

CHURCH IMPROVEMENT: BUILDING A CHURCH THAT HONORS GOD AND LOVES PEOPLE THROUGH JOYFUL PRAYING Philippians 1: 3-11

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

Is there anyone in your life that whenever you think of them you have a feeling of happiness? Is there anyone in your life that when you talk about them, you always talk about them with warmth and joy? What is it about this person that evokes such warm and enthusiastic sentiments?

What adjectives would you use to describe your prayer life? Why?

Often in our lives, relationships are more a source of frustration and pain than they are of joy. Our praying is more often dutiful, bored and distracted, rather than joyful. This passage holds some keys for us to understand how Paul, who is a person just like us, could be joyful in his remembrance of the Philippians and in his praying for them. Here we'll find help in our search to live lives of joy.

STUDY

1. Based on vv. 3-6, how would you describe Paul's relationship to the Philippians? How does he feel about them?

He is very fond of them. He is joyful whenever he thinks about them and their response to the gospel and to him. He views them as peers in that they both share in God's grace. He does not view himself as superior or in a different category from them.

2. What does Paul do in response to how he feels about them?

He praises God for them and he prays for them. There is a spontaneous joy that bubbles up in Paul when he remembers these people and this joy pours out of him as thanksgiving to God. Thanksgiving and praise are the natural expression of a joyful heart.

3. The main question we need to answer from vv. 5-6 is why does Paul joyfully give thanks and joyfully pray for these people? But before we do that let's think about gratitude for a moment. How do children respond at Christmas when they get a present they didn't want? How do they respond when they get exactly what they had hoped for? When mom gives you a present, do you thank your sister for it?

When people get gifts they don't want or like they will dutifully say thank you but their hearts will not be joyful. On the other hand, when you get a gift you love you spontaneously, out of a joyful heart, give thanks. The words and the demeanor in both situations may be identical but one is honest and joyful while the other is dutiful and joyless. Obviously you only thank people for the gifts they give. You never thank someone for giving you a gift they did not give.

4. How does Paul give thanks? What is significant about the fact that he thanks God for the Philippians?

Paul is full of joy because of the Philippians and thanks God because what makes him happy about the Philippians is God's doing. The Philippians don't deserve the credit for who they are or what they have done. Paul knows the only explanation for their Christian behavior is the mercy of God.

5. Verses 5 and 6 both begin with the word "because" in the original. In verse 5, why does Paul give thanks with joy and pray with joy for these people?

He prays with joy because of their partnership in the gospel from the very first day he met them right up to the moment he writes this letter.

6. What does Paul mean by the phrase, "your partnership in the gospel"? How have they been his partners?

- Acts 16: 13-15 *The moment Lydia became a Christian she provided Paul and his coworkers with room and board while they stayed in Philippi preaching the gospel.*
- Acts 16: 29-34 *The moment the jailer trusted Christ he cleaned Paul and Silas' wounds, bandaged them and fed them.*
- Phil. 1: 19 *They have been praying for Paul while he is in prison.*

- Phil. 1: 29-30 *They are suffering for the gospel, just like Paul is.*
- Phil. 4: 14-19 *They have sent him financial support many times and just recently sent him another gift by Epaphroditus.*

They have been partners with him by supporting him with their prayers and gifts and by joining with him in suffering for the sake of the gospel.

7. Why would this motivate Paul to give thanks and to pray for the Philippians? Verse 6 gives us the connection between their behavior and why Paul joyfully thanks God and joyfully prays for them.

In verse six Paul says that he thanks God and prays with great joy because he is absolutely convinced that what God starts he always finishes. Paul knows that the Philippians behavior, i.e., their joyfully embracing Christ and their joyfully supporting him and joining with him in suffering for the gospel can only be explained by God's doing a "good work" in them. Paul knows that every human being naturally hates Jesus and those who follow Jesus (John 7:7 & 15:18). Therefore, if these people now love Jesus and his followers, the only explanation is that God has given them new hearts (Ezekiel 36:25-27, John 3: 1-8, Acts 16:15, Ephesians 2:4-5, Phil. 2: 13, 1 Peter 1: 3, 1 John 2:29, etc.). He is joyful in his praying for them because he knows that God is going to answer his prayers because what God begins he always finishes. Confidence is the necessary precondition for joy. Nothing will kill your joy like worry, fear or uncertainty about the future. If you know that good things are going to happen in the future, the likelihood that you will be joyful is increased. For example, if you know that no matter how hard you study you are going to flunk the test, how happy will you be to study? You will not do it. But if you know, with certainty, that if you study you are guaranteed an A, how will you study? You will do it joyfully. Paul prays with joy because he knows God is going to answer his prayer.

