

## Commentary on Philippians 2:14-18

### Title:

Purity in a Wicked Society

### Big Idea:

Paul commands the Philippians to be content so they may remain pure in God's eyes by being an example of Christ to their wicked society and rejoicing in Christ through the good times and the bad.

### Outline:

- I. (v. 14) Paul commands the Philippians to do everything without grumbling or complaining.
  - A. (v. 15a) The reason the Philippians should not gripe is so they remain pure in God's eyes.
    - 1. (v. 15b) Paul wants the Philippians to live this way despite the fact that they live in a sinful society.
      - a. (v. 15c) The reason for this is that they may be an example of Christ to not only the citizens of Philippi, but also to the entire world.
    - 2. (v. 16a) The way Paul encourages them to do this is by sharing the Word of life with their society.
      - a. (v. 16b) The result of this is Paul's work being redeemed.
      - b. (v. 16b) Another result is that Paul will be able to be proud of the Philippians' right choices.
- II. (v. 17) Paul rejoices with the Philippians.
  - A. (v. 17a) Paul is rejoicing even though he is experiencing difficulties and, possibly, martyrdom.
  - B. (v. 17b) Paul rejoices because of the Philippians' strengthening commitment to Christ through his example.
    - 1. (v. 18) The way the Philippians are to rejoice is, like Paul, in all things, even when facing death.

## Authorship

Philippians was a letter authored by Paul. While this has been disputed on a few occasions, there have never been any viable reasons to doubt that Paul was the author. One of the most conclusive evidences of this authorship is in the letter itself: the very first verse with the words “[From] Paul and Timothy” (Philippians 1:1). The writing style, personal descriptions, and names of friends are another indication that it is a genuine letter from Paul (O'Brien 1991, 9).

It was most likely just Paul who wrote the letter, not Timothy (Hawthorne 1993, 708). This is further supported by the use of personal pronouns, “I,” “me,” and “my,” which occur over fifty times in the letter. Hawthorne also says that, historically, the Church has accepted the letter as from Paul.

In the 1840s, F.C. Baur challenged the authorship of Philippians. His is the only well-known challenge to date. One of his convincing arguments was that the hymn of Philippians (2:6-11) was not the style of Paul. This argument has not been accepted in more recent commentaries (Hawthorne 1993, 709) (O'Brien 1991, 10).

## Date and Place of Writing

This letter was written while Paul was serving a serious prison sentence (1:7, 13, 14), which was potentially where his life ended (1:20-24). His place of imprisonment was probably Rome, though there are three other possible locations. Rome acquires most of its accreditation from the book of Acts. The biggest criticism for Rome being the place of writing is the distance between Rome and Philippi, though a substantial enough fact to say that Rome was *not* the place of writing. The differing opinions on the place of writing are gathered from other letters written around the same time as Philippians, which reference Paul and his imprisonment. Whatever the

city Paul was held in, we know it had to have a praetorium (1:13) as well as people belonging to the house of Caesar (4:22). We also know that Timothy was with him (1:1, 2:19-23), that Paul planned to visit Philippi upon his release, and that several trips had already been made between his place of imprisonment and Philippi. From this, it can be concluded that Paul was within a relatively close proximity to Philippi (Hawthorne 1993, 709).

It is also possible that the letter may have been written from Ephesus, gaining its integrity from the fact that it was significantly closer to Philippi and would have been more accessible to those visiting Paul in prison. The theory for Ephesus loses most of its credibility when you realize that the entire theory is based upon conjecture, and there is very little solid evidence provided for it (Hawthorne 1983, xxxix). There is also a possibility of Corinth, based on the fact that there was a house of Caesar there. Finally, Paul could have been held in Caesarea due to Luke's specific statement that Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea (Acts 23:35), which is in agreement with Paul's own statement in this letter (Philippians 4:22). There was also a praetorium in Caesarea (Hawthorn 1983, xxxix).

