

## **A PRAYER FOR A FAVORITE CONGREGATION**

Philippians 1:3-11

**The congregation in Philippi was Paul's favorite.** He wrote to them and said, "*I thank God every time I think of you...*" He said he prayed with joy for them in every prayer. Paul founded the Philippian church after a remarkable vision while in Troas. Philippi is in northern Greece and Troas is on the western tip of Turkey. Paul was in Troas on a missionary journey. During the night he had a vision. A man from Macedonia (northern Greece) stood before him and pleaded, "*Come over to Macedonia and help us.*" Paul did. He was convinced God was calling him to evangelize in Europe. Philippi became the base of operations of Paul, Silas, and Luke. They lived there for some time.

**Remarkable things occurred while they were in Philippi.** A rich business woman named **Lydia** converted to Christianity under their influence. She was a seller of coveted purple cloth and eagerly used her income to support their mission. A **slave girl** regularly told fortunes in the market place. She made her owner wealthy by plying her trade. She followed Paul and Silas day-after-day and called out to others about their presence. Paul recognized she was possessed by demonic forces and performed an exorcism on her. The result was she no longer told fortunes. Her owner was irate and had Paul and Silas thrown in jail. While they were in jail, an earthquake occurred. The door to their cell flew open. They could have easily escaped, but chose not to, lest the **jailer** suffer because of it. He was so moved by their selflessness, that he asked about their faith. That resulted in him and his household choosing to be baptized. They were welcomed into the Philippian church.

**The Philippians were very hospitable to Paul and the others.** They continued to send gifts to support Paul's mission, even after Paul had moved on. No wonder Paul loved them and continued to joyfully pray for them.

**We have a letter Paul wrote to his favorites.** It's really an **extended thank you note.** He was likely imprisoned in Ephesus when he wrote it. Hearing of his plight, his readers, the Philippians, gathered a substantial sum of money and sent one of their members to make the long, dangerous journey to deliver it to him. When people were imprisoned in Paul's day, they received no food or help from their captors. They had to rely on family and friends for basic necessities. The fact that the Philippians gave generously and risked danger for him reveals the depth of their love of Paul. He writes to express his deep gratitude and love of them. In verse 7 of our text Paul says, *"It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart..."* In the original Greek that verse could also be translated as *"because I hold you in my heart..."* That's apropos because it works both ways.

**Paul tells them that he prays for them with joy and he tells them what his prayer is.** It is Paul's prayer for the Philippians, but it could be Paul's prayer for Landrum Presbyterians too. It has three parts which could be petitions for any congregation and any individual Christian. Listen carefully to Paul's prayer for you and make it your prayer for yourself and Landrum Presbyterian Church.

***"This is my prayer,"*** Paul writes, ***"that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and wisdom."***

Love overflowing with knowledge and wisdom is not how we usually think of love. We normally think of love as overflowing with compassion and generosity or with affection and attention. Love overflowing with knowledge and wisdom is an interesting thought.

**Poet J.D. Freeman caught the essence of it in a poem:**

I sat down to write,  
and I asked myself,  
“What shall I write?”  
My heart said,  
“Write about love.”  
But my mind said,  
“Write about wisdom.”  
My heart did not argue with  
my mind,  
It merely embraced my mind  
with love.  
Then after a while  
my mind spoke again and  
said, “Love is wisdom.”

**The poem captures Paul’s idea of love overflowing into wisdom** and of wisdom working back into love. Robert Fulghum put it in another memorable form. “Wisdom,” he writes, “was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but it was in the sandbox in Sunday School. In that sandbox I learned simple rules for loving neighbors.”

“Share everything.  
Play fair.  
Don’t hit people.  
Say you are sorry when you hurt someone.  
Don’t take things that aren’t yours.  
Hold hands and stick together.”

Think what better, more faithful churches congregations could be (not to mention communities and nations) if we put the loving wisdom of the Sunday sandbox into usual practice. Jesus' call to love overflows into wisdom that blesses one and all. Paul prays that it be so for us.

Paul continues, ***“This is my prayer... to help you determine what is best, so in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless.”*** He prays that wise love will result in moral discernment. The Philippians lived in a world, like ours, where several moral issues were blurred or distorted. It was hard to discern the right thing to do. Paul wants them to grow in the ability to tell the difference between right and wrong, even when they appear as shades of gray.

**Here we are 21 centuries later and it is still a world of shades of gray.** We face many deep moral dilemmas. Should abortion be available on demand? What is an unacceptable sexual lifestyle? What is the purpose of marriage? Can a Christian go to war? Is capital punishment ethical? Is euthanasia permissible? How free are we to manipulate genetic codes? Which positions on these issues would most honor God and bless neighbors over the long term? These are the sort of things Paul prays about for us. He prays for our ability to make ethical judgments through moral discernment. He prays for our ability to comprehend God's will and live in God's way.

