

IT'S YOUR ATTITUDE THAT COUNTS

Philippians 1:9-14

Doubtless all of us are acquainted with the custom of taking a report card home for parents to sign at regular intervals. Many have always dreaded that occasion. Perhaps they did acceptable work in most subjects. But down at the bottom of that report card there was always a grade on " deportment," or "Conduct," or "Attitude." And that grade has landed many in trouble.

Perhaps some of you, who had done something out of line and had a poor grade in this category heard your father or mothers say, "Son, or daughter, it's not so much what you do; it's your attitude that counts." Those words stated a basic and important principle of life. It's your attitude that counts.

If you were in Rome, and you desired to do so, you could walk down the street to a little iron gate through which you could pass to a long flight of concrete steps leading down below the sidewalk. At the bottom you would see a prison cell, one that is damp, dark and dirty. The only light available would be from a small electric bulb set in the wall and from an opening at the top of the cell. That prison cell is one in which Paul was confined, at least part of the time, during his imprisonment in Rome. And it was while he was a prisoner in Rome that he wrote Philippians.

The important thing, which I would like for you to bear in mind, about these verses is that they were written while Paul was a prisoner in Rome chained to a Roman soldier day and night. He had suffered much and was drawing toward the end of a life that the world would call a failure. He was facing a trial that might well have ended in his execution.

Seemingly Paul's antagonists had checked and broken his ministry. His enemies had pursued him relentlessly, and now this mighty itinerant for his Lord was a prisoner awaiting trial in Rome, and living in hourly expectation of death beneath the axe of the executioner. Was he inclined to murmur? Was he impatient with his restraints? Was he touched with depression? Was there any unfavorable reaction in his enthusiastic spirit? Of course, his spirit was wounded because he thought that the work of his Lord was being hindered. It would have been natural if he had become embittered, and even morbidly sour, but the glorious truth is that he did not do so.

It is to be remembered that Paul had purposed to preach the gospel in the chief city of the world. He had written an epistle to the brethren at Rome in anticipation of his visit, and in this he informed them that he longed to impart unto them some spiritual gift, and prayed that God would open the way for him to come to them. His prayer had been answered; yet how strangely!

If you had been under circumstances similar to those of Paul, what kind of a letter would you have written to close friends? Would you have devoted a page or two to giving a detailed account of all your troubles and hardships and sufferings? If so, you would have revealed your great unlikeness to Paul. He began his letter, not by speaking of himself, but by assuring his friends of the prayerful concern which he had for them. It was his attitude that counted.

Still, it is also certain that Paul's attitude is what ought to be the normal Christian one. We who follow Jesus Christ should be distinguished by a concern for others which supersedes concern for ourselves. Part of becoming a Christian is the inversion of values in the personality. One who is not a Christian will normally have self at the top of his table of values. Far down the list will come the needs of others, and, perhaps, at the very bottom, will be God Himself. But the Christian must be different! Self is dispossessed of the throne, and Christ takes over. Christ first, others second; self last! This is the Christian attitude.

Paul had the Christian attitude toward life. As he addressed himself to his dear friends in Philippi there was not a word of complaint or bitterness. Paul was able to see the hand

of God when things went against him. He was able to get sweet out of bitter. The capabilities of the Christian faith to triumph over all circumstances come into clear relief in Paul's account of his imprisonment. There was not a single suggestion of defeat. The violence of Paul's enemies had not defeated his purpose, but had actually helped to accomplish it. The chain which bound him to a soldier gave him the opportunity for which he had prayed. If he could not preach to large crowds in the Forum, he could and would influence the individual soldiers who served as guards over him. When he was imprisoned, Paul could not imagine anything except that the gospel would be hindered, and here it was actually being furthered by the very means which it had been thought that it would be set at naught.

At the very first of his letter, Paul launched out with an expression of concern for the Philippian Christians. Naturally this concern manifested itself in prayer. That is the normal Christian way. If we believe in prayer, and if we are concerned for others, then we cannot help but pray for them. Intercessory prayer, of lifting our hearts to God in prayer for those about us, is a distinctive of our faith which must not be neglected. If you actually love someone, almost unconsciously the name of that individual will begin to find its way into your prayers. The most natural thing is to pray for those you love.

Paul had the Philippian Christians in his heart. That means that he held them in his memory, thoughts and affections. They had shown themselves to be united with him in closest fellowship, both in his sufferings and in his witnessing for Christ. The paragraph in which Paul expressed his joyful gratitude for his Christian companions indicates that the strongest bonds of friendship are those which are formed by fellowship in Christian service. The most sacred and abiding ties are those which are due to a common relationship with Christ, and to an earnest and hearty cooperation in work undertaken for the Lord.

Paul's prayer for the Philipppians, as recorded in verses nine through eleven, reveals that he prayed for four things for them. He prayed that God would give them an intelligent love, and that the full tide of their love might be confined to right channels and kept free from all that was selfish and impure. He was very anxious that they might be able to tell the good from the bad. He prayed that their love might grow richer in two respects -- accurate knowledge of right and alertness in applying such knowledge to the experiences of life.

