

Welcome to Neighborhood! Will you please open your Bible with me to the New Testament book of Philippians, chapter 1. We are continuing in our series called ILLUSIONS. An illusion is something you believe is true, but it is fake. It looks real, but it's hollow and empty. It can lead us away from what is true & trustworthy.

The Illusion I would like us to examine today is called HEDONISM. It's OK if you don't immediately know this word...neither did I. Hedonism comes from the Greek word *hedone* (hay-doe-NAY) which means "PLEASURE." Simply stated, Hedonism is the idea that the primary goal in life is pleasure: what feels good, whatever is easy, whatever is comfortable...go after those such things.

Hedonism states that Pleasure is the only "good"...it's the only thing that has value...and therefore pleasure should be the guiding principle of human action. Within Hedonism is the avoidance of pain. For the Hedonist: pain, discomfort, & suffering are intrinsically evil...they have no value...and therefore they should be avoided at all costs. A Hedonist lives to maximize pleasure and minimize pain.

Now let me be clear: pleasure is not evil! God is the creature of pleasure...it's His idea. The Christian does not reject pleasure or delight or enjoyment. But Hedonism asserts that pleasures alone make up "the good life." Jesus Christ taught that the pursuit of personal pleasure will prove empty. He warned "Life is not measured by how much you own." (Luke 12:15 NLT) Philosophers speak of the "paradox of hedonism." Referring to the way pleasure seems to go sour after awhile: Ever eaten too much candy? You might enjoy it at the time, but later you have a terrible stomach ache...and eventually your teeth rot away.

A few problems with Hedonism:

1. Hedonism doesn't deliver what it promises:
  - Jim Carrey, a very talented actor of our time, had this to say: "I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer."
2. Hedonism doesn't know what to do with pain, suffering, hardship, discipline, or anything undesirable.
  - Yet life as we know it (because of sin) includes pain & tragedy.
  - A wise man has said often, "we live in a morally broken pain machine."

Now, I don't suppose any of you would label yourself a "Hedonist." The word "Hedonism" carries with it a judgmental tone. I do believe we have traces of hedonism in us. I admit that I have an inner-hedonist within me: That tendency within me to pursue only the things which bring me the greatest pleasure. I choose that which is comfortable, easy, and without struggle. I avoid endeavors which might be difficult, painful, uncomfortable, and undesirable. These choices make my pleasure the basis for decisions in life.

CASE IN POINT: Chemistry class - I confess to you: I have avoided Chemistry class my whole life. I made it through high school, college, and graduate school having never taken a day of Chemistry. IT'S HARD! I am proud of it...at least I was until the day I tried to cook hot dogs for our youth group using a duraflame log! Those logs are treated with dangerous chemicals to help them burn!

But on a larger scale, what happens when we allow the inner-hedonist to dictate our life?

- Seeking what is easy...that which brings pleasure NOW...aiming for a trouble-free existence?
- What happens when we experience suffering, pain, & difficulty?
- How is our view of God affected when we go through trials & tragedy?
  - We wonder is God good? Has He forgotten me?
  - "Isn't it God's purpose to maximize our pleasure & minimize our pain?"

*What is the Christian's response to the Illusion of Hedonism?*

To answer this, I would like us to learn from the Apostle Paul in Philippians 1, beginning in verse 12.

Context of Philippians: The year is about 61 A.D. You live in a city called Philippi (which is a Roman colony). You are a follower of Jesus. You don't worship in the pagan temples, you worship with a group of Christians. It was this man Paul who helped establish this Jesus-worshipping church. Paul came into town 10 years ago and proclaimed that JESUS IS KING, (not Caesar).

And because of Paul's message, he was eventually arrested and carried off to Rome some 800 miles where he is in chains...in prison or under house arrest...awaiting his trial. Because you and the church in Philippi LOVE Paul so much, you take up an offering to send to Paul some money. Because if you are a prisoner in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Rome, you are completely dependent on outside help for food and other necessities. You send this money with one of the church members named Epaphroditus so he can minister to Paul's needs. Epaphroditus gets ill while in Rome and Paul sends him back to Philippi. And when Epaphroditus returns, he has in his hand a LETTER - a personal letter from Paul, written to you and the rest of the church. Because you love Paul and are concerned for his well-being, you all have one burning question: "Paul, How Are You Doing?" Someone begins reading Paul's letter aloud. Paul begins by saying, "I thank God for you...for your partnership in spreading the Good News of Jesus...and I pray for you all the time!"

