

Modeling a Godly Response to Mud

Moving Forward, Part 2

Philippians 1:15-18

In any election season, the commercials ramp up, the rhetoric ramps up and the flyers start flooding your mailbox.

Those of you who are in leadership positions in the church or in the market place can sympathize with political candidates, on both sides of the aisle, simply because you understand the impossibility of defending your record and your reputation.

I was reminded all over again in this recent election cycle and I'm sure each candidate probably felt like they were constantly running uphill.

30-second commercials are extremely effective; sound bites are impossible to answer and reputations are really impossible to completely protect.

I don't know if you were like me, but during a football game, or news break, that political message came on the screen, endorsed by the candidate . . . and that 30 second commercial was intended – most often, to completely demolish the reputation of their opponent.

And my response was probably a lot like yours. I would watch a commercial about how bad one candidate was and I'd end up thinking to myself – Are they terrible, or what?!

Then the next commercial comes on by the other guy and I'd watch that one and think to myself – Man, that person is just as bad . . . what a terrible person!

In fact, after watching the commercials I'm pretty convinced that both of them need to be in prison . . . locked away somewhere forever.

You've come to expect that kind of activity during a political campaign . . . and the higher the stakes, the more mud goes flying through the air.

Party politics is a part of politics . . . and you've come to expect it in an election. But what you don't expect is to find it in the assembly.

Rivalry in the world is one thing; rivalry within Christianity is another.

The truth is, a party spirit – a factious, divisive spirit can be much more devastating in the church. For one thing, playing politics in the body of Christ is never out of season; in other words, you don't have to wait every 2 years or 4 years to throw mud or canvass for votes or attempt to demolish someone's reputation.

Throwing mud is always in season . . . you get a year-round license . . . and it can get ugly . . . not just in politics, but in the pews of your average, evangelical church.

The problem isn't a new one – for politicians or parishioners.

In fact, the Apostle Paul is about to reveal how deeply divided the believers were in Rome.

Let me invite you to turn in your New Testament to Paul's letter to the Philippians.

While you're turning, you might remember that the Apostle Paul has just delivered some good news; his imprisonment in Rome has actually advanced the gospel.

Even though it looked like he was moving in reverse, God was actually moving him forward.

That's the good news; but now Paul is about to deliver some bad news.¹

Let's go back and pick it up at *verse 14* and get a running start. ***Most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment are much more bold to speak the word without fear. 15. Some indeed preach Christ from envy and***

rivalry, but others from good will. 16. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. 17. The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.

In a nutshell, here's the issue; Paul's imprisonment in Rome has created division – accusations – a party spirit – among many believers in the church there in Rome; in fact, it's turned into an election campaign led by church leaders, many of whom, unfortunately, are acting like some politicians running for office.

We'll get into the details in a moment, but let me alert you to the fact that we're about to witness the Apostle Paul, with mud all over his face – so to speak. We're about to watch Paul respond to accusations . . . to misinterpretations . . . to a factious, party spirit.

As we go back and unpack what we just read, I want to point out 5 actions in Paul's response.

Paul is covered in mud, but he's about to model a godly response to politics in the pews . . . in fact, we're about to discover why we should imitate Paul, as he imitated the example of Jesus Christ.

Let me give you:

Five ways to model a good response to mud:

1. Paul openly identifies the problem

As hard as it is for us to imagine, Paul was actually not well received in Rome. If you have a conception that Paul was everybody's hero in the church, you need to understand that is a misconception.

This veteran missionary and church planter – the ambassador of God to the Gentiles – was actually beloved by many but ignored, if not disliked by most.

And here in *verse 15*, Paul says that the churches and pastors are divided into two factions. Notice *verse 15 again – some preach Christ from envy and rivalry.*

The word for envy (phthonos: φθονος) refers to not only wanting what someone else has, but actually wishing that person harm.ⁱⁱ

Their preaching included 30 second commercials that were intended not only to gather a following, but destroy the reputation of Paul.

Chrysostom, the 4th century church leader, in one of his Discourses used this same word here for envy

when he referred those who are – and I quote – “plotting against one another and gloating over the misfortune of their neighbors.”ⁱⁱⁱ

You can imagine the world doing this – but surely not people who represent God, right?

Let me remind you of the religious leaders of Jesus' day as they complained and bellowed that Jesus had upset their traditions and that He'd threatened to destroy the Temple and that He'd blasphemed God and they needed to protect their heritage and their religion and the sanctity of their temple.

