

Characterized by Love

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Bible Verse: Philippians 1:9-11

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Our Old Testament reading this morning is from Psalms 37:3-7. If you have a bible with you, please turn there, otherwise you can find it in the bulletin. That's Psalms 37:3-7. Listen now to the word of God. "Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness. ⁴Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. ⁵Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act. ⁶He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday. ⁷Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices!"

And then, moving to our New Testament reading, which is also our sermon text for this morning. Philippians 1:9-11. "And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."

Let's pray. *Almighty God, our heavenly Father, as we read in the Psalms would You teach us, o Lord, the ways of Your statutes. Would you give us, this morning, understanding that we may keep Your law and observe it with our whole hearts. Would You lead us in the paths of your commandments to love You with all of our being and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Would You strengthen us this morning in grace. Would you open the eyes of our hearts to see more of Christ. And, presence Yourself with us as we sit under Your holy word. In Christ's name we pray, amen.*

I'd like to remind us of where we find ourselves in Philippians 1:9-11, is actually the continuation of a prayer that Paul begins in verse 3. It's a prayer that stretches from verse 3 through to the end of verse 11. And his single prayer in fact, has two aspects to it. He begins in 3-8 with a prayer of thanksgiving. And he prays and thanks God for these Philippians, for their partnership in the gospel, and for the reality that He who has done a work through them into the nations is also doing a work in them and their salvation. And then in verse 9, our text this morning, there is a transition from thanksgiving to petition. Paul appeals to God in his prayer. He prays to God for one thing. That the love of these believers would abound; that their love would increase more and more and more. And so that this church would be characterized by love.

This morning, we're going to consider two central points. Two points that arise from the text; I'm not going to force it into three sermon points as is typical in preaching. But we have two main points this morning before us. The first is the kind of love that Paul has in mind; what is the kind of love that he's referring to here. And the second is the fruit that this love produces in the lives of believers. In other words, Paul is concerned with one main thing and this one main thing produces a harvest. And it's in this sense that we might say there's a kind of cause and effect relation going on here in our text this morning, as when we say that physical training makes one stronger. Or if you hit a ball harder, it's going to go farther. And so, in scripture, we see that a heart that is propelled by love will, in the end, produce a fruit of righteousness. As Paul says to the Galatians in chapter 5: "faith, working through love is fruitful", it results in good deeds, in good character.

And so, like Paul, we are going to focus on the main thing, which is being characterized by love, which will result in being filled with a fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ. A love that abounds: our first point. If the love of the Philippians is to increase then what we find is that this love is necessarily quantifiable. It's able to be measured. The love that Paul is referring to is not abstract; it's not some kind of fuzzy feeling that's devoid of any kind of content. It's not some generation notion of 'love', as we hear in the culture today. Paul has a particular kind of love in mind. A kind that these believers, in fact, already possess. And this love is concrete, it is substantial. And it's interesting to note that as Paul addresses his prayer to God for the Philippians in our letter before us, there is a differing manner in which Paul speaks of love to how Christ refers to the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2, where Christ talks about the Ephesians having abandoned the love that they had at first.

Instead here, in our letter, we see that Paul is praying for the Philippians that their love would increase. That it would grow, little by little, being realized day by day. Whether at home or at work, whether in the playground or in the grocery store, whether in your private life or else in public. If we pause, for just a moment, and we consider this love, we see that Paul doesn't specify the object of the love that he has in mind. And at first, this may in fact appear a little puzzling. What is this love? What kind of love is it? And does the bible inform us, in terms of the breadth of scripture, to help us understand to what Paul is referring to. What is the object or the end of this love? You see, by definition, love has an object. Love is not some gaseous vapor that kind of wafts into a room. When we love, we love *someone*, we love *something*. Now, the nature of love, in fact, is common to each and everyone one of us in the room. We might love differing things, we might love the same thing to differing degrees, but what's common to us is something that's germane to love.

