

A Good Church pt 2

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A couple of weeks ago before I went out of the country and it's so different to look at Philippians 1 compared to Ephesians 1. In Philippians 1, Paul talks a lot about just practical stuff about how they fellowshiped together and what a good and faithful people the church at Philippi were and are rather, and in Ephesians he just jumps right into that rich doctrinal treatise of what everything is all about. This is a good reminder to all of us as we kind of refresh ourselves on the means of church ministry and of church polity. We go by the word of God in everything that we do.

Seven words appear in chapter 4 of Philippians that Paul would never say to the church at Corinth. Those 7 words are: you are my joy and my crown. Corinth was a troubled, difficult church and probably caused the Apostle Paul many sleepless nights praying for them and struggling and wrestling with the church at Corinth of how to fix a lot of their problems and get them on a better track but when he writes to Philippi, the church at Philippi, he just continually is affirming and commending them and talking about what a joy they are to him and what a blessing they are to him. They just seem to be on the right track so I call them a good church. In today's world, in pastor's circles, sometimes you'll hear, "Boy, that's a good church." What they mean by that is it's large and they pay a good salary to the pastor and other stuff or maybe the services are exciting. But a good church is a church that is a biblical church and has a spiritual heart and loves the right things, is centered on the right things and is committed to the right things and the church of Philippi gives every evidence of that kind of church so we're calling this a good church.

Let's look at it again. Philippians 1, beginning in verse 1, "Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God in all my remembrance of you." Wow, don't you want your pastor to feel that way about you? "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you." You just have to run in pastor's circles to know how exceedingly rare that is. I mean, it's just extraordinarily rare to hear a pastor say, "When I think of my congregation, I just thank God for them." I'm sorry, it just doesn't happen. Now, I do that and I mean that's the truth. I do that. I did that in London a bunch but I don't hear it from many others. Verse 4, "always offering prayer," here it is, "with joy in my every prayer for you all." He must have been a southern boy. Verse 5, "in view of your participation in the gospel from the

first day until now. For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."

Now, first of all, last time we talked about how a good church understands the parity in the church. The parity in the church. In verse 1 here, he lumps together himself, Paul and Timothy, and then he says, we are bond servants. Then to all the saints who are in Philippi and the overseers and deacons. So he takes himself, men in the office of apostle, his associate, Apostle Timothy. He lumps them in with all of the saints and lumps in with all of them the overseers and deacons. He's saying, what he's saying is, "We may have different roles and responsibilities but we're all equal sinners before this holy God. We all equally need his salvation and there is none superior to the other though we may have differing responsibilities in the body."

The very same thing in the household. God has ordained the husband to be the head of the family and the head of the household but that does not mean he has some special, unique, superior value or intrinsic worth. Absolutely not. He has differing roles in the household. Someone said one time: a marriage is a creation of God and a creature with no head is dead but a creature with two heads is a monstrosity. That's what we're seeing today. Our culture has scoffed at and spit upon, if you will, the truth of God's word because our culture is wiser than God. We are dissolving the definition of family. We're dissolving the family unit. We're going to out-wise, if you will, God in this world. We're just going to throw away all these restraints and all these principles. We know how to do it better than anybody else. And we're starting to see the falling apart, listen my friend, when you break down God's ordained system which is the centerpiece of culture and that's the family, you break down the culture and it starts unraveling and falling apart and that's where we are.

Well, I'm chasing a little bit of a rabbit there. Paul's point is there is a parity in the church. Differing responsibilities, differing levels of authority and leadership. He doesn't tell the church to submit to deacons or love deacons, though we should love deacons. Deacons are lovable guys. He doesn't tell us to hold them in high esteem. But he does tell us to do all of that for elders or pastors. What is he saying? He said, "There are just different roles and responsibilities, different structures of authority but we're all equal before Jesus Christ." So there is a parity in the church and a good church gets that and they stand in that and they walk in that.

Now, number 2, this is new material: he says also a good church understands the priority of the church. The priority of the church. The one thing that just jumps off the page to me that he says, "This really points out that you guys are on track," verse 5, "in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now." The Gospel. He says, "You guys get it but the important thing is God being glorified through the preaching, teaching, sharing of his Gospel." It's about the Gospel. It's about the Christ of the Gospel and the Gospel of Christ. Someone said we need to make a great commotion over the great commission and that's kind of punny I guess, but it's true. We do need to do that.