In chapter 1, verse 12...like any letter you would write to a friend, Paul takes a moment to catch his friends up on his present situation:

*Philippians 1:12-14 (NKJV)*

*But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ; and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.*

1:12 "the things which happened to me"

Paul is referring to what his friends already know: He was arrested in Jerusalem based on false allegations. He was nearly lynched by a religious mob...ends up in a Roman prison. Paul escapes a beating by appealing to his Roman citizenship. As a prisoner, he is put on a boat for Rome...a storm hits the boat, Paul is shipwrecked for months on the island of Malta. Paul reaches Rome bound by chains, in the company of the condemned, destined to wait at least 2 years for his trial from an earthly king.

1:13,14 Paul uses the phrase "my chains" to sum up his experience:

While Paul may have literally been in chains, the term is a metaphor for his suffering, specifically his imprisonment. We read in Acts 20:22-23 that Paul had been warned by the Holy Spirit that chains & afflictions awaited him if he went to Jerusalem. Shame, pain, suffering: everything a Hedonist would seek to avoid, seeing no value in such things.

1:12 Paul says that these things (his sufferings, his chains)

"have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel" - the phrase indicates progress, movement; His sufferings were not an end, but have actually led to something else...something good.

"the furtherance of the gospel" - The gospel (Christ Died for Our Sins) is advancing, progressing. The word "furtherance" is a Greek military term referring to the army engineers who go before the troops to pave the way into new territory.

You might think that imprisonment might dampen his Paul's evangelistic efforts...or caused the Christians to be quiet about the gospel. But Paul's chains have resulted in:

- CONTACT with the LOST:
  - Paul says the whole "palace guard" has heard about Christ.
  - The palace guard refers to the emperor's elite troops stationed in Rome.
  - They guarded Paul around the clock.
  - Since they may have rotated on a 4-6 hour shift, Paul would have had access to MANY of them... sharing with each one about Jesus!
- COURAGE for the SAVED:
  - The family of God had become "much more bold to speak the word without fear"
  - The word "speak" refers to EVERYDAY conversation
  - The Christians in Rome took advantage of Paul's situation to say a good word for Jesus Christ to their neighbors.

God is TURNING Paul's chains to advance the spread of the gospel message. God is HIJACKING evil for His good purposes.

Paul continues: *Philippians 1:15-17 (NKJV)* Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from goodwill: The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; but the latter [preach Christ] out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel.

Because of Paul's chains, Christ is being preached all over the place! Some are preaching Christ envy and rivalry with Paul. Others are preaching Christ out of love for Paul. So apparently there were some Christians who preached a sound gospel, but they were personally at odds with Paul (maybe some of his critics?). This doesn't happen today, does it? Christians who both preach Christ but disagree on some matters of theology?

A story is told about two great English Evangelists - John Wesley & George Whitefield

- Both of them were very successful, preaching to thousands, and seeing many people come to Christ for salvation.
- But they disagreed on some matters of theology.
- Somebody asked Wesley if he expected to see Whitefield in heaven.
- Wesley said "NOPE, I do not."
- "Then you do not think that Whitefield is a Christian?"
- To which Wesley replied, "Of course Whitefield is a Christian! But I do not expect to see him in heaven —because he will be so close to the throne of God, and I so far away that I will not be able to see him!"
- So while Wesley & Whitefield differed in some matters, they did not seek to oppose each other's ministry.

What does Paul think of all of this?

*Philippians 1:18 (NKJV)*

*What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.*

Paul's aim in life is greater than maximizing pleasure or minimizing pain...his aim is that CHRIST IS PREACHED. The glory of Christ is Paul's great & controlling interest in life. Christ is preached...THIS is Paul's cause for joy. His joy is not in his chains... "Yay! This metal on my skin is great!" No...the pain is there for Paul. It's like Paul is lifting up his chains acknowledging the pain of his present situation...but asking us to LOOK THROUGH the links of the chains to see the BIGGER PICTURE of what God is doing. God is bringing FRUIT from a desolate, barren place (Paul's chains).