One might love thin crust pizza a little more than deep dish, and that may be a sin in Chicago, as I hear. I love my wife, Cathy Barson, I love her as my wife, whereas her good friend loves her as a best friend. We see differing measures of love or differing loves entirely. But at the core of love, when we speak of love, is something common to each and everyone one of us. Something that we all have in the act of loving something, or in loving someone. You see, it's Augustin that said the proper object of love is the good. See, when we love someone or we love something, we are drawn towards them because we first saw them to be good. They were favorable in our minds. We were moved towards them, drawn towards them, as in the love of friendship. And in this act of love, our minds and our wills, both of them, are in play. We first view something to be good with our minds and then we, in desiring that, will to move towards the thing that we love. And this is why love is

an incredibly powerful act. You see, what love does is it unifies, it binds us with that which we love. Two persons, or two things, are bound together as when a husband and wife are united in love or when a mother's love for her newborn baby as she is drawn, in love, to her new son.

And it's for this reason that you and I need to be incredibly careful with what we love; what we deem to be good. Because what we love is not necessarily good in accordance with God's law. We need to be careful what we set our affections on, because by nature our hearts are like magnets for that which we see to be good. We desire that. And so that in the act of love, we are moved towards whatever we think is good; what we have set our hearts upon, and in that act, a union of sorts takes place. For example, when we have a look at the life of king Solomon; a king of Israel, a wise king of Israel, we see the nature of love at work. You see, kings of Israel were not to have multiple wives and this law was not just some kind of cold, arbitrary commandment that was true of the kings, but rather, the commandment, in fact, was reflective of the nature and principle of love. And that's something helpful for us to grasp when we consider the commandments of God which in these days are viewed to be oppressive; antiquated. We need to understand the nature of love when we consider the commandments of God. When Solomon married women from pagan nations, hundreds of them, his heart was turned away from the living God. His heart was turned towards the idols that they served. And so, his life began to become conformed, in an increasing manner, to the teachings of these new gods. Why? Because a kind of union had taken place. His heart now desired and knew good. This is exactly what scripture teaches, throughout the pages of scripture, and it's this: that we become like that which we worship. We become conformed, more and more, of that which gives us our greatest sense of value, security, worth, and identity. What is it that gives you your ultimate sense of identity and worth? You will become more and more like it. Whether it's money, whether it's relationship, or whether it's God.

See, this is the very nature of love. Every person, made by God, has been made to be a lover. We love from the heart; we can't help it. It's what we are. We are inclined unto the good. And so, God has made us with that direction, with that affection, to find satisfaction; the greatest satisfaction of our soul, in He who is the highest and chief good, which is God Himself. Nothing, in all the world, can satisfy the depths of our hearts, quite like Him, who is perfect goodness itself. God. See, what's become obvious this morning to us in considering the nature of love is that love, by definition, has an object. So, we might ask, what is the object? As we circle back to Philippians 1:9, what is the object that Paul has in mind within his prayer? And it's simply this: that we are to increase in our love for God and our love for our neighbor. This is exactly what Jesus speaks about in Matthew 22 when he sums up the revealed will of God for man. And Jesus says this, he says ³⁷ "And he said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.'" What Jesus is talking about here is the moral law of God. It is how mankind is to live within God's created world. A world that is to be characterized by life--by love. This is how all of humanity is to live. We are to live lives of love. We are to be characterized by love. We are to love Him who is perfect goodness Himself. And we are to love those who have been made in the image of God.