Our priority, you see, in the church is not man and his needs but it is the need of man and the need of man is to hear the Gospel. We believe in the sinful depravity of man. We believe what the Bible says about man being ungodly. That man is hopeless. That man is the enemy of God. That man is lost. That there is a dire, dire, desperate need man has of a divine Savior. We believe, as the Bible teaches, that men will die once and after they die they will face judgment and they will be judged according to what they have done and indeed even what they are because Jesus said, "If you think it in your heart, you committed murder already." So there is going to be a powerful day of judgment.

We believe that there is a literal hell. There is an actual place of physical torment and, by the way, you will not be separated from God in hell, God will be in hell. The psalmist said, "If I go down into the depths of Sheol, behold thou art there." The people say, "Well, I'll just go to hell and get away from all this God stuff, religion." No, you won't. You'll run right into God in hell but he will only be there there in his wrath and judgment. He will not be there in his mercy and his grace and his lovingkindness. He'll only be there exhibiting his wrath. You will not escape God. You can't do it. There is a hell where men are separated from God's love and God's graciousness and God's goodness but they will experience the torment for their sins.

And we believe that Jesus was a literal man. The Bible is not just some allegorical book as some liberal theologians would try to tell us that is trying to teach us a better way to live and how to love and care for one another. Can you believe it? Can you believe it, that's it's a common notion in this new, radical, progressive, they call it, liberal age to say that Jesus would want us to embrace things like homosexual marriage? Jesus would want all of this stuff? And they just pervert and warp. That's the reason why I picked Acts 4:20 for the theme of our fall outreach, "Be saved from this perverse generation." How they pervert it. It really means to be crooked. How they twist, how they put a crook on everything.

No, Jesus literally came. He was literally born of a literal virgin. Jesus was born of that virgin. He lived a sinless life. Then the Lord Jesus Christ went to the cross and there on the cross he literally became the sin-bearer. He became the guilt offering in our place. And God the Father took his wrath and crushed it literally upon Christ's shoulders as he hung on the cross and there he died. Then he rose on the third day, showing that he had fully justified all of those who would believe on him. Then he went to sit at the right hand of the Father where he faithfully intercedes for all that are his. And we believe as Romans 10 says, "Whoever shall call," or literally it ought to be amplified out, "Whoever shall become a caller on the name of the Lord shall be saved." Another verse that is so misused, especially in evangelistic circles, it doesn't mean just one little hoop jump action, it means those who turn in their hearts, their hearts are changed and they turn from trusting their works and their religion and their view of how to please God. They turn from all of that and they turn to become one who says, "I'll call on Christ the Lord to be my only hope of having my sins forgiven and I didn't just call on him, I became one who calls on the Lord. I call on him, 'God, help me be a better husband.' I call on him, 'God, help me. Save me from me.' I call on him, 'God, forgive me again.' He's the new one that I call on for everything." Those who become callers on the name of the Lord show forth

that they are the ones who have been truly born again and are saved. We believe those things.

The Gospel. Now look, the Gospel must be the center of everything we're about. The notion when I was a young preacher was something like this that the Gospel was this very, very simple thing and there is a sense in which the Gospel is a very simple thing. And we need to get all these boys and girls to believe the Gospel by the time they're six, seven, maybe eight at the oldest, get that done so they're safe and then the rest of the time we need to make the church interesting, exciting, culturally relevant so that we can keep people coming. So the Gospel is just kind of something that you did to a child and they got that done and then it went on. That is so, so, so wrong. Now, good men and well intending people sort of hold to that but the Gospel is the totality of what we're about – listen – in both justification, the moment you believe on Jesus and sanctification that you're a part of until you get to heaven. We keep preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ and it keeps helping us and helping us and helping us continue in our salvation, not to earn sanctification but to continue in our sanctification. We need the Gospel and the preaching of the Gospel. It's not just a one time, quick fix, hoop jump. It's the totality of what we're about. We live the Gospel and we will die by the Gospel. Like Spurgeon said, "If God is not going to win them with the truth," meaning the Gospel, "he's sure not going to win folks with a lie." We stay with that truth.

