

Partners in Christ

If you have a bible with you, please open it with me to

Philippians 1:3-11 and let's listen together to what the apostle Paul writes to the Philippian church (and to us). ***I'll read it for us.***

Phil 1:3-11.

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.

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.

Let's pray... (to the glory and praise of God...)

I want to begin this morning by stating a core **conviction** – one that the apostle Paul is getting at from start to finish in his letter to the Philippians – the conviction that ***relationships are the proving ground of the gospel.***

That it's in our relationships with others and one another that our experience of Christ, our love of Christ, our devotion to Christ, our living in Christ – is shown for what it is... is proved real and authentic... or weak... or lacking...

Relationships are the proving ground of the gospel. More than what we profess or declare (though these are important), but by how we live in relationship with others... how we love and forgive...

This is where the reality of our life in Christ is *revealed*...

Which should not surprise since the gospel is all about **the restoration of relationships** – and at the core, ***being reconciled to God... restored, by grace, to God*** – to love God as we are loved... and to live in this love...

Right? This is the **goal** of God's work in our lives – that we would, by the work of God's grace in us, come ***to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves***... That's what God created us for and it is the goal of the gospel – it's what the gospel seeks to bring about in our lives...

So let me say it once more: **relationships are the proving ground of the gospel. And we know it. We feel it.**

We feel it in the **deep joy** that we know relationships can bring – and in the **deep pain** that they can also cause.

We know it in the reality that nothing can move us to prayer – to cry out to God – more than relationships – whether it is out of a longing for relationships, or for healing in our relationships.

Douglas Webster, a wise pastor, professor and author that I studied with years ago, once wrote about life in North America.

"The preeminent source of pain in this culture is broken relationships. The only war many people experience firsthand is the war going on inside their homes and within themselves. This is the war that rages between husband and wife, parents and children, and soul and spirit. This is where we feel the spiritual famine, the emotional drought and the physical drain. It is in our friendships, our marriages, our families and in our very selves that we feel this leanness of soul—this humiliation..." (Soulcraft, p.15)

This deep awareness that it is **in** our relationships and **in regard to** our relationships that we experience **our deepest need for Christ** – for grace...

I start here this morning because this is where Paul begins his letter to the Philippians – with both **joy** and **longing**.

Hear Paul's words again **(Phil 1:3f)**,

*"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..."* (we'll stop there).

I can't read this without smiling. What a beautiful and affectionate start to Paul letter to the Philippians.

*"**I thank my God every** time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with **joy**..."*

Over the last while, as I've been preparing for this series, I've been asking people to tell me what they'd say Philippians is all about. And every other person has distilled Philippians to one word: **joy**.

Which is understandable – Paul mentions joy or is simply overflowing with joy at seemingly every turn in this letter.

But let me suggest one guiding practice as we venture into this letter that mentions joy so often. We need to constantly be asking:

What is behind Paul's joy and the joy that he is inviting us to know? Cause I think Paul would be sad if all we heard in his letter was "*I'm joyful, and you should be joyful.*" I'm pretty sure he'd think we hadn't actually read his letter.

So... let's ask the question right here. **What is causing Paul to experience joy? What is bringing him joy?**

He tells us – "*In all of my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy, **because of your partnership in the gospel** from the first day until now...*"

"Because of your partnership in the gospel."

This is the source of Paul's joy – that the Philippian's are his partners, his companions in grace; his sisters and brothers, his co-laborers in Christ – and that they have been so "*from the first day until now*".

Which, as we talked about last Sunday, is not just some abstract, theological statement or slogan for Paul – but something **real**, something **demonstrable**, something that Paul has experienced

in relationship with the Philippian church over the years they have known each other.

If you were here last Sunday, you'll remember **Acts 16** and the stories of Paul's time in Philippi years before – and the people he would never have forgotten.

Lydia – a wealthy woman who dealt in purple cloth – who when she heard and believed the gospel, **immediately** invited Paul and his companions to come and stay in her home. Her newfound experience of grace, her newfound **union with Jesus** made Paul and his companions **her companions** – bound together in grace. And she expressed this partnership in a tangible way. Paul's need was her concern and so *her casa was their casa...*

The gospel not only saved her soul, but the gospel made her Paul's **partner** in the gospel. *Bound together by the deepest bond.*

But this wasn't just something that Paul experienced with Lydia; the **Philippians jailer**, once he'd heard the gospel and believed, became Paul's **care-giver**. As **Acts 16:33** tells us, "*At that hour of the night the jailer took them [Paul and Silas] and washed their wounds... brought them into his house and set a meal before them...*"

His newfound union with Christ was not just a private and personal experience, it changed his relationships – making Paul and

his associates **his** *companions* – **his** partners in the gospel. Bound together by the deepest bond.

Which gives us a context to hear Paul's words in v.3f,

"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all of my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel **from the first day until now...**"

"from the first day until now..."

