

Praise and Prayer

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No one learns in a vacuum. We are social learners. And, in today's passage, Paul teaches us through his example. He teaches how to live but also how to think like Christians. So, let's read our text and begin to see how.

Philippians 1:3-11

³I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

⁷It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. ⁸God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

⁹And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

Well, today's passage has two main parts—(1st) a statement of **praise** to God for the Philippian church from Paul, and (2nd) a **prayer** Paul reveals that he's praying for the believers there. So, let's look at these two to see what God is teaching us.

1. A Praise (vv. 3-8).

For a moment, think about the kinds of things you typically say thank you for when you worship. What are your defaults? What are your go-tos?

- A nice meal? A relaxing vacation? A great date night?
- That your family is healthy and happy? That you just got a raise at work?

These are the kinds of things that I usually tend towards when thanking God. And, I should say, they're all good things to praise the Lord for. All are blessings from God—good gifts from above (James 1:17).

Yet, if such things are the sum-total of your praise bucket, then you've missed or are ignoring the far greater blessings you have in Christ. Your worship is starving. You need to put some meat on its bones.

Notice the kinds of things Paul praises God for as he writes to the Philippians. I can count three things which fuel and focus Paul's worship of God here.

- First, he's thankful for the people in that young congregation of believers. When he remembers them, he always praises God. (I wonder if you think about the people in this church that way...all the people, even the people who are different than you, in fact, *especially* the people who are different than you. Do you praise God for them...or wish they'd move churches?)
- Second, he's thankful for their partnership in gospel ministry. This apostle praises God for this local church's service over many years. (Once again, is this something that fuels your worship—that the Lord God has protected and prospered gospel ministry through this congregation, and many others in this city, for hundreds of years, and around the entire globe for thousands of years? Does that lead you to worship?)
- Finally, he praises God for God's faithfulness as it regards the Philippians and their future. He's thankful and confident that God is working in them, and if God is at work in them (*Paul tells us!*) he will see his perfect work in them to completion. (Do you believe this? And, if so, does it lead you into praise and worship even as it does for Paul?)

When you really reflect on Paul's praises here, I bet you feel a lot like I do—like you're pretty bad at praising God, like your thanksgivings are pretty shallow. Do any of you feel that way? I know I do.

Well, if you're feeling under the pile, if you're feeling like a terrible Christian, I'm here to reassure you that...it's far worse than you think.

Not only is Paul worshiping the Lord Jesus for all these other-centered kinds of blessings, he's writing these joy-filled praises while a prisoner in the city of Rome. Now, he wasn't necessarily in some dark prison-cell, but Paul was likely under guard at all times in a kind of house-arrest situation. Can you imagine? Can you imagine praising God like this from prison?

This past week my kids and I have been passing around a pretty nasty cold—coughing, sniffing, and aching. Nothing too serious, right, just enough to make each of us uncomfortable and irritable for a few days! And, what I've noticed about me, whenever I'm ill, is that I seem to dwell on whatever is wrong with my little world and to ignore all that's so right. Can you identify with that?

So God, in his providence, gave me this cold to deal-with and, simultaneously, gave me this passage to deal-with. The Lord placed an imprisoned Paul praising him before me at the very time I was inclined to complain about a constantly runny nose. I mean talk about rebuke and conviction.

Jesus robbed my self-pity of all its pleasure! Thank you, Lord!.

When pastoring, it's common to find yourself at the bedside of those people who are seriously ill and dying. That's normal for a pastor. What's really uncommon for us is to find ourselves next to the bedside of someone who is ill like this and, yet, who maintains an attitude of joyous praise. In my pastoring, I can count those people, people who worshiped God in the midst of their trials, on one hand.

Tim and Cindy had been at our church in Pennsylvania for just a little while when Tim had a massive heart-attack and had to be put on life-support for a number of days. The doctors were nearly certain he would not make it. We were fairly certain that we'd be doing Tim's funeral soon.

Yet, he did come through. All though, when he did, his outlook was not good. His kidneys had shutdown, and he was a shell, physically speaking, of the husband and father he'd been before. He had great difficulty doing the most basic daily tasks. Dialysis was now part of his weekly routine. He couldn't work to support his family as he had before. Daily life for Tim and Cindy was a tremendous struggle!

But, friends, when I would meet with Tim to pray with him or counsel him. I'd be the one who left pastored. I would go to bring him encouragement and care; yet, I'd leave feeling encouraged and cared for by him. There wasn't a more thankful

or worshipful person in our church. And Cindy, who now had the tremendous burden of taking care of so many of Tim's physical needs, always had a smile on her face when she'd come in a room. She'd always stress how much she felt blessed by God. She'd always give him glory for his provisions.

Dear friends, Tim and Cindy strengthened my faith. What encouragers!

