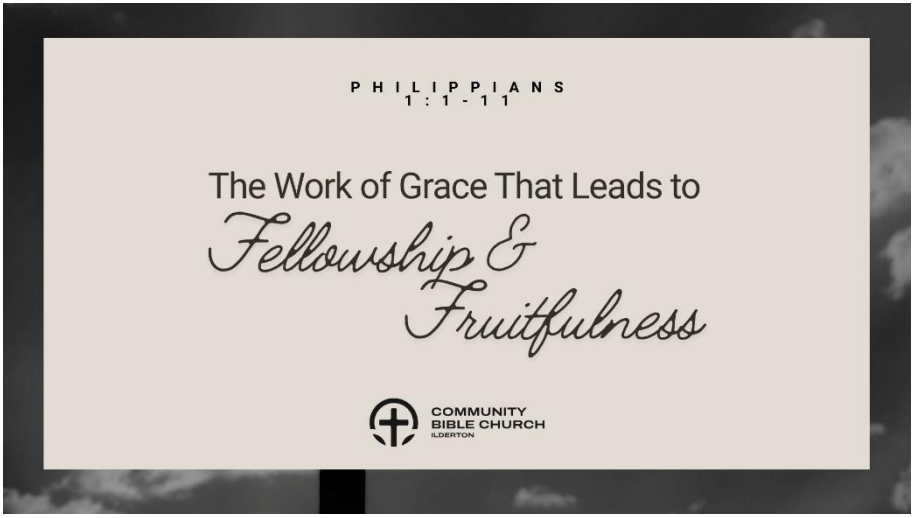


SERIES INTRO

We're starting a new sermon series this morning called “Press On". It is out of Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. The entrance of the gospel into Philippi, and into what is now known as Europe, is described in Acts 16:12-40 with the conversions of a slave girl, a soldier, and a woman named Lydia. The founding of the Philippian church is marked by these conversions.

James Montgomery Boice, in the introduction to his commentary on Philippians, says this about Paul's letter: “Any Christian who is feeling down or discouraged about anything should study Paul's great letter to the Philippians. This is true because of Paul's circumstances when he wrote it. He had been kept in prison for two years in Caesarea, without trial, and he was being held for an unknown amount of time in Caesar's jail in Rome. He had survived a perilous storm on the Mediterranean Sea. He had been deserted by most of his friends. Others, even Christian leaders, had spoken against him, hoping to get him into even more trouble with the government. He was facing possible execution for his faith. Terrible! **Yet no book in the Bible is so filled with joy as Philippians.**"

As we examine this letter, we will see what kinds of thoughts occupy Paul's mind while he is locked in prison and see what we can learn from that. What does Paul want others to know? How can he challenge and encourage, exhort and teach from his prison cell?

If you are a “favourite verse in the Bible" kind of person, you'll know that this short book of the Bible is packed with powerful and memorable passages. You'll recognize these verses and passages and come to a deeper understanding of them as we dig deep into what Paul was communicating to the church at Philippi, and to us.

The tone of Paul's writing in Philippians is more informal and personal than his other letters. This indicates familiarity and friendship. In the same way you would write one way to an unfamiliar audience and quite another way to a friend or group of friends.

A few years ago, many of us were having regular Zoom calls with various people and, to be honest, not really liking it very much. When you join a Zoom meeting with people you don't know, you are a bit nervous and more guarded. But I can remember back in 2020 when we, as church members, got onto Zoom at 10:15 AM on Sunday morning with other church members; it was still a little weird, but it was different. We fell quickly into warm greetings, caring questions, and well-known inside jokes. Paul seems to know the people in this church in the way we know each other as church members, and the tone of his letter reflects that.

Despite the reality of his circumstances, the word "JOY" is found 16 times in the four chapters of this letter. And it's important for us to remember that Paul isn't writing about joy in a comfortable, bright, pristine space. He's not in his study backed by mahogany bookcases and writing on fine paper. He's in a brutal, dark and dirty space, and yet he's in possession of deep and resilient joy. How is that possible? We will see as we go through this letter.

SERMON INTRO

Paul begins his letter by encouraging the saints to trust God's grace in their lives from beginning to end. God begins the work in our lives by his grace, making us partakers of grace, which leads to righteous fruit in our lives. It is his work from beginning to end!

Beginning in verse one, then, we read…

> [1]*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus…*

The word Paul uses to describe himself and Timothy is "servant," or bondservant, or more literally, slave. Slave is, of course, a loaded word, but the authors of the New Testament chose this word to identify themselves. This a word that, when applied to human relationships, has a very negative connotation, but when applied to the relationship between humans and God, it is actually a positive statement of identity.