**We are wise to know that our culture approaches these questions in a manner different than that of Christianity.** The culture changes its attitudes and approaches over time, from generation to generation. Contemporary thinking says whatever promotes what I

perceive as life-enhancing is good. Whatever I perceive as life-diminishing or contrary to what I think will contribute to my well-being is bad. Right and wrong are based on the fulfillment of individual desires. It is assumed that personal freedom is the best path and solution to happiness, and this freedom has a redemptive quality to it. Our culture tells us this is what makes us happy and decent human beings. The Christian approach focuses on God and neighbor, while our culture's approach focuses on self. They tend to produce differing judgments.

**Christian faith says there are intrinsic criteria for right and wrong designed into the created order.** These criteria exist by the nature of things. They go beyond an individual and even an aggregate of individuals in a community. We answer to a higher authority. Our ethics and moral principles are to reflect the character of our Creator. Christianity says this is our life purpose – to reflect our Creator. Personal happiness is a by-product of being godly.

**There are some moral issues about which all of us, Christian and non-Christian agree.** For example it is wrong to steal or kill. Yet, we have different methods and criteria for determining right from wrong. Paul prays that we'll have the ability to make moral discernments on the bevy of ethical dilemmas we face and the moral courage to think and act as Christ's disciples.

**Therefore, Paul's prayer is also that we'll have the mind of Christ.** In the first verse of our text Paul writes to the people "*in Christ Jesus.*" In the last verse he notes that they'll see results "*through Jesus Christ.*" Paul prays that we'll be people who live in and through Jesus Christ. Our

union with Christ through the Holy Spirit is the source of moral discernment. It gives us the mind of Christ.

**In John 1:9 we read: “*The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*”** It means what we call “the incarnation” of God in Jesus. It means that Jesus reveals to us the will and way of God. He is our source of moral discernment. The greater our ability to think and live like Jesus, the greater our moral discernment.

**David Brainerd, a 17<sup>th</sup> century missionary among Native Americans, wrote this in his journal:**

I never got away from Jesus and him crucified; and I found that when my people were gripped by this, I had no need to give them instruction about morality. I found that one followed as sure and inevitable first of the other.

**Our moral issues are often profoundly complex.** People of good will debate them without unanimity and satisfactory outcomes. Christian moral discernment comes in and through Jesus Christ. This is the basis of Paul’s prayer.

**Finally, Paul prays that our moral discernment would produce “*the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.*”**

Paul prays we will be righteous people. We sometimes misunderstand righteousness as strict observance of the rules. It includes obedience but righteous is better understood as relationships based on justice and love. Remember that both Jesus and Paul taught that fulfillment of the Law comes through love of God and love of neighbor.

Love of God is demonstrated by worship; love of others is demonstrated by seeking their best in all circumstances. Righteousness is right relationships with God and others. It is insisting on care and fairness for one and all. It is doing unto others as we would have them do to and for us. Righteousness is love in its most basic form.

**A few years ago I had a conversation with a nurse who works in pediatric ICU in Methodist Hospital in Dallas, Texas.** Our conversation fits Paul's prayer for our moral discernment and righteousness or right relationships. She spoke of the heartbreaking situations they face with desperately ill children. She said it is gut-wrenching to decide which children will receive continued care and which will not. Demands exceed resources and costs exceed most everyone's ability to pay. So their medical ethics team, of which she's a part, must make hard choices to care for some and not for others.

**I asked how they make such determinations.** She said they consider things like health viability and potential quality of life. "How do you determine quality of life?" I asked. She said it is mostly the child's potential to grow up and achieve. The more likely they are to walk, talk, hear, learn, grow, and achieve, the more likely they receive continued care. "So you measure quality of life by by ability to flourish and achieve." She agreed. I asked if they ever consider the ability to love and be loved. She paused and wistfully said, "No." I quietly noted that she is a Christian and works in a Methodist hospital. And I wondered, when we Christians measure quality of life, should not the capacity to love and be loved be part of the equation?

**Paul prays we'll be righteous, rightly related to God and others.** This is how love overflows with wisdom into moral discernment. He prays this way for us, “*so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless.*” He means that in the end when we are judged, our judgment will be based on the quality of our lives. That quality won't be measured by our ability to walk, talk, or think. It won't be measured by how many degrees we've earned, rewards we've received, books we've written, championships we've won, or businesses we've founded. We will be judged on our righteousness. A quality life is one that brings God praise and glory and brings others love. That is righteousness. For that Paul prays for us.

**Occasionally someone offers that he/she is praying for us.** It is usually encouraging when it happens. The last time I vacationed in Pennsylvania, I played golf with my old friend, Jim McCormack. Over lunch, Jim told me he prays for me every Wednesday. On Wednesdays as he prays, Jim pictures a map of the U.S. and moves from state to state in his imagination. He thinks of friends in each state and prays for them weekly. When he gets to NC, he prays for me. It is a joy to know that every Wednesday my friend Jim asks God's blessing for me.

**Paul prayed for his friends in Philippi.** We know enough of Paul to know that whatever he prayed for them he prays for us. It is Paul's prayer that we'll be righteous people who love God and others. He prays that our love will overflow in wisdom, which will result in righteous that displays and engenders love. Make it your prayer for our congregation. Make it your prayer for yourself.

Sources:

- Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone, The Prison Letters*, SPCK.