The foundation of Paul's joy is his rock solid confidence in God's sovereign control over everything and everyone. Joyful living and joyful praying can only exist where confidence in God's sovereignty flourishes. Paul is not blind to the presence of sin and danger. But, while he is not ignorant about the reality of evil he is completely certain that God always finishes what he starts. When he looks at people he doesn't simply see the problems but he sees the evidences of grace.

When he doesn't see any evidence of grace he knows that grace can break through at any moment, for no one can resist God's will.

8. Why does Paul mention the return of Christ in v. 6?

The goal of God's work is not just giving people a happy life on planet earth. Christ came to bring us to heaven and into an eternal relationship with God. So Paul's joyful praying is not limited to just what is happening in the present. He prays with his eye firmly fixed on the ultimate goal, making safely into heaven.

9. Make a list of three Christians you know and write beside each name two or three evidences that God has been gracious to them. Thank God for his gracious work in them.

10. Are you happy when you think of other Christians? Why or why not?

11. Do you believe what Phil 1:6 says?

12. Do you pray with joy for others because you know that God always finishes what he starts?

Prayer (and life) is joyful when we are confident of God's control over everything.

13. In v. 7 Paul says it is "right" (literally, "just") for him to feel this way about them. To what does the phrase "feel this way about you" refer?

It is right for Paul to be confident that God is going to complete what he has begun. It would be wrong for Paul to feel any other way about them. Their partnership in the gospel with him should produce in Paul joyful confidence in God's work in their lives. He ought to joyfully thank God and pray for them because of their partnership.

14. What does he know is true about both the Philippians and himself?

He knows that both of them share in God's grace. The only explanation for Paul's willing suffering for the gospel is that God has graciously changed his heart, just as grace is the only explanation for their love for Christ and him.

15. What does the knowledge of this mutual sharing of grace produce in Paul? (v. 8)

Paul knows that people do not belong to God because of any innate superiority. Rather he and they were hell-deserving sinners who have been rescued out of sin entirely by an act of enormous mercy. They belong to the same family and have the same Savior and Father. Paul's love for them is not based on the fact that he likes their personality or because they have been kind to him. He doesn't love them because they are the same race or in the same life situation. He knows that they are both recipients of grace and so he loves them with the love that comes from Jesus .

16. What hinders your loving people like Jesus loves people? See Acts 20:33-35.

We are defensive in our relations to others because we are afraid that others will take our limited resources, whether of time or money or emotional energy. We believe that receiving is more necessary for our happiness than giving. We view ourselves as needing what others have rather than as viewing ourselves as wealthy with the riches of Jesus and therefore secure. We covet what others have. We have limited affections because we live in a limited world. We live in a world where people and their needs are big and God is small and impotent to help. We love little because God seems little to us. He cannot be trusted to meet our needs while we engage in meeting the needs of others.

17. How does the grace of God relate to Paul longing for the Philippians with the affection of Christ Jesus?

Paul lives in the world of grace. This is a world where God is large and people are very small. He sees expressions of God's powerful mercy all around him and knows that no one can take anything from him. He cannot be reduced in any way because his resources are not his own but those of Jesus Christ. His affections are large because he is amazed at

grace. He is astounded that the God who made everything has chosen to love him by killing his very own son so that Paul is free from condemnation and guaranteed an eternal home. His affection for them is not dependent upon their love for him but upon Christ's love for him and for them. He knows that no one and nothing can take the most important thing away from him, the love of Christ (Romans 8: 35-38).

Prayer (and life) is joyful when we have God's love for his people.

18. Verse 9 is the content of Paul's prayer for the Philippians. What does he pray for them?

He asks God to cause their love to abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.

19. Love for what or whom?

Simply put, he is asking God to cause these believers to obey the two great commandments. The great commandments are: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself." He is asking that their love for God and for others would flourish.