Paul prayed that they might have a discerning love, or the ability to detect the good from the bad even if they looked alike. Such love will enable one to "distinguish the things that differ," -- virtue and vice, false and true prophets, corrupt and sound doctrines. Paul also prayed that they might have a transparent love, and a fruitful love. Fruitfulness is possible only through union with Christ. God has given us life, and to us He is looking for much fruit.

I am grateful that Paul prayed "that ye may approve the things which are excellent." Evidently the ones for whom Paul prayed had come to approve those things in life which are good. But Paul was not content that they should stop there. Always, to Paul, the Christian faith was a growing, dynamic thing. The Christian believer is one who is in a continual state of progress -- growing, developing, maturing. So Paul says, "I want you to come to approve those things which are not only good, but those things which are excellent --the best in life."

Paul prayed that his Philippian friends might grow in love, and mature in judgment, and maintain that attitude which would mark them as followers of the Christ. His best argument for what he was saying was simply his own life. It was Paul's attitude that counted.

How did Paul take what happened to him? He took it in stride, of course. He said: "But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel: So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places." Even though he could not reach the Roman citizens out there in the city, he would witness to each and every soldier who was chained to him in-

side the prison. Paul discovered that he was reaching people while he was a prisoner who might never have been reached otherwise. The chain which deprived Paul of his liberty gave him his opportunity.

The guards saw Paul in chains, wondered why, asked him, and he told them. They soon learned that he was a man who was suffering for his faith in Christ and his devotion to him. His Christian optimism and joy were obvious to all who observed and heard him. They learned that Christ was the secret of Paul's joy. If there is one thing above all others which the New Testament declares by word and example, it is that happiness and joy are not dependent upon outward conditions or circumstances. Paul was not bitter because of what happened to him. Nobody can be bitter and happy at the same time. If you are bitter, you are miserable, and not joyous. The things that happen to us either make us bitter or better. Facing the things which came up against him, Paul determined that he would be better because of them. It was Paul's attitude that really counted.

It is amazing what a positive and Christian attitude toward disappointment and frustration can do. Two young, poor and ambitious brothers ran a patent-medicine show. One of the brothers acted as a juggler and magician; he drew the crowd and his brother sold the medicine at a hundred percent profit at least. At last the law caught up with them. They were told that they were practicing medicine without a license. It was a keen disappointment to them. The one thing they could do they were prevented from doing. The older of the two, Harry, said, "Here's what we'll do. I'll get a job with a carnival, and put you through medical school. In a few years you will have a license to practice, then no cop can order us around. We can go back to this business and clean up!" So one boy went to medical school, and the other into circus and show business. Years later the medical student became Chief Radiologist in a New York hospital. Harry became known as Houdini, the foremost magician of all time. Often he said, "What seemed like the worst troubles in my life have often paid me the biggest dividends!" It's one's attitude that counts.

Attitudes have an effect upon those around us. That is why they are so important. It is not difficult to trace the effect which Paul's attitude had on those with whom he came in contact. When Paul and Silas went to Philippi the first time for the purpose of establishing a church there, they had been beaten, thrown into prison, and placed in stocks. Their attitude in the midst of their suffering and imprisonment was revealed in the words, "At the midnight hour, they prayed and sang praises unto God." No wonder that when God's earthquake came to open the prison the other prisoners obeyed Paul when he commanded them to remain in their cells. No wonder the frightened jailer chose to throw himself at the feet of Paul and Silas and cry out, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" It was Paul's attitude that counted.

On that long and terrible journey to Rome Paul was a prisoner in chains on the ship. When the ship was tossed and buffeted by the terrible storm, it was to Paul, their prisoner, that both captain and crew turned for help and advice. Why? There could not have been any other reason than this, during the long days of the voyage something about Paul had made a deep impression upon those sailors. It was his attitude that counted. It's your attitude that counts.

There is a tradition or story which may or may not be true. It is said that during the days Paul was a prisoner in Rome, some seventy individual Roman soldiers, at one time or another, stood guard, chained to him. And tradition says that of that seventy all except two received Christ as their Saviour, while they guarded their notable prisoner. How did that come about? Do you think it was because Paul preached masterful sermons to them? I don't think so. Those men had to watch Paul all day and all night. They saw him at his best and at his worst. They heard him tell how to be saved. They listened to him when he prayed. They watched him suffer. One of the most important factors in the conversion of those soldiers was the way in which Paul lived — the inward strength he showed, and the radiant faith he demonstrated. It was his attitude that counted.

Always, it is your attitude that counts. Those who are not children of God watch the Christian. They watch his attitude toward temptation, toward sin, toward trouble, toward sorrow, toward suffering and toward death. With the right attitude we can do so much for Christ and for others, and can influence them in a manner that they will never forget. It's your attitude that counts.