

STUDY ON THE BOOK OF PHILIPPIANS

APPROVE WHAT IS EXCELLENT!

Read Philippians 1:1-11

Introduction

Chapter 1 includes a brief introduction (Philippians 1:1–2) followed by three key sections. First, Paul gives thanks and prayer on behalf of the Philippian Christians (Philippians 1:3–11). Second, he focuses on the expansion of the gospel (Philippians 1:12–18). Third, he emphasizes that, for the believer, to live is Christ and to die is gain (Philippians 1:19–30). Along the way, Paul explains that how a Christian life is a reflection of what they set their mind on. He stresses the importance of rejoicing and joy and connects the faith to concepts such as glory.

Paul is certainly interested in thanking the church at Philippi for their generous support. At the same time, he is concerned about some negative influences, including false teachers and arrogance within the church itself.

Address and Initial Greeting.

“Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 1:1-2)

Notice how he identifies himself and Timothy as "bondservants of Jesus Christ." "Servants" is probably too weak a translation. The Greek noun "doulos" is used of "a male slave as an entity in a socioeconomic context," or "one who is solely committed to another, "slave, subject," denoting "compulsory service." Hired "servants" come and go, but "slaves" are committed to their Master for life. Paul is revealing here that he and Timothy are a slave to do God's will and fulfil God's purposes in this life.

The church in Philippi as we studied last week was founded by Paul some eleven years before this letter on his second missionary journey (Acts 16:11-40). This was the first church established on the continent of Europe.

Addressing the Saints:

This means all the Christians in Philippi. He writes to the whole church and then includes the leaders. It's backwards from the way we might address a group -- distinguished leaders first, then fellow citizens but not Paul's way of addressing the body in this letter.

In a general sense, the word "bishops" is meant for those with leadership responsibilities. The ancient Greek word meant overseers and was used to describe general leadership before it came to describe a specific office recognized by some Christian traditions and the word "deacons", it meant for those who had recognized positions of service.

"Grace and peace" are Paul's customary greeting. The typical Greek greeting was "grace" or "favour." The typical Hebrew greeting was Shalom, "peace." Paul combines them and moves them from an everyday usage to a special greeting where each word holds a spiritual meaning. Paul is pointing specifically to the "grace of God" and to "peace with God," which is the blessing of a right relationship with God. "Grace and peace!"

Paul Gives Thanks for the Philippian Christians.

“I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (vv3-6)

When Paul remembered what all the Philippians did for him, he was extremely thankful. He was naturally grateful to the Philippians, but more so to God who had worked such kindness through the Philippians. The Philippians were extremely generous towards Paul, both when he was with them (Acts 16:15, 16:32-34) and when he was apart from them (2 Corinthians 8:1-7, 9:1-4, and 11:9). It is therefore of little surprise that Paul prayed for the Philippians, and he did so with joy. This was one way Paul felt he could repay the Philippians for all they did for him.

It was a true partnership, a mutual sharing, a two-way street, of giving and receiving. In the case of the Philippians, it was giving money, love, and personnel (Epaphroditus) to support Paul's ministry. And they were receiving in return spiritual and material blessings (4:19).

Paul used the words “for your fellowship in the gospel...” This was one reason Paul was thankful for the Philippians. The idea is that the Philippians “partnered” with Paul in his spreading of the gospel through their friendship and financial support, and they did so from the first day until now. They didn’t wait to see if Paul was a “winner” or “successful in ministry” before they supported him. They got behind Paul and his ministry early.

The actions of these Christians in Philippi challenges us in our giving, partnering, and support, not just to your church but also to your pastor or ministry leader.

“...being confident of this very thing...”

"Confident" is the perfect participle of the Greek verb *peithō*, which means here, "be so convinced that one puts confidence in something."

What is Paul confident of?

Not the ability of the Philippian church but of God. Yes, we have a responsibility to repent from sin and turn towards God. But thankfully, our salvation and eternal destiny do not on rely upon our feeble efforts to be righteous. They depend upon God himself who has declared us to be his ("saints," verse 2) and will complete what he has begun in our lives when Christ comes ("the Day of Christ," verse 6). Paul has given us a wonderful assurance of God's involvement in our salvation -- and it certainly won't be the last mention of this in the Letter.

But we are not to presume upon God's grace or give false assurance to those who really aren't trying to live for Christ. This assurance is intended for believers who are sincerely seeking to follow Christ, in spite of their imperfections.

