

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-18
MAKING AN IMPRESSION

Is there one person above all who has made a lasting impression on your life? Is there someone that you admire, perhaps someone with whom you work(ed); a neighbour or a family member; someone you met in Church, a brother or sister in Christ? People leave impressions on us in both good ways and bad ways; we remember their qualities and try to emulate them; we see their faults and know that we should avoid making same mistakes. On the other hand, what kind of impression do we make on other people? We can ask that question of ourselves as individuals, for the people that we meet: people we sit beside at work, or meet every day on the bus; on our family, our children, our grandchildren; on our neighbours. We can ask that question of Church – what impression do people have of Juniper Green Parish Church? The answer to that might surprise you at times; people have long memories. We have to be ourselves, and not become preoccupied with what other people think of us, but being ourselves, what kind of impression do we leave behind us?

Paul's letter to the Philippians is full of Christ, but not so much as an explanation of the gospel as the implications of the gospel. "Be like Christ; this is how the people whom Jesus has loved should think and act and behave." He has already said, first of himself "*For me...*" (1:21a) and his ministry is surely a great example of a man whose mind is focussed on Jesus and being the kind of person Jesus wants him to be. Then to the Christians in Philippi "*Whatever happens...*" (1:27a) This is a huge challenge! It is crucial that we learn this lesson, that we learn to live life and conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel. We've all heard stories of people who accuse Christians "how can you call yourself a Christian and..." and the sentence finishes with some kind of wrong behaviour that has clearly left a bad impression on the person who makes the criticism. This is a huge challenge for the Church and for us. How do we react?

There are two themes in Philippians 2:12-18 that are big and important themes. Obedience and evangelism are the challenges with which Paul brings the Philippian Christians face to face and brings us face to face with the same challenges. Neither word is comfortable for us, for different reasons. Obedience is not a popular twenty-first century concept: we do things as we feel like it and as we see fit; if it makes us happy, we will do it; if it fits with our other plans we might make a space for it; but the notion of obedience smacks of someone else controlling our lives and we don't like that; it doesn't fit with our view of life! Evangelism brings with it a picture of going round doors forcing people to listen to something, with a foot stuck in the door and compelling people to do something against their will, even making people change their minds, or views and opinions and our tolerant age doesn't like that notion. However, these are important words; let's see what they *really* mean.

1. Obedience: "*Therefore my...*" (2:12f) This is a bit like a rope that is made up of several threads woven together. Only when we get all of these threads together will we see the whole picture. *The first thread:* "*continue...*" there is a clue here; we are carrying on something that has already begun; salvation is already at work in us because of what Jesus has done for us. Jesus has achieved our salvation and He is already at work in us to save us. Now, we need to live as people Jesus has saved and put that faith into practice in the way we think, speak and behave. We need to continue that process by growing in faith, developing our faith, living in a manner worthy of gospel; we are not saving ourselves, but we are learning obedience because Jesus has already blessed us.

The second thread: "*it is...*" we grow, we develop, we persevere, we learn, but it is God who is at work in us at one and the same time; Christian life is a partnership,

God and us working together in harmony and all that we do, we do in the strength that God supplies to us.

The third thread: "therefore as..." They have learned that it is good to obey God and have started well; now they need to keep going; they need to keep obeying God because of the sense of what God has done for them and in them. Obedience in the New Testament is never a forced duty, but a thankful response to the work of God in our lives.

What impression has Jesus made on you? Whatever is your response to that question is key to this challenge to obedience! If Jesus makes little impression on our lives, then our response will be limited; the greater the impression that Jesus makes, the greater will be our desire to obey Him. It is as simple spiritual truth! Acts 16 tells the story of the birth of the church in Philippi, made up of a slave girl, a ex-Roman soldier turned town jailor and a foreign cloth trader! These three people are the nucleus of the new church; they are not altogether promising material. But these are three people on whom the gospel had made a huge impression, a life-changing impression and because Jesus had made this huge impression on their lives, they had this burning desire to obey Him and live their life for Him, in obedience to God. Their obedience was sparked off by a deep sense of gratitude: "God has given us this great salvation; we should live for Him to best of our ability." It hasn't changed! Have we lost this sense of gratitude? Have we refused to let Jesus make any impression on our lives? Is Scotland becoming lukewarm to Christian values because we have lost this sense of gratitude? Have we lost the sense of this great salvation?

