

Philippians 1:1-11

Abounding in Love

And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more...v. 9

The opening paragraphs of most of Paul's epistles reveal Paul to be preeminently a man of prayer. I would go a step further and suggest that they also reveal Paul to be preeminently a man of praise and thanksgiving.

Ro 1:8 *First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.*

1Cor. 1:4 *I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ;*

Eph. 1:15,16 *Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints, Cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers;*

I believe the spiritual health of a man's soul can be gauged by what dominates his heart. If Christ dominates a man's heart then that man will find himself following Paul's example of giving thanks. When a soul is taken up with Christ and is in constant communion with Christ, you see, he'll be more taken up with how bountifully blessed he is in salvation than he'll be taken up with his own faults or the faults of others or the terrible state of the world or the awful state of the church.

This is not to say that he becomes oblivious to the awful condition of the world or to his own sins and shortcomings and challenges – it's only to say that those things will not be the things that dominate his heart. We've seen this already by Paul's example in this epistle to the Philippians. How easy it would have been for Paul to have felt sorry for himself – *here I am in prison* he could have written. *Do you have any idea how hard life is in prison? Are you aware that it's not fair or just that I find myself in prison? What have I done to deserve this? Why would the Lord allow something like this to happen to me? Please pray for me, dear Philippians that I won't sink under a weight of despair.* And then he could have gone on to lament: *Already the church, even in its infant stage is in a state of decline – some are actually preaching Christ out of contention not sincerely with the aim of adding affliction to my bonds* (v. 16).

Such sentiment might be expressed by many Christians today. Indeed – I wonder how many Facebook posts you would have to read by Christians to find what I'm now describing – posts that say in effect – *poor me – nobody understands me – nobody feels as sorry for me as I feel for myself – why doesn't the world revolve around me anyway?*

What a contrast to Paul who writes from a Roman prison *I thank my God upon every remembrance of you. In every prayer of mine I make request with joy for your fellowship in the gospel and I am confident that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.*

Now I know that you have to be careful about placing too much confidence in any man. You never want to fall into the Corinthian practice of some being of Paul, some of Apollos, some of Cephas etc. But on the other hand when I read paragraphs like the one in this first chapter of Philippians, I can't help but say – I want to be like Paul. I want to be like him in that I'm more focused on what I'm thankful for than I am on what I think I lack or what I think I need or what I think are the faults in others or what I think are the problems in the church of Christ.

Is such a vision too high an ideal? Is it realistic? Is it spiritual – is it scriptural to want the joy of salvation to rule my heart? In a sense I've answered the question by asking the question – you know the verse in Nehemiah 8:10 that says *for the joy of the LORD is your strength*. Isn't that what Paul is demonstrating to you in this first paragraph of Philippians?

Not only is Paul demonstrating this very thing but I believe he's also teaching us how to rise to this ideal. Remember what I said a moment ago – Paul is in prayer. We considered in our last study his specific prayer request for fellowship in the gospel with the Philippians. His prayer continues in v. 9. Notice what his prayer request is in that verse: *And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ; Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.*

I believe that the petition of this prayer is singular even though it might appear to be more than just a single request. I believe the petition is simply this – *that your love may abound yet more and more*. The literal meaning of the next verse (and we'll see this in the course of our study) indicates to us that when your love abounds yet more and more it leads to certain things – it leads to the approval of things that are excellent etc.

What I want to do this morning is to focus on this singular petition – *and this I pray that your love may abound yet more and more*. Abounding love, then, is our theme. If this petition of Paul teaches us anything it teaches us that our love can and should abound more and more. If your love is at a low level it needs to abound more and if it's at a high level it can abound even more than it already does.

The question I want to raise and endeavor to answer, then, is this:

How Can the Christian's Love Abound More and More?

Consider with me first of all that his love will abound more and more:

I. By His Knowing the Nature of that Love

When Paul prays for the saints at Philippi that their love may abound more and more he is using the word that conveys to us the unique nature of Christian love. It's the word *agape*. *I pray that your (agape) love may abound more and more*. The AV sometimes translates the word *charity* in order to convey the unique nature of this love. This is the

same word, then, that is expounded in that well known chapter in the New Testament – 1Cor. 13. This is that love, then, that suffers long and is kind and envies not and seeks not her own and is not easily provoked. We did a devotional study of 1Cor. 13 not long ago in which I pointed out that every descriptive phrase in that chapter finds its fulfillment in Christ.

