

III. Lesson 3: God at Work/Praying for Growth – Phil. 1:6-11

October 4/5, 2006

Aim: To explore the bonds of grace and love that are possible among Christians.

A. God at Work (Phil. 1:6-8)

Joy does not go unthreatened in the human heart. All very well to rejoice in what God had done in the past in these Philippians; but what would happen to them under pressure? Would they stand firm? Was Paul's joy in them well-grounded?

1. Confidence in God (1:6)

a) God's Work (1:6a)

Paul assures the Philippians that he has every reason to be joyful. It is not as though their Christian faith depends ultimately on him or his ministry to them. It has a firmer, more reliable foundation than that. The good work of the lifelong transformation of these believers has its origins in God. Later Paul will explain more fully *how* God does this (2:12-13). For the moment he is more interested in stressing that it is *God* who does it.

- *Paul speaks about God beginning the work in the Philippians. Look again at Acts 16:6-40 and list the different evidences of this.*

b) Finishing Touches (1:6b)

Paul had been present at the conversion of a number of the Philippians and had seen how they continued to live out the Christian faith. He had seen evidences of the working of the Holy Spirit in the lives of each of these Philippian believers.

The verb Paul uses, 'bring to completion' (*epiteleo*) suggests the idea of putting the finishing touches to. The majority of the work has already been done by God. The Philippians were already Christ's; now God was completing His great work. The work of salvation is sure because it is God's work – He will complete it. The perseverance of the saints rests on the perseverance of God with the saints.

- *On what basis is Paul confident that God will complete this work? What other passages in his writings shed light on this confidence?*

c) Christ's Day (1:6c)

The reason God has begun to work in us is because He has a long-term plan. He is getting us ready to see and share in the glory of His Son. The 'day of Christ Jesus' refers to the end of time and the Final Judgment of Christ. Paul looks for the return of His Savior in majesty and glory. Then the work of restoration and salvation which God has begun will be complete. When God writes your name in His book, it is there forever. Paul was thankful because he knew that he would see the Philippians again – if not in Philippi, then in heaven.

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2. Feelings about the Philippians (1:7-8)

a) In Paul's Heart (1:7a)

Paul openly confessed his feelings about his friends in Philippi. To 'think' or 'feel' (*phronein*) means much more than a mental exercise or an emotional reaction. It signifies sympathetic interest and concern, expressing as it does the action of the heart as well as the intellect. Paul and the Philippians were bound together by a common bond: grace. However bad his circumstances were, he still had them in his heart. Paul loved them, and he lingered in prayer for them.

b) Partakers in Grace (1:7b)

Paul says literally that the Philippians are 'fellow partakers of the grace of me.' That could mean the grace which he experiences; but it may also mean the grace-gift which he possesses. The closeness of fellow-feeling is based upon a common participation (*koinonia*) in the grace of God, and a deep sense of oneness even though the apostle and the church are separated by distance. They have been (literally) fellow-partakers, fellow-fellowshippers in his grace, whether he has been a prisoner, or an apologist, or an evangelist. They have been committed to supporting his ministry whatever his circumstances. No wonder he was grateful for them!

c) Affection of Christ (1:8)

The bonds of grace are strengthened by adversity; the affection of the heart is deepened by sharing in suffering. His feelings for them are so strong that he can call God as a witness to their reality. The word 'affection' (*splanchnois*) refers to the intestines; his 'gut-feelings' as we might colloquially put it. In ancient thought the viscera were regarded as the seat of emotional life (*cp.* Is. 63:15; Jer. 4:19). This is real Christian affection.

- *In verses 7&8 Paul says the Philippians are: 1) in his heart; 2) share his grace; and 3) longed for with the affection of Christ. How would the presence of these qualities make a difference in our fellowship at Covenant?*
- *'The bonds of grace are strengthened by adversity.' How was this true for Paul? How have you experienced that?*

B. Praying for Growth (Phil. 1:9-11)

Our tendency is to say: If God does the work, we have nothing to do. Paul's logic is the reverse: Because God is at work, we have a responsibility to respond to His work. This will become even clearer when the apostle returns to the same theme in 2:12-13. But here, in the early part of his letter, where he is assuring the Philippians of his prayers for them, he wants to share with them what it is that he prays. He prays for their spiritual growth. Later he will tell them how he does not rest content with his own spiritual progress (3:12-14). Here he indicates that he longs for their advance in grace as well.

1. Growth in Love (1:9a)

Central to his concern is that his friends should grow in 'love' (*agape*). Growth in love was essential if they were to respond in a Christ-like way to new and potentially difficult situations (and people!). There is no end to love. It can never say, 'I have enough.' Love is a grace in which we can always advance. No matter how much we love, we can love more. That is why

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Paul prayed that the love of the Philippians might ‘abound more and more.’ Paul prayed in this way because abundance in love is something for which the grace and help of God are required (*cp.* 1 Th. 3:12).

Paul does not specify the object of this love. Is it God? Is it our fellow-Christians? Is it non-Christians? If he does not limit love’s object, should we? It is ‘all of the above’!

