

# CHURCH IMPROVEMENT: BUILDING A CHURCH THAT HONORS GOD AND LOVES PEOPLE THROUGH JOYFUL PRAYER

## Philippians 1:3-11

### INTRODUCTION

In v. 4 of our text this morning the apostle Paul says that he always prays for all of the Christians living in Philippi with joy. I wonder how many of us would say that we pray for others with joy? Most of us would not use the word joyful in describing our prayers. We would more likely say we pray “dutifully” or we pray “infrequently” or we pray with “distraction” or we pray with “confusion” but I doubt most of us would say that we pray with joy. So this morning I want us to consider from this brief paragraph at the beginning of Paul’s letter to the Philippians what makes for joyful prayer. My assumption this morning is that if our prayers are offered with joy then our praying will be more frequent and more effective.

### MAIN POINT

**Prayer is joyful when...**

#### **I. It is confident of and delighted with God’s sovereign grace (vv. 3-7)**

Paul begins in v. 3 by telling the Philippians that every time he thinks about them he praises God. 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. Granted there is a kind of thanks that is merely perfunctory and dutiful and has no joy in it. Probably some of us experienced that kind of thanksgiving during Christmas. The whole family is sitting around, watching as you open Aunt Gertrude’s gift. You open the paper and discover the most unsightly tie you’ve ever seen and you say something like, “Wow, thanks so much. That’s the most interesting tie I’ve ever seen. You are so kind to give it to me.” While your words express gratitude to Aunt Gertrude, your heart is in your shoes. That is not the kind of thanksgiving that Paul offers here. He is like the child whose parents give him a Wii video game system with his 10 favorite games. He can’t believe his eyes and spontaneously hugs his mom and dad and tells them how awesome they are to give such a cool gift. He immediately calls all his friends and tells them about his parents’ generosity. His heart is full of joy and so his lips are full of praise. That is Paul. He is full of joy over the Philippians and he thanks God for them. He tells God how great he is to do what he has done in and through the Philippians.

But notice that it isn’t simply his thanksgiving that is full of joy but also his prayer is full of joy. He joyfully gives thanks and he joyfully prays. Why is he so joyful in his praying? Both v. 5 and v. 6 begin with “because”. In other words, Paul tells us the two reasons he thanks God and prays for them with joy. First, he joyfully prays for them because of their partnership in the gospel from the first day he met them right up to the present moment. What does he mean by “their partnership in the gospel”? Acts 16 records Paul’s first meeting with the people of Philippi. When Paul and his companions come to Philippi he preaches the gospel to a small group of Jewish women. Acts records how the Lord opened the heart of one of them, a businesswoman named Lydia, so that she believed the gospel and was baptized. She then invited Paul and his companions to stay at her home. Thus from the first day of her conversion she becomes a partner with Paul in the gospel by providing him with room and board. Some time later Paul and Silas are beaten and thrown into jail. Through a series of events, the man in charge of the jail becomes a Christian. As soon as he becomes a Christian he cleans Paul and Silas’ wounds and bandages them. From the first day of his conversion he becomes a partner with Paul in the cause of Christ.

In this letter he mentions other ways they are his partners. In 1:19 he mentions that they are praying for him while he is in prison. In 1:30 he tells how they are suffering for the sake of the gospel, just like he is. In 2:25-30 he describes how they sent Epaphroditus to help Paul in the work of the gospel. Then in 4:14-19 he talks about the many financial gifts they have sent to him over the years to support him in his work of preaching the gospel. He is not exaggerating, from the very first moment that these people experienced God's grace and thus embraced Christ; they also embraced Paul and the task of proclaiming the greatness of God's salvation. So, Paul prays joyfully for these people because of their commitment to him and the task of preaching the gospel. However, why does he thank God for what they have done? He is not thanking them for their partnership but he thanks God for their partnership. Also, why does their behavior motivate him to pray for them joyfully?

If Paul had only said v. 5 and not v. 6 then we would conclude that Paul's joyful praying for them was because of their expression of care and concern for him. "I am so happy because of how you have loved me and so I will love you by praying for you. I'll do it gladly because of how kind you have been to me." But v. 6 does follow v. 5. 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. 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. 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 is not joyful because he knows what great folks the Philippians are. He is not joyful because they have been nice to him. He is joyful because he knows that what God starts, he finishes and their partnership is the evidence that God has begun the work of saving them and so he knows God will finish that work of salvation. He believes what God says in Isaiah 43:13, "When I act, who can reverse it?" And he believes Psalm 33:11, "The plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations." He looks at the way the Philippians have responded to the gospel and he sees God's hand at work. Paul knows that what Jesus said in John 15 is true. Jesus said that the world hates him and hates all those who follow him. So Paul knows that if people love Jesus and love Jesus' followers, there is only one explanation, God has taken them out of the world and given them new hearts. Paul knows that God is the cause behind the Philippians behavior and so he is full of admiration for God and joyfully asks God to finish what he has started because God always completes the work he begins.