See, Paul tells us that love is the fulfilling of the law. It's the prescribed way of living life in this world. It is the ethic by which we are to do all things before the face of God. In Galatians 5, Paul says the following ¹⁴ "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as

yourself.” Now, loving your neighbors as yourself is not the means unto salvation; it is not the way unto salvation, as if we were to make God a debtor in virtue of what we have done thus God needs to give us something in return. Rather, loving one’s neighbor is the way of live for those who have been saved by the perfect obedience of Christ on our behalf. It’s the way in which believers are called to live life, live out their faith in the here and now. And so, it’s to this end that Paul prays, to God, that the love of these Philippian Christians in the here and now, that love that they already have, a love for God and their neighbor, would increase more and more. It would be felt in tangible ways; it’s measurable. And this love is to grow in knowledge and all discernment. It’s to be informed by the word of God. You see, to be filled with the knowledge of God and His will results in walking that is a manner worthy of God, which involves loving God with your all and loving your neighbor as yourselves. Actions that actually attest to God being at work in your life.

And so, having had a look at the kind of look that Paul has in mind: a love for God with our all and a love for neighbor as ourself, let’s now have a look at the fruit that this particular love produces: our second point. We don’t need to wait long at all actually in our text this morning to see why it is that Paul prays like he does. He tells us immediately that such love will enable us to approve what is excellent, and in so doing, be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Christ. There it is. As one commentator says, “a growing love, fed by proper knowledge and moral insight, enables one to see the best way to live in the light of the day of Christ.” You see, this kind of love produces fruit in your life which, in turn, it doesn’t simply benefit yourself but those around you. This love impacts the motivation for your life, of how you think, your ability how to discern between various things. This love impacts how you act and go about your life. And Paul says that the immediate fruit of such love is an approval process, such that we are able to approve what is best, what is most excellent. Distinguishing, not so much that which is good and, on the other hand, that which is bad. Though that certainly would be included. But that believers are able to make a determination between that which is better and that which is best.

You see, in the Greek, the Greek original, the word that is used for approve is typically refers to the testing of metals and the testing of money. It speaks about distinguishing the quality and purity of gold, for example. Whether the gold you have is 18 or 20 or 24 karat gold. Or whether the silver you might have in your hand is sterling silver or that which you might find in your wallet, coin silver, which really is an alloy of copper and silver. And the testing of the two metals, what that does, is enables us to determine which metals is better than the other. Which one is the best? Which is the most superior. This is what Paul has in mind; he wants you and I to distinguish not simply between what is good and what is bad, between kindness and hatred, between humility and pride. But between that which is very good and that which is best. See, in the scriptures we don’t find an exhaustive list of what we are to do in every circumstance in life. Life is not so neat and tidy. It’s not so simple. And neither is Christianity a set of laws to adhere to, a set of imperatives to live by, a list of simple directives: at every turn, do this, do that. In this instance, go here. The scriptures are not like that. But every day, you and I are faced with choices. We’re faced with choices, some are big, others are small, and many of them are in fact, not black and white. Life is far more nuanced than that. We make decisions on a daily basis about our children, about work, about relationships, about vocations, about neighbors, about school, what we’re to do with our money, how we’re to prioritize our time, how we’re to steward our bodies with rest, with exercise, with

food, what we are to think about. And on and on we could list the various things on a daily basis that we think about and what we are to decide.

What Paul has in mind here is how do we decide between what is permissible and what is, in fact, beneficial. Between what is second best and what is best. Determining that which is most excellent. Paul shows us that there is a direct link between a love that increases for God and our neighbor with the ability to approve what is best. He says, “it’s my prayer that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment so that” and it’s an indication of a purpose clause, “so that you may approve what is excellent.” And so, just like king Solomon, how we live our lives is reflected of what we in fact approve. That which we deem to be most excellent in the moment. And our day to day lives are filled with lots and lots of little decisions which in the end because ultimately determinative of how we make the big decisions of our life; who we will marry, what the focus of our life will be, how we view God, the church, the gospel, our vocations, our parentings, and on and on. Friends, you know that nobody’s heart, who loves Christ, no one’s heart grows cold overnight. No one commits adultery on first impulse. No one settles for mediocrity without lots of seemingly insignificantly determinative choices. But this doesn’t need to be the case. When we meditate upon God’s word and we kneel at the foot of the cross we see the love of God for us in Christ, our hearts will be warmed, our minds enlivened, our passions stirred, the spirit of God at work within our souls, and we will be changed. Our love for God and for our neighbor increasing steadily, increasing more and more.

