

Called to the Right Struggle

[Philippians 1:20-30](#)

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Not everything that is unpleasant is meant to be eliminated. Some things are supposed to be endured and to transform us along the way.

Throughout this next year, I will be preaching on the theme of calling. Last week I began this series in Philippians which begins by claiming our calling is always to participate in God's own calling or work in the world. Today as we continue in Paul's letter to the Philippians we learn that our calling is also to share in the struggle of Jesus Christ.

From the moment that Cain rose up to kill his brother Abel, our world has been divided by a great struggle between those who get hurt and those who do the hurting. When in our history have we not known the struggle between slaves and taskmasters, the poor and the greedy, the abused and the abuser, or the saint and the tyrant? Paul called this the struggle between the children of light and the children of darkness. Augustine called it the struggle between the City of God and the fallen cities of our earth. Jesus called it the struggle of a new kingdom that has invaded our dying world. This is the great struggle that lies behind every war, every broken heart, every scheming maneuver at work, and every piece of gossip we hear. It's the struggle between sin and righteousness, evil and redemption. The battle ground where this great struggle is taking place is within our own hearts.

When in your own life have you not known a great spiritual struggle? Maybe it appears as the struggle of a beautiful adult who is talented, strong, and gifted, but who is still a hurt child who was never good enough. Or, the struggle of wanting to receive the grace of God, but desperately trying to make your own dreams come true. Or the struggle of a new creation in Christ who wants to conduct a holy life but who is still a sinner addicted to sin. Sometimes it feels as if there is a war going on within our own souls.

Paul knew about that battle all too well. In the seventh chapter of his letter to the Romans, he wrote that he kept doing things he didn't want to do, and he couldn't seem to do the good things that he did want to do. "Wretched man that I am," he laments, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

In his letter to the Philippians, where he discusses our calling so eloquently, Paul claims that whether we are talking about the great struggles that are tearing apart our world or the painful struggles that are tearing apart our souls, one of the first things that you have to do is to choose which side you are on. Evil or redemption? You can't avoid making a choice. In fact, you are called to choose a side in this struggle.

Every time you enter into worship, every time you open your Bible or pray, Jesus Christ will force this great choice upon you once again. "Do not think that I have come to bring peace," Jesus said, "I have not come to bring peace but a sword..." (Matt 10:34). Jesus did not arrive as God in the flesh to negotiate peace in this great spiritual struggle. He never organized a summit for the Pharisees, Romans, and Zealots, or asked, "Can't we all just get along?" No, Jesus came to win the struggle and to defeat the evil that oppresses the earth and plagues our hearts. He came to enter into every one of our earthly struggles so that we may find God with us in the midst of these struggles. Maybe, even to find God within the person we struggle against.

There are some religious systems that have a goal to lead us to a higher plane of contentment where we are not troubled by struggle. But that is not what Jesus was talking about. No, Jesus claimed that joy and peace are found not by fleeing all struggles, but by taking on the right struggle in life, which was his struggle – the great struggle to establish the reign of God in our earth, in our families, and in our hearts. So Jesus' struggle has now become a part of our identity.

Once when I was attending a gathering of Palestinian pastors, a church youth worker from the West Bank was introducing himself before he spoke. He started by explaining his position on the ancient fourth century debates about Nicea. Then he told us what his church thought of the creed produced in Chalcedon in the fifth century. A church youth worker! By the time he got to explaining his church's position on the medieval popes who called for the crusades, I leaned over to the person next to me and whispered, "When is this guy going to tell us about himself?" The man said, "He is telling you about himself." We live in a society that has seduced us into thinking that we can each construct our own lives. But Middle Easterners do not think like this. They cannot understand themselves apart from their place in long, historic struggles.

This is one of the hard lessons American diplomats have learned in helping the Middle East find peace. Steeped in pragmatism, we are tempted to say, "Sure, there has been some injustice, but just get over it." But that would be like saying, "Stop being who you are. Give up your identity," which for them is more rooted in the struggle than it is in resolutions. As our wiser diplomats have always known, any real peace in the world is going to have to account for peoples' identities before God. So now these diplomats are delving into the conflicting religious traditions, helping people to see that their struggle has never been for dominance, but for peace and reconciliation before God.