When you look at the context of this letter, Paul isn't saying this just to individuals, but to the church as a whole. He is saying: "He who began a good work in you Philippians will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." As we see later in the letter, he is encouraging them to mature as a group.

“He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.” When Paul thought of the beginning of God’s work among the Philippians (from the first day), it was natural that he also thought of the day when that work would be complete. Paul also expressed his confidence in God’s ability to complete that work.

Paul's Affection for the Philippians

“Just as it is right for me to think this of you all because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as both in my chains and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers with me of grace. For God is my witness, how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ.” (vv7-8)

Paul’s thankfulness, joy, and desire to pray for the Philippians was right because they stood beside him in his trials for the gospel, and they received the same grace he did (you all are partakers with me of grace). Paul was a man of towering intellect, but he was also a man of great heart, and the Philippian Christians were in his heart. He could even call God as his witness regarding his deep affection for them.

Prayer for Discernment

“And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.” (vv9-11)

The Philippians had a lot of love, and they showed it to Paul. Yet Paul didn’t hesitate to pray that their love would abound still more and more. It doesn’t matter how much love for others we have; we can still have more! This is not just any kind of love for God. It is love that becomes more discerning and knowledgeable about who God is and what really pleases him.

When we are young, we can be carefree and careless. We don't know what to watch for -- what is important and what is of no importance. As we grow, we grow more discerning. In this verse, Paul applies discernment to love.

Result of Paul's Prayer:

Paul prays that their love may mature and become discerning so that they might achieve three things:

1. that you may approve the things that are excellent
2. that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ
3. being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Approve Excellent Things

In verse 10, "discern" (NIV), "determine" (NRSV), or "approve" (KJV) is the fascinating Greek verb dokimazō. The root idea is "to make a critical examination of something to determine its genuineness, put to the test, examine." Gold, for example, would be tested to determine its purity. Oxen would be put through their paces to determine their usefulness. The word can also extend to the meaning, "to draw a conclusion about worth on the basis of testing, prove, approve."

"What is best" (NIV, NRSV) or "things that are excellent" (KJV) is the participle of the Greek verb diapherō, "be worth more than, be superior to," or here, "the things that really matter."

We've looked at the words. Now what does the sentence mean?

The good is the enemy of the best. We can be so preoccupied with good things, that we don't have time for the best, most important, most significant things. We can live years of our lives pursuing things that are transitory and ultimately of little worth. Good, maybe, but not of ultimate importance.

Paul's prayer here is that we are able to determine by critical examination which things are of greatest importance and put our efforts into those things -- the things that are of greatest worth.

Sincerity and No Offense:

Have you ever lost hope of being blameless? I have. I fall short of my own expectations of me and then blame myself. I wonder how a just God cannot help but blame me for much more stuff. Then I remember what the cross is all about. God has placed my blame and sin and guilt upon Jesus. He died for me as my sacrifice for sin, as Peter put it, "*For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God*" (1 Peter 3:18). Now I am without blame in God's eyes -- not my doing, mind you, but God in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19).

How therefore, is it possible for you to be sincere and without blame until the day of Christ?

Filled with the fruits of righteousness:

The work of becoming sincere and without offense is really God's work within us. It happens as we are filled with the fruits of righteousness.

Bearing fruit is always the result of abiding in Jesus (John 15:4-6). As we abide in Him, we receive the life and nutrients we need to naturally bear fruit to the glory and praise of God.

Fruit is a produce or an outward manifestation of a grown seed / tree. As we abide in Jesus, His nutrients in us will enable us to have fruits and fruits in full. Paul is revealing that as our love abound in knowledge and all discernment, fruits will follow.

To the Glory and Praise of God

Paul prays for a love towards God that discerns the best from the good and as a result produces a life that is pure, blameless, and of good character. This is what the Spirit builds in us when we yield to him (Galatians 5:22-23). Paul closes this prayer with the words: "... to the glory and praise of God."

That is the final purpose and goal of our lives, of course. This is not about us, but about God. Our lives are not to be lived so that we achieve our goals and are happy. But as both slaves and saints (people dedicated to the service of God), our lives are to reflect well on him. That's what we're about. Jesus said:

"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."
(Matthew 5:16)

Paul has a way of putting it all in perspective in the first eleven verses of this brief letter to the Philippians.

