

## **“Gospel Worthy Struggle”**

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First Presbyterian Church  
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**New Testament Lesson: Philippians 1:21-30**

**Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 145:1-7**

Last month, 12 church members completed training to be ChristCare small group leaders here at First Presbyterian, venturing into a new and uncertain area of ministry. The promise – the hope – is that the congregation, our church members and friends, and people in your community – your friends, coworkers and acquaintances – will join a ChristCare group organized around a mutual interest or activity.

In addition to doing fun stuff together and/or learning something new, a ChristCare group provides a safe place to grow spiritually and offer Christian care to one another. In other words, it is a place where faith intersects life. It is at the intersection of our day-to-day lives and our love of Jesus, that we are blessed. And yet, this does not come without a little struggle and commitment and investment on our part. We have to struggle to get past what’s blocking us in life, we have to be committed to living out the Gospel, and we have to invest ourselves in our own spiritual growth.

These are not easy things to do. Having a breakthrough in life takes a little effort, living out the Gospel takes courage, and growing spiritually takes time. That’s why the Apostle Paul writes a letter to the Philippians. Paul is encouraging the Philippians to keep at it. He says, “... You are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.” It seems that Paul and the Philippians are both struggling to get beyond whatever it is that’s standing in the way of their faith lives and spiritual growth.

So Paul encourages them, praying that they will “in no way (be) intimidated by (their) opponents.” We don’t know for sure who or what the Philippians and Paul are up against. The letter never makes that clear, though scholars suspect it was all the other groups in Philippi who had values and beliefs contrary to the Christian faith. So Paul pleads with the Philippians to (quote) “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that ... I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.”

The Philippians were Roman citizens. But Paul is calling them to a higher citizenship, a citizenship they now enjoy as members of the Christian community. Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel, says Paul. In Paul’s day, it really took something to live a gospel-worthy life. They had to be willing to make choices that had them stand out from others, choices mostly about how they spent their time and where they invested their resources.

Well, we can relate to that, can't we? I know our new small-group leaders can relate to that. When I asked them about taking the ChristCare training, it's not like they were looking for something more to do. It's not like they had a clear vision for how this would fit into their lives. It's not like they knew they could do it – that they already had all the skills and knowledge needed to lead a small group. Believe me, none of them was just waiting by the phone for me to call and invite them to step out in faith on behalf of the Lord.

But that's what they did. And that's what each and everyone one of you do when you invest your time and resources in church activities, you step out in faith. We are all called to step out in new ways as we grow spiritually and build up the community of faith. And this can be really hard. It's hard to live out our Christian faith. Sometimes it feels like our vary lives are on the line.

That's what it felt like for Paul. Paul says, "... Living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh – (in other words, if I keep showing up in life) – that means fruitful labor for me," that means the Lord can use Paul to nurture and grow the church, nurture and grow the faith community that he founded. "My desire," says Paul, "is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you."

While part of him would rather retreat from life's struggles, Paul chooses to stay active in the world, for the sake of the church, for the sake of his calling as a follower of Christ. And so he makes his mind up, saying, "I will remain and continue with all of you, for your progress and joy ...." And Paul asks the same of the Philippians – he asks the same of us – calling to us from across two centuries of time, from when Jesus walked the earth, Paul says "... Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." Well the gospel of Christ is the gospel of Christian love, care, and concern, a self-giving love, care, and concern that brings blessings to all. We can do that, can't we, even if it takes a little self-sacrifice and a lot of faith?

Two friends were walking through the woods when they thought they heard something. They turned around and saw a big black bear off in the distance, and it was coming toward them. Both men started to run, but one of them stopped to change into tennis shoes. The second man said, "You don't have time to change shoes. You can't outrun that bear!" The first man said, "I don't have to outrun that bear. I only have to outrun you!"

As Christians, we are all called to give of ourselves for the sake of others, though not as bear food. Rather the demands upon our lives have to do with the choices we make, how we choose to spend our time, energy, and resources. As Christians we are called to step out in faith as we engage in the life of the church, the life of our community of faith.

I encourage each of you to do that, step out in faith as a member or friend of this Christian community that we call First Presbyterian Church. There are dozens of ways you can do this, whether that's through one of our four adult Sunday school classes, 10 ChristCare group, nine groups or ministries sponsored by

Presbyterian Women, not to mention all our committees and boards, mission outreach opportunities, and music ministry programs.

I encourage you to try something new, not because you're looking for one more thing to do, but because this is an opportunity for you, an opportunity to connect your faith to your day-to-day life. So much of life is about just showing up, about pushing through whatever it is that has us sit on the sidelines. Life is about getting out there and embracing the blessings God is extending to us – to you and to me.

The Apostle Paul was certain that if he just kept showing up when it came to living out the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, blessings would abound, for him, and for those he loved, for generations to come; blessings from God through Paul to us. And yet this was still a struggle for him. It's a struggle for all of us; life is a struggle. The trick is to make sure your life's struggle a Gospel worthy struggle.

You can either work to shield yourself from life or work to engage in the fullness of life God would have for you, a fullness that comes from continued growth and vitality. Either way, life takes work. It's just that one way leads to God's blessings and the other to emptiness and isolation.

As members and friends of First Presbyterian Church, you have wonderful opportunities to gather in faith, wonderful opportunities to grow spiritually as individuals, and wonderful opportunities to grow collectively as the body of Christ.

Take this opportunity. As we enter into a new program year here at First Church, take this opportunity right now to prayerfully search your heart, looking for where God would have you connect or reconnect. And in doing so, let us all open ourselves to new ways to live out our faith together, in the fellowship and joy of Jesus Christ. Amen.

## Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, we thank you for the gift of family, both the families we are given by birth and the family of faith into which we are baptized.

We thank you for those who parent us – who encourage us to grow, who model healthy relationships, who teach us the ways of Christ.

We thank you for those who stand in the gap when family lets us down, as they inevitably do.

We pray for the brokenness and struggles that afflicts all our families, and ask you to bring healing and restoration where relationships are strained or severed.

Bless us as we endeavor to walk as faithful disciples within our family of faith, to the praise and honor of your Son, Jesus Christ, to whose glory we raise our voices in song, praying the prayer that he taught us:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;  
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive  
our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,  
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**