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INTRODUCTION

Every chapter in the book of Philippians contains at least one verse that has been popularized by the Christian culture. These verses have been seen appearing on t-shirts, coffee mugs, eye black, etc. For example, in chapter one, verse 21, “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” Chapter 2 contains a common parental training verse, “Do all things without grumbling or disputing.” Chapter 3, “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus.” And, finally, in chapter 4, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

However, the man responsible for these quotes, as moved by the Holy Spirit, was not sitting in a safe Bible study setting, sipping coffee, or preparing for an athletic competition. Paul penned this letter while probably while under house arrest with a royal guard chained to him 24/7. And he was in this situation, not for breaking any major law, but for unashamedly proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. He was not sure what the outcome of his situation would be, but the idea of execution was a very real possibility. But recently, Paul has received a visitor, a faithful friend and minister, who has traveled over a thousand miles by land and sea, risking life and limb, to bring him gifts and a report of the condition of the church in the city of Philippi.

The city of Philippi had been overtaken by the Roman Empire and was settled by Mark Antony who filled the city with veterans. These settlers enlarged the city, fortified its wall, and formed a Roman colony abounding in Roman culture, architecture, language and organization. It could have been named “Little Rome.” It rested on the Via Egnatia, which is a key military and commercial road, a frequent stopover for trade and transport. All of this made Philippi a thriving city, rich in military history.

In fact, if a person served 25 years in the Roman military, they were automatically granted citizenship, which was a highly coveted status. With that status, they were given all the rights associated with it, such as the right to vote, own property, run for office, etc. It has been approximately 10 years since God started this church through Paul’s preaching, and now he writes to them after receiving the gifts they sent with Epaphroditus, but also to learning of their progress in the faith. What he learns is the church is facing external opposition, Jewish influence, and internal dissension. And when facing such difficulties and trials, we need encouragement. We need a message to remind us we belong to a heavenly kingdom. And that knowing Christ, our King, surpasses the fleeting pleasures of this world. Even if it cost our lives, does not compare to knowing Jesus Christ. This is the life lived when it is gripped by the gospel.

Let’s pray.

THE SALUTATION (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: ²Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

FROM SERVANTS (1A)

ON MISSION

From the very opening of this letter we gather some pertinent information. First, the letter was written by Paul and Timothy. Paul is the primary author as evidenced throughout the letter as he writes in first person. Scholars believe he was between 50-60 years old. Thus he had been serving Christ approximately 25 years. Approaching the end of his life, he didn't allow his age, physical condition, financial status, nor his present circumstances to prevent him from continued service to Jesus Christ.

He had grown in his understanding of the gospel to the point, that he could "count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." (3:8). Even as he faced the possibility of death, he wrote this letter of encouragement. Because his life and his focus were eternal. In fact, he actually looked forward to death. For him, death would be just the beginning of seeing Jesus face to face. So, he could be in prison and not think of himself but think on others. He could be near the end of his life and not think retirement, but redemption. His life on earth was temporary, but his mission was eternal. We can become so easily distracted from the thing that matters most. Even though we are not missionaries in another country, we are missionaries where God has placed you. For some of us, we would rather hide from the world rather than engage it with the gospel. And others, are so engaged with the world, we are hidden from the gospel, as if that's possible.

WITH ONE ANOTHER

Secondly, notice that Paul is not alone. Timothy was with him. Timothy was converted a year or two before teaming up with Paul on his second missionary journey to Lystra. This was nearly ten to fifteen years prior to this letter. At the time, Timothy consented to being circumcised according to Jewish custom, since he would be evangelizing to the Jewish community. As Paul's protégé, he was learning to become all things to all people, so that by all means some might be saved. He traveled with Paul for the rest of his second missionary journey, was with him on the third and part of the fourth. He visited churches on Paul's behalf, worked with Paul on several letters, and accompanied him on the fateful journey to Jerusalem. [\[1\]](#) Paul was Timothy's father in the faith. And nothing deterred him from serving Jesus as Paul's cohort. What would keep two men together, traveling across the known world, facing loss and opposition, and suffering together? Men who were gripped by the gospel.