The foundation of Paul's joy is his rock solid confidence in God's sovereign control over everything and everyone. Joyful praying can only exist where confidence and joy in God's sovereignty flourishes. Human logic says that if God is truly in control of all things, if he is going to complete what he begins then what is the point of prayer? God is going to do what he is going to do whether or not I pray. However, God's logic is that because he is in control of all things then joyful prayer is what necessarily follows. The only reason I can and will pray with joy is because God is going to do what he says he is going to do and nothing and no one can prevent his work from going forward. Paul is not blind to the presence of sin and evil. 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 sovereign grace. Paul prays joyfully for these dear friends because he knows by their behavior that God has saved them and therefore God's will is that they live like Christians to the end of their lives and so Paul confidently asks God to finish what he has started.

Parents, joyfully thank God for any evidence of grace you see in your child's life and joyfully pray that God would exercise his omnipotent power to overcome all of your child's natural hatred of God and love for sin. Ask God to begin the work of salvation through your preaching the gospel to your child and then ask God to complete that work. Each week we are given the names of others who belong to our church on the tear off portion of your program. Take them home and joyfully thank God for the work of grace in people's lives and joyfully pray for God to do more work. Be sure to join us this week here at church to joyfully pray for God's

work to go forward in our lives and in our missionaries and in our community, nation and in the world. We are going to join together this week to ask the sovereign Lord of the universe who always completes what he starts to begin and to bring to completion the work of salvation in our lives and in the lives of others.

*Prayer is joyful when...*

- *It is confident of and delighted with God's sovereign grace*
- *And when...*

## **II. It is motivated by Jesus' love for others (vv. 7-8)**

Paul begins v. 7 by declaring that his confidence that God has begun the work of salvation in them and that he will finish it is the only right way for him to feel. Paul says it would be wrong for him to draw any other conclusion about God's work in their lives than this one. But then he goes on to say that his joyful enthusiasm is not simply because they have been his partners or because he is confident of God's completing what he started. He is joyfully praying because he loves them so much. Do you see it in both vv. 7 & 8? In v. 7 he says he "has them in his heart" and in v. 8 he uses the most extreme language to declare his love for them. He longs or yearns for them with an affection that comes from Jesus and is as intense as Jesus' love for them. This affection that Paul has for them is born of the fact that they both are recipients of God's unmerited favor. 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 grace. Christ was given for their sins and they were given faith in Christ by an act of God's unmerited favor. They belong to the same family and have the same Savior and Father not because of anything they have done or decided but entirely by an act of God's free grace. 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. So his love for them is the same love that Christ has for them.

One of the greatest hindrances to joy in my life and in your life is that we don't care about what happens to others. Our affections are very narrow and restricted. We only care about what happens to us and to those who are closest to us. We are only kind to those who are kind to us or to those we want to be kind to us. 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 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. Paul, on the other hand, 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 loves them with the affection that is produced by Jesus Christ.

C.S. Lewis has an excellent description of what happens when we constrain our love out of fear of the suffering and loss that love always entails: "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to heartache, or at least to the risk of heartache, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and agitations of love is Hell."

If you want your joy to be full then your love for others must not be limited. The only way you, as a limited, finite person can have a love that is not limited by your own narrow self-interest is to be taken up into the immense love of God in Christ. Prayer is joyful when you are praying for those you love because your

happiness is bound up with their happiness and when you pray you are seeking their greatest happiness. Is there anyone you love with the love of Jesus? In other words, do you love people not because of who they are or what they have done for you (or might do for you) but in spite of who they are, because you are amazed at the love of God for you?

*Prayer is joyful when...*

- *It is confident of and delighted with God's sovereign grace*
- *It is motivated by Jesus' love for others*
- *And when...*

### **III. It asks God to do what God wants done (vv.9-11)**

In verse nine we come to Paul's actual prayer. Verses 9-11 are one long sentence. It is a complicated sentence and it is a deeply theological sentence. Prayer must be thoughtful and theological. Prayer is not simply having a wishful thought that good will come to another person. By theological I mean prayer must be formed in accord with who God is and how God works in the world. We need to remember that we are not just walking up to our buddy but we are approaching the God who made the world and everything in it, who is a consuming fire. We are not as careless in our approach to humans as we often are in our approach to God. Kids, when you really want to be able to go over to your friend's house, don't you think about how you are going to ask your mom? Don't you form your request in a manner that shows you know how she wants you to behave and that respects her? You don't talk to her like this: "Hey you, I want to go over to Joe's house and burn up this old sofa he has laying in his backyard. His parents are gone, so there won't be any adults around to give us a hard time. That wouldn't be a problem for you, would it?" When you ask your boss for a raise, you approach her in a respectful manner. You have carefully thought out what you are going to say so you can be clear about what you want and why she ought to give it to you. I'm not suggesting that you should attempt to manipulate or deceive God. However, we all know that if we are going to approach a person worthy of our respect in order to gain his favor, we must be thoughtful and we must approach him in a manner that fits with his position and desires. That's what Paul shows in how he forms this prayer.