We're careful here at Grace Life not to build any distractions in the church that might pull away from the Gospel. We'll do some different stuff from time to time, even our fellowship meals for the fall outreach, we kind of wrestle with we're not putting too much emphasis on anything else other than the Gospel. We don't want to even give the appearance of some kind of bait and switch thing here. We want the Gospel to be centerpiece. Paul said, Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." All men need the Gospel. We need to be Gospel centered. In our small groups, we need to be about the Gospel.

Now, there is one sense in which if you are preaching and teaching the word faithfully, you're preaching and teaching the Gospel. You just can't get away from it. It's like Spurgeon said, he pastored in London in the middle part of the 19th century and he said, "Every road in England leads to London." He said, "You just go anywhere and you keep going, you'll either go to the sea, then if you do, turn around and you'll go to London eventually." He said, "That's what you do with every text of Scripture. Every text of Scripture leads to the cross. Every text of Scripture has some bearing on the Gospel."

Now, while you might say that preaching the word doesn't mean you're always explicitly teaching the Gospel but preaching the word in one form, fashion or way always contains something of the Gospel. The Gospel is the centerpiece of all of our small group work. The Gospel must be the centerpiece of all of our preaching. The Gospel must be the centerpiece of our family life. You know, through the years we've tried to encourage families as you're raising your children, make it Gospel centered. And many years ago, we began to emphasize as you're raising your children and you have to discipline them,

always be humble before your children and say, "You know, mommy and daddy sin too. We disobey and we need a Savior and you disobey, son, or you disobey, daughter, because you have sin in your heart and you need a Savior." Why? Why do we raise children? Because we're Gospel centered in our homes.

My grandson, I don't know if you've been around him but he's different. When they're yours, they're different, aren't they? They were at my in-law's house having a meal the other day and he was being contrary at the mealtime and his mom finally said, "Okay, I'm done with you. Your daddy will have to deal with you now." He put his head down and he had his head down for a little while and finally he looked up and said, "Okay, I have sin in my heart!" and that's the problem. Why did he say, "I have sin in my heart"? Because his mom and dad are Gospel centered. They keep saying, "Look, that disobedience, that misbehavior, that meanness is because we're sinners and you have sin in your heart." And he gets it.

Now, he doesn't know all that that means but that's what we're about in all of our ministries and all of our lives, we want to be Gospel centered. In our student ministry we want to be Gospel centered. We're not going to do one thing for kids, another thing for young marrieds and another thing. Look, we're not interested in what the culture says this particular demographic is into. I'll tell you what we're into: we're into the Gospel because that's the only thing that has the power of God unto salvation.

In our children's program. Why do we put such emphasis on our Sunday School? Our small group literature? Teaching these fellows and girls, this little ones, all the glorious attributes of God? Because they need to know who God is so they can grasp who they are and how they need a Savior to know this God because we're Gospel centered. We haven't arrived but we are very, very, very, very intentional about that. Now, I know there are things that happen and these waves come across the church and this wave comes across the church but we're not catching waves, we're preaching the Gospel. Those waves crash on the shore and dissipate and I believe they leave the true children of God kind of disillusioned. We're going to stay with the Gospel at Grace Life Church.

Well, he says, "You're a good church because you get the priority of the church." From the very beginning, Paul says to the church at Philippi, "You have been participating in the Gospel." Now, probably that has a great emphasis on how they supported his ministry but I think it's broader than that in that they grasped it for their own lives and their own local church ministry too.

Now, number 3.: they're a good church because they brought joy and gladness to their pastor's heart. They brought joy and gladness to the pastor's heart. Look at it there again, verse 3, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all." So, like Hebrews 13:17, I think I've got that written down as a good cross-reference here, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they," why? Why do you obey your leaders and submit to them? Because they're some kind of elite? No. No. No. God has given them an awesome and differing responsibility than you. "For they keep watch over your souls," Paul says in Hebrews 13:17, "as those who will

give an account." Others in the church won't give an account for the souls in the church like the pastors will. That's a heavy thing. Why do you think I have led us to change a lot of stuff? Now, if you haven't been here over ten years you probably don't know about most of this but we changed a lot of things. Why? Because I'll give an account. I'll give an account for your soul and to some degree all the church pastors will.