The unwilling enslavement of one human by another is evil and results in evil. That's because no human master is omniscient, omnipotent or universally and ultimately sovereign. But Jesus is all of those things, and the willing "self-enslavement" of a human to Jesus is not evil; it is glorious. It is the best choice you can make! Recognizing this, Paul and other early Christians described themselves as slaves of Christ, the only perfect, sovereign and benevolent master. That was their commitment then, and that should be our commitment today. This is a complete submission. It is when all personal ambition and desire are set aside to serve God. It is when "let your will be done" is the constant cry of our hearts.

That's who the letter is from. Now…

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

Let's talk about this word “saint”... In Roman Catholic theology, lowercase “saint” can mean “all baptized Christians who are joined to Christ, including the faithful living on earth, those being purified in purgatory, and those in heaven.”[1] In the uppercase category of Roman Catholicism, a Saint is “a deceased person who has reached heaven, lived a heroically virtuous life, offered their life for others, or died as a martyr, and is held up as a model of holiness.”[2] In more colloquial terms, we call someone a saint who only seems to do good or, sarcastically, someone who thinks they are better than everyone.

But the biblical definition of saint is quite simple: it simply means Christian. The word refers to anyone who has repented of their sins and follows Jesus as his disciple. If you've done that, you are a saint. Paul wrote this letter to a specific group of saints belonging to the church at Philippi.

He then lists two sub-categories of other saints.

> First, overseers. In the New Testament, overseer is a term interchangeable with pastor and elder. These are men who are entrusted to lead and care for a local assembly. These men are called to “oversee,” or you might say “keep an eye on” the church, providing care, protection, and teaching.
>
> Second, there are deacons. Deacons are people who perform humble, task-oriented duties as they attend to the physical and practical needs of a church.

The church at Philippi has both overseers/elders and deacons, which was the norm for first-century Christian churches. We still take that as the expected norm today, and so that is the structure we are pursuing for our church here in Ilderton.

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[1] https://focus.org/posts/what-is-a-catholic-saint/
[2] https://focus.org/posts/what-is-a-catholic-saint/

Next we have the first appearance of the word “grace." We need to explore this word if we are going to understand the rest of this passage.

> [2] *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Very simply, grace is God's unmerited favour toward undeserving sinners. It's all the good he does to us, none of which we deserve. It's every blessing we receive, noen of which are owed to us. It's God's favour, his kindness.

God does only good to us, even though we deserve none of it. God constantly blesses us even though he is not obligated to do so. God is constantly kind to us even though we are often unfaithful and unkind to him. This is grace.

He wishes them peace as well, a biblical word that communicates quietness, rest, and wholeness. The gift of peace is another gracious provision from God.

So that's the introduction to this letter. Now he begins to speak truth to these hungry souls, assuring them first of this…

1. God Completes the Work He Initiates (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,*

He remembers them often and this remembrance is what you might call an “affectionate pondering." Paul uses this word seven times in his letters. It seems he made a practice not only of thinking of people, but of thinking fondly of them. I'm sure other less pleasant thoughts were available, but in his letters, he makes a point of

expressing affection in this way. He remembers them fondly and prays for them joyfully.

He mentions this twice in verse four, both times using a word that indicates a specific type of prayer. This is not a prayer of praise, thanksgiving or confession, but a prayer that makes a specific request of God based on an awareness of specific need. In other words, Paul knew this church well enough to pray specifically for them.

He prays specifically for these needs and does so with joy. What caused his joy? Their partnership with him.

> [5] *because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*

They were partners with Paul in two ways. Generally, they were in fellowship with him as fellow followers of Jesus. The same word rendered "partnership" here is rendered "fellowship" in Acts 2:42: "*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*" So they were partners with Paul just as we are in partnership, or fellowship, with all genuine believers around the world.

But they were also partners with him in more specific tangible ways. They sent him gifts to use for ministry purposes, and in that, they held a special status. We read in 4:15: "*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.*" These were especially faithful people!

Whether in spirit or in tangible contributions, their partnership was a gospel partnership! They were partners in sharing God's Good News! The good news that the promised Messiah had come, that he had died for sin and was raised back to life, and because of this, people

could be reconciled to God. They were partners with Paul in sharing *that* good news.

This news was from God; it was *his* news. Paul's marketing team didn't invent this message to generate revenue or gather a crowd. In fact, it often did the opposite. Paul's mission *is* a divine message. God assigned him to this mission, and God will see that his mission is completed, and that Paul's part of it is completed. Paul understood all of this, and he stood firm in his belief that it was true. And because of this, he was sure and could assure the Philippian believers 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.*

God initiates a work of grace in our lives. That work of grace is our salvation, and God will bring that work to its completion. This is true for every believer. Paul believes this truth; he is confident in its truthfulness.

