

My plan had been to go from the Leviticus series to a Samuel-Kings series.

And there are lots of good reasons to do that –

but since we are in the Psalms in the morning service,

I thought it would be good to do a NT series.

And as I considered what epistle to preach,

Philippians came quickly to mind.

The church in Philippi was not fractured with division like the Corinthians.

There was no major heresy – like in Galatians.

The church in Philippi had its share of personal conflicts (Euodia and Syntyche)

and faced plenty of dangers (Paul cautions them against the Judaizers),

but Paul’s central concern in this epistle is to urge the church

to make progress in their faith.

As one commentator puts it,

“the world is too perilous and the gospel too glorious,

for them to be content with past achievements.” (ESV 2276)

They must press on toward the goal

for the prize of the upward call in Christ Jesus. (3:14)

And so I want us to reflect on the book of Philippians

as an opportunity to us to grow in our own discipleship.

1. “Grace to You and Peace” – Paul’s Greeting (1:1-2)

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:

2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The standard Greek letter opened with three words

Name of sender (nominative)

Name of recipient (dative)

chairein (“greeting”)

So the standard Greek letter would open,

Paulos

Philippois

Chairein.

There are hundreds, even thousands of letters from the ancient world that begin this way.

Paul, to the Philippians, greetings.

The pattern could be expanded to give more precision –

(or often enough, to flatter the recipient) –

but this is the basic pattern of the Greek epistle.

And Paul follows this basic pattern,
but gives it three distinctively Christian twists.

- 1) Paul and Timothy (the senders) are said to be “servants of Christ Jesus,”
Only here, Romans and Titus does Paul use this phrase in the greeting.
This is not the word “diaconos” – which would have the idea of “minister”
or “agent.”
Rather, this is the word “doulos” – slave, or bondservant.
Isaiah had spoken of the Servant of the LORD –
a phrase that was translated “doulos” of the Lord.
So when Paul is saying that they are servants of Christ Jesus
he is emphasizing that Christ Jesus is their only master.
Paul and Timothy are *servant leaders* –
that is, they are servants of Christ Jesus.
This theme will come back again in chapter 2,
when Paul will describe Christian character in imitation of Christ,
who himself became a *doulos* (a slave)

- 2) The Philippian church is further identified as being “holy in Christ Jesus”
The doctrinal theme of Philippians is properly said to be “sanctification” –
and so it is fitting that Paul begins by reminding them
that they are already *holy* – they are already saints in Christ Jesus.
By virtue of their union with Christ, they have been set apart
as holy to God.

But who are these “Philippians”?

We learn about this back in Acts chapter 16.
(Please turn back to Acts 16)

If we would understand Paul’s epistle to the Philippians
we would do well to go back to the book of Acts for context.
Paul’s ministry in Philippi (and Timothy’s role) is laid out in Acts 16.
We hear first of the calling of Timothy in verses 1-5,
and how Timothy joined Paul’s traveling presbytery.

16:1 Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. 2 He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. 3 Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. 4 As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. 5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

Then in verses 6-10 we hear of Paul’s call to Macedonia (the region of Philippi):

6 And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. 7 And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. 8 So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. 9 And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

And finally in verses 11-15 we hear of the beginnings of the church in Philippi, which was the leading church in Macedonia for many years.

11 So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, 12 and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days. 13 And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. 14 One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. 15 And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.

The rest of chapter 16 tells us about the conversion of the Philippian jailer, and how Paul was forced to leave Philippi after some days in the city. From Luke's shift in pronouns (from "we" in chapter 15 to "they" in chapter 17), it seems clear that Luke was left behind in Philippi to continue the work. And no doubt it was through this connection that the Philippian church continued to support Paul's ministry through financial assistance. We know from Acts, Philippians 4 and 2 Corinthians 11 that the Philippians gave sacrificially to support the work of the apostle, and also to aid those who were suffering in Jerusalem.

The Philippians were not wealthy, and so Paul did not ask them for money for Jerusalem, but in 2 Cor 8:1-5, he says:

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 2 for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. 3 For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, 4 begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— 5 and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.

The Macedonians (which includes the Philippians) gave "beyond their means" because "they gave themselves first to the Lord

and then by the will of God to us.”

So the first thing that we see about the Philippians’ partnership in the gospel is that it is a partnership that is rooted in a commitment to seek first the Kingdom of God.

Paul then took their gift to Jerusalem –
and we know from the book of Acts that while he was in Jerusalem he was arrested and imprisoned –
and eventually wound up appealing to Caesar.