20. What does he mean by the phrase "in knowledge"? See Romans 1: 28, Eph. 1: 17, 4:13, Col. 1:9-10.

The knowledge that Paul is praying for here is the knowledge of God and his love for us in Christ. He is not simply asking that they have some do-good sentimentality but that they love God in response to and in proportion to their knowledge of him and his love for them. He knows that our love for God and people will only flourish as we grow to know and delight in his love for us.

21. What does he mean by the phrase, "in depth of insight"? The word translated "insight" is only used here in the NT but is used 22 times in the book of Proverbs. Here are a few of those occurrences: Proverbs 1: 22, 10:14, 11:9, 12:1, 14:6, 7, 22:12, 24:3-4 (the same word is translated "knowledge" in each of these verses.)

Paul is praying that their love be full of wisdom, not foolish. He wants them to love people wisely, in accord with the way that God has made the world. It relates to being people who know the truth of God contained in his word and so have their love directed by God's word, not by human understanding or desire.

22. What will happen when the love of people for God and others is flourishing in knowledge and depth of insight (1st clause, v. 10)?

They will know what is best in every situation they encounter. Paul knows that life is complex and that people's needs are complex. So he prays for a flourishing love rooted in the knowledge of God's love for us in Christ and rooted in wisdom as revealed in God's word. He knows that is love flourishes in this way then there will be a community of people who know how to love others in the complexities of the human tragedy.

23. What will happen if people's love is flourishing in knowledge and depth of insight so that they are discerning what God wants in every situation they face? (NOTE: the "and" in the middle of v. 10 in the NIV should be translated, "in order that")

The purpose and result of living in a discerning way is to show up at the judgment seat of Christ pure, blameless and filled with the fruit of righteousness. Paul's concern isn't that they enjoy warm, loving fellowship on planet earth. Individual Christians will only make it safely to heaven if they show up at the judgment seat pure, blameless and filled with the fruit of Christ's righteousness. Individuals will only show up in this condition if they are part of community of believers flourishing in knowledgeable, wise love for God and others.

24. Why does he tack on, "that comes through Jesus Christ"?

Jesus gives his righteousness to people and his righteousness always produces fruit or results in the actual lives of those to whom he gives righteousness. The only people in heaven will be those to whom Jesus gave his righteousness and all those who were given his righteousness show they possess his righteousness by the quality of their character and conduct. (Gal. 5:22-23)

25. Finally, what is Paul's ultimate purpose in praying as he does?

His highest ambition and greatest desire is that God is glorified. He knows that when what he prays, happens, God will be glorified. His ultimate purpose for praying with joy is his joy in God. He delights in God and wants more and more people to delight in God forever. Therefore he prays this.

26. Please note, Paul is asking God to do what he says God is going to do in v. 6. We see here (again) that what John Calvin said is true, "God never promises us anything that he does not also command us to ask of him in prayer."

27. Are these the sorts of things you want for your life, the life of those you love, this church?

28. Is this what you pray for?

Prayer (and life) is joyful when we ask God to give what is best to His people

A Prayer Based on Philippians 1: 9-11:

Lord, I ask you to cause my love for you and for other people to never stop increasing. I yearn to know your love for me in such a way that it pours forth from me in love to you and to others. Grant that I might live amazed at your grace and power, confident that you always finish what you begin. Grant me the wisdom that only comes from you so that my love isn't simply pious sentimentality but real and beneficial. Lord, grant that I might know how to apply your word to the complexities of my life and the lives of others. Give me courage and compassion. Grant that I would consider the needs of others with the same intensity that I consider my own needs, that I would act to meet those needs with the same energy I work to meet my own needs. I'm asking you to do this so that I will live a life that is pure and blameless in your sight, that is filled with the fruit of Christ's life in me, so that I can stand confident and unashamed when Jesus comes again. I know Lord that I cannot live this life. Christ must produce this life in me by his Spirit. So would you pour out his Spirit on me so that I would live like this. I don't expect you to hear my prayer because I am worthy or righteous. I am asking you to do this so that your greatness, grace, and power are clearly seen in and through my life. You alone deserve the honor and the praise for every good and perfect gift comes from you alone. Amen.