He writes about this good work that God initiates in his letters. In Galatians, he asks why people would revert to a system where salvation is attained by human effort when the Spirit had so graciously initiated the good work in their lives. His point was that the work continues the way it began. It began by God's Spirit, and it must continue by God's Spirit. And here in Phil. 1:6, he proclaims that it will also be completed by God's Spirit.

The truth is this: We can't start the work of salvation by human effort. We can't sustain the work by human effort. And we certainly can't complete the work by human effort. God starts the work… and sustains the work… and completes the work.

Now, that doesn't mean there is no "work" for us to do, as Paul indicates a few verses later when he says, "*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but*

much more in my absence, ***work out your own salvation with fear and trembling****…*"

So we must work out what has been imputed to us, but the decisive work, the work that makes salvation possible and sustains that salvation, has already been done… and is being done… and will be brought to completion. When? "At the day of Jesus Christ"—in other words, on the day Jesus returns, and this age of history comes to a close.

God had begun a good work in these people to whom Paul writes. The beginning of the good work was the moment God granted them repentance and they responded in faith. And Paul assures them God's work of redemption will continue in their lives and reach its completion on the day Jesus returns.

The same is true for us. God has started something in us that he will finish. He's not like us and our half-finished projects. God sets us on the path of reconciliation and redemption and promises that we will be fully reconciled and fully redeemed. Paul assures us that we need not worry. We don't have to wonder, husbands, the way our wives often wonder: "Will he get the job done? Will he finish what he started?"

God *will* get it done! This means that wherever you're at today in your journey with Christ, if you have experienced the new birth, you **are** on a journey from spiritual death (your starting point) to the full and permanent presence of God (your eternal destiny).

This journey will end either at your death or Christ's return. Until one of those two things happens, God is working to bring his work to completion. That means it's happening RIGHT now! Sometimes you can feel it, and it feels great. Other times you can feel it, and it's painful! But rememer: he is doing work! For a piece of marble to be made into a magnificent statues, many hammer blows are required and many chucks must be chipped off. To make a study table

requires a lot of cutting and sanding. The construction of a building involves numerous noisy and dirty processes. But when that work is done, we look at the finished product and marvel at its beauty.

A day of marvellous perfection is coming for all who belong to him. And when that day comes, we'll understand what those unpleasant phases of construction were all about. But until then, we trust this promise that "*he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion.*"

Paul is confident that their faith will stand and that they will persevere until the end because of God's sovereign saving grace among them. He is confident about their future, and he doesn't derive this confidence from their personal qualities as human beings, but from his trust in God's ability to accomplish what he has promised to accomplish.

While we wait for that day, we can take this as an encouragement…

2. Together We Are Partakers of God's Grace (7-8)

> *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.*

What does it mean to hold someone in your heart? It means that at the core of your being, in your emotional centre, you think of them often—and warmly. We can feel this way about many people—any friend with whom we have a good connection.

But something more exists between people who, by God's grace, are filled with God's Spirit. Why? Because we are all partakers of God's grace. We share something—the most important thing—in common: God's grace—his Spirit that dwells in each genuine believer. We're all

drinking from the same fountain. We're all participating in the same mission.

And when we partake of God's grace, it shapes us into people who are still unique but share certain things in common. A common understanding of who God is. A common understanding of how his sovereignty rules the events of our lives. A common understanding of the mutual care and support we owe one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

We are fellow partakers of God's grace and co-labourers for the Lord, pursuivng his mission together, laying aside personal goals and agendas to, as Paul writes a bit later, "*in humility, count others as more significant than [our]selves.*"

The Philippian Christians are good examples of this. They supported Paul with prayer and finances. Their willingness to stand in solidarity with him encouraged him. He was sharing the gospel, establishing it where it was previously unknown, and they were co-labourers in this by their support.

They feel sorrow for him, and he is longing to be with them. For Paul, this generated some very strong feelings! Listen to what he writes next:

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

Paul yearns for the Philippian believers with this pure, sacrificial, Spirit-inspired affection.

Now, not to make things too awkward this morning, but as a pastor, I know what he's talking about; I feel like this too. After leaving our previous church where I'd been for 15 years and starting here last year, there were times when I "yearned with the affection of Christ" for the people of the Aylmer EMMC church. Why? Well, because we

covered a lot of ground together over those years. We endured many pains and trials as a church family. I held them in my heart for many years; they were dear to me.