Last year I was invited to a small luncheon with some of our military leaders at the Pentagon. They were charged to work with the ongoing problems in Kosovo. At one point during the lunch, an Admiral said that he and his colleagues had become convinced that the solution to the crisis in Kosovo was not military. The solution, he claimed, had to involve forgiveness. Yes! Yes! Yes! Now we are talking about the great struggle. The real struggle. Because until we are convinced of a God of grace, we will never find a way to be gracious in this world.

The same thing is true in your family. When you are engaged in a great ongoing family argument, as every family has been, the real question is not how do we negotiate what he wants, and she wants, and you want. At best that just results in spreading the disappointment around. The better question is how do we discern what God wants in this family? It isn't an easier question, but it is a better one, and the only one that leads out of the stalemate and rehearsals of hurt.

Every struggle that we face in life is first and foremost a struggle with God. Until we allow God to prevail in our own hearts during this struggle, we will never know how to respond to others. "Only live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ..." Paul tells the Philippians, "Standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel. . . You are having the same struggle that you saw I had, and now hear I still have." Notice that Paul assumes these followers of Christ will struggle. His caution is that they struggle together in the right struggle – the struggle for the gospel.

It used to be that when I read Paul's exhortation to live worthy of this gospel, I assumed it meant to try very hard to be worthy of calling myself Jesus' disciple. But a closer study reveals I was wrong. The word for "worthy" in the Greek is *axios*, from which we get the word axle. What Paul is really telling us is to live, so tied into Christ, that our life revolves as his does. Our identity turns on his identity. His joy is now our joy, and his struggles are our struggles, and his compassionate mission has now become ours as well. You see, the legacy of taking on Jesus' struggle is not that we are turned into warriors, but into lovers. Because the struggle was always about making the reconciling love of God known on earth.

Remember, these are among the last words Paul wrote when he was in prison. The old Apostle has known a life filled with struggle and conflict. But he has now learned to be so in to Jesus Christ that his life is not even his own anymore. As he says in verse 21, he now lives for Christ. And if he dies, he will die for Christ, and in Christ. As we read through verses 19 to 27, it is obvious that Paul is not clear about which he prefers. Does he want to live and continue serving with the Philippian church in the great struggle for the gospel, or die and commune more fully with Christ? In verse 19 he says that he is confident he will be delivered. But in verse 20 he wonders if that is the best thing. In verse 22 he admits that he doesn't really know what is best. Then in verse 23 he claims his desire is to be with Christ in heaven. In verse 24 he says, "then again, maybe I should stay here with you." In verse 25 he seems convinced that is what will happen. But in verse 27 he admits, again, that he just doesn't know what will happen. These are the wonderfully unedited, internal conflicts of a man who is not afraid of dying. And the reason he is not afraid of dying is that he has already found a vision of heaven in life.

This leaves us with one final insight about the great struggle to which we are called. Not only do you have to decide what side you are on in the struggle, and not only do you have to see this as a struggle with God, but you have to have a vision of heaven along the way in life's struggle.

For too long churches from both the theological right and the left have tried to prove their social relevance to the competing issues of the day. And along the way they have allowed our gospel to be captured by competing political and ideological agendas. Ironically, this has made these churches less and less relevant. What people are looking for today is a transcendent hope that begins in a place above the competing factions and then breaks into this life as if heaven were breaking into earth. People are also looking for churches that are unashamed to stand under heaven and help them find this sacred hope.

That is the kind of church we want to be – a church that stands under heaven with a glorious vision for a future filled with hope for earth. We believe that Jesus rose from the dead, and that through the Holy Spirit he is reigning over every square inch of the earth. So there is reason to hope because a risen Savior is still at work! Your home belongs to Jesus. So does your place of work. And so does this world that appears to be pulled apart by struggle. So we dare not flee these struggles since they are occurring within Christ's kingdom. Our mission is to enter them, but not to worry about prevailing. That is a Savior's worry. Our calling is to witness the many glorious ways in which he is bringing a little bit more of heaven into the struggles of earth.

O God, so convince us with a vision of heaven that we may be of use to Christ on earth. Amen.