Mark's Gospel just pulls off their mask and informs us that even *Pilate perceived that the chief priests had handed Him over because of envy (Mark 15:10).*

Same word Paul uses here.

The religious leader *really* just wanted to protect their turf – their following – their fame.

So Paul is openly declaring the truth that the envy of pastors and churches who actually preach Christ – that is they do know and believe and preach the gospel – still, they do so with envious, self-centered, personally ambitious motives that have actually created antagonism against Paul.

As hard as it is to believe, Paul was ignored in Rome, at best – and attacked at worst by others who actually believed and preached the gospel of Christ.

And why?

Because they were filled with envy – Paul had shown up in Rome and they had all been fine without him; and they frankly didn't want their little following losing interest in them and potentially following him.

Paul attributes to this factious camp another devastating characteristic. Not only are they envious of Paul but, he adds in *verse 15*, they are preaching with *rivalry*.

Perhaps your translation it reads *selfish ambition* or *contention*.

One linguist wrote, this word rivalry from eritheia (εριθεια) relates to political maneuvering and election intrigue.^{iv}

400 years before Paul used this word here in his letter, Aristotle used it in his work entitled, *Politics*, to refer to a self-seeking pursuit of political office by unfair means.^v

In other words, these pastors and leaders and churches were canvassing for votes and attention and support and Paul was in their way.

This is politics in the pew at its worst!

And they're willing to go to any length to keep their churches from any sense of loyalty to the Apostle Paul.

By the way, this helps explain that odd text in *2 Timothy 1* where Paul writes something I really didn't understand until I studied this text in Philippians 1.

Paul writes to Timothy near the end of his imprisonment in Rome these surprisingly sad words – *You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me* (Everybody in Asia turned away from me . . . in other words, they abandoned me . . . Paul goes on then to write this) . . . *may the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains, but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me earnestly and found me (2 Timothy 1:16-17).*

Are you serious? Onesiphorus arrives in Rome and he has to search diligently to find the Apostle Paul? The churches and leaders had so completely abandoned Paul that a few years after he had arrived, nobody even knew where he is!

No wonder Paul comes to the last few lines of the last letter he'll write before he's executed and he writes, *"everyone deserted me."* (*2 Timothy 4:16*).

And why?

Envy . . . you've got something I don't have and I want it and I don't want you to have anymore.

Rivalry . . . you're getting more attention than me and I don't want you to have any of it because I want all of it.

Envy and rivalry taking place, not in a political campaign, but in the church . . . turning one Christian against another . . . but even worse, causing one Christian to throw mud at another.

That's the first faction or grouping.

Notice the second faction in verse 15 – [they are] are those who preach Christ from good will.

Good will is a reference to desiring the best for someone else – in this context they are wishing the best for the Apostle Paul.

So here you have Paul's honest and open identification of a major problem – division in the body . . . politics in the pews.

But Paul, and God's Spirit through him, not only openly identifies the problem . . . secondly,

2. Paul boldly reveals the motive

He isn't just going to say there's a problem with envy and rivalry, he's going to tell us what the motive is behind it all.

Notice *verse 16. The latter – that is, those who preach from good will – do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel; the former faction – proclaim Christ out of rivalry.*

Stop for a moment . . . Paul makes it clear, the problem here isn't the message – it's the motive

They are all preaching Christ – the gospel – genuine faith in Christ alone.

They're using the same sermon notes and the same Study Bible.

The problem isn't their message . . . it's their motive.

And Paul provides a clue as to perhaps why so many found it easy to effectively bump Paul off their radar . . . not even visit him, bring him casseroles, send him cards . . . just completely write him off.

Notice the phrase in *verse 16 – The latter do it out of love* – watch this – *knowing that I am put here for the defense* – the apologia (απολογία) – apologetics – *the defense of the gospel.*

Here's the clue – *they know that I have been put here.*

The verb literally means, to be *appointed* . . . to be destined for this place.^{vi}

In other words, these sympathetic believers who loved Paul understood that he had been appointed to imprisonment for the sake of apologetics!

This verb was also used in the military world for someone receiving a special assignment.^{vii}

That was Paul's attitude.

And how grateful he was for the church in Philippi – his faithful supporters – they knew he had been appointed to this imprisonment by God. A few in Rome understood it as well . . . that his apartment and his chains and his Praetorian guards represented his classroom where he had been assigned by God to teach.