As Paul will mention later in this letter, this grace-given partnership wasn't some **momentary** friendship and unity, but something that the Philippians had carried on **over the years since...** supporting him in his mission, sending provisions for him in times of need, and praying for him all along the way...

Paul's joy was not simply a remembrance of what once was, but a celebration of what had continued down through the years – "*from the first day until now...*"

Which is why Paul **thanks God** every time he remembers them.

Did you notice that? **Who does Paul thank?** He thanks **God**.

Not that he won't express his thanks to the Philippians later in the letter, but underneath and behind the grace of their beautiful partnership, Paul knows that this is all the outworking of **God's** grace. Of **God's** work in and among them... A work that **God began...**

And so Paul's joy isn't just in **their** partnership, it's **in God** – the God who does exactly this – who, in grace, through the gospel,

restores us to Himself **and to one another**... Binds us together,
makes us partners together in Christ...

Which tells us that this isn't just Paul's joy; **this is, in fact, God's joy**. This is something **God delights** to do and pursue...

Which, I don't know about you, but to me, this is **good news**.
To know that this is something that **God** is seeking for us and in us
and among us... That this *deep, ongoing, joyful, selfless and self-giving partnership in Christ* is not just something that **I** ache for or
that **you** ache for, but is actually something that **God** is passionately
seeking in us and for us and among us...

What a beautiful and encouraging gift. That in Christ, we can
know that God loves to initiate relationships. That this is what **God**
does because this is what **God wants**...

[I'm sure I'm not the only who has experienced the ache of
seasons where it feels like we are always the one initiating
relationship. That's a hard place to be. Sometimes our deepest ache
can simply be for someone else to initiate friendship with us.]

And here Paul tells us that this is exactly what **God** is always
doing... In grace, initiating relationship with us and one another.

And this stirs Paul with thanks – and joy...

And then **more joy** – because of the hope, the confidence – that (v6) "He **who began a good work in you** will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

Again, this is good news, isn't it?

That "He who began a good work in you **will carry it on to completion** until the day of Christ Jesus."

I know we often apply this verse to individuals (ourselves, others, a friend, a family member), and it is definitely applicable, and worth celebrating.

But this morning we need to hear these words **in their context** – in the context of Paul's joyful celebration of their grace-inspired partnership in Christ – with one another and with Paul – "*from the first until now*".

But **of late**, as this letter reveals, they've been experiencing some relational tensions among them, some breakdowns even, theological differences, agendas and egos, threatening their partnership in Christ. Some of them might have been losing heart and wondering maybe if fellowship was still possible.

And into this context, Paul's writes:

"I rejoice in your partnership from the first day until now, being confident in this, **that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.**"

What a beautiful word of hope – for each one and for the community of the Philippians. A beautiful word that would inspire and invite them to not give up on each other... and their partnership in Christ... ***because God wasn't about to give up on them and their partnership in Christ...***

If we were with Paul when he wrote or dictated this letter, I wonder if this is one of those moments where we'd see his quill or voice break a little. Understanding the context – the reality of Paul's deep affection for this church and the reality of tensions simmering in the community and unity that might have made it feel fragile at times – I suspect these words came from a deep place in Paul's heart for the Philippians.

He goes on, (v.7f)

*"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."*

Imagine hearing those words – the letter was being read aloud by one in the group – as you stand or sit alongside someone or some others with whom you are wrestling through something, or possibly already withdrawing from...

I wonder if Paul, as he again and again says "**for all of you**" was hoping and praying that the Philippians would be pulled into not just **his** heart for them all, but "*the affection of Christ Jesus*" **for them all**?

As we read this letter, we need to constantly keep in mind the **communal/relational** aim of Paul's words. And behind them, the **communal/relational** aim of God's heart in inspiring Paul to write this letter.

The gospel is never just about "me and Jesus" – or my eternal address. The gospel is about **the reconciliation of all things in Christ** – the restoration of **all** of our relationships. Which is why the unity and community of the church matter so much to Paul – and to God – because the gospel is revealed most clearly in community. In relationships... *In relationships and community marked by the love and grace of Christ.*

Which again, isn't just an abstract, theological reality. It's something we know by experience – as did Paul...

As one commentator says of Paul's relationship with the Philippians, "**When community works**, it is Paul's support and his joy. *When it doesn't work, it is the bane of Paul's life—and ours as well.*"

And so with all this burning in his heart, Paul shares with the Philippians **the prayer** that he's praying for them – **Phil 1:9-11.**

"And this is my prayer [he writes]: 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."

What a prayer. As always, there is so much here – but at the core – Paul’s really just praying for **one** thing – one thing that brings together **two** things. He prays:

"That [their] love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight..."

He’s concerned about their relationships – their life as a community in Christ – longing for them to continue and to grow in deep partnership in Christ.

And to this end, he prays for their love – which he affirms that they have. He’s not praying that they will start loving each other. He’s praying that their love would grow in a particular way – would be guided and shaped by something specific – by, what Paul refers to as, ***"knowledge and depth of insight."***

"That your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight."