AS SLAVES TO CHRIST

And from the opening verse, we also learn the mission: slavery to Jesus. Paul often opened his letters with specific self-identifiers. These identifiers related to the audience and situation he is writing. For example, to the Galatians, Paul introduced himself as an apostle. In the letter to Philemon, a prisoner. And, here he has addressed himself and Timothy as slaves of Christ Jesus. From the very beginning of this letter, he is setting the tone that best fits with his objective for his message. In most of your Bibles, this word may be translated as servant, or bondservant. Regardless of the translation, if we are honest with ourselves, we may find the terms slave or servant derogatory. But we must realize that the truth is that we are all slaves to someone or something. The Bible is clear that we are either slaves to Christ or slaves to sin, and it's impossible to serve two masters. Paul and Timothy have been set free from the master of sin and death, to serve the One who has set them free. This Jesus came not to be served, but to serve. And we will later read, the characteristics of a slave to Jesus, is one who is obedient, submissive, and humble. Paul and Timothy, saw themselves as free in Christ but choosing slavery to Jesus as a way of life. Those gripped by the gospel joyfully submit themselves as slaves to Jesus Christ.

TO THE SAINTS (1B) CORPORATELY

Notice also that Paul addressed the church corporately. To all the saints who are at Philippi. Paul will use this pronoun "all" throughout this letter. Every time you read or hear the word "you" think "you all." Not singularly, but you as in corporately.

DISTINCTIVELY

Yet, the "you all" is also distinct. They are saints just as we are saints. You are no longer who you once were. Yes, the gospel transforms us individually. But it doesn't stop there. He transforms us from sinners to saints and adopts us into a new family. We become a new people group. We become saints and citizens in a new kingdom. Even though we struggle with sin, it doesn't change our identity. In fact, it's quite the opposite. Because of our identity, we will face all kinds of struggles. It will manifest itself within our hearts, in our relationships with each other here, and with others out there. When we engage in these battles, we must remind ourselves, we are not who we were. This is the power of the gospel. And the more we are gripped by it, the more power we have to overcome the world for God's glory.

INCLUSIVELY

Paul also makes a point to include church leadership in his address. This is the only time Paul specifically mentions overseers and deacons in the opening of his letters. And he doesn't mention them again in the rest of this letter. His point, I believe, is they should realize they are on a level playing field with the rest of the saints, not above them. A church gripped by the gospel, will have biblical leadership in place. And leaders humbly submit to the king and serve him with joy.

IN SALVATION (2)

Finally, in normal Pauline language, he has ended this opening with a gospel greeting. Those words were rich in significance to him. A man who once prided himself on his heritage, his education, his obedience to law, and the defense of the Jewish faith, knows grace. Before conversion, he spent every ounce of energy working to destroy the followers of Christ.

But that all changed the moment Jesus confronted him on the road to Damascus. There, he encountered grace. When you have met the grace of God through Jesus, when you are gripped by the gospel, you begin to understand peace. In one electrifying moment, Saul, became Paul, and grace transformed him forever. The power of grace enabled him to pour himself out for the sake of Jesus. When we are in our darkest moments, it's the people who partner in the gospel with us, that bring us hope. We want to know we are not alone. We want to know our labor for the gospel is not in vain. This is what ignites Paul's thankfulness for this people.

THANKFUL FOR FAITHFUL PARTNERSHIP (v.3-6)

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. 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.

REMEMBERING RELATIONSHIPS (3-4)

As fresh grace was delivered through the hands of Epaphroditus, so Paul explodes in prayerful thanksgiving for these saints. There are times when a rebuke is needed, or a clarifying teaching. But other times we need passionate encouragement, and this is what Paul delivers. Those we love the most are the ones we pray for the most. Parents have prayed far more for their children than probably anyone else in their lives. And to Paul, the people who comprised of the church in Philippi, were his children. Think about it, it wasn't the gift that ignited his love for them. I mean, what really could Epaphroditus have brought to him that would have meant that much that would cause him to launch into a joyful prayer while imprisoned? A blanket? Clothes? Money? Some fresh baked cookies?

