Philippians in the first century, live in what Paul refers to as **"a crooked and twisted generation"** (v. 15). I'll have more to say about those words in a moment, but for now I think you'll agree with me that they accurately describe our world in 2013. It is morally crooked, intellectually twisted, spiritually degenerate, and in countless ways dark and ugly. Everywhere I turn I see one more disheartening and disgusting example of the devaluation of human life, the distortion of human sexuality, the corruption of our financial institutions, greed, arrogance, selfishness run amok, and I find myself saying: "I want out of here. Just get me out of here." Or, in my more spiritually reflective moments my response is simply: "Come quickly, Lord Jesus!"

I promise you that I will never yield to that temptation. I'm not going anywhere. Darn it! But seriously, many in the history of the Christian church have said, "I've had enough; I can't function any longer in this cesspool of society; I can't live a godly life surrounded by so much ungodliness and temptation." In response, they've quit their jobs, abandoned their families, said good-bye to the church and run off to the desert or the wilderness.

The so-called "monastics" believed that withdrawal or retreat from the world would protect them from the temptations of both society and the flesh. They believed that if they were going to avoid being corrupted by "a crooked and twisted generation," the only solution was to run away from it and, in effect, hide.

One such monastic named Antony (250-356) fled into the desert where he eventually barricaded himself in an abandoned fort for twenty years. Perhaps the most famous of all monastics was a man named Simon the Stylite (390-460) who spent 10 years alone in a cell in Antioch. In 423 he began living at the top of a 60 ft. pillar. For 30 years he sat on a platform a mere 3 ft. in diameter! His example inspired countless others.

Now, I've never been tempted to take it that far, but ***the prospect of isolation from the world and thus insulation against all its temptations and corruption has at times struck me as appealing***. So why, then, have I never given it serious consideration? Aside from the fact that I'm married and had two daughters to raise, aside from the fact that there are some things about our world that I actually enjoy, like baseball and movies and college football and hanging out with friends, why was this never a legitimate option?

The answer, in part, is found here in Philippians 2:14-18, especially in vv. 15-16. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's be sure we know what Paul is saying that leads up to his point about our responsibility in this world, in this crooked and twisted generation of ours.

#### *Grumbling and Questioning (vv. 14-15a)*

It almost seems that in commanding us not to grumble and question or dispute he might as well have commanded us not to breathe. Such things are so natural to fallen, sinful people like us. But Paul has something very specific in mind in using these words.

His language echoes the OT description of the Israelites who grumbled, murmured and complained against Moses following the exodus from Egypt and during their wandering in the wilderness (see Exodus 15-17; Numbers 14-17; 1 Corinthians 10:10). In fact, ***virtually everything Paul says in vv. 14-15 is designed to contrast how the Jewish***

*people acted during their wilderness wandering and how we are supposed to act today.* Let me give you some examples.

**First**, the Israelites grumbled and complained against both God and Moses, insisting that they had been brought out of Egypt to die in the wilderness. “Better to go back into Egypt, even if it means slavery; at least there we would have enough food and water!” The bottom line was that they didn’t believe God’s promises to them. They let their challenging circumstances drown out the voice of God’s covenant promise that he would bring them into a land flowing with milk and honey.

I don’t think Paul is suggesting that the Philippians were grumbling about God or questioning his goodness or whether or not he was trustworthy. **Their “grumbling” was against one another.** It amounted to complaining and gossiping and slandering one another. It’s the sort of “grumbling” that contributes to the breakdown of unity in the body of Christ, the very thing Paul had earlier called them to pursue and cultivate (see 1:27 and 2:2). The “questioning” here in v. 14 is probably a reference to petty arguments over matters that simply didn’t matter. There was division in the church because of silly disputes over secondary doctrines and personality conflicts.

“Stop it!” says Paul.

The **second** indication that Paul has in mind OT Israel in the wilderness is from what he says in v. 15. The word translated “without blemish” was used to describe the perfection of the sacrificial lamb in Leviticus (see Exodus 29:1 and 1 Peter 1:19). And the Israelites were “children of God” whose calling was to “shine as lights” in the Gentile “world”. We read in Isaiah 9:2 – “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.” Israel had been called to serve as “a light for the nations” (Isaiah 42:6b). “I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6b).

