

3.13.16

A Prayer of Thanksgiving

Philippians 1.3-11

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When we began this series about Going Deeper in Prayer we talked about how nice is to be able to go back and re-read nice cards and letters that we've received. I hope you have saved some that have meant a lot to you so you can read them again and draw love, comfort, encouragement, and even wisdom from them.

This is also something we do as Christians. A significant portion of the New Testament is composed of letters by the Apostle Paul. Paul wrote letters to specific congregations, he didn't have the universal church in mind nor was he thinking about how 21st century people in North America would respond to what he wrote. The inspiration of God's Spirit, the specific teaching of those letters, and the collective witness of the church that has seen them as authoritative that have caused us to still read them for guidance in our lives today. Around the year 62, Paul was imprisoned in Rome and it was from there he wrote to the church in Philippi. Paul had a special relationship with the church in Philippi. Together they had been partners in giving, receiving, working, and rejoicing in what God was doing through them. Now Paul, their church founder, was in prison facing the threat of death. He hopes to be reunited with them once again, but the chance of that is not looking good. Whether he is with them or not, he writes to encourage them to continue to live out the gospel together in their community.

The letter begins with a greeting and then words of thanksgiving. In verses 3-6, Paul expresses gratitude for his relationship with the church in the **past**. In verses 7-8, he shares his affection for them in the **present**. In verses 9-11, he concludes his thanksgiving with a prayer for the church's **future**. Let's listen:

³ I thank my God every time **I remember you**, ⁴ **constantly praying with joy** in every one of my prayers for **all of you**, ⁵ because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

⁷ It is right for me to think this way about **all of you**, because you hold me in your heart,^d for **all of you** share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I long for **all of you** with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

⁹ **And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight** ¹⁰ **to help you to determine what is best**, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹ having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God."

Paul begins the letter by pouring out his heart in gratitude to God for all God has done and is continuing to do through the Philippians. Paul's prayer begins with thanksgiving, not with asking for anything. In circumstances that could understandably breed doubt, despair, even bitterness, (being in prison with little hope of freedom) Paul remembers all God has done and all he has experienced and he is grateful. The depth of Paul's faith and his approach are inspiring. He's trying to assure close friends who are worried about his imprisonment and facing death that he has not been robbed of his joy. In Acts 16:11-40 when Paul and Silas first came to Philippi they were arrested, beaten, and thrown into prison. Their response to that adversity was to pray, sing hymns, and to witness to other prisoners and to the jailer who came to faith and whose entire family was baptized. They were bold about their faith and sought to be an encouragement to others rather than complaining about their own situation. Paul's imprisonment then and at present helps to advance the gospel. Being in prison did not stop Paul nor the gospel, just as it failed to crush but in some ways served as an incubator for greater influence and impact for John Bunyan in England, Martin Luther King Jr. in the US., Nelson Mandela in South Africa, or Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma name a few.

Like Paul, by focusing on God's grace, the good news of the gospel, and giving thanks, we can experience joy and contentment even in the midst of difficult circumstances. Paul is confident that God was with him and

^d Or *because I hold you in my heart*

the Philippians in the beginning of their ministry together, and God will be with them to the end, even to the day of Jesus Christ's return. Paul is able to believe that even the most difficult moments can be transformed by God's grace. Can we live with similar faith?

Beginning with thanksgiving, as Paul does, is good advice for our prayers individually and as a church. By reminding ourselves first of the gift of God's grace and the good news of Jesus, we're constantly reminded of our reasons for thankfulness. Paul is thankful as he remembers the church with joy and confidence, and he longs for them with the affection or compassion of Christ, with a love that is more than human affection. How about us? Do we remember and pray for other Christians? One way you can is by being part of our church email prayer chain, if you'd like to become a part of it, call the church office with your name and email address and we'll put you on. We are perhaps most likely to pray for others when they are in need, but there are other types of prayer. Paul knew the Philippians were praying for him and it meant a lot. As your pastors, Mary, Barbara, David and I need you all to be praying for us just like Paul did. What if we turned our prayer sheet over and prayed during the week for the groups and events meeting at church – who knows how God might use our prayers to transform lives? In our prayers for other Christians, how much time do we spend as Paul does, thankfully remembering them in joy, confidence and in love? This is an area we can probably grow in. Praying for others with thanksgiving is both good for the relationship and for strengthening faith.

Paul was able to remember and give thanks for the church this way because they had expressed their commitment to the Lord and to each other by **sharing** in the work of the gospel through their prayers, mutual ministry, and their generous giving. They labored and fellowshiped together to further the gospel and through the work they've shared God has drawn them closer together.