No, it was more than the gift. It was their relationship. I am not demeaning the gift that was sent but that was not the primary reason for Paul's exuberant prayer of thanksgiving for them. No, it was because of their partnership in the gospel!

PARTNERING WITH PEOPLE (5)

PRACTICALLY

What is this partnership? First, the partnership expressed itself in practical giving. This wasn't the first time this church gave to Paul. We read in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5 this:

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

When we give our money, it is gospel partnership. When we give out time, it is gospel partnership. When we give our resources, our homes, our possessions, it is gospel partnership. And when we send Pastor Russ out to train pastors across the world, we are partnering in the gospel.

FAITHFULLY

And not only did the Philippian church give practically, they also gave faithfully. In chapter 4, Paul says, "And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only." Faithful giving is a sign of a people gripped by the gospel. Our society has a difficult time embracing faithfulness today. Discontentment and selfishness permeate our culture. If you are not happy with something or someone, then find another. Enduring faithfulness is hard to find. We are always searching for more. It is even seen in our churches. Looking for some program or person that will give us what we want. Yet we will admit, there is not perfect church. Faithfulness to each other despite inner personal conflicts and struggles, are signs of a people gripped by the gospel.

CONFIDENT IN COMPLETION (6)

CONVINCED

In Paul's 30 plus years in ministry, he had learned Christ was enough. He was convinced, that he who began a good work in them would bring it to completion because of he who began the work.

OF (JESUS) THE CREATOR

Recall that on Paul's second missionary journey, the Holy Spirit hindered them from returning to Ephesus. They then tried to go north to Bithynia but again, the Spirit thwarted them. It was at this time Paul had a night vision urging him to visit Macedonia. In this instant came one of the gospel's greatest turning points in history as they traveled along the Egnatian Way to Philippi. When they arrived, no synagogue existed, a place Paul normally visited first. But he discovers a women's prayer meeting on a riverbank. Near the waters of a river, comes the first Philippian conversion. The single seed of the Philippian church, the faith of one, the faith of a mustard seed. Lydia, a wealthy business woman, is converted. The gospel spreads to her family and then to the Roman jailer and his family. This was first church in Europe.

Little did he know the impact this tiny gospel seed would have in history. But as he sat in his cell, he could look back and smile while looking forward. Nothing can stop the gospel.

When the apostles were arrested for proclaiming Christ in Acts 5, they were brought before the council. After a brief trial, they were ready to kill them. But Gamaliel, a respected priest and rabbi, advised, "If this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail.; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God." Over two thousand years later, and Christ's church continues onward. Do you believe that Jesus Christ will complete his work in the life of this church? Or are you cynical about the future of this country, or for your future, or for your children? Do you get depressed as you look out over the cultural landscape, and think, "the world is falling apart." Well let me tell you something, it's been falling apart since the great rebellion in the garden! And if it weren't for the gospel, there would be no hope and no future. But regardless how dismal our world may appear to be, and may be, God still reigns! And He will complete the work He started since the creation of the world. This church has faced trials of many kinds of the years, but it remains. And it remains because of Jesus Christ. It is His church. He initiates, sustains, and completes our salvation. And it will be completed at His consummation.

AT THE CONSUMMATION

Paul knows there is a bigger plan in place. The gospel didn't start with him and it will not end with him even if he is executed. God's plan is eternal. We may never see in our lifetimes the work God does through us. That is a difficult pill to swallow. But with our eyes fixated on the eternal, it will keep us from being distracted from the mission. It will keep us gripped with the gospel.

CONFIDENT OF GOD'S GRACE (v.7-8)

⁷It 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. ⁸For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

AFFECTION FROM THE HEART (7A)

The gospel changes our affections. Paul attests to this. He affirms his genuine love for them along with his confident expectation of them. They are partners in the gospel and partakers of grace.