Let's look at one last statement Paul makes in Philippians 1:19, 20:

*Philippians 1:19, 20 (NKJV)*

*For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.*

Paul confronts the Illusion of Hedonism:

Whether by life (PLEASURE) or by (DEATH)...Christ will be magnified. Christ will be magnified: Enlarged; all of Christ's greatness will be shown in my body. Does Christ need to be magnified? Well, the stars are much bigger than the telescope. Yet the telescope magnifies the star and in a way "brings it closer" for others to see, understand, and enjoy.

Paul's body...and our bodies...are to be like the telescope. Because to the average person, Christ is a misty figure who lived a couple thousand years ago. Our lives become a LENS by which our neighbors view Christ and come to see His power, His love, and His grace for all mankind. So that we, like Paul, can say: "Whether by life or death...by pleasure or pain...Christ will be magnified in my body."

So the question to Paul: "How are YOU doing?" Paul says: "Well, these chains are heavy...they hurt...I would rather be with you...and visiting the other churches. But the gospel is advancing...Christ is preached... He is magnified! In light of that, I am good!

You see, something has captured Paul...SOMEONE has captured Paul. Jesus has destroyed Paul's inner Hedonist. Paul lived for MORE than personal pleasure & pain avoidance. Paul found GREATER PLEASURE as he delighted in God, in the work of God in this world, and in magnifying Christ to everyone he could. Paul wrote these words to his friends in Philippi as an example. They too were walking through difficult & painful experiences. Paul wants to encourage them...and us...in how we handle adversity. This passage is one which God's people have turned to again & again to find strength in times of pain. His words are for us today as we consider:

- What is our primary aim in life? (is it pleasure?)
- How we will handle adversity? (avoid it at all costs?)

When I was 18 years old, I had two life experiences which challenged my inner-hedonist:

#### 1. *"Delight Yourself in the Lord"*

After 18 years of living for my own pleasures and comfort, I got a taste of delighting myself in GOD and finding pleasure in His GOOD WORK. I went to Hermosillo, Mexico in a van with my youth pastor and 10 other teenagers as we served alongside a missionary family. This family was devoted to sharing the good news of Jesus to the people of Mexico. We mixed cement, we performed dramas on the street, and we worshiped with the church of Mexico. I spent a week observing a man named Duane Grassman as he ministered to the people of Mexico. A man who lived not to maximize his own pleasure or avoid pain & discomfort...but lived to preach Christ. And he had so much joy...he loved what he was doing! I worked harder that week than I ever had before. I was sore, tired, challenged...and content! I would fall into bed each night knowing that I had participated in something good that day...something God was doing for others. I spent a week considering others, not my own wants & desires. I loved it. I experienced the joy of the Lord and being a part of His Good Work. It was through that experience that I made a decision to that the primary aim of my life would be to: find delight in God and to point others to Jesus.

#### 2. *"God's Redemptive Turn"*

A few months after I returned from Mexico...still 18 years old and in my freshman year of college, God took a very painful experience and hijacked it for something good. I woke up one morning and the whole right side of my face was paralyzed. I was diagnosed with Bell's Palsy. From the top of my forehead to the bottom of my neck: nothing moved. My face sagged, I couldn't blink my eye, I couldn't talk clearly nor could I eat without making a mess. While this was mostly a cosmetic issue...it devastated me. For about a year, the paralysis was very obvious and pronounced. In fact, I still cannot move most of the right side of my face. I just wanted people to look beyond my paralyzed face, my crooked features, and get to know the real me...who I was on the inside, not the outside. I learned that I am more than a face.

God was teaching me something profound...something I carry with me today: It was like God was saying to me: "Trav, what you want is what every other person wants: to be loved and treasured for who they are, not what they look like on the outside." It changed my definition of beauty. It changed how I see other people...how I treat people. And I believe God, through this painful valley, was shaping a pastoral heart in me. It has also taught me to work on the deeper issues of my character rather than focusing on my outward appearance. While I would never want to experience Bell's Palsy again, I would not be the man I am today had God not walked with me through it. I learned that I do not need to fear pain or difficulty or trials, for God can bend / turn hardship for His good purposes.

Hedonism says we should pursue personal pleasure and avoid pain, but the truth of God's Word assures us: *Delight yourself in the Lord, He will work all things out for YOUR GREATEST GOOD and HIS GREATEST GLORY.*

As you find yourself in a particular difficulty, hardship, or painful experience: don't walk through this alone. God has given us the gift of Christian fellowship that we might find strength in times of deep need.