So he says, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account." Now, here it is, "Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you." So Paul writes to the Hebrew church and he tells them, "Make sure you're a joy to your pastor." Now, if you've got a faithful and God-called pastor, then those are synonymous. Honoring God and honoring your pastor and bringing him joy should be the same thing because he should want for you what the chief Shepherd wants. If the undershepherd doesn't want what the chief shepherd does then he's a hireling. But the undershepherd should want what the chief shepherd wants for God's church.

Now, I've jotted down some things here about you and I've got 12 things about you that bring me joy and I'm convinced bring God joy.

You support biblical preaching. Now, to you that's like, "Are you kidding me? We're commended for that?" Do you know I counsel with pastors almost every week who are in hot water for just trying to verse-by-verse preach the word of God. I mean, not even getting close to the stuff I say to you. I mean, just trying to get there but you're right the opposite. If I were to veer off to something else and God forbid, I'd rather lose my voice first, but if I were to do that, you'd have some serious meetings with the church elders and say, "This has got to stop. We love Brother Jeff but what happened to the word?" You support, you get, you're centered on biblical preaching.

2. Another reason why you're a joy to me is you practice every member ministry. I really do not know the church of any size that has a longer term record of the people purposing to care for, serve, minister, evangelize, equip one another through small groups the way you do. As a matter of fact, the trend today is way away from that. The church of any size in any city that I know of would do well to have 50% of their folks in active small group ministry but you have had a heart for that. You've grown at that. You've owned that for the glory of God. You practice every member ministry for the glory of God. I thank God for that. It gives me joy in my heart.

3. You hold to sound doctrine. As Paul left the church at Ephesus, he wrote to them to affirm to them that though he wasn't perfect, he was faithful and here's what he said to them to show that he was faithful, "I determined to declare to you the whole counsel of God. The whole. I didn't leave stuff out that was difficult. I didn't leave the doctrines that are mysterious and that really crush our pride and stretch our brain. I didn't leave that out. I declared to you the whole counsel of God." And you're that kind of people. You're the kind of people that says, "We want a thorough, biblical theology here. What does the Bible say is God's overarching purpose and what are the truths of the word of God containing all of God's purposes. That's what we want. Give us, 'Thus saith the

Scriptures." "God forbid I share with you from my heart every Sunday. Somebody says, "Well, let me just share from my heart." Well, the Bible says your heart is desperately wicked and deceitful beyond all things. I don't want to hear from your old rotten heart. Now sure, there are times when dad's share their heart or times when a pastor would share his heart, but you know what I mean. We need the word of God. You are committed to sound doctrine, a biblical theology.

4. You are thoroughly Gospel centered and are not looking to anything else. For the sake of your children and your children's children and to grow this church other than the Gospel. I haven't sensed a hint of that. Nobody has come to me and said, "You know, if we'd get some of that stuff, that whizz bang stuff, boy, we'd have a big student group." Well, what matters if you have a big student group if God hasn't apprehended them with the Gospel? You're very Gospel centered. We've already talked about that.

5. You hold to biblical conversion. You have grasped that we must not fall into the trap of simple, even superstitious hoop jumps where we turn the Baptist church into something of a Roman Catholic miniature model where if we can just get you to walk an aisle or go through a motion then we can declare you converted. That we strive here to sit down whether you're seven years old or 87 years old and open the word of God and study the word of God and make sure you can say to us, "Based on the word of God, Pastor, I have experienced that new birth. I have experienced repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ. I still struggle but Christ is my only hope." It's not me declaring you saved, it's you declaring you saved as God the Spirit confirms that in your own soul from the word of God. Biblical conversion that stays. You see, when you're biblically converted, God keeps you. Yes, you must be committed to him but he holds you and you can't get away.

6. Biblical evangelism which is certainly the other side of that coin where we are committed to share the Gospel with anyone and everyone we can and be evangelistic and share the Gospel. I lump in there, of course, world missions, sharing the Gospel to the ends of the earth. You are a people that have enthusiastically supported my leadership to say, "Let's do all we can to influence others for the glory of God around the earth and share this Gospel and plant churches."