So now Paul is in Rome, under house arrest,
preaching the gospel to whoever will come and hear it.

When the Philippians became aware of Paul’s situation,
they “raised a large monetary gift,”
but also apparently asked him to send Timothy back
to help them through some difficult times in their own congregation
(the divisions between Euodia and Syntyche).

They sent Epaphroditus with their gift,
who fell ill on the trip, but finally made it to Rome.
Paul, however, could not send Timothy, and so sent Epaphroditus instead (Philippians 2).

Moises Silva summarizes what Paul is trying to do here:

“How could he convey his great joy for the church’s continual participation in his apostolic ministry while at the same time rebuking them unambiguously for their grave lapse in sanctification? Would he be able to express his heart-felt thanks for their costly offering and yet discourage them from doing it again? And how would he report truthfully his own troubles without intensifying their spirit of discontent?”

“The very difficulty of the task that was before the apostle would draw from him, under divine inspiration, a message full of comfort and joy, rebuke and encouragement, doctrine and exhortation. Quite beyond Paul’s own powers of anticipation, the letter he was about to dictate would speak to the hearts of countless believers for many centuries to come.” (5)

Paul also includes the ordained leadership in his greeting:

“with the overseers and deacons.”

The overseers (episcopoi – bishops)
were those who exercised the office of rule in the church,
while the deacons (diaconoi – ministers/servants)
were those who assisted the overseers.

It is important to note that by the end of the 50s
there are already two distinct offices in the church.
While we are not given any information here as to what these men *did*,

their titles suggest that the overseers focused on governing/shepherding, and the deacons focused on service.

- 3) The third change is perhaps the most important – and the most significant
Paul alters the standard ‘greeting’ (chairein)
to the Christian ‘grace’ (charis)
and the distinctively Jewish greeting ‘peace’ (eirene – the Hebrew *shalom*)
He also reminds us that this “grace and peace”
comes from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Why is this important?

Because here at the beginning of his epistle,
Paul wants you to see that the Christian community is distinct.
You are a holy people – you are set apart by God for himself –
and what forms and shapes you
is the grace and peace of God himself.
And by including the Lord Jesus Christ with God our Father
Paul emphasizes that Jesus does what only God can do.

But then Paul tells the Philippians:

2. “You Are All Partakers with Me of Grace” – Paul’s Thanksgiving (1:3-8)

*3 I thank my God in all my remembrance of you,
4 always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy,
5 because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*

In verses 3-5 Paul gives thanks for the Philippians.

Gratitude is important!

It’s important to communicate it to one another (as Paul is doing here) –
but it’s even more important to communicate it to God!

If you are not grateful to God –
you won’t be grateful to one another.

*I thank my God – I’m telling you now – because I’ve been telling God about you!
And I thank my God in all my remembrance of you.*

When I remember you before God – I’m grateful to him.

There’s a whole lot of reference to prayer here –

*I thank my God
In all my remembrance of you
Always in every prayer of mine for you all
Making my prayer with joy*

But also notice that the word “all” or “every” occurs four times in verses 3-4:
“all my remembrance”

“*always*”
“*in every prayer*”
“*for you all*”

And if you remove all the prayer words and the word all from verses 3-4,
what are you left with?

Joy.

This is a theme that he will come back to repeatedly in Philippians.
When he remembers the Philippians –
he gives thanks to God – and makes his prayer with joy.

These three things come together to emphasize the *reason* for Paul’s thanksgiving.
Paul is deeply grateful for the concrete expression
of the Philippians’s care for him as a minister of the gospel:
because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

Paul is not concerned merely about himself.
They are not giving him money out of charity –
or some sense of general benevolence.
Rather, their financial assistance is a “partnership in the gospel.”
(This is the word “*koinonia*” – communion – fellowship)

You see here very clearly one outworking of Paul’s discussion of the body.
If every part of the body was an evangelist,
then very little evangelism would actually get done!
Each part of the body has its own function.
And when the whole body is working properly,
then the gospel goes forth to the ends of the earth.

That is why Paul goes on in verses 6-8 to talk about the implications of this:

*6 And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you
will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*

Paul is going to challenge the Philippians with certain problems in their sanctification.
He is going to urge them to “fix” certain things in the life of the body.

And so he gives thanks to God for the evidence of the “good work”
that God has begun in them –
confident that God finishes what he starts!

And I am glad to be able to say the same thing to you!

I give thanks to God with joy for your partnership in the gospel!