Notice now, on the other hand, this ambitious faction – *verse 17* informs us, have a different motive. Their motive isn't love for Paul – their motive is actually, Paul writes *at the end of verse 17, to afflict me in my imprisonment.*

Literally, they want to make my bonds more galling to me . . . even more painful.^{viii}

Their underlying motive was to make Paul's life miserable.

And you're wondering, why in the world would a Christian – a pastor – a church leader – a believer – ever want to make Paul suffer even more?

I personally think in this revelation of motive, we're given a huge clue as to what's going on behind the scenes.

First, we know from history that prison had a huge stigma attached to it – much of that has remained to this day.

One historian writes, "Paul was certainly aware that his incarceration reflected negatively on his credibility . . . prison was a place of dishonor . . . considerable pressure was exerted on those who knew a prisoner to treat him with revulsion or to abandon him entirely."^x

Could that be the case with Paul? I believe so.

In fact, it explains Paul's remark to Timothy that when Onesiphorous found where he was living under house arrest, handcuffed to a Roman guard, Paul writes with deep appreciation that ***Onesiphorous was not ashamed of my chains.***

Secondly, keep in mind that these Roman believers had certainly heard how God had rescued Paul and Silas from prison earlier . . . why not now?

They knew that God had miraculously rescued the Apostle Peter from prison . . . surely God isn't honored by Paul's imprisonment.

Their underlying motive of wanting Paul to suffer in prison was based on their belief that Paul's chains were his own doing and God would never allow His chief ambassador to languish for years in prison unless something was wrong with Paul himself.

John MacArthur, in his commentary on Philippians, did a wonderful job imagining all the possible things people had said about Paul's imprisonment that would have eventually caused just about all of them to abandon him.

- Like Job's friends, there would have been envious preachers in Rome claiming that Paul's imprisonment was the Lord's punishment for some secret sin.
- Still others may have thought that the Lord kept Paul in prison because of his inadequate and misleading preaching of God's word.
- Others may have thought that Paul was old-fashioned and that a more relevant approach was needed to reach the sophisticated people of Rome.

- Others may have argued that if Paul had been completely uncompromising and true to the faith he would have been martyred long beforehand. So he evidently made a deal with the Romans to protect his life and secure favorable treatment.
- Still others may have maintained that Paul was in prison because he lacked the victorious faith that would have gained his release. He was obviously failing to tap into the Holy Spirit's power.
- Others would have claimed that the very fact that they were free to preach and Paul's was in prison was proof that God was finished with him and now going to use them instead.^x

Simply put, it's a good thing Paul is out of the way and those of us who matter to God can get on with it.

Those who loved Paul, of course, knew better. They knew he wasn't in prison because of secret sin or an impure life or a lack of faith or because God was finished with him.

In fact, they knew he had been given his most difficult assignment ever – an ***appointment*** from God that would require the ***greatest*** faith . . . the ***purest*** life . . . and the most ***persevering*** trust that God had not abandoned him.

Listen to what he wrote Timothy during these days – I only read you the first part earlier so I could save this part until this moment – Paul writes with chains around his wrists to Timothy just months before his execution – ***Everyone deserted me . . . but the Lord stood by me and strengthened me . . . so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it (2 Timothy 4:17).***

These chains are not a disgrace . . . they are a grace . . .^{xi}

From God . . . for His gospel . . . and for His glory.

Paul openly identifies the problem.

Paul boldly reveals the motive.

3. **Now notice, thirdly, and I think we can begin to understand how Paul graciously resists revenge**

Look at verse 18. What then.

Stop there . . . what then? You could translate it, “*So what?! What does it matter?*”

In other words, what does it really matter if I’m loved or hated – this is God’s assignment.

Maybe for you – this is the message you need from God more than any other right now . . . chains . . . misunderstanding . . . dishonor . . . abandonment . . . and you’re splattered with mud.

Verse 18 should have opened with, “Let me tell you a thing or two . . . I’ll have you know . . . wait til I get a hold of you!”

Paul could’ve written a chapter or two that skinned these Roman Christians alive!

He resisted self-defense – self-promotion – he could have rattled off his resume . . . had they forgotten his epistle? Had they forgotten his past?

He could have reminded them all!

No . . . that’s how you respond if you want to jump into the political frackas . . . and Paul refuses to play the game.

Preaching Christ isn’t a race for spiritual scalps . . . it isn’t a contest to see who can win the most delegates on the convention floor.^{xii}

Paul refuses to play pastoral politics in the parish or among the pews for followers . . . he won’t join their game.

But Paul – they’ve abandoned you . . . you should hear what they’re saying about you and your imprisonment.