The date of writing is more dependent on *where* Paul was imprisoned; the dates are gathered from other letters that were written by other authors, referencing Paul and his imprisonment in that city at that time. The debate lies in these references. More specifically, during which other letters was Paul imprisoned and writing Philippians? If the letter was written from Rome, Paul wrote it between A.D. 60 and 63. If written while in Ephesus, between A.D. 54 and 57. If written from Corinth, about A.D. 50. Finally, if it was written in Caesarea, it was written between A.D. 58 and 60 (Hawthorne 1993, 711). Since Rome is the most likely place of writing, Philippians was probably written between A.D. 60 and 63.

## Recipients

As the name implies and the greeting confirms (1:1), the letter is written to the Church of Philippi in Macedonia, the first church that Paul founded in Europe. The Philippians are obviously a group that is dear to Paul since the letter is the most personal of all of his letters (Hawthorne 1993, 707). It is also evident that the members of the church care about him, since they visit him frequently.

Paul brought the gospel to Philippi with his companions Silas, Timothy, and Luke. While on their way to Bithynia, Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia who begged them to come and help them (Acts 16:9). Upon arriving, Paul discovered that there was no synagogue in the city, just a small house of prayer outside the city gate (16:13). Paul presented the gospel to the few women that gathered there. One of the women, Lydia, believed the gospel along with her family whom she told. She allowed Paul and his companions to stay at her home for the remainder of their visit (16:14-15). It was from this event that Paul's ministry was started, and the Church in Philippi was founded.

## Historical, Cultural and Social Context

The culture was rather hostile towards the church in Philippi (O'Brien 1991, 27). There were many false teachers pressuring the leaders of the church, which was why Paul so strongly wanted to impose a good moral example upon them; the opponents in the society of Philippi could have been gentiles (Philippians 1:27-28) or legalists who were unbelieving Jews (3:2). One thing is for sure: The opponents were "enemies of the cross" (3:18-19) (O'Brien 1991, 27).

The culture of Philippi in Macedonia was unique because it was a military outpost, populated with veterans of Emperor Octavian's wars. Though it was not located *in* Rome, it was part of the Roman Empire, and thus the citizens were exempt from land and poll tax. Citizens

were also entitled to protection under Roman law (Hawthorne 1993, 707).

Though Paul encouraged the people of the church to adhere to the Roman law when it did not directly contradict the Biblical law, he also warned them not become content to live in the ways of their culture. He encouraged them to conduct themselves in a Christ-like manner (1:27). Undoubtedly, it was not easy to live in Philippi and be part of the church, which was persecuted (Hawthorne 1993, 708).

### Occasion of the Letter

Paul was prompted to write because of the financial gifts they had sent him through Epaphroditus (4:18). While visiting Paul, Epaphroditus became ill and had to stay longer than expected. Part of the letter is to assure the Philippians that Epaphroditus did arrive and fulfill his duty, almost dying in the process (2:30). Paul also wanted to encourage and enlighten the Philippians in the way of Christ.

### Purpose of the Letter

Paul encouraged the Philippians that they are citizens not of this world, but of Heaven (3:20) and that they should not conduct themselves in the same manner as the unsaved. He also warned them against selfish ambition and challenged them to remain humble (2:3), reminding them to boast only in Christ, to act as He did, and to take the nature of a servant toward everyone (2:7). He also exhorted them to not complain (2:14), to be an example of Christ to their culture (2:15), and to make sacrifices pleasing to God (2:17).

Paul's letter also was written to provide an example for the Philippians as to how a believer should accept physical suffering for the work of Christ. More aptly, Paul wants to warn the Philippians against dangers which he has seen other churches be torn apart by. The errors can be described as "thinking that the boundaries of Christianity are defined by the Mosaic Law

and that Christians who have ‘arrived’ spiritually can do anything they like with their bodies” (Thielman 2002, 346). Paul says that Christians must always stay attentive to Christ’s teaching, no matter how much they think they have “arrived.” He also warns the Philippians against quarrelling, reminding them that this may taint their witness.

Essentially, Paul is trying to encourage the Philippians to maintain the image of Christ in their conduct. He wants them to look to Christ for their answers, not to society or their peers. More personally, he uses his own circumstances of suffering in chains for Christ, as an example for them and us to follow.