Paul is showing us that in approving what is best, which is determined in light of who Christ is, we will be pure and blameless for the day of Christ. He wants us to live his very day, he wants us to live this life, this very day in the light of that great day when Christ returns. That day when he will judge the living and the dead. That day to which all history points and to which all history courses. You see, when something is pure, as Paul writes here, it’s said to be unmixed, unadulterated, with any other substance or material, as we find in the Oxford dictionary. There’s an absence of an alloy and impurities have been extracted. And in the scriptures, we see that purity, time and again, the language of purity, has to do with our hearts. Jesus says “blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.” See, Paul’s train of thought in these three verses before us is building towards something, and that building is simply this: an increasing love for Christ, fed by knowledge and all discernment, enables believers, such as you and I, to approve what is best, and so being made pure in heart, bearing the fruit of righteousness, made ready for the day of Christ’s return.

Love fulfills the law and produces righteousness. It’s what this love does. In other words, if love was a tree the fruit of that tree would be righteousness. It’s what love produces. Righteous deeds and thoughts are motivated by a love for God and a love for neighbor; for those around us. I want us to listen closely to Paul’s words as we read in 1 Corinthians 13, he speaks to us about the nature of love, he says: “⁴Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸Love never ends.” Friends, when we listen to those words, each and every one of us, are humbled. We are humbled by these words; we realize that no one can do this without the help of God; not one of us. At the very center of the word sin is “I”. It’s what sin epitomizes. The epitome of sin is *me*. It is I who is defensive, self-centered, and judgmental. It’s I

who am grouchy, contentious, and irritable. It's I who's envious, racist, doubtful, and unbelieving. See, when love turns inward and becomes self-consumed, love turns into something totally different. It becomes dark and parasitic. Sin is the very opposite of love. See, the seeds of sin lie dormant in your heart and my heart, ready to germinate, and its into this that Paul prays: may your love abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment.

Friends, there's hope in Christ. There's hope for our hearts, for our actions, for our loves. And we need to look to the cross, for it's at the cross that man is reconciled to God in love. It's at the cross that man's will is turned outward from being inward onto himself is now outward in love unto God and unto those around him. There's a remarkable little text in 1 John 4, where John very simply says the follow: "19 We love because he first loved us." In other words, we love God because God first loved us. And God calls us to discern what is best on the basis of a higher love. A love for Christ and for His cross, a love for God that deepens and increases in relation to growing in knowledge of Him, of wanting to know Christ and the power of His resurrection. That's Paul's cry, that's what's seeping through the pages of Philipians, Paul's desire is to know Christ and the power of His resurrection such that he says "for me to live is Christ and for me to die is to gain Christ." Paul is enrapt in a great love, filled with knowledge and discernment, of who his savior is.

As we consider this love, let's be reminded that we can only do it because of God. We look to the cross; we see the two posts of the cross. The vertical beam and horizontal beam. The vertical post is love unto God as that is we have been reconciled by way of the cross unto God, through Christ and His blood alone, such that we who only loved what was good for us now love Him. Exhorted to love him with all of our hearts, our minds, our soul, our strength. And in the light of being reconciled to Him, we may be reconciled to one another, akin to the horizontal bar of the cross. That with the love of God for him, we may now love those around us with the love of Christ. What we find in this is that both the command to love and the ability to love like that come from Christ. Alas, pray like Paul that our love may increase more and more with knowledge and with discernment, that we would have the fruit of love, which is righteousness, being a church here in Wheaton, Illinois, Chicagoland area, that is characterized by love in all that we do and all that we say.

Let's pray. *Almighty God, our heavenly Father, we echo the words of Paul this morning, and we pray that we would be characterized by love, filled with a fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ. To the glory and praise of God, amen.*