

Kingdom-Minded Gratitude  
From Philippians 1:12-21

I want to admit off the bat that I had a really hard time landing on a passage and theme for this week's communion meditation. With all that's going on in the world, and with the most recent government mandate, I really struggled with knowing how to best shepherd Trinity from the pulpit. Maybe you've felt similarly. You may not be in a position to preach or teach, but you just kinda feel stuck with everything. Whether because of COVID, the government's response to COVID, your employment or school situation, the issues facing marginalized communities, racial division, or our culture's hostility towards biblically principled ideals, there are lots of things to make us feel anxious, angsty, or even down-right mad.

To make things worse, these issues are complicated. There are no easy answers, and there don't seem to be any straight-forward solutions. Our lives have been disrupted for a long time. And if I'm honest, it really bothers me. There have been several things - things totally outside my control - that have bothered me recently. Maybe you have felt (or are feeling) the same way.

While there are many things I would like to say, I think the best thing I can share in this moment is how God's Word has been ministering to my heart these past few days. Turn with me to Philippians 1:12-21. [Read passage]

It turns out, I'm not the first Christian to feel trapped. The apostle Paul, at the time of writing, is imprisoned in Rome for

preaching the gospel of Christ. No, this wasn't house-arrest; it wasn't a stay-at-home order. It was a first-century Roman jail cell equipped with a grand total of zero amenities. Not only was he imprisoned, his personal rivals made envious attempts to one-up Paul while he was sitting in jail – talk about kicking a guy when he's down! But most significantly, Paul, the spokesperson of Christianity to the gentile world is clearly not on good terms with the Roman empire - not great PR for a new religion.

In the midst of his crummy situation, what does Paul do? Does he get bent out of shape about it? Does he put his whole life and ministry on hold? Does he question God or give himself to worry? No; he does none of those things. Instead, he continues to work to advance the gospel and gives thanks to God for the opportunity to do so. Consider Paul's boldness and gratitude:

“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel... Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry... what then? Only that in every way... Christ is proclaimed and in that I rejoice.”

Paul is not distracted by his imprisonment, and so his situation does not detract from his mission and purpose. If I'm honest, I have been too easily distracted by my circumstance these last few months. The news media, social media, personal projects, and plenty of other things can suck me in pretty quick. And as I reflect on these words, I wonder how these distractions have detracted from the mission and purpose to which God has called me.

Paul is not distracted, but neither is he discouraged. In jail? Awesome - people are hearing about Christ! Personal rivals kicking you when you're down? Praise God the gospel is being proclaimed! "Yes, and I will rejoice," says Paul.

Why? Because he knows, he is totally certain of two things:

(1) That he will be delivered [v. 19] - Released from prison? Released from this world? Probably, in light of the second thing he's certain of.

(2) Christ will be glorified [v. 20] - he doesn't condition Christ's glorification with a particular outcome. Paul knows that God doesn't need him alive in order to give glory to the Son. "Whether by life *or death*, Christ will be honored in my body." Well, that doesn't sound very encouraging. And it's not - unless death is gain, unless in death there is a better hope than anything that this life can offer.

For Paul, living meant serving Christ; it meant living in service to others as they progressed in their joy and faith (v. 25). But for Paul, death was no loss. Death meant his faith becoming sight; it meant beholding the glory of God in all its splendor in the face of Jesus Christ. For Paul, death was gain. And with this kind of unshakable, immovable faith, how could he be discouraged? He wasn't overcome with sadness, anger, or anxiety - he was rejoicing! He was thankful!

How about you? How about me?

You know the last thing I want to do when things aren't going the way I want them to go? Give thanks. I don't want to rejoice in what God is doing or how He has provided. I want to fixate on what I lack. I want to be distracted by the negative circumstance I find myself in. That's easy. What's harder is stopping to consider how God is working, rejoicing in that grace, and fixing my eyes on the glory of Christ, whatever the cost.

To clarify: committing yourself to rejoicing in and being thankful for God's grace in difficult times does not mean that we cease from trying to improve our circumstances or championing the cause of freedom and justice. It just means that our work to effect meaningful change must always come from a position of kingdom-minded gratitude.

- I rejoice in the gift of technology and how God has used this season to expand the reach and impact of our ministry beyond our immediate church body
- I am thankful for how God has used this time to connect in a deeper and more prolonged way with my family
- I rejoice in the unique opportunities to connect with and minister among our youth at ONEighty
- I am thankful that God has used these trying circumstances to sharpen me, sharpen our elder team, and prompt meaningful and difficult (but good) conversations
- I rejoice in the gift of my wife and the companionship we share through this trial

- And I am thankful that there is nothing that can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus!

Perhaps you've noticed that I've used 'rejoicing' and 'thanksgiving' somewhat interchangeably up to this point. That's because in Greek, they come from the same word. This word was also the earliest term for communion: *eucharist*. Eucharist means 'thanksgiving.'

The Christian *always* has reason to give thanks and rejoice. Not because our earthly situation is always pleasant, but because our eternal situation is always secure in Christ. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the bedrock for every Christian's joy and thankfulness.

So I'll put it to you, Trinity: How has God been at work in your life through this season? What things should you be rejoicing in? How might God need to tune your heart this morning to sing his praise?

And now I'd like to pause and give us time to reflect on how God has been at work in your life. Think about the evidences of His gracious hand. Write them down if that helps you. And if it's really difficult to think of anything specific, just reflect on and give thanks for the gospel.