7. Meaningful membership. It gives me great joy to know that you only want in membership at Grace Life those who are truly added by God to the church. In Acts 2, "The Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." In London, they had all the pastors stand up and all of them stood up and talked about how many they had in attendance and how many they had in membership in their churches and every single church there had more attenders than they had members. Do you know why? Because they take membership serious and the only church there that had just a little more in membership than they had in attendance was us and, of course, they understand that we've been working on that for many years but really if you go back in church history, they would tell you that if you've got more on roll than you've got in attendance, you're unhealthy. You're not very sound. Well, I'd say, well, give us some mercy because

we started with about 3,000 dead wood and we've been chiseling on this thing for years. But you're committed to having a membership that actually means something.

Do you remember years ago how upset folks got when we started purging our rolls of those who never came? I had mommas call me, "You can't take my son off the roll." He's 40. He's 40. The man was 40. Now, bless her heart, we were very kind to her. She somehow in her mind thought, "If he comes off the roll, he goes to hell." No, no, no, look, the church roll is the service roll for God. Your membership roll is in heaven. The salvation roll is in heaven, the service roll is down here and if you don't show up, you're not serving. And so we began to hopefully with as things went along, at least with humility and compassion and lovingkindness to make sure that membership at Grace Life really meant something. It wasn't just sticking your name on the roll and never having any kind of participation in the work of the Lord in the church.

8. You're a joy because your commitment to compassionate church discipline and accountability. Folks, if you cannot say what a Christian is not, then you can't say what a Christian is and there's got to be some standard if it has any meaning at all.

9. You're a joy because you support a biblical understanding of church leadership. You remember when I was the only pastor here. We only had one elder and it was me and I explained to you that I didn't think that was healthy or best. The Bible doesn't give a real absolute here but the weightiest example of the New Testament, as a matter of fact, far from there being one pastor over several churches, you see clearly in the New Testament single churches with a plurality of pastors and you went to that model, embracing the biblical truth of it and I praise the Lord that you have a conviction about that here.

10. You hold to biblical conflict resolution. One of the most important things we've ever done I think for our witness is when we studied what the Scripture says about how to get along with each other when we disagree and we agreed together that if we have a conflict and we can't get over it and, hey, by the way, good Christians can have a conflict and these are meant to get over it. That's okay. You just get over it biblically. You don't go and form your group of 25 against their group of 25 and then we'll fight it out and see who can get the most votes in the church business meeting. Not going to happen here. We get together and even some of those who unfortunately have been removed from church membership recently were removed because there was a conflict and they adamantly refused to try to resolve it biblically. It wasn't because of even their sin, it was their refusal to even sit down with the offended party and try to work it out. And so you've been committed to that for years and it has made a huge difference in our church life here and our harmony and our love for one another and our witness to the community. Did I say that was number 10?

11. You love your pastor and love your staff. It's just very, very, very obvious. Now, you are commanded to do that. The Bible says to love your pastor. But you do do that and it's not a matter of your pastoring staff being worthy, it's a matter of you honoring God. There has never, ever, ever been, never been just like the church at Philippi, where a church really joyed in Christ that did not love and joy in their pastor who brought them

the word of Christ. God doesn't let you do. "Well, I love Jesus but that pastor." Impossible. Now, if he's a hireling and a false teacher, then I can see that. You can't have. Every time the Bible speaks of a mature church like the church at Philippi, they had a great love and devotion for their leadership and you've had that for years and it's a great, great joy to my life.

12. The last one, you possess a Gospel humility. A Gospel humility. There is a genuine humility that is very apparent in this body where men do not waltz in here and say, "I'm somebody in town and I know how to run this church better than other folks." That doesn't happen here. It just doesn't happen. We don't have Jezebel spirited women who try to run things using their husband as a mouthpiece. We have had, but we don't have that here. There is a sweet Gospel humility in this congregation.

Now, are we perfect? No. But I thank God for you and it's a joy to me that that kind of Gospel humility permeates the body of Christ here where just as Paul said as he started out, whether it's Paul and Timothy who hold the office of apostle, maybe Timothy would be an associate apostle or the elders or deacons or all the rest of us where there is parity in God's church. All equal before him.