Listen, for those of you who lead a ministry – for those of you who step up to lead as elders – for those who volunteer to serve as deacons – for those who teach a Bible class – a men’s group or ladies Bible study – for those who lead in some parachurch ministry – or on some mission field – the question is not:

- will you ever hear criticism;
- will you ever feel the sting of mud;
- will you ever feel the pain of lonely perseverance;
- will you ever be the subject of misunderstanding –

No, the question is not; *will you* experience it, the question is, *what will you do* when it happens? As a pastor, I wonder how I would have been able to persevere like Charles Spurgeon who would preach on Sunday to 5,000 people on Sunday in London England during the 1800’s and then every Monday, receive the delivery of yet another anonymous letter from someone who thoroughly criticized his preaching. Not that sermons and preachers are above

criticism . . . valid criticism at that . . . but . . . every Monday.

I rather enjoy the story of D. L. Moody who lived during the same time as Spurgeon, pastoring in Chicago. He was often the recipient of derogatory and demeaning mail. He would often receive anonymous letters filled with all sorts of accusations. On one occasion he was sitting on a platform during a service where he was about to preach. An usher came up and handed him a note that had been folded in half. Moody unfolded the note, and it had in large letters just one word, “Fool”. He held it in his hand as he stepped up to preach and he said with a smile, “I have just been handed a note with the single word “Fool” written on it. I often receive unkind messages that are unsigned – well the strangest thing has happened here; the author has forgotten to write me a message but has merely signed his name.

That’s probably not the best illustration of refusing to retaliate, but I knew you’d appreciate I as much as I did.

Chuck Swindoll writes, “What do we do when a harsh word is spoken to us [or about us]? We usually shout back . . . even louder.”^{xiii}

The truth is, if Paul had chosen to retaliate, he would have had far more mud to throw back . . . and it would have stuck.

Paul graciously refuses to shout back . . . to retaliate in revenge.

Here’s why . . . number 4:

4. Paul wisely refocuses the priority

What then . . . so what . . . only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

In other words, even if they preach out of pretense – false motives – rivalry and competition against me; even if they preach Christ in truth – that is, out of loving understanding of my assignment in prison – so long as Christ is preached, ***in that I rejoice.***

By this point in the text, with what we’ve come to understand about Paul’s painful circumstances, you could almost forgive him for a verse or two of self-pity . . . some sort of depressed, discouraged, or even despairing acknowledgement.

Paul isn’t superman here . . . he simply has a grip on the fact that God has assigned him to that apartment . . . and to those handcuffs.

Even though the church at large had written him off; and even though pastors and church leaders in Rome don't come to see him . . . or encourage him . . . or worse, they are telling everybody, "Yeah, that old Paul is out of touch . . . he's out of gas . . . besides, he's obviously getting what he deserves."

Paul effectively says, "I'm aware of that . . . but as long as they are preaching the Gospel of Christ . . . that's what matters."

You see, here's the difference.

Their priority was to get people to follow them; Paul's priority was to get people to follow Christ.^{xiv}

There's one more way to handle the mud that gets thrown your way.

5. Paul intentionally shapes his attitude

Notice the last statement in *verse 18*. Don't miss it – underline it – marvel and learn from it – **Yes, and I will rejoice**.

In case you're wondering if you read it right – as long as Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice . . . I'll make sure you get it – **Yes, I will rejoice**.

This verb is what linguists call volitive, which means this is a decision of the volition – the will; and it's also future tense, which means Paul is saying that this is his decision – not just for the moment while he's writing this letter; this is his decision which he will take in to the future.^{xv}

Which lets you know that those other people in Rome were fighting on their feet; Paul is effectively fighting this battle . . . on his knees.

It is tragic, though . . . they really had no idea of who Paul was. Not like we do – we have all his letters . . . we even know what he was doing in Rome through this letter to the Philippians . . . most of the believers in Rome would have had no idea . . . we have access to the full record of Paul's visions; his assignment; his missionary journeys.

Many of them would only have assumed that he was just some old Apostle who evidently wasn't all that valuable anymore to the church or even to God.

Can you imagine what they missed? For more than 2 years, the great Apostle lived in their neighborhood and they never went to see him . . . talk with him . . . question him about difficult doctrines . . . receive greater understanding of key transitions in the church. Think of what they missed.

Instead, they rallied to accuse him . . . and they virtually forgot him.

Let's be careful, beloved. It may not be the Apostle Paul you're taking aim at . . . but learn the lesson not only of Paul's wonderful response, but learn a lesson from the tragic mistake of these believers in Rome.