Is there someone you could write or call and tell them you're praying for them with thanksgiving for how they have shared in your life? How does it feel to receive a call or a card, email, or letter like that? It's like pulling into a gas station on the emotional road of life and having our tank filled and then the attendant

who filled our tank says, *“It’s on us; have a great day.”* And we drive out with a smile on our face, our heart a bit lighter, and our foot a little heavier on the accelerator because we’re ready to keep going down the road of life. We need these emotional pit stops even more than our cars need gas – which is why we react differently to a card that is personally addressed to us from a friend versus yet another credit card solicitation. Email ads that invade our inbox are instantly eliminated without being opened, but a personal expression of thanks or appreciation is read, saved and read again.

We live in an age of entitlement, of increased and often highly unrealistic expectations, a time when cynicism, negativity, rudeness, and anger are a part of everyday life. This is so much the case that sometimes even Christians who are in situations far more comfortable than a Roman prison have difficulty expressing themselves or their opinions in ways that are appropriately respectful, humble, considerate, appreciative, kind, and thankful. That is the danger of writing something down, it preserves whatever was said and our mood or emotional state at the time for anyone to see. This kind of correspondence is like someone letting the air out of our tires or putting a small hole in our emotional fuel tank – it drains us and slows us down. New Red Sox pitcher said in an interview that there are two kinds of people faucets (those who pour into other people) and drains (which needs no explanation).

Paul begins with thanksgiving and helps the church to feel encouraged and loved before he expresses anything else. Whenever we’re going to share any kind of suggestion or comment with someone that may involve possible improvements or changes we think need to be considered in their work, behavior, or in a relationship – following Paul’s example is wise. Begin with thanksgiving – specific, tangible, honest thanksgiving and then share with humility for their consideration what might make it even better. All of us are far more willing to listen when spoken to in this way, yet often we fail to speak that way ourselves.

Paul begins with thanksgiving for his **past relationship** with the church and then assures them of his great affection for all of them **in the present**. Did you notice how frequently Paul used the word **“all”** when speaking of his

relationship with the church? (Review verses 4, 7, 7b, 8). Paul's apparent need to convince the church that he was praying for all of them; that he thought of all of them with the love of Jesus; that he held them all in his heart; that he longed for all of them - seems to indicate there was a problem within the church. We don't know the specifics of all the problems causing the sense of division within the church, but we know from elsewhere in the letter that people are disagreeing with each other, and Paul is urging people to have the same humble mind as Jesus and assuring them of his affection. Paul knew it's always hard when someone we love dies, but there is some solace to be taken if we have let our feelings be known and if we have not held back words of thanks. People need to hear that we care for them.

Finally, Paul shares a prayer of intercession for the future. Paul prays that the Philippians will **grow and mature in love**. Not a love that is sentimental and easy; not a love that shrinks from truth-telling and tough engagement; but **a love that is joined to knowledge and understanding**, to probing and discerning, to putting itself to the test in real-life situations and loving even when it's difficult. Paul writes, *"This is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best."*

Prayerful love combined with knowledge and discernment enables us to determine what is best. Paul didn't know if he would ever have the opportunity to be with the Philippians again so he prays that their *"love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best."* This is not a bad prayer for us to pray for our loved ones as well.

Paul begins his letter to the Philippians, which was the next best thing to being there, by telling them and now us:

Give thanks and remember God's grace and mercy in the past.

Give thanks for love and ministry that is shared at present.

Pray for continued growth in love and knowledge so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless,

having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God."

Over the last five weeks, we've heard Paul pray for Churches and their people that we would grow in faith, hope, and love; that God would pour out a spirit of wisdom, revelation, and power so that we might grow and be fruitful followers of Jesus and for all this we give thanks. May we become the kind of people Paul prays that we will be.

Blessing: *“Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.”*
Philippians 1:27

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Have you ever saved a letter someone wrote you? If so, what made it special?
2. Paul wrote Philippians while in jail and most likely with the knowledge that he would never see the recipients of the letter again. If you were going to write a last letter to someone – who would you write? What would you want to say?
3. Paul's prayer begins with thanksgiving, not with asking for anything. In circumstances that could understandably breed doubt, despair, even bitterness, Paul remembers all God has done and all he has experienced and he is grateful. What has God done for you that makes you feel grateful and thankful?
4. How does focusing on God's grace, the good news of the gospel, and giving thanks, assist us in experiencing joy and contentment even in the midst of difficult circumstances?
5. Is there someone you could write or call and tell them you're praying for them with thanksgiving for how they have shared in your life? How does it feel to receive a call or a card, email, or letter like that?
6. Paul concludes with a prayer of intercession for the future. If you could pray for someone you know or for yourself – what would your prayer for the future be?