He is the One who is kind and longsuffering who envies not and seeks not his own but the good of others and the glory of his Father. This is the kind of love that Paul wants to see abound more and more in the lives of the Philippians. It's the love that Christ manifested by his life and death which means that it's a love that is unlike any other kind of love. It's the love of Christ that wins the hearts of Christ's followers and compels them to follow after Christ in the obedience of faith – *faith which worketh by love* (Gal. 5:6).

And I say it's important to understand the nature of this love if we're going to abound in it because the very term *love* and the very notion of *love* conveys ideas in our culture that run completely contrary to the kind of love that Paul has in mind in his prayer.

Love in our day is very often thought to be nothing more than tolerance for anything and everything that runs contrary to God's word. Or – love in our day is thought to be little more than an emotion. And if you find your heart dominated by this emotion then it becomes easy to justify all manner of sin because this strong emotion can be found in connection with sin. This is especially true for young people – the rationale goes something like this – how can something be wrong that feels so right? (that might even be the lyric in a pop song). How can something be wrong that I feel so strongly about on an emotional level? Oh how the devil sets up many Christians for destruction by such a snare.

This distorted view of love is what leads many young people into promiscuity and into many unwise decisions. It's been some time, now, but I do remember reading Jonathan Edwards's work entitled *Charity and its Fruits*. This work of Edwards is all about agape love. It's based on the first 3 verses of 1Cor. 13. And the thing I vividly recall from this work is Edwards remark that respect is foundational to true love. *Love will dispose to all proper acts of respect to both God and man* he writes. I find that statement to be profound and needed in such a culture as ours.

And could I suggest to you – especially to you young people that where respect is present restraint will be exercised and where respect is absent indulgence will be the rule. You should never, therefore, justify indulgence just because it may be accompanied with strong emotions. Respect which leads to restraint is at the base of true love. And those that would entice you into sin based on strong emotional feelings are not demonstrating love, they're demonstrating unbridled lust. Don't ever mistake mere emotionalism for love therefore.

But would you notice something else about the nature of this agape love that distinguishes it from mere emotionalism and ties it directly into the matters of intelligence and discernment. Notice again Paul's petition – *And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more* and then notice the realms in which this love is to abound more and

more *in knowledge and in all judgment*. Do you see the qualifiers to this love? This isn't just any kind of love – this is love that abounds in knowledge and judgment. The word judgment means *discernment*.

And so Paul has in mind an intelligent love and a discerning love or a discriminating love. The very fact that these terms are used in connection with such abounding love indicates to us that there doesn't have to be a choice between something that's rationale vs. something that's emotional.

Often times Christianity is divided into those two categories. Presbyterians and those that are Reformed are thought to be those that are cold and rationale. They place an emphasis on theology. They love to develop arguments to advance or defend things that have no practical value where the Christian life is concerned so the thinking goes. On the other side of the spectrum are those like many in the Charismatic movement that think the Christian life should be governed almost entirely by subjective feelings and that we shouldn't waste time with fruitless and speculative theological debates. We should simply love instead.

I believe our text makes it quite apparent that love and knowledge as well as love and discernment go hand in hand. Now I won't deny that there is a danger to knowledge that can be gained or can function apart from love – Paul does write in 1Cor. 8:1 that *Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth*. There is such a thing as knowledge that only caters to pride. But we also need to realize (and I've said this before) that the Holy Spirit does not bypass the believer's head in order to reach the believer's heart.

The kind of knowledge that Paul has in view in this text, you see, is not merely the knowledge of academics – it's the knowledge of experience. In particular it's the experiential knowledge that is gained through communion with Christ. It's the very knowledge that Paul himself cries for later in this epistle in 3:10 when he says *that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings being made conformable unto his death* (3:10).

And isn't that expressed desire of Paul a sure indication that there is so much room for any Christian to abound in love more and more? Who knew Christ better than Paul knew Christ? And yet Paul would display the same desire for himself that he expresses in his prayer for the saints at Philippi. Paul would abound more and more in the love that springs from the knowledge of Christ. One Greek grammarian defines that word *abound* as a constant overflowing or a perpetual flood of love.

If you would abound more and more in this love, then, you must have some idea of what it means and you must be able to distinguish it from the many wrong notions concerning love that are found in our world today.