And if that weren’t enough, yet a **third** reason we know that Paul is contrasting the failure of OT Israel and the calling that is now on the Christian church is because of this reference to “a crooked and twisted generation” (v. 15). In the OT, Moses used that language to describe Israel herself, not the Gentiles. Listen to the description of Israel in Deuteronomy 32:5 – “They [that is, Israel] have dealt corruptly with him; they are no longer his *children* because they are *blemished*; they are a *crooked and twisted generation*.” But now this applies to the non-Christian world in the midst of which we, the church, the true children of God, are to shine as lights without blemish.

Yes, you are the children of God, says Paul. So live like it! Being the children of God is not wishful thinking: it is rock-solid reality. So let your privileged status as God’s sons and daughters work itself out in the way you conduct yourself.

*Shine as lights in the world (v. 15b)*

Wait a minute! Hold on! To live blamelessly and innocent in the Garden of Eden is one thing. I think I can do that. No problem. To live without blemish in the New Heavens and New Earth I can understand. But here we are being told to live godly and righteous lives “*in the midst of*” this crooked and twisted generation. It is “*among*” such sinfulness that we are to live. As if that weren’t enough, he says at the close of v. 15 that all this righteous living takes place “*in the world,*” not in heaven or on earth behind the closed doors and impenetrable walls of a secluded monastery, nor in the relative safety of a cave in the desert or in a hut in the wilderness.

**No, it is not merely inside a church building like this one. It is not merely within the confines of our own homes in OKC. Rather, it is *right smack dab in the middle* of this perverse and degenerated world of ours! We aren’t told by the apostle to run away from it, or to pretend that it doesn’t exist, or to regard it as better than it is, far less that we should just give up and be conformed to it. No. We are to live this way *right smack dab “in the midst”* of this morally warped and spiritually stupid society of ours.**

*Darn it!* God simply won’t let me quit. He won’t let you quit. He won’t let any of his “children” pull out and hide away. Rather, he says it as clearly as it can be said: “Live as blameless, innocent, blemish free children of God right smack dab in the middle of this crooked and twisted world where you are to “shine as lights” in the darkness.

*Darn it!* God just ruined all my plans for a quiet and safe retirement! There go my plans for finding a home in the mountains or in some remote village along the sea. I had it all worked out. I could finally find peace, away from the moral corruption of society, cut off from the crime and ugliness of life, separate and secluded from the brokenness of human lives and the sadness of human sin and the sorrows that inevitably come from living in this crooked and twisted generation.

*Darn it!*

And please note that this “shining” is not passive, as if in the midst of the darkness you merely stand out or are visible or are morally different from the darkness of the world. No, no, no. ***By your shining you are to dispel the darkness!*** Your godliness is like a beam of light that pierces the night sky and changes the atmosphere. ***You are not simply to be distinguishable from the world around you. You are to illumine that world.*** You and I are not here merely to provide a contrast against the background of moral darkness in our world. Rather, “Christians are to dispel the darkness of evil and ignorance that is everywhere around them” (Hawthorne, 103).

I fear that many Christians have adopted an unbiblical approach to life in OKC, namely, that we are simply to ***quietly tip-toe our way around the wickedness and hope no one notices that we are here.*** Now don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that we should expect to bring complete transformation to our society, as if by our vocal and visible presence we can usher in the consummation of God’s kingdom on earth. That, as you know, awaits the return of Jesus Christ. But we can shine as lights into a life here, and another life there, and by the power of the Spirit bring freedom and forgiveness and hope to those otherwise ensnared in the bondage of guilt and despair.

What does this mean in practical terms?

- What this means is that when gossip reaches your ears you don’t merely play dumb or remain silent but strongly insist that it can do no one any good to perpetuate such rumors.
- It means that in a world where people are obsessed with themselves and material gain you shine forth as one who verbally and visibly treasures Jesus Christ above all else.
- It means that when lies are told you do more than simply walk away; you first speak the truth.
- It means that where you see betrayal, you model loyalty, and where you hear obscene speech, you utter words of encouragement and affirmation, and where you observe stingy self-absorption you shine forth in generosity and sacrifice.
- It means that when racially prejudicial or sexually suggestive comments are made you do not keep your mouth shut but rather call for compassion and sensitivity and purity of heart.
- It means when you are invited to the strip club you don’t stop at saying no but explain why it cheapens and devalues women and is a betrayal of one’s wife and serves only to distort one’s view of the opposite sex.
- It means that when the weak are oppressed you don’t close your eyes but come to their rescue.
- It means that when the disabled are mocked or taken advantage of you run to their defense.
- It means that when people laugh about how they cheated the IRS by evading legitimate taxes you speak up for integrity and honesty, even if it costs you friendships and promotion at work and means that you won’t get invited to join the crowd at the next Thunder game.
- It means that when suffering strikes us all, you do not yield to the ways of the world and become bitter and cynical but instead you shine forth as those who entrust themselves to the goodness and providence of God.