The main request that Paul makes is in v. 9. He asks God to cause their love to abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment. The rest of this sentence contains the results that he expects if this request is granted. What is he asking God to do? Simply put, he is asking God to cause these believers to obey, to live in accord with 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 with all your mind. 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. He is asking God to give them affection in their hearts for God and men that would result in actions that express that love. But what does it mean to ask that their love would abound "with knowledge and all discernment"? The knowledge Paul is referring to is the knowledge of God and his love for sinners in Christ. Paul knows that the fountain of our love for God and for others is a growing knowledge of and delight in God's love for us. Paul knows that the quality of our love is determined by how well we know and rejoice in the love of God for us in Christ. But then Paul also knows that this love must not be some kind of syrupy sentimentalism. It must be a love that understands how God loves us in Christ. It is a love instructed by doctrine and in touch with the realities of life in this world. It must seek to meet the needs of real people in real situations. So he wants their love to flourish with a wisdom that understands God's love and the conditions in which we must love others. Love cannot be gullible and naïve. It must deal with the reality that those whom we love are sinners and therefore not everything they want is what they need. It must deal with the reality of suffering and recognize that while we must always resist evil and help those who suffer that the goal is not a pain free life on planet earth.

This love that is founded upon God's love for us and is wise in its understanding of God's love and people and life will then produce people who know how to figure out what to do in every situation. The phrase, "approve

what is excellent”, means that we will be people who know how to apply God’s word to a variety of situations. When love flourishes in the knowledge of God and with the wisdom of God then we become people who can see and approve God’s will in the complexities of the human dilemma. God’s word becomes a rich source of help and wisdom to be applied to our lives and the lives of others. We become people who know how to love God and love people in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. We live like Christians in every kind of circumstance and we know how to help others live like Christians in every kind of situation.

Quite a few years ago our son Justin and his best friend Noah were not getting along. It was summer and they were spending every day together playing basketball and swimming at the pool. Jane and I were friends of Noah’s parents and we all were noticing and feeling the effects of the growing conflict between our two boys. I don’t remember whose idea it was but we arranged a meeting of both sets of parents and the two boys. We were able to sit down and discuss how the boys were feeling and to then go to God’s word together and talk about the source of the conflict and how to handle it. What could have led to the destruction of our friendship was used by God to strengthen our friendship. We could have become defensive and have blamed each other for the problems our children were having. But, God graciously caused us to love him and one another and then to turn to his word for help on how to love one another, how to deal with the problem we were facing. This is what Paul is praying.

Paul is asking God to create a community of people who are not paralyzed by fear or immobilized by a narrow, self-centered lifestyle. He is praying for people who pour themselves out in risk taking love for God and for others. People who know how to be loving people in whatever suffering comes to them and who seek to help others become loving people in all sorts of circumstances. People who are not sitting around waiting for someone to love them but who are actively looking for ways to bring the love of God to others. If your happiness depends upon whether or not others love you the way you want them to, you will never be happy. But if your happiness depends upon your loving God and others, then joy is just around the corner.

Look at the final link in the chain of cause and effect that he prays. Verse 10 says, “and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.” Notice Paul wants them to be a loving community but he doesn’t want this simply so that they may have a nice life on planet earth. He is praying this so that they will make it safely to heaven. He wants them to abound in a wise love that is based upon a knowledge of God’s love so that they will live pure and blameless lives right up to the return of Christ and so be able to stand safe and secure in the great Day of Judgment. “Filled with the fruit of righteousness” is parallel to “pure and blameless”. A pure and blameless life is the fruit, the effect of being made righteous in God’s sight by Jesus. Jesus Christ gives us his righteousness as a gift and this produces a life that exhibits certain characteristics or fruit. Please do not miss this; this entire life is the result of being made right with God through Jesus. No one ever lived a risk-taking life of wise love that resulted in being pure and blameless, which is the fruit that comes from righteousness, by their own power. It is all a gift. Paul knows that the only people in heaven are those who have been saved by the work of Christ; people who are trusting in Christ alone, not in themselves (see 3:7-9). These people have been given right standing with God, that is, righteousness, on the basis of Christ and his work. But he also knows that everyone who has been given Christ’s righteousness is fighting to live this kind of life. So he prays, joyfully, that God will make people into these kinds of people so that they will make it safely to heaven.

What Paul is praying is that God would do what he said in v. 6 that God does do. He prays that God will complete the work he began. He is asking God to continue to fill these people with the knowledge of his great love so that they wisely love God and others by applying God’s word to the conditions of life. He is asking God to continue to produce the fruit of a pure and blameless life that comes from being made righteous in and through Jesus. Paul’s chief concern for people is their eternal well-being, not their comfort while they live on planet earth because this is God’s chief concern. So his prayers reflect this concern. He knows that what people really need is not to be cured of their illnesses or rescued from financial disaster. What people really need is to be full of wise love that produces blameless lives so that they will make it safely to heaven. That is what he joyfully prays. Is this what you and I pray? Do our prayers sound like Paul’s prayer? I think for most of us our prayers are not joyful because we are not praying the way that Paul prays nor are we praying for the

things that Paul prays. May the Lord himself cause our love to abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment so that we will approve what is excellent and so pray with joy.

*Prayer is joyful when...*

- *It is confident of and delighted with God's sovereign grace*
- *It is motivated by Jesus' love for others*
- *It asks God to do what God wants done*

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