Here and there, in Paul’s day and in ours, it often feels like there are really just **two options** in front of us. Two ways to live the Christian life and seek the good of others. Here and there we may find churches that seem to have picked one option over the other...

One is a way shaped and dominated by **love** – seeking to show God’s love **above all**. *"For love covers a multitude of sins"* (1 Peter 4:8 says).

And the other way is shaped and dominated by **knowledge** or **truth** – seeking to speak and reveal God's truth **above all**. Because it's "*the truth that sets us free*" (John 8:32 reads).

But Paul isn't interested in one without the other. Nor is he convinced that either on its own leads to the unity and community that God is seeking and that will bring them and us true joy.

He prays for the Philippians - "*that **your love** may abound more and more **in knowledge and depth of insight...***"

And before we conclude that "knowledge" here is simply a matter of using our heads as we love, Paul uses a very specific word here for "knowledge". A **specific word** with a **specific meaning**.

It's the same word we hear in many of Paul's other prayers.

Two come to mind. Two prayers that often pray for us...

Ephesians 1:17, "*I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may **know** Him better.*"

Colossians 1:9f, "*We continually ask God to fill you with the **knowledge** of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please Him in every way...*"

And here in Paul's prayer for the Philippians, Paul uses this same word for **knowledge** – **epignosis** – a word that shows up 15 times in Paul's letters, 20 times in the New Testament – which always in Scripture refers to **the knowledge of God and His will**. This isn't just

using our heads, this is a knowledge *rooted and aligned with the revelation of God and God's will and desires...*

And this is what Paul prays that the Philippians love would abound in – ***more and more...***

"***That your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight...***"

Anything less and, according to Paul, their love would **not** be God's love. Not truly a saving, redeeming, reconciling love.

And that is what they need – and what we need also. What we as a community need.

Wise love. Love wise with the wisdom of God. Love aflame and aligned with the knowledge of God and His good desires and perfect will. *A love that runs in the path of God's good commands...*

I love how Douglas Webster (whom I referenced earlier) states this. **He writes,**

"The apostle's prayer is for ***discerning love, insightful love, righteous love.*** To the apostle, love minus regard for God's will is really not love at all. Love abstracted from the knowledge of the holy is mere sentiment and opinion. For many people, love is... divorced from knowing and doing the will of God... [But] Paul prays for true love, love that seeks to discern what is best and to practice what is pure and blameless." (17)

Which is exactly where Paul's prayer moves next.

Notice what Paul describes as **the goal** of this prayer.

He prays that:

"[their] *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.*"

This is the goal of Paul's prayer... Because this is the goal of **God's** love and grace in our lives. When God acts in love and grace toward us, this is His aim – not just to support us in whatever it is our heart is set on, but to lead us "*to discern [to know] what is **best***" and, by the empowerment of grace, to **pursue it**... that you "*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.*"

Anything less and, according to Paul, our love is not God's love, and, consequently, not a love that leads to the deep partnership in Christ that God wants for us, to the true fullness of life that the Jesus offers, and to the glory and praise of God...

"*so that you may be able to discern what is **best** and may **be pure and blameless**...*"

Ok, but hold up: is this even possible? Is Paul's admonition and goal even possible – that you and I "*may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ...*"

I know, at one point in our Discipleship Group this week, we came to this verse and someone was honest enough to say that it feels

like an impossible goal or aim. Which prompts the question: *How loving is it to call someone – be it ourselves or another – to this goal or aim? **Is it even possible?***

And that's where we need to make sure we read Philippians well here... Because Paul is intentional to present this in a way that alerts us to the reality that, ***in Christ and through Christ, it is possible!***

Notice what words follow "pure and blameless" (in v.10).

Let me read it for us. "So that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless – ***for the day of Christ.***"

If we've been paying attention to all that Paul says here, these words will pull us back to something Paul has **already said** – **in verse 6** – "***Being confident of this***, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until **[what?]** – until ***the day of Christ Jesus.***"

In other words, this is something that is possible because this is something that **God will do**. This is possible because it's something that **God** is committed to bring to ***completion***.

And if that wasn't enough, Paul concludes his whole prayer with this final description of where all this is leading – **v.11** – "*filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.*"

In other words, **it's possible. *In Christ and through Christ...***

Not completely in this life – the fullness will only come in the Day of Christ Jesus – but more and more in this life – by the work of God's grace in us – a good work that God began long ago and that He **will** carry on to completion until the day of Christ.

To the glory and praise of God.

What a beautiful picture of what it means to live as **partners in Christ... as brothers and sisters in Christ... as companions and co-laborers in Christ...**

A community so alive with the love of God that we would seek God's best for one another... that our love would abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight – and we would live in this love for one another – in action, in word and in prayer – in faith, hope and love – **to the glory and praise of God.**

And this is my prayer:

*that your love may abound more and more
with 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.*