I am delighted to see the evidence of the beginning of that good work in you.
And I am confident
 “that he who began a good work in you
 will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ”

This statement resounds with a confidence that is not complacency!
If God has begun a good work in you,
 then he *will* continue it
 and he *will* complete it.

I rejoice to be with you!
But at the same time, I see some things in the our life together
 where we need to improve in our sanctification –
 we need to grow in our discipleship together.

*7 It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart,
for you are all partakers with me of grace,
both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.*

The grace here in verse 7 is not the grace of salvation,
 but the particular grace of partnering in the gospel

What impresses Paul so much about the Philippians
 is their continued support of him even in a time when they would suppose
 that he could not do much for the defense and confirmation of the gospel.
He will tell them in verse 12 that the result of his imprisonment
 has been *further* opportunity for gospel witness.
But they were willing to support him whether or not he was able to preach,
 because they understood (what the Corinthians did not)
 that they owed Paul their very lives!

And so Paul replies:

8 For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

This is a great phrase:
 “I yearn for you all with the splanchna of Christ.”
 Literally, the entrails or guts of Christ.
 The King James used to translate this “bowels of Christ.”

It is a visceral term:
 All my innards long for you!

And so Paul turns to pray for them:

3. “That Your Love May Abound More and More” – Paul’s Prayer (1:9-11)

*9 And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more,
with knowledge and all discernment,
10 so that you may approve what is excellent,
and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,
11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ,
to the glory and praise of God.*

Here we see the relationship between the various aspects of the Christian life.
It moves from love to knowledge to active holiness to worship.

1 - The Christian life is founded on love.

But love cannot remain static.

In your marriage,
love cannot remain static.

If your love is not abounding in knowledge and discernment,
if you are not actively learning how to love your wife better,
how to love your husband better,
then that is not love!

Love grows!
Love abounds!
Love overflows!

2 - And Paul says that Christian love abounds more and more
“with knowledge and all discernment”

What sort of knowledge is Paul talking about?
Knowledge includes information.
If you lack information, you don’t know.

You need to know God.
(the men are starting J. I. Packer’s book “Knowing God”
this Tuesday!).

But the knowledge of God is not a matter of bare intellect.

This is why Paul emphasizes knowledge *and discernment*
(the word here is the word from which we get our word “aesthetics”).

Aesthesis means “experience, insight, perception.”

It is not enough to have a piece of information –
you have the discernment to know what to do with it.

3 - And what is the purpose of this knowledge?

Not so that you can be smarter than everyone else,
but that you “may approve what is excellent,”

Discernment is important!
But discernment takes practice.

Knowing the story of the Bible –
knowing the doctrine of the Bible –
is important,
because it is only if you understand how you fit into God's world
and God's purposes for history
that you then can "approve what is excellent,
and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ."

In other words, knowledge is unto holiness.
Knowledge cultivates love.

Augustine once said that every passage of the Bible teaches us one of two things:
love for God and love for neighbor (or perhaps both).
He said that if you haven't yet seen how this passage shows us love for God and neighbor
then you haven't understood it properly.

What do you think of that?
Can you really say that every passage in the Bible teaches love of God and neighbor?

But think of what Jesus says:
"on these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets."

In other words, Jesus said that we should interpret all of the scriptures
in light of the two great commandments.

So we see that love must be the starting point –
out of which abounds knowledge and discernment
that results in our ability to approve what is excellent,
so that we might 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.

Notice Paul's emphasis here on the moral purity that is associated with the day of Christ.
This is rooted in his conviction that Jesus
has already passed through the final judgment.
Because Jesus has already been vindicated in his resurrection from the dead,
therefore those who are in Christ share in his justification now,
and will be made perfect in holiness for that day.

Paul is saying that in this life, our sanctification is not yet complete.
But he is saying it in such a way as to exclude all complacency!
Sometimes when we talk about how sanctification is partial in this life,
we can sound as though we were saying,

“Oh well, we sin sometimes. We can’t help it. So what?”

That is *not* what comes across here!

Listen to Paul again:

*9 And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more,
with knowledge and all discernment,
10 so that you may approve what is excellent,
and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,
11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ,
to the glory and praise of God.*

Paul’s emphasis on the partial character of our sanctification in this life
has its emphasis on how we *do have* a true beginning of our sanctification!

Are you approving of what is excellent?

Do you find yourself drawn to that which is good and pure?

If not, then you are loving something or someone other than Christ.

As we go through Philippians we will keep coming back to this –
because this is at the very center of what Paul wants the Philippians to see.

*9 And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more,
with knowledge and all discernment,
10 so that you may approve what is excellent,
and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,
11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ,
to the glory and praise of God.*