But would you consider next that not only does the Christian need to know the nature of this love, but if he's going to abound in it he must do so:

II. By Going to the Source of This Love

I'm sure you see in the text that this is Paul's prayer which means quite simply that Paul must go to the Lord to see the matter of abounding love accomplished in the Philippians. *And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more.* When you compare this verse to other verses in the New Testament you discover what might appear at first to be a paradox.

In our text abounding love is a prayer request and yet listen to the words of 1Thess. 4:9,10 *But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. 10 And indeed ye do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more.* Or consider this verse from Peter's first epistle: 1Pe 1:22 *Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, [see that ye] love one another with a pure heart fervently.* And then there's this verse from 1Jn. 3:23 – *And this is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment.*

So in our text in Philippians Paul prays that their love might abound more and more and yet in these other verses what is prayed for in Philippians is exhorted in one instance and is commanded in the next instance. Why would Paul pray for their love to increase in one instance and then he and Peter and John exhort Christians to increase their love in the other cases? The paradox only appears on the surface and the key to solving what is only an apparent dilemma is found in the words of 1Thess. 4:9 where Paul notes that *ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another.*

The only way, then, for the exhortation to increase in love to be heeded is to go to the One, the only one who can teach you to abound in love. In both instances the truth emerges that we are completely dependent upon God and upon Christ and upon the Holy Spirit when it comes to the matter of our love abounding. God is, after all, the source of all love. Indeed John gives something of an abbreviated definition of God by stating that *God is love.*

And Christ himself has shown the greatest demonstration of love by leaving heaven's glory and coming into this world to live for us and die for us. *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends* (Jn. 15:13). The way then to abound in love is to *see from his head, his hands, his feet sorrow and love flow mingled down.* And keep your gaze upon the cross of Christ until you, like the hymn-writer can ask – *Did e'er such love and sorrow meet or thorns compose so rich a crown?*

And when this greatest demonstration of love is contrasted in your mind and heart to what you know you deserve from God on account of your sins then the love of God will certainly defy comprehension. With another hymn-writer you'll find yourself asking: *How can it Be? How can it Be? That God should love a soul like me, O how can it be?*

It is certainly on such a subject of Christ's love that preachers and poets and commentators and hymn-writers find themselves at a loss. Who can tell it? What words can a preacher find that will adequately make his hearers know it? One hymn-writer in

trying to express it focuses on the inadequacy of words to express the truth of God's love – when he writes: *Could we with ink the ocean fill, And were the skies of parchment made; Were every stalk on earth a quill, And every man a scribe by trade, To write the love of God above would drain the ocean dry, Nor could the scroll contain the whole, Though stretched from sky to sky.* Do you see how this hymn-writer acknowledges that the subject of Christ's love is not only beyond him but beyond all adequate expression?

Perhaps the best commentary on our text in Philippians is found in another prayer of Paul's – his prayer for the saints at Ephesus. I know I reference it often and I do so without apology. It's a prayer that you ought to read and contemplate and memorize and make your own. It's a prayer that gets to the heart of how abounding love will be manifested to us and through us.

Notice the emphasis on the love of Christ comes out a little later in the words of Eph. 3:14-19: *For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15 Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, 16 That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; And let me pause here just to say that when the inner man is strengthened by God's Spirit then the next thing happens which is given to you in v. 17 That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; And when Christ is dwelling in your heart by faith then something else happens as the verse goes on to say: that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; 19 And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.*

Do you see how the Christian first becomes grounded in this love and how once he's grounded then his soul takes off, as if were, in every direction as it comprehends in increasing measure the multiple dimensions of the love of Christ? I've always found it remarkable that this prayer by Paul amounts to a prayer for Christians to know what is beyond knowing or that Christians might be able to comprehend in fuller measure that which ultimately defies comprehension.

Now there is a difference between the petition about love in Ephesians and the petition about love in Philippians. In Eph. 3 the focus is most definitely on Christ's love to you – *knowing the love of Christ which passeth knowledge.* In Philippians the focus is on the Christian's love and should be understood as his love for God and for Christ and his love for others. *This I pray that your love may abound more and more.*

By comparing these two prayers I think it shows us how God answers the prayer for the Christian's love to abound more and more. The Christian's love will abound more and more as he comes to understand and appreciate in his own heart more and more how Christ's love has abounded toward him.

Are you aware this morning, dear Christian, to any perceptible degree as to how much God loves you? What does it mean to you that no greater demonstration of love could be conceived in God's wisdom than what he has shown you in Christ? And yet I fear that

there are some within the sound of my voice that take such a profound and incomprehensible demonstrate of love to be a thing of little consequence. Your heart does not respond to it. You find your heart unmoved even as Christ crucified is set forth among you.