2. Growth in Knowledge & Discernment (1:9b)

We often say that love is blind. From one point of view that is true. Love transcends human differences and divisions. But from another point of view Christian love requires vision. We need to be able to recognize and to see what can be done in response to it. That is why love cannot grow strong unless it is in the context of increased or ‘full knowledge’ (*epignosis*).

‘Insight’ or ‘discernment’ (*aisthesis*) is the employment of the faculty which makes a person able to make a moral decision. Love and insight need to go together. To love is to have the motivation to help; discernment enables us to see what the real need is. Love means we have compassion; discernment means that we see the situation clearly and realistically.

Paul will soon find it necessary to warn the Philippians about the ever-present danger of false teachers (3:2, 18-19). Thus, their love needs knowledge and discernment. How often the church today has refused to stand against doctrinal error because someone has argued that we must be loving! Love and truth are not enemies. The most loving thing we can do is stand for the truth in a loving way.

Where do knowledge and insight come from? Such insight and discernment come only from God. They come by divine revelation. For us today that means they come through studying and knowing the Scriptures with the help of the Holy Spirit.

3. Growth in Holiness (1:10)

a) Approve What Is Excellent (1:10a)

Paul desired that the Philippians have knowledge in order to exercise full discernment to know right from wrong. But it was not sufficient for them simply to be able to tell right from wrong. They also needed to be able to weigh up matters so carefully that they would only choose the very best.

The word ‘approve’ (*dokimazo*) means to ‘distinguish’ or ‘to put to the test.’ It is often used to denote the testing of coins. Those coins which are ‘approved’ are genuine currency. The idea of seeing through to the heart of a matter is involved. This phrase probably includes the idea of choosing the best as well as recognizing it. Holiness is not only a matter of the mind and our understanding; it involves the will and our commitment.

Fulfillment of the apostle’s prayer will be that his friends will have the ability to discern, and then to practice in their Christian living, the really important issues in their corporate life as a believing Christian community.

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b) Pure (1:10b)

‘Pure’ (*eilikrineis*) here means ‘sincere’ or ‘unmixed;’ it also carries the context of judgment or testing through sunlight. That is, the light of the sun reveals the truth of the matter; clear sunlight reveals that which is unmixed, pure, and genuine. Purity should be something which permeates the whole of our lives until the day of Christ.

c) Blameless (1:10c)

‘Blameless’ (*aproskoptoi*) refers to refraining from stumbling. It may mean either that we have not stumbled morally, or that we have not been a cause of stumbling to others. Like Paul, we make up our minds that we will not put a stumbling block in the way of our fellow-Christians (*cp.* Rom. 14:13; 1 Cor. 8:9-13). Holy living is both positive and negative. We should always seek to do those things which are right and good, and we should refrain from doing those things which are sinful and evil.

4. Growth in Righteous (1:11)

a) Fruit of Righteousness (1:11a)

Paul reminds his readers that the ‘fruits of righteousness’ (*dikaiosune*) ‘are by Jesus Christ.’ Is Paul speaking about righteousness as the fruit of grace, or of a new lifestyle which is the fruit of righteousness? In either case the consequence is the same: a life that is right with God, both in terms of our relationship to Him (justification) and our obedience to Him (holiness). The one never exists apart from the other.

b) God’s Glory (1:11b)

The WCF Shorter Catechism first question asks, ‘What is the chief end of man?’ The answer is: ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.’ If we have the Holy Spirit within us, guiding and strengthening us each day, then we shall automatically produce fruit for God’s honor and glory. Our lives will be lived for the ‘glory’ (*doxan*) and ‘praise’ (*epainon*) of God.

This is the kind of ‘knowledge and discernment’ Paul prayed for the Philippians. We need to continue to pray for it, both for ourselves and for each other.

C. Application & Discussion Questions

- *Is it fair to charge some Christians with ‘fickleness’? Are there serious evidences of it? Is it more predominant now than in previous generations of Christians? If so, why?*
- *The apostle Paul identified salvation as God’s good work (1:6). Read Ephesians 1:3-14. When did God begin this work? What aspects of this work can you identify?*
- *Paul described salvation as a sure work that will not fail (1:6). What makes it so sure? Read John 10:27-30; Romans 8:31-39; 1 Peter 1:3-5.*
- *Paul’s prayer in vv. 9-11 focuses on several things. What are they? Explain what Paul means by: 1) knowledge; 2) insight; 3) the fruit of righteousness. What is the difference between insight and knowledge?*

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- *How do you think Paul would have expected this prayer to be answered — how do we grow in these graces?*
- *Examine the contents of Paul's prayer (cp. also Eph. 1:15-21; Col. 1:9-12) and compare it with the content of your own prayers for others. Are there differences? What are they? Why do they exist? What can we learn from these prayers to help us to pray?*
- *Questions for personal reflection and contemplation: Has your love for God increased at all since this time last year? Do you pray more often? Do you read the Bible more intelligently and more eagerly? Do you try to put into practice what you hear in sermons? Are you seeking to live a more holy life than you did last year? Have you tried to live a blameless life? Are you wanting to be filled with the fruit of righteousness? Is pleasing God your main aim in life? Do you strive to show the blessings of God to everyone you meet?*

For next time: Read Philippians 1:12-18a and Ferguson chapters 5-6.