

TRAFFIC CONTROL

Philippians 2:1–18

I passed my driving test on the mainland of Orkney, the largest of those tiny islands off the north of Scotland. It was in the capital city, Kirkwall, but in spite of its elevated title Kirkwall is a small place, with, at that time, less than 5000 inhabitants. There were no roundabouts and no traffic lights. However, as it happened, on the day of my test there were road works in the centre of the town and temporary traffic lights were in operation.

This chapter of Philippians has always reminded me of a set of traffic lights. If life is like a journey – and it has often been compared to one – then this chapter offers us some traffic control.

Verse 3 begins with the words, ‘Do nothing.’ That’s a red light. It’s saying ‘Stop.’ Verse 5 says, ‘Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.’ That’s not saying, ‘Go’ – not yet – but ‘Get ready. Get into gear.’ It’s an amber light. Verse 14 says, ‘Do everything.’ Now we’re on green. Now it’s ‘Go.’ These signals are not here to frustrate us or to hold us up. They’re here for our safety and our progress.

Verses 1 and 2 map out our journey and remind us of our navigators. Christ and his Spirit are our guides and the emphasis seems to be more on *how* we are travelling than *where* we are travelling.

‘If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.’

Encouragement, unity, comfort, love, fellowship, tenderness, compassion, joy, harmony, co-operation: these are the evidences of progress on the Christian journey.

1. The red light. Stop.

Verses 3–4. ‘Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.’

Here are three situations where God turns the lights to red and tells us to stop.

Selfish ambition. Paul is talking about motivation here, not action. You can be active all right but if your motives are wrong then you need to stop. This is what 1 Corinthians 13:3 is all about. ‘If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.’

You may say, ‘I believe in action,’ and God may be saying, ‘Stop! Think about your motivation. Is it all just for your own glory, your own advancement, to make you look good?’ Selfish ambition? Stop. Do nothing.

Vain conceit. This is not a desire to be something you’re not, but a false pride in what you are. It’s like the Scottish boast (and I’ve sanitised it a bit). ‘Here’s tae us, wha’s like us? No’ many, and they’re a’ dead.’ We had a saying in our family which must have come from my mother’s side, from Yorkshire: ‘Eee, they did like me!’ Someone had said it at some point and it stuck. Vain conceit, empty pride? Stop. Do nothing.

A lack of humility. Humility is defined here as considering others better than yourself. Lack of humility is defined as looking after your own interests and ignoring what matters to other people. True humility is not navel-gazing and asking, ‘Am I humble yet?’ It’s looking at other people and saying, ‘They’re better than I am. How can I get involved with what matters to them?’

Do you recognise any of these? Selfish ambition, vain conceit, self-interested pride?

Have you seen that red light? If you don't stop you are in danger of a big crash.

2. The amber light. Think.

Verse 5. 'Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.' In the original language this verse is very compact. *Think this in (or among) you, which also in Christ Jesus.* It can be translated in two ways.

First there is the traditional translation we are familiar with from the Authorized Version. 'Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.' Look back. Look back to the life of Christ, the very opposite of selfish ambition, vain conceit and self-centred pride.

'Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped [or something to be exploited], but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient, even to death — even death on a cross!'

The devil came to Christ in the desert and offered him the world. But Christ turned his back on all that because he put our interests far beyond his own. In the Garden of Gethesemane he was in anguish of spirit, saying, 'Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not my will but your will be done.'

This is the way of thinking that should be in you.

But there is another way of translating verse 5. 'Let this mind be in you, which also you have in Christ Jesus.' This way of understanding the verse reminds us that the Christian life is not a struggle to imitate Christ. It is a power that enables us to live 'in Christ'.

Again and again in the letters of the New Testament we are reminded that when we put our faith in Jesus we are in Christ and he is in us. We're back to the double environment we were thinking about last week. 'In Christ Jesus in Philippi'.

If your idea of being a Christian is to imitate the life of Christ in your own strength you will struggle and you will fail. Have you ever been in a car when it's run out of petrol and you have to get out and shove? What a struggle. But that's not how it's meant to be. You shouldn't be pushing the car. The car should be carrying you.

In Christ we have all the resources we need for life and godliness. That's not to say that all our problems will disappear but Christ is there to help us, to carry us, to reform our thinking and transform our living. Later on in chapter 4 Paul says, 'I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength' (verses 12, 13).

Christ *has* set us an example, the greatest example in the world, but Christ has also promised us his power, the greatest power in the world. Get your thinking straight. Paul could say, 'I live – yet no longer I, but Christ lives in me' (Galatians 2:20).

3. The green light. Go.

Verse 14. 'Do everything...'. There's still a note of caution. 'Do everything without complaining or arguing.' We're not alone on the journey of life. There are other travellers and the way of safety is the way of courtesy. Some people – even some Christians – are morphed into a different character when they get behind the wheel of a car. What is it about that environment that affects us so badly?

The way of safety is the way of courtesy and that has to be true of the journey of life as well. Do everything without complaining or arguing.

Then Paul says (verse 15), 'so that you may become...' It's a process. In terms of the journey it's a progress. There's plenty that's crooked and depraved and dark in the godless world around us but we are to become blameless and pure, children of God without fault, shining like stars in the universe.

Verse 16 talks about our responsibility towards the word of life, the living word, referring to both the word of Christ (the Bible) and the Christ of the word. We are to 'hold out' the word of life. We are to witness. It's the only hope for light in the midst of darkness, salvation in the midst of evil, life in the midst of death.

If you look at the footnote in the NIV you'll see that the verb has another meaning. We are to 'hold on to' the word of life. It is what will sustain us. We must not neglect it.

As I drive around I see an increasing contempt for traffic lights, and I can't say that I've never driven through a stop light, either an amber or a red. It's a very dangerous thing to do. It's dangerous to keep going when you should stop and it's just as dangerous to stop when the lights are telling you to go.

In this chapter God has given us three lights: red, yellow and green. Stop. Get ready. Go.