AFFECTION FROM FELLOWSHIP (7B)

Not only was this church partaking with Paul through gifts and faithful service, but also in the gospel. The gospel will bring unimaginable joy but it will also bring difficulty and hardship. How? Because we must work out the sin within our hearts in the context of the church body. In addition, we are no longer citizens of this kingdom. We have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. The gospel separates people from darkness, but it unites the people of light. It is the fellowship, (partakers), or koinonia, of grace. This is the tie that binds us together. Grace bridges, not only between the sinner and Savior but also between souls of the saints. Just as Paul is imprisoned due to his allegiance to Christ's kingdom, the Philippians will need to stand firm as citizens of the same kingdom. Therefore, because of the conflict they will face and are facing, he yearns for them with the affection of Christ Jesus.

AFFECTION OF JESUS CHRIST (8)

Only God knows what Paul truly feels about them and that is what Paul calls upon as evidence. What more is needed? God is the witness of what is in his heart and in that he trusts. The affection of Christ for one another is what we all must pursue. It surpasses all earthly relationships.

What do your relationships look like? Are they only based on worldly similarities? Or are you working to love those that are much different than yourself? Do you feel distant from your brothers and sisters? Do you have little affection for others here in church? Whose fault is that? It is yours. You have to learn how cultivate and pursue people - talk to them, seek to share with them, and encourage them to share with you. If this is a struggle, then Paul has an answer. Pray.

PAUL'S INTERCESSORY PRAYER (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.

INCREASING LOVE (9)

He is not praying for their obedience. Nor that this church would work out their issues. Rather he prays for their love to abound! It's not that they lacked love but as difficulties rise, the antidote is more love. But not love as the world defines it. It's not an emotional feeling of affection for one another. But it is an informed and insightful love.

INFORMED

Informed by the gospel. As we grow in our knowledge of Jesus, our love should increase for Him. And as our love for Jesus grows, our love for one another grows. Is biblical knowledge is feeding your love for Him and each other?

INSIGHTFUL

This love is also discerning or insightful. It is the ability to view all of life and its circumstances through the lens of God's word. It is the ability to identify the heart of the matter, whether it is within yourself and/or others apply to gospel to it. This kind of love, then equips us to approve what is excellent.

TO APPROVE (10A)

Biblical love has practical implications. As your love in and for the gospel increases, your biblical worldview is sharpened. Then your biblical decision making in the midst of trials and tribulations becomes clearer. You see situations and circumstances differently. And as personal conflicts arise, whether it is inside the

church or not, will be better equipped to resolve conflict because your mind is grounded in the love of and from the gospel. And why is this important?

FOR THE DAY (10B)

Because Jesus is returning. Our desire should be to present each other, as a body, as one that is undefiled from the world and morally upright. It is a picture of a father presenting his daughter to her husband on the marriage day. His daughter, whom he has provided for, protected, and kept for her day, is handing her over to another. We are the bride of Christ.

May we see ourselves as a people, praying for each other's purity and holiness. And may we be a people who encourages one another for the day of His return.

FILLED WITH FRUIT (11A)

So that in that day, spiritual fruit abounds! The only way spiritual fruit grows, is through Jesus Christ.

TO HIS PRAISE AND GLORY (11B)

And finally, it is not for our own glory, but for His. Our conduct, in love and good deeds brings glory and praise to God. But it cannot occur in our own power. It comes through Jesus Christ in us. It comes through the gospel.

REFLECT AND RESPOND

First, are you gripped by the gospel? Or have you become hardened to it?

Has hardship in life and in relationships, dulled your love for others? Are you seeking to build relationships with one another here?

Finally, what do you pray? Are they centered on health issues for others only? Or do you pray for others only when there is a request? If there are no requests, then you don't pray? We all need to gospel. We need it every day. If you have nothing to pray for, then pray for your flock and this church. Pray for our love for each other.