Yes, it's a crooked, twisted, dark, and oftentimes ugly generation in which we live. And yes, God is calling his children to remain within it and shine as lights so that by his power we may, here a little, there a little, dispel the darkness, change lives, and honor the name of Christ.

*Holding Fast to the Word of Life (v. 16)*

**“And how, in heaven’s name, do you expect us to do this, Sam?”** I’m so glad you asked! I want to spend our remaining time together giving you an answer, or I should say, Paul’s answer, or yet again, God’s answer. It’s found in the first half of v. 16.

How do you “shine” in a sick, perverted, darkened world? **By holding fast to the word that gives life!** The key for us is the meaning of the word translated “holding fast.” It can mean to “hold fast” in the sense of guard and protect, but also to “hold forth” in the sense of make known and proclaim. Here, though, there is also the idea of “giving heed to” or “fixing one’s attention upon” (see 1 Timothy 4:16; Acts 3:5). Thus we are to explore it, explain it, embrace it, protect it, offer it to others by making it known, and focus upon it with dedication and devotion.

The “word of life” is both the good news of the gospel of what God has done for sinners in Jesus Christ as well as the word of revelation found in Scripture that explains what that gospel is. It is the word of “life” because it is there that we find truth regarding where life may be found, namely, in Christ. But it is also the word of “life” because it is used of the Spirit to impart new life (1 Peter 1:23-25).

Let me say this with as much force and sincerity as I can. ***The one thing that will prevent your light from being snuffed out by the darkness of this world is holding fast the word of life. The one thing that will protect you from becoming crooked and twisted like the world around you is holding fast to the word of life. The one thing that will guard your heart and ward off the perverse influence of a society such as ours is holding fast the word of life.***

So, I want to take a few minutes and talk to you about what we all must do to “hold fast the word of life,” and in particular ***what this means for how you come into a corporate assembly*** like this where this “word” is proclaimed, explained, and preached. I could talk about numerous ways in which we heed Paul’s counsel, but I want to focus on ***only one dimension*** of what it means to hold fast the word of life. It is perhaps the most important dimension.

In other words, I want to say a few words in closing about ***how you hear or how you listen to God’s Word.*** My suspicion is that most Christians rarely think twice about what they are doing on a Sunday morning and thus rarely if ever take steps to prepare their hearts and minds in advance for that glorious experience. And the simple fact is that if you don’t maintain a diligent and disciplined approach to hearing and responding to God’s Word you won’t shine as lights in this dark and twisted world.

But first, I want to respond to the horribly misleading and distorted perspective that I hear in certain circles of professing Christians today. We are being told that corporate gatherings such as this where Scripture is preached and taught and explained and applied is outdated, ineffective, and even dangerous. I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve either read or heard someone say, “Oh, I don’t need to gather with the church on a Sunday to hear someone preach. That’s so boring. It’s all about one man exercising his spiritual gift while hundreds of others sit passively and do nothing.”

How utterly insane! ***I can’t think of anything more active and engaging and participatory and practical than listening to God’s Word being explained and applied.***

For one thing, **listening to God’s Word is worship!** When you hear a truth from Scripture about God’s love and marvel and perhaps even weep that you are a recipient of God’s saving affection, ***that’s worship!*** When you listen attentively to the truth of divine grace and mercy and your redemption and the forgiveness of sins and you are left breathless that so great a blessing is yours, even though you deserve hell, ***that is worship!*** When you feel conviction for your sin and are called to repentance for having hardened your heart against God, as Scripture pierces through your resistance and shines a light into the darkness of an indifferent soul, ***that is worship!***

I simply don't understand how anyone can suggest that listening to and heeding and thinking over and meditating upon the glorious truths of God's Word is a waste of time, or that it doesn't require energy and focus and is only about the person speaking and not the person hearing. Nonsense!

Consider what Jesus says about hearing the Word in the famous parable of the soils. Each of the four different types of soil is differentiated by how it "hears" the Word of God (see, See Luke 8:12, 13, 14, 15). Thus he concludes with this exhortation: "**Take care then how you hear**, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away." I think he's telling us that if we have a heart devoted to hearing and responding to the Word we will be given understanding and our lives will bear the fruit of godliness.

Why is hearing important? Jesus says that **our salvation depends upon it** (Luke 8:12b). He says in Luke 8:15 that **whether or not we "bear fruit" depends on how we hear**.