### Commentary

Vss. 1-13 In these verses of chapter 2 of Philippians, Paul has been encouraging the Philippians to be of one mind. Paul has been telling them to be humble and obedient, even to the point of death, just as Christ was. He reminds them that Jesus Christ did this for the Father, and they should be willing to do the same for God.

Vs. 14 Paul starts off this passage with an all-encompassing ( $\pi\alpha\varsigma$ ) command, “do everything.” “Grumbling” and “arguing” are objects of the preposition “without,” which is the manner in which Paul says to do everything. By this, Paul is commanding the Philippians to be set apart from the world, not griping about things they dislike but rejoicing even in difficulties.

The term used here for “arguing” is used rarely in the New Testament. It is used more frequently in the accounts of the Israelites wandering through the desert and “complaining” to Moses about their misfortune. “... Moses made clear to them that their complaining was not as much against him as against God (Ex. 16:2-9; 17:3; Num. 11:1)” (Thielman 1995, 139). This Old Testament reference is implied by 1 Corinthians 10:10 as well.

The KJV renders these as “murmurings and disputings.” That translation slightly dulls the impact of this verse with the word “murmurings,” though the root Greek word *γογγυσμός* translates directly to “murmuring,” “complaining,” or “grudging,” or “grumbling,” depending on the translation and concordance used. In this passage, Paul indirectly references an earlier passage (2:3) to continue warning the Philippians of things that may hinder love.

The first three verses are all a part of the same original sentence and are the supportive arguments for why you should not grumble and complain (2:14-16). “So that” begins the reasons Paul gives for the Philippians to not argue (2:15a).

Vs. 15 Paul tells the Philippians to whom they belong by saying that “you” (the Church at Philippi) are “children of God.” Hawthorne says that this is translated as “faultless children of God.” The Greek word *τέκνον* (derived from the root word *τίκτω* which means “[to] give birth to” (1983, 102)) can be translated as “child,” “son,” or “daughter,” but in all occurrences implies a direct family relation, giving the sense that, as Christians, there should be resembling characteristics between the Philippians (Hawthorne 1983, 102).

In the same verse, the words “blameless,” “pure,” and (without) “blemish” are adjectives modifying “you.” They are characteristics the Philippians should have as children of God (2:15a). “‘Blameless,’ ‘innocent,’ and ‘without blemish’ gives the very clear impression that Paul is describing the final end toward which God is moving the church at Philippi” (Fowl 2005, 123). Paul is constantly looking forward to the time when all of life’s work will be rewarded. Additionally, the Greek words used here, *ἄμεμπτος* for “blameless” and for *ἀκέραιος* “pure,” relate to the Hebrew Old Testament words, translating to the same English, that are often used in reference to a holy sacrifice to God, much like the drink offering discussed in verse 17. *ἄμεμπτος* is also the same word used in 1 Thessalonians 3:13.

Several translations, including the ESV, NASB, and NKJV translate part of the verse as “... in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom ...” (2:15b) in which “whom” is ambiguous, meaning it refers to everyone, not just a specific group of people. However, the Greek word from which it is translated does not directly mean “whom.”

The Greek words *ὅς* or *ὅσῃ* are translated as “... primary word[s] ... the relatively (sometimes demonstrative) pronoun[s], who, which, what, that: — one, (an-, the) other, some, that, what, which, who(-m, -se), etc” (Strong 1996). The NET translates it as “in which,” while other translations, such as the NASB and NKJV, translate it as “among whom.”

The controversy lies in whether the passage should be ambiguous or not. Clearly Paul is referencing the Philippians and their society, so it seems logical that the translations, which render this Greek word, in this passage, as “whom,” are poor translations. The word cannot be ambiguous since the context defines a specific people group; the word should be rendered as “in which” as the NIV and NET have done.