They always will be dear to me, but now my focus is you—the believers who meet here in Ilderton. So guess what happens now? When I am away from you, as I was the last two out of three Sundays, I feel disoriented and unrooted, and I long to see you again, to be among you. I now "yearn for *you* all with the affection of Christ."

And this is good! This is as it should be! This is what happens—and is supposed to happen—between fellow partakers of God's grace. Our lives are intertwined; we carry our pains and sorrows together; our joys lift each other's spirits.

Paul sincerely yearns for them, and he yearns for them properly, with "the affection of Christ." That's an important distinction. There are many types of "affectionate yearning," and not all types are pure, helpful, or holy. Outside the church, some people yearn for attention, affirmation, and admiration. This is a selfish and self-serving affection, often seen in high-profile musicians, athletes, and actors.

But even inside the church, we often fall short of this level of Christ-saturated affection, don't we? When our emotions are not Christ-saturated, they are self-saturated. We long to see people, to be with them, not out of concern for their encouragement but for our own selfish purposes. Often, we crave admiration and affirmation. But we also want to feel loved and appreciated, and those are indeed legitimate emotional needs. But look at how Paul goes about it. He looks to the needs of others with the mind and affection of Christ, counting others more important/significant than himself.

We must learn from this that the emotional needs we sometimes yearn for others to fill are often filled by serving others with the love of Christ, not by using others to fulfill our cravings. If we tap into the

affection of Christ, if we love what he loves and the way he loves, we will not lack emotional fulfillment in our lives.

This can happen in individual relationships, but it can also happen in a corporate setting. Sometimes pastors look to the church's people for emotional fulfillment. There probably isn't an honest pastor around who wouldn't admit that this is an occasional temptation. But Paul sets an example in this as well. He is careful to channel his affections through the affections of Christ.

This kind of affection grows by partaking of God's grace together. It results in affectionate fellowship.

Here's one more thing it leads to…

3. Partaking of God's Grace Leads to Righteous Fruit in Our Lives (9-11)

> *9 And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment,*

Paul often speaks in chains of logic and connected ideas. Speaking from the foundational to the applicable to the eventual. That our love would abound more and more is foundational. That we would approve of what is excellent is applicable. That we would be pure and blameless for the day of Christ is the eventual, or at least gradual.

He prays that their love would abound more and more. More and more, even increasing. Is that something you can say for yourself? Is your love for God's people, and especially the people of your church family, abounding more and more? I pray that it is.

I hope that you're eager to come together each week. I hope we leave this gathering with a better understanding of the importance of the

body of Christ gathered together for worship, prayer, and the preaching of the word. I hope you marvel at how precious it is to come together, and I hope that when we come together, it expands our love and appreciation for one another.

Our love, Paul writes, should abound with knowledge and discernment. Knowledge—knowing and understanding God, his word, and his people. We are not to love ignorantly or blindly. Our love will increase according to the measure of our knowledge. This involves discernment. Discernment involves sifting, separating truth from falsehood. It involves inspection, evaluation and decisions made based on that inspection and evaluation. It means "to put to the test" and then to approve or disapprove based on the finding.

> [10] *so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,*

First, we must examine ourselves in light of God's word and then also examine our brothers and sisters in that same light. This is not solely to identify what is wrong but also to point out what is right and praiseworthy. We must encourage each other in every way we possibly can, honestly while avoiding flattery. Notice what is excellent in others, and honout them for it.

A knowledgeable and discerning love will lead us to approve all that is excellent. A deeper knowledge of God leads to greater harmony in the church. The threat of disunity is always present in a church because we are naturally prone to fault-finding.

So you must grow in knowledge and discernment because there's a lot at stake. Paul wants them to grow in knowledge and discernment so they will approve what is excellent. Not approve of what is ok, or average, or good enough, but what is excellent! This is not merely choosing good over evil but choosing what is best even among the good.

Choosing good over evil is a first step, but then we find many good things to choose from, and it will not do to simply hold on to whatever good is closest. We must choose the best among the good—that's what excellence is. We haven't done the hard work of discernment if we focus only on avoiding everything false, ugly and dishonourable in this world. We need to train our eyes to see what is excellent—what is best among the good—and then think about those things. This is what Paul is driving at when he writes later: "*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*"

This will lead to purity, the state of being unstained by the world. This will lead us into blamelessness, not being the cause of other people's sins, either by setting an example in sinning, or by causing them to sin in the exercise of Christian liberty.