*Suggestions for how to hear and "hold fast" the Word of Life*

**Prepare for preaching by praying:** "If you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God" (Proverbs 2:3-5). See Psalm 119:18 and Ephesians 1:17-18.

**Prepare for preaching by resting.** If you find yourself listless on Sunday morning, struggling to stay awake, your mind wandering and your body weak, it may be because I'm boring and not making any sense. If that's true, shame on me. But it may also be because of what you did on Saturday night. I doubt if any parent here today would recommend that their teenager stay out late and indulge themselves in the world when they are scheduled the next morning for the ACT or SAT. But is not the knowledge of the truth of God's Word of infinitely greater value?

**Model for your children how to hear and hold fast the Word of life.** Parents, do you by your own lifestyle teach your children that worship by hearing God's Word is so optional that it doesn't matter whether you come or if you come you come exhausted and distracted and out of a sense of duty rather than delight and joyful anticipation for what God is going to say?

**Hunger for God's Word like you do for your favorite meal** (1 Peter 2:2). If you find yourself already stuffed and not hungry for Scripture you need to ask, "What have I been eating that has dulled my appetite for Scripture?" Listen to what God himself says about his law, his precepts, his commandments in Scripture – "More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward" (Psalm 19:10-11).

**Be teachable, but not gullible. In other words, listen critically** (Acts 17:11).

**Be attentive.** After all, God's Word is your very life (Deut. 32:47).

**Purify your heart and mind before you come to hear** (James 1:21).

"It astonishes me how many Christians watch the same banal, empty, silly, trivial, titillating, suggestive, immodest TV shows that most unbelievers watch - and then wonder why their spiritual lives are weak and their worship experience is shallow with no intensity. If you really want to hear the Word of God the way he means to be heard in truth and joy and power, turn off the television on Saturday night and read something true and great and beautiful and pure and honorable and excellent and worthy of praise (see Philippians 4:8). Then watch your heart unshriveled and begin to hunger for the word of God" (John Piper).

**Hear humbly** (James 1:21). In other words, be open to rebuke. Be open to change. I've known people who come to church *with a chip on their shoulder*, daring the pastor to say something that they disagree with or hoping he will slip up in some way so they can decapitate him after the service. Or they come convinced they are infallible and omniscient and there is nothing more for them to learn. That is not humble listening. Now, it is true that some preachers are dull and ill-informed. Shame on them. If I'm a dufus and say something stupid or misleading or confusing, I'm not asking you to believe me or accept it as God's truth.

**Mingle the Word with faith** (Gal. 3:5; Heb. 4:2). Pray that God would deepen your confidence in what you hear.

**Practice what is preached** (James 1:22).

**Seek the Spirit** (Luke 11:13).

**For heaven's sake, bring a Bible!** Look at it. Read it. Write in it. Labor to cultivate a taste for God's Word, through meditation and memorization. Transformation comes through the renewing of your mind (Rom. 12:1ff.). **Listening, though, is never purely an intellectual exercise. We listen to encounter God. We listen to hear his voice. We listen to experience his love. We listen to have our affections awakened.**

All these points apply equally well to **the songs we sing**. Listen to them. Hear them well. Don't just sing the words in our songs, think about them. Muse on them. Meditate on them. Turn them back into prayer.

And never forget, as someone once wisely said, that **"when the singing is over, worship is not."** It is in our hearing and responding to God's Word, in our reading and rejoicing over its truths, that Christ is adored and honored and his presence intensifies and his preeminence becomes preeminent.

How do we shine as lights in a crooked, dark, degenerate world? We do it by holding fast the Word of Life. Hold it firmly. Keep your eyes on it constantly. Fixate your mind in its truths. Don't leave it. Give yourself to it. Exert a strong grip upon its principles and set a penetrating gaze on its truth.

#### *Conclusion*

Do you want **freedom**? Then hold fast the word of life, for as Jesus said, "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32).

Are you desperate for more **faith**? Then hold fast the word of life, for as Paul said, "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17).

Are you hungry for **joy**? Then hold fast the word of life, for Jesus said to his disciples, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11).

Do you need more of the **Spirit** and his supernatural and miraculous power? Then hold fast to the Word of life, for Paul asked the Galatians, "Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?" (Gal. 3:5).

Do you long to **live blamelessly and without reproach**, as Paul exhorted in Philippians 2:14-15? Do you aspire to shine brightly in a crooked and twisted generation? Then hold fast to the word of life, for Jesus prayed this to the Father: "Sanctify them in the truth; your **word** is truth" (John 17:17).

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