Additionally, where the Greek text says *φαίνω φωστήρ κόσμος* the NET translates it as “... shine as lights in the world ...” whereas the NIV translates it to “... shine like stars in the universe.” *φαίνω* most commonly means, “appear” or “shine.” The word *φωστήρ* is seen only twice in the NASB, once as “brilliance” and once as “light.” Finally, *κόσμος* appears most frequently (184 times in the NASB) as “world” (2:15c).

Paul is trying to convey to the Philippians that they should stand out in their culture, set apart as believers in Jesus Christ; that they should set a moral standard. It is unclear why the NIV stands alone in its translation of this passage, since the majority of other translations render it as “shine as (or “like”) lights in the world.” Most likely the translators of the NIV derived their understanding from the meaning of the word *φαίνω*, which is “an illuminator, i.e.



(concretely) a luminary, or (abstractly) brilliancy: — light” (Strong 1996). This taken into account, it would make more sense for a star to shine in the universe instead than in the world.

Vs. 16 The word “by” (omitted in some translations) introduces *how* the children of God can shine as lights in the world (2:16a). This understood transition leads into the controversial translation of a single Greek word and how it is rendered in various translations.

[IP] The single Greek word is ἐπέχω. The NASB agrees with the NKJV, translating the word as “holding fast,” whereas the original KJV translates it as “holding forth.” The NIV renders the word as “[to] hold out.” The NET reads, “holding on to,” and the NCV renders the word “[to] offer.” The NLT renders the word as “firmly.” This is reflected in Table 1 (Herrick) (O'Brien 1991, 297).

**Table 1 - Translation Comparison**

<b>Agreement with O'Brien's Conclusion</b>	<b>Agreement with Herrick's Conclusion</b>
NASB, NKJV – “Holding fast”	KJV – “Holding forth”
NET – “Holding on to”	NCV – “Offer”
NLT – “Hold firmly”	NIV – “Hold out”

The transliteration for the Greek word used here is “epecho.” A few definitions listed for the semantic range of the word are to “give heed unto,” “stay,” “hold forth,” and “take heed unto.”

The phrase ἐπέχοντες, transliterated as “epechontes,” rarely means to “hold on to,” as it is translated to in the NET bible, but usually tells someone to “hold out” something. In this case, Herrick says, Paul is encouraging the Philippians in the way they should show the light of Christ; that is, they should let their light shine boldly. How? By holding *out* the Word of life (Herrick)!

Herrick also points out that the word directly in front of this phrase is κόσμος, the Greek word often translated as “world,” which could imply evangelism. This would again imply that

the Word of life is the tool the Philippians are to use. They are to hold it out as a witness to the world (Herrick).

O'Brien takes a different approach to the Greek than Herrick does. He looks at this Greek phrase *ἐπέχοντες* and says it should be translated to mean to "hold fast" to the Word of life. He points to the fact that Paul is encouraging the Philippians to live a certain way, as lights to the world *for* God, and that the way they can do this is by holding tightly to God's words (O'Brien 1991, 297).

If you accept Herrick's conclusions and translate the word as to "hold out" the Word of life, this passage can be interpreted to promote the spreading of God's loving message; it can be a passage to encourage people to witness (Herrick).

Contrarily, if you accept O'Brien's conclusions and translate the word as to "hold fast" to the Word of life, this passage can be interpreted to encourage believers in a way to strengthen their own spiritual walk. According to O'Brien's conclusions, this passage has no inference leading towards evangelism (O'Brien 1991, 297).

Most likely Paul's intentions were to encourage the Philippians to be a witness for Christ, holding forth the Word of life as their basis for faith. This is in agreement with Herrick's conclusions, as well as by Paul's strong encouragement for evangelism in other passages (1 Corinthians 1:18-31, Philippians 2:12-30, 1 Thessalonians 2:1-16). Paul is a firm believer in getting the message of Jesus Christ out, not simply sitting idly by. The evidence seems to suggest that evangelism was his intention with this passage.

Farther into the verse, Paul uses the phrase "Word of life" (2:16a) as a reference to the message of Christ. Paul makes it clear that this Word is essential in living a blameless and pure life. Paul is also always looking forward to the day of Christ, when Christ shall return and all

pain and suffering is done away with; all pain and labor is redeemed (2:16b). “This expression ... refers to that time when Paul, as all Christians, must stand before the tribunal of Christ, not for the purpose of finding out his eternal destiny, but to give an account of his stewardship to his Lord” (Hawthorne 1983, 104).

The result of the Philippians holding forth the Word of life is so that “on the day of Christ [Paul] will have a reason to boast” (2:16b). “A reason to boast” is Paul looking at the contrast between what he is doing (as a child of God) and what is going on around him (the darkness of the world) and being able to rejoice in it. “On the day of Christ” is when Paul will be able to boast in the Philippians’ commitment to God. The day of Christ is referenced other times in the New Testament as being the day when the Lord returns (1:6, 1:10, 1 Corinthians 1:8). Though Paul will be proud of the Philippians until the day of Christ, he realizes that on the day of Christ he will be rewarded for his efforts and the persecution which he is now suffering.

Vs. 17 As another subject to this passage in Philippians, Paul wants the Philippians to see what lengths he has gone to in order to be used for God: He is rejoicing, even in his imprisonment and potential death (2:17a). Additionally, Paul says he is glad to “... rejoice together with all of you,” implying he has a desire for the Philippians to be rejoicing in his circumstances as well, not wasting their time feeling sorry for him. Not only does Paul desire that the Philippians rejoice with him in his troubles but he also encourages them to rejoice together in their own difficulties. Paul is proud of the Philippians’ strengthening faith in Christ, due to his example (2:17b). He is proud in this, and states that because of their strengthening faith, his execution will not be for a lost cause.

The single Greek word *σπένδω* means “to pour out as a libation, i.e. (figuratively) to devote (one’s life or blood, as a sacrifice) (‘spend’): — (be ready to) be offered” (Strong 1996).

The KJV renders it as “offered.” The word, in conjunction with “sacrifice,” brings light to the fact that Paul is indeed making a human sacrifice of himself for the Philippians. However, in the manner the KJV translates the word it loses the context of a drink offering. The direct meaning is “to pour out.” The word *σπένδω* is used only twice in the NASB, both times it is used in conjunction with “as a drink offering.” Paul has been known to use this phraseology in his other writings as well (2 Corinthians 12:15) (2 Timothy 4:6).

The Message Bible makes this passage much more vivid saying, “Even if I am executed here and now, I’ll rejoice in being an element in the offering of your faith that you make on Christ’s altar, a part of your rejoicing” (Philippians 2:17). That is to say, Paul is happy that in his potential death he can help the faith of others to grow. This translation helps understand Paul’s meaning, but, again, it loses the original significance of the drink offering.

Often in Paul’s writings, a “drink offering” was a significant term that referenced an Old Testament offering. The drink offering was presented along with additional burnt offerings of thanks and presented as “... a pleasing aroma to the Lord” (Numbers 15:1-10). As described in the Old Testament, the drink offerings were given to the Lord as a means of thanking him for his provision or protection. In Numbers, the offering was to be given to the Lord to thank Him after the Israelites finally entered the Promised Land. The drink offering is also mentioned and described as being given during a feast of thanksgiving (Leviticus 23:9-13). “Paul probably has the Old Testament model in mind here and speaks of how his suffering and possible death joins with the sacrificial suffering ([Philippians] 1:28) and giving (1:7; 2:26; 4:15-18) of the Philippians to make a sacrifice pleasing to God” (Thielman 2002, 357).

There is a question as to whether Paul’s mention of a drink offering is an analogy to his martyrdom or whether it is to bring light to his sufferings for Christ. “On the one hand, drink

offerings were offerings of wine, not blood ..." (Fowl 2005, 128). Conversely, Jesus used wine at the Last Supper, just before his own death. Paul also uses this type of language in how other writings to refer to his own death (2 Timothy 4:6, Romans 2:2). However, this seems to stand in contrast to Paul's original point. Paul is most likely encouraging the Philippians to offer their lives *as* a sacrifice for God. If this is to the point of death, so be it, but he is speaking of a living sacrifice (giving up one's own will), as he has done in other passages (Romans 12:1-3).

Vs. 18 As translated by the NASB, "You too, *I urge you*, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me" (Philippians 2:18). The clause "I urge you" is not derived from any Greek word. It is an implied clause that the translators added to reflect Paul's urgency. It is brought out by Paul's sense of urgency throughout the passage, especially in his begging the Philippians to make his potential death worthwhile. His sense of urgency comes from his desire to keep a hope in his friends in Philippi.

In comparing seven different translations, no two translations render these first words the same. The Greek phrase beginning verse 18 is *δέ αὐτός*. *δέ* is translated frequently to mean "also, and, but, moreover, now" (Strong 1996). *αὐτός* is a "... reflexive pronoun self, used ... of the third person, and (with the proper personal pronoun) of the other persons" (Strong 1996), so it is the cause for the clauses meaning "[you] in the same way." It essentially means "you also" and is meant to convey a following of the speakers example.

The NET translates these three words as, "and in the same way." The NIV renders the clause as, "so you too." The NASB, as mentioned above, translates it as "you too, *I urge you*." The NLT renders it as, "and you should be." The Message has the most bizarre rendition: "but turnabout's fair play." The KJV translates it as "for the same cause," and finally, the NKJV renders it as "for the same reason." The various translations are hardly an issue since they do not

affect the meaning of the passage, but the amount of diversity among the translations does provide for a more clear understanding of the context.

The clause itself, “in the same way” (2:18), is telling the Church in Philippi to rejoice even in their “crooked and perverse society” (2:15b). Still in verse 18, Paul is telling others to accept torture, even to the point of death, for the sake of the “Word of life” (2:16a).

Paul is not telling the Philippians that death and torture is something to be glorified and rejoiced in. Rather he is telling the Philippians that noble circumstances *resulting* in death should be rejoiced in (Fowl 2005, 129). Paul is telling the Philippians that the hope and contentment he is having in his martyrdom is from the actions that are leading to his death, not solely in his death.

### Application

Personally, the entire passage speaks to me as a means of encouragement towards evangelism, not only in the words we speak but also in the actions we convey to others. Specifically, when Paul says, “Do everything without grumbling or arguing,” in relation with his command to “shine as lights in the world,” I believe Paul is stressing that our actions are the strongest indicators of our true character.

I struggle with this, especially in our overly critical culture, and have a hard time being satisfied with what I have. Not just being satisfied, but also *not* pointing out the flaws I find in the things around me. For the sake of sarcasm, which often turns to mockery of the subject of abuse, it helps me to forget my own troubles and feel better about myself, rather in contradiction to Paul’s first thirteen verses in chapter 2.

I want to make it a point to stop this; while I don't believe there's anything wrong with sarcasm by itself (in certain contexts, Jesus was sarcastic); this is a form of humor which God has graced us with. However, it is a sin when taken too far to defame part of God's creation.

People often speak of me as a friendly and amicable person, so more often than not it's a personal sin of mine to lack humility and tear things apart in my mind. To confront this, I'm going to try to be more verbal with my feelings, explaining this to others to keep me accountable when I begin to complain about needless topics.

None of this will be accomplished unless I'm setting an example to others of Christ, as Paul said, by living by and sharing God's word. I'm eager to work at a Bible camp again this summer, being an example to hundreds of juniors, sharing my testimony and sharing God's love. It will be an ideal situation for this at the camp I'm working at, as I will be looked up to as a role model by kids of all ages, many of which are very influential. Not only will I be able to have one-on-one interaction with the kids to share God's love that way, I can also show his example through the work that I do for the camp: cleaning bathrooms, cleaning dishes, pulling weeds, mowing, etc. I want to do all these things without complain, as God would want, and not just without complaining but joyously, with a positive attitude. I can do this, as explained before, through accountability from my boss.

Not only at the camp this summer but for the rest of my life I want to mold my character to these values found in this passage. With close friends and colleagues, I can apply the same methods in the future as I will use at camp this summer. I can be an example to both non-believers and my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

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