Whenever you get caught up with throwing mud – you invariably take your eyes off the greater priority – the greater goal, which is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

During the 1800's, Charles Spurgeon pastored a downtown church in London that carried enormous weight as a leading voice for the gospel.

Among many institutions that Spurgeon and his church were involved in was the establishment of a college for pastors where hundreds of men were eventually trained for ministry.

During the later years of his ministry, Spurgeon denounced the growing heresy among the pastors and churches where the atoning work of Christ was no longer held as necessary and the inspiration of scripture no longer believed by many. His church was in this same association, known as the Baptist Union.

Since Spurgeon's voice carried significant weight, all of the pastors and churches in London and beyond were effectively challenged to clarify their doctrine and embrace the clear gospel of Christ.

Over the years, however, envy had done its silent work, and instead of rising to Spurgeon's warning, pastors and church leaders instead challenged Spurgeon – accusing him of exercising authority he didn't have and daring to make other leaders and pastors look foolish.

Spurgeon eventually resigned from the Baptist Union and that only made leader angrier. A movement grew within the Baptist Union to censure Spurgeon – that is, to publically denounce him and thus diminish his standing among the believers and churches in and around London – and beyond.

A meeting of the members was held, without Spurgeon present of course, since he'd resigned from the Association. One man by the name of Henry Oakley was there and he recalled the bedlam in the auditorium of the City Temple where the meeting was held.

He wrote, "I was present at the City Temple when the motion was moved, seconded, and carried. Possibly the City Temple was as full as it could be. I was there very early, but found only room in the aisle of the back gallery. I listened to the speeches.

The only one of which I have any remembrance was a pastor who spoke in favour of a liberal theology and the justification of doubt. The moment of voting came. When the motion of censuring [Spurgeon] came up, a forest of hands went up. “Against the motion” called the chairman, but I did not see any hands, although history records that there were seven [who voted not to censure Spurgeon].

Without any announcement of numbers the vast assembly broke into tumultuous cheering, and cheering and cheering yet. From some of the older men, their pent-up hostility [against Spurgeon] found vent . . . It was a strange scene. I viewed it almost with tears.

I stood near a graduate from Spurgeon’s own College, whom I knew very well. Mr. Spurgeon had welcomed him from a very lowly position. He went wild almost with delight at this censure of his generous teacher. I say it was a strange scene, that this vast assembly should be so outrageously delighted at the condemnation of the noblest and grandest leader of their faith.^{”xvi}

When he learned of the vote, Spurgeon wrote a friend and ended it by writing, Pray for me that my faith fail not.^{”xvii}

Today, Charles Spurgeon is revered as the most effective English pastor in the last 250 years.

Today, the Apostle Paul is revered as the greatest missionary statesman and defender of the faith in the history of the church.

J. Oswald Sanders wrote in his classic work entitled *Spiritual Leadership*, The crowd at large does not recognize a leader until he is usually gone; and then they build a monument for him with the stones they threw at him when he was alive.^{xviii}

When mud comes flying through the air . . . in your direction, don’t stoop to throw it back.

- Identify the problem
- Clarify the motive
- Refuse to retaliate
- Refocus on the priority

And intentionally choose – make a choice . . . to rejoice, so that in the end, and ultimately, Jesus Christ receives glory and the gospel moves forward.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/9/2014 by Stephen Davey.

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i Adapted from G. Walter Hansen, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letter to the Philippians* (Apollos, 2009), p. 71

ii Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland, general editors; *The Expositor’s Commentary: Volume 12* (Zondervan, 2006), p. 199

iii Ibid

iv Ibid

v Hansen, p. 73

vi Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Regency, 1976), p. 546

vii John MacArthur, *Philippians* (Moody Publishers, 2001), p. 67

viii J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Joy of Living: A Study of Philippians* (Lamplighter Books, 1973), p. 34

ix Expositor’s, p. 200

x Adapted from MacArthur, p. 65

xi Adapted from Expositor’s, p. 200

xii Dennis E. Johnson, *Philippians* (P & R Publishing, 2013), p. 62

xiii Charles R. Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick* (Thomas Nelson, 1978), p. 75

xiv Sam Gordon, *An Odyssey of Joy: The Message of Philippians* (Ambassador, 2004), p. 48

xv Adapted from Rienecker, p. 547

xvi Ian Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), p. 163; quoted by John MacArthur in *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Crossway, 1993), p. 222

xvii Ibid

xviii J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership* (Moody Press, 2007), p. 122