Now, it would be tremendously easy—at this point in the sermon—to say that what we need is to be more like Paul or more like Tim and Cindy. It would be easy to say that what we need is to have a deeper, more profound sense of God's blessings or to have a more courageous attitude of praise, especially in the midst of hardship and suffering. In fact, that's precisely what many sermons today will tell us to do—worship like Paul worships, praise God like Tim and Cindy praise God.

Yet, that's not the application because that's not gospel; that's not good news. If you try to do that on your own, the weight of it will crush you.

Friends, Paul wasn't able to praise God like this because he worked hard at it. Tim and Cindy weren't thankful in the midst of their trials because they really tried to be thankful. No...there's something deeper and far more mysterious at work here. Just listen to these first six verses again. Listen for who is at work in us.

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus (vv. 3-8).

Who's working a good work in you...and will carry that work to completion? The Lord of your salvation is. God's at work in you.

Remember from last week's sermon that Paul attributes a believer's sainthood or holiness to being in Christ. I made the point that prepositional phrases in Scripture are extremely important. That is so true. We are in Christ. Christ, through his Spirit, dwells in us. So, we find our righteousness in Jesus, and he works his righteousness

into us. And, along these lines, we get a hint of how Christ is doing that very thing in today's passage. Just ask yourself—*When Paul says he longs for the Philippians, whose affection does he long for them with?*

Not his own affection but Christ's affection in him (v. 8)! When we trust Jesus for our salvation, something mysterious begins. Our selfish affections begin to die, and Christ's holy affections begin to live in us.

If you want to praise the Lord like Paul or Cindy or Tim, then you must rely on the work of Christ in you. You must trust in the work of the Holy Spirit to change and transform you—to give you hope and joy in the midst of whatever storms rage around you in this sinful, fallen world. *Friends, whenever we attempt to go it alone, we miss and minimize the gospel! Don't do that!*

Well, let's turn now to Paul's prayer for the Philippians.

2. A Prayer (vv. 9-11).

Listen again to what Paul's prayer is for this local church.

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God (vv. 9-11).

This is a deep prayer. And, far from being merely for the church at Philippi, his prayer is for us. It speaks to our little church at the corner of Ashland and Berwyn and points us in the right direction. It gives us the right vision.

We hear a lot of talk about love today. And, Paul likewise wants to talk to us about love; he's praying that our love might abound—overflow ever more and more into the world around us. If you ask anyone walking by our church this afternoon whether they'd like love to abound out to the world, they'll almost certainly respond, without any reservation, "*Yes!*"...because they'll be defining love in whatever terms they think best.

But, friends, Paul's prayer is for love with a backbone. It has real substance. It is not a love defined by the individual. It is not a relativistic love. No...the love which Paul prays for is love that's eternally determined by the character and actions

of our Creator. This is why Paul prays for a love in us that abounds—“in knowledge and depth of insight” (v. 9) which will help each of us “discern what is best” (v. 10) so that all of us might eventually be “filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ” (v. 11).

The love Paul prays for here is the love we see in our Savior—Jesus Christ. And, its most clear expression is his sacrifice on our behalf at the cross of Calvary. A sacrifice to save his enemies! A sacrifice to make his enemies his friends!

So, we have to ask as we close—What does such a Christ-like love look like in us? What does Paul’s prayer look like in 21st century Chicago? Well, it very likely won’t entail a literal crucifixion. But, it will inevitably mean we’ll die a multitude of figurative deaths in order to love them.

- First, put to death all your curses; sacrifice them when they come to mind. Sacrifice them when you’re wronged—mistreated and cheated and mocked. Begin, instead, to pray for those who treat you like this (Matthew 5:44). Praying for your enemies is the first act of love.
- Second, put to death any desire you have to dwell upon your enemy’s faults and failures. Rather, focus your attention on ways he or she images God—his or her virtues (Philippians 4:8). This is easier said than done.
- Lastly, put to death your very modern sense of personal, inalienable rights. You don’t really have them. Your model is Jesus who washed Judas’ feet knowing full well that he’d betray him; who prayed for God to forgive us as he hung dying on the cross. Friends, Jesus possessed every possible right but didn’t use any of them for his advantage (Philippians 2:5-11).

Do you want to see Christ Jesus more and more in you? If so, then, as you rely on the Holy Spirit, start practicing this kind of love—especially for your enemies.

We make far too much of feelings when it comes to love. We wrongly believe that we must feel love before we can act in love. But, actually, this flies in the face of Jesus’ command to love our enemy. Certainly, we won’t feel love for him or her before we obey this command. After all, they are our enemies!

No, the point in the command is to act that way whether we feel like it or not. And, the beauty of the command is that God is pleased to transform our affections for them through the process. I'll close with this from C. S. Lewis.

The rule for all of us is perfectly simple. Do not waste time bothering whether you "love" your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him.¹

¹ You can read the extended quotation from Lewis [here](#).