So…

- Abound with love more and more
- With knowledge and discernment
- So that you may approve what is excellent
- The fruit of following that chain of commands is that we are found pure and blameless for the day of Christ, and…

> [11] *filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.*

Filled with the fruit of righteousness. The idea here is not just that no evidence of evil and impurity will be found in us on that day. It's not just that you'll be a clean slate or a pure white sheet of paper, but that you'll be filled with evidence that your trust in God led you to live a life of many good works. You will have left an easily found trail of evidence. If you were filled with the fruit of righteousness, there will be evidence of that filling. It will be like squeezing a jelly-filled donut!

Finally, this will be “to the glory and praise of God." If this is the fruit of righteousness, not self-righteousness, our actions will glorify God, not ourselves.

CONCLUSION

To you, the saints of the church in Ilderton, God has granted grace and peace.

Over the summer, we've heard about God's character in the Psalms. For example, in Psalm 103:

> *8 The Lord is merciful and gracious,*
> *slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*
> *9 He will not always chide,*
> *nor will he keep his anger forever.*
> *10 He does not deal with us according to our sins,*
> *nor repay us according to our iniquities.*
> *11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth,*
> *so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;*
> *12 as far as the east is from the west,*
> *so far does he remove our transgressions from us.*
> *13 As a father shows compassion to his children,*
> *so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.*
> *14 For he knows our frame;*
> *he remembers that we are dust.*

Jesus Christ was the epitome, the ultimate perfect representation and example of God's mercy and grace. "*He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities,*" because Jesus bore his wrath and our punishment. By his grace, he removes our transgressions, and we are made alive to walk in his freedom. His grace is shown in his compassion for us. The peace of

being reconciled to God is granted to you because God sent his Son to die a substitutionary death in your place.

And by his mercy, we are now partakers of this grace.

God began this work in us, and he will bring it to completion. Paul really believes this. You can hear it later in the letter, where he doesn't know which to choose: to keep living or to go to be with the Lord. He can leave that determination to the Lord because he knows God will lead him in the right direction and finish the work he started.

When I read through this letter, I really resonate with Paul's desire for that day to come and for the work to be complete! The longer I live, the more I understand why Paul put this thought down on paper: "*My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.*" Why is that far better? One big reason is that the work of salvation and sanctification will be complete! No more struggle with sin or discouragement or depression, or anxiety. That sounds amazing to me. You? But God decides when the work ends, and his decision will be perfect. But be assured of this: God completes the work of grace he initiates.

If you have experienced his work of grace in your life, if you've been born again, you can rest safely and securely knowing that he will finish the work. Nothing can separate you from his love once you are in him.

This means you can joyfully work for him not to earn his favour, but out of gratitude for the unmerited favour he has shown you. It means you can love others without trying to get from them what only God can provide. Which then means your love can grow more and more because both its source and its target are rooted in Christ, who is infinite and divine. You will be eager to pursue knowledge and discernment. Then you will find what is excellent; you will hunger and thirst for righteousness. And you will be satisfied.

This is the righteous fruit that will grow in our lives when we love one another as God loves us.

I pray that it will be so among us, more and more…

Questions to Ponder and Discuss

Introduction

1. How does Paul's deep joy while imprisoned in Rome challenge our tendency to link spiritual contentment to favourable outward circumstances?

2. How are a distant, guarded acquaintance and a warm, familial fellowship described among the Philippian saints different?

God Completes the Work He Initiates (vv. 3–6)

3. What does it mean practically to submit to Jesus as a willing bondservant (doulos) rather than treating him merely as a helpful advisor?

4. Why is it vital to confess that salvation and sanctification are initiated, sustained, and completed by God's Spirit rather than human effort?

Together We Are Partakers of God's Grace (vv. 7–8)

5. What does it mean for believers to be fellow partakers of divine grace, and how does that shared grace unite a diverse local congregation?

6. How can we distinguish between self-saturated affection that uses others for validation and Christ-saturated affection that sacrificially serves them?

7. In what ways can a pastor or church leader guard against relying on congregational approval for ultimate emotional security?

Partaking of God's Grace Leads to Righteous Fruit in Our Lives (vv. 9–11)

8. How do we test whether our good deeds are bringing glory and praise to God or merely drumming up acclaim for ourselves?

9. What is the difference between simply avoiding what is overtly sinful and actively exercising discernment to approve what is excellent in our daily lives?

Conclusion

10. How does keeping the day of Jesus Christ anchored before our mind's eye change how we evaluate our current earthly ambitions, trials, and investments?

The content of this booklet was written by Michael Krahn, lead pastor of Community Bible Church in Ilderton, Ontario. We are a gospel-centered church devoted to the faithful teaching of Scripture, the building up of believers, and bearing witness to Christ in our community and beyond. To learn more, join us for a Sunday service, or connect with us directly, scan the QR code or visit: cbcilderton.ca/contact-us