There's another scene you should try to view since you find your heart unmoved by the scene of Calvary's cross. Try to picture what the expression will be on Christ's face when you stand before him on the day of judgment. I don't know that there will be a sternness to the expression on his face so much as there will be a combination of astonishment and heart-break in his countenance and voice. His expression, if not his words, will say to you *I loved you with the greatest expression of love that Divine wisdom could conceive and you wouldn't have it. I made the way for justice and love to prevail for you but you've chosen justice without love and must now be judged because your love for sin has prevailed.*

Oh that those of you that choose sin over Christ might be converted to choose the love of Christ that can save you rather than the love of sin that must damn you. To those that know any kind of heart response of faith to Christ's love – I'm sure I speak the desire of your heart when I say you have the desire to abound in love more and more. I want to love him more, your heart tells you, and I want to love those that he loves with greater purity and greater fervency.

There's only one way to see that desire through. You must go to the source where true love is found. You must behold him in his love for you and in so doing you will be increasingly conformed to the love that he has shown for you.

How, then, does the Christian abound in love? He must know what love means so that his love will abound in knowledge and in all judgment and he must go to the source for where love is found – *and this I pray that your love may abound yet more and more.* I'll only take time to mention my final point. We've considered what it means and where it's found. Consider with me finally that if you would abound in love you must do so:

III. By Appreciating Where It Leads

It leads (v. 10) to the approval of things that are excellent. We have to be careful here because I'm afraid that such a verse as this, if not rightly understood and applied, can create the temptation of leading the Christian to impose his personal tastes on others.

For example: I received an email this past week from Pastor Wesley in Monrovia, Liberia. Pastor Wesley runs The Master's Radio Station in the capital city of Monrovia. We've recently begun as a church sending Pastor Wesley support for his station. We feel compelled to do so because he airs sermons from our denomination and from our church in particular over that radio station. In this email from Pastor Wesley he was making an appeal for more funds since things have been tight for him in recent months but included in his request was a donation of Southern Gospel CDs and a portable CD player. Evidently Pastor Wesley wants to play Southern Gospel music over his radio station.

Some might wonder – does this man know anything about standards of excellence? Does he know anything of the love of Christ? Could I suggest to you that Paul’s standard of excellence makes no direct reference to musical style or artistic tastes so much as it makes reference to Christ himself. We’ll have occasion to visit this matter again when we eventually get to 4:8 *Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.* We’ll have to consider that ultimately Christ himself is the one who is true and honest and just and pure and lovely and of good report so that I should think on the things that will lead me to him and avoid the things that will distract me from him. He is the standard of excellence.

The only thing I want to leave with you now is the basic truth that abounding love will lead you to approve things that are excellent and by way of contrast will lead you shun the things that are sinful. Notice also from v. 10 that abounding love will lead you to sincerity and it will guard you from being offensive.

It’s a sad thing when Christians in their zeal for the truth become offensive in the manner in which they attempt to contend for the truth. If only they could perceive how much they undermine more than support the cause of the gospel by their misplaced zeal and contentious manners.

And I’m not now denying that there is a place for righteous indignation in the cause of Christ. Christ himself turned over the tables of the money changers and purged the temple of God. On the other hand – Christ knew how to be pure in his rage whereas the rage of Christians too often becomes tainted with a spirit of envy and covetousness and sin.

It is in the context of hatred for the enemies of the Lord that the Psalmist says in Psalm 139: *Do not I hate them, O LORD, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee? 22 I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies. 23 Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: 24 And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

It is certainly fitting that in the matter of our righteous indignation we seek the Lord to search our hearts and help us to keep even our hatred untainted by sin. So abounding love leads the Christian to approve things that are excellent; it leads him to sincerity which means really it keeps him free from hypocrisy; it leads him to be without offense and it leads him (v. 11) to the fruits of righteousness and to a proper aim and focus in his life which should be *unto the glory and praise of God.*

And so we see then, at a glance, good motives for abounding in love by seeing where abounding love leads. Aren’t you glad that God intends for his people to be driven by his love? Where the gospel is distorted and perverted the driving force becomes guilt and fear. Thank God we’ve been saved from servile fear and from the guilt of sin. May we make it our prayer, then, that our love will abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment.