

## **Philippians 1:21-30**

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

## **Matthew 20:1-16**

'For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

## **Being "In the Zone"**

This week I read about an interesting phenomena being studied by a team of business scholars, some from Columbia University here in New York. It's called the too-much-talent effect.<sup>1</sup> In sports, it's what happens when a team has a lot of individual talent and the sum total of that talent, rather than enhancing team performance, actually detracts from team performance. Think Miami Heat 2011. You had LeBron James, Dwayne Wade, and Chris Bosh, some of the

best athletes in basketball, all on one team and competing with the Dallas Mavericks, who had perhaps one outstanding athlete in Dirk Nowitzki and a lot of mediocre athletes, yet the Mavericks succeeded in winning the NBA championship title. The scholars who studied this phenomenon deduced that too many outstanding athletes can actually work against a “team” precisely because “individuals” are not always “team” players. I remember a boy on our high school basketball team who everyone recognizes as an excellent basketball player. He had great ball-handling skills, and he was a good shooter; the problem was that he tried to do it all himself, and our high school had only a mediocre record because he did not work with other players. If you have an excellent athlete who tries to do everything by himself, you can actually bring down the morale of the team. In fact, if you have too many excellent athletes on the same team, they may actually compete with one another for the best individual stats. Thus a “team” that plays as a team can defeat an assembly of individuals who overall have more talent, more skill. In a way, this has been the story of Christianity, which started with a bunch of common fishermen mixed with a tax collector and a few other misfits, then added a gentile community with a mix of common folk, and grew into a great religion. Christianity flourishes not because it has the greatest individual scholars or theologians, but because we work as a team. We are a community united in mission, and as such we can overcome the challenges we face, if we can truly stand together.

Both the Epistle lesson and the Gospel lesson are making this point. Paul is encouraging the good people of the First Church of Philippi to stick together, as a team, to defend themselves against those who are opposed to them. At this time, Christianity as a religion is not well-defined; Paul is probably the best theologian on the payroll, and the churches are made up of a hodge-podge of slaves and merchants and soldiers and mainly common folk, and they are opposed by the powers of a vast empire. Paul speaks of being “one in spirit” which is translated from Greek words that convey the notion that hearts beat together, that there be synchrony as if our hearts are all beating together at the same pace. To use a sports metaphor, it’s what athletes call being “in the zone.” It’s what happens when a team is united in its goal; we have all seen this on the athletic field – it’s one of the beautiful aspects of sports, particularly when you see an underdog team function in such harmony that everything seems to go just the way it’s supposed to go. To use a different metaphor, it’s like what happens when an orchestra plays a particular piece of music so perfectly, as a symphony (the word symphony comes from the Greek *sumphonia* meaning *harmonious*, and harmony is about perfect collaboration in tone and rhythm and volume). Paul is urging this church to strive for perfect harmony.

Jesus’ parable illustrates the flaw of thinking in terms of individual reward for individual labor. A landowner hires laborers at different times of the day in order to bring in a harvest, and when it comes time to pay them, he pays everyone a day’s wage whether they worked a full day or not. Those who worked a full day feel resentful, because those who worked less are receiving the same wages as they do. They are like the athletes who seek special recognition for the part they played in the victory. They want the limelight. They want greater compensation than their co-laborers. They want credit for what they’ve done, more credit than those who may have done less. They are individuals seeking individual recognition. But the landowner doesn’t care if some laborers work less than others; he cares about reaping the harvest, and everyone who helps in

the process gets a fair wage. He is not short-changing anyone. But the ones who work the longer day complain that they don't receive more than the ones who work but a few hours.

And here we see how goals diverge; the individual is consumed in self-interest, like a top athlete who thinks, "You're paying for my special talent as an individual, my personal performance. This is what I'm worth." But the landowner has a different mission; his mission is to harvest the field, and he does what is necessary to complete the mission...and he treats everyone on the team fairly. Some do more work, and some do less, but he's not concerned about individual performance, and I thank God for that, because there are lots of people in this world who are a lot better at doing a lot of things than I am, BUT GOD STILL CALLS ME TO HARVEST THE FIELDS. HE CALLS ALL OF US TO HARVEST THE FIELDS, to bring others to faith, to bring forth HIS kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, and it matters not to him when we join in the labor, nor does it matter how well we work; what matters is that we complete the task together, that we, as a team, win the game.

What ultimately determines a church's success in accomplishing mission is not the individual talent it contains but rather *how well the members work together as a team, how synchronized our hearts are in pursuing our mission*. If any one person tries to dominate, or if the star players start competing with one another, we lose.

You may ask, "What is our mission?" What are we at Bethel called to do? Every church has a mission statement somewhere; some are better than others. Some are forgotten. But without a mission statement that we can agree upon, we are at risk of fragmenting. The very first thing we're called to do is to *define our mission as a church*. Some churches define their mission in terms of "radical hospitality," some in terms of "loving God and neighbor." I could tell you what I think our mission should be, but that wouldn't be good teamwork. We have to come up with that mission as a church, as a team, and once we've defined it we need to figure out how to achieve it, as a team.

So what I'd like you to do over the next few weeks is to ask yourself, "What are the most important things that a church should do?" Then talk to each other about those things that you think define a church. Share those ideas with me. Together over the next several months I'd like us to work together in defining our mission, and then determining what strategies we need to employ to achieve that mission. We certainly have ministries in place that will support the mission statement that we develop, but we may have some that don't support it or that need to be modified to better support it. But we need to unite as a team. We need to work as a synchronized community. Some will no doubt do more than others, but we need to avoid the temptation to compare ourselves with one another, to expect individual reward. We need stay in the zone, thinking as a team, and staying focused on the common goal.

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<sup>i</sup> Sports Teams May Lose Out From Having 'Too Much Talent' found online at <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/news/releases/sports-teams-may-lose-out-from-having-too-much-talent.html>.