2. Evangelism – there are two pictures here that are about Christians making an impression on the world in which we live. 1) "*we shine like stars*" against the black background of a sinful world, "*crooked &...*" This is not a particularly attractive picture of the world that Paul paints, but against that darkness, Christians shine like stars. We can't see the stars in daylight, but they are still there; we can't even see them from the city when other lights get in the way, but they are still there. We are called to shine like stars in the world around us and we do that by the quality of life that we live. Christians are called to be distinctive, to live in a manner worthy of the gospel, to put into practice the example, teaching, values of Jesus, to be different from the world around us and as we live that life, we shine like stars; we add value to the world, we make a good impression and we give people something new to see and think about and even aspire to find for themselves. I know for me, that it was the quality of someone's life that made me take a serious look at the gospel and was an important step on my journey to finding faith for myself.

2) "*you hold...*" Life is full of offers: 'buy one get one free'; '2 for price of 1'; 'a free upgrade on your phone'; '£5 off when spend £50'. Some of them seem too good to be true and we reject them; others are good and genuine and we take advantage of them. We have something to offer our world; it is a message that speaks of life and that brings life to the people who embrace it. We don't force people to listen; nor do we force people to accept it. We have an offer to make – the offer of the message of life in Jesus. There are problems: sometimes we want to keep it to ourselves, we don't really want to share it because we quite enjoy the blessings and we're not sure want to share them with others; or we are embarrassed by our faith because so many people laugh at Christians these days and we're almost ashamed to admit to our faith, so when the opportunity to share it with someone does arise, we get tongue-tied and are not sure what to say and the message is not held out! Yet, telling the stories of Jesus, telling people about Jesus, is the best service that we can offer to the world; sometimes those who laugh at our faith, secretly wish they had what we have; sometimes the person next to us is crying out for someone to tell them about faith and how to find it. Hold out the word of life to the people you know and meet.

There is one final and simple key to evangelism and the impression we make on our world. *“Do everything ...” (2:14)* How do we show the world that we belong to Jesus, that we are the children of God? “Preacher, surely there must be some great demonstration of love, some example of self-sacrifice to which we must aspire; surely that is how the world sees God in us!” No! It is much simpler than that: *“Do everything...”* No grumbling, no criticism, no arguing over things that don’t matter, no selfish carping, no impatience with others. It is very simple! We can be hugely impressive, a breath of fresh air in our world! Go back to Numbers 13: this is one of a series of incidents in which Israel grumbled and complained and argued and it dragged them down and down until they disobeyed God and walked away from His will. It started off simply: “we’re fed up with this manna!” in chapter 11; “we want meat”. In chapter 12, Miriam and Aaron complained about Moses’ leadership. Then in chapter 13: “We can’t do this; it is too hard to conquer the land” – in other words, “we don’t believe God can keep His promise” and “we wish we were back in Egypt!” – how short-sighted were these people! Life in Egypt was awful; they were slaves, being beaten up, with no food to eat and God saved and rescued them. They grumbled and complained and it festered away at their spirit till they lost their way and the nations laughed at them and God let them lose! Grumbling and complaining drags the spirit down, undermines faith, spoils our relationships and changes the message; we make an impression on the world by our complaining, but it is the wrong impression! We are to show Jesus to the world, to make a good impression on the world, be a breath of fresh air in the world – how? *“Do everything...” (2:14)* We will agree that it is a good idea; let’s put it into practice.

I’m not a huge fan of Monty Python, though I know some of you are; they made a film called *The life of Brian* which is a sideways glance at story of Jesus. There is a piece in that film called “What have the Romans ever done for us?” in which Reg (played by John Cleese) is trying to stir his gang up to fight the Romans and he asks the question “So, what did the Romans ever do for us?” He gets all sorts of answers back and becomes frustrated: the last line of the sketch is this: “Apart from sanitation, medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, fresh water, public health, what have the Romans done for us?” The point is this: God has done great things for us: in Christ He has blessed us with everything we need and we could make up an even longer list of the blessings of God on our lives and on the world: forgiveness, peace, hope, love, adopted to be His children, grace, promise, presence, faith etc. Because God has done all of this and has given us all of these gifts we obey Him: we live life in a manner worthy of the gospel; this is the proper response to the salvation God has achieved for us in Christ; this is our grateful response to the God who has saved us. Because God has done all of this and has given us all of these gifts, we hold out the word of life: we share Jesus with others, we show Jesus to others by the way we live. It has a simple starting point: we rejoice in Jesus and in all that He has done for us; *“Do everything...”*; so we become a breath of fresh air; we shine like stars, we hold out the word of life.