

Gospel Relationships

Philippians 1:3-11

Family Enrichment: Parenting for Relationships

January 6, 2013

Introduction

The month of January has traditionally been used to highlight and focus on “family issues” from the pulpit. This then culminates in the annual “Family Enrichment Conference/Retreat.” This year’s guest is Stuart Scott, Associate Professor of Biblical Counseling at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, speaking on “Parenting on Purpose.” The evening series this year is entitled “Parenting for Relationships.” Each of the evening messages will focus on an aspect of relational living derived from Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Now, even though the direction of the series is oriented toward the work of *parental* instruction and modeling of Scripturally informed relationships, the content will be easily generalizable to all, whatever your particular circumstances may be.

Circumstances

In fact, our circumstances create the context of our existence. These affect to a great degree our understanding and response to whatever occurs around us. We experience “reality” as we interact with input or stimulus that is “out there.” We process that information internally as we receive, reflect and react to it. A significant component to this context is that it involves engagement with things and especially people other than ourselves. Indeed, we recognize as problematic those individuals who struggle with relating to other people. Some seem to be either “locked” within their own consciousness and some seem so self-absorbed that others have no true meaning to them. A context of relationship is how God himself exists (here you should be hearing ideas of both trinity and creation), and how He has created us to be. God placed man in a three dimensional context of sensory glory in the garden. Mankind lived in this intimate setting to have relationship with God, his own “male-and-femaleness” and the world around him. Relationship is an actual “component” to what it means to be human from a Biblical perspective. This is brought to an even clearer expression in the New Testament when we read texts that bring living and social relationships into focus. These then are to be experienced as a consequence of our position “in Him” or “in Christ.” Paul even uses the metaphor of citizenship in his correspondence to the Christians living in the city of Philippi to highlight and reinforce this relational concept.

Citizenship

The church in the city of Philippi was founded during Paul's visit to Macedonia in the account we can read in Acts chapter 16. Luke reports on the trip with this remark seen in verses 11 and 12: "So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony." We know from other historical sources that the residents of this city had a special place in the region, having been restructured as a result of Roman conquest and occupation. They were regarded as true citizens of the Roman republic, now empire. This was a status not to be scorned as it afforded one the recourse and security in an otherwise unstable world. It is important to notice Paul's reference to this fact in his letter to the Philippians. In verse 27 of chapter 1, we find Paul's rhetorical thesis statement translated in the ESV as: "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ." The phrase "manner of life" seen here is different from the usual phrase we see translated with the same words. It has the same "meaning" but has a different flavor that is lost when expressed this way in English. The other phrase involves the idea of walking, as if living is a walk in time and space. The word Paul is using here is that of "citizenship." But here, Paul's use of "citizenship" in 1:27 affects how he expects the expression of the gospel to be understood.

Citizenship is indeed a relational term. Later in the letter in chapter 3, verse 20 he tells them their true citizenship is heaven using a related term (right after a "walk-as-living" term in verse 17). As one commentator has said "Against the colonial preoccupation with the coveted citizenship of Rome, Paul interposes a counter citizenship whose capital and seat of power are not earthly but heavenly, whose guarantor is not Nero but Christ. Philippi may be a colony enjoying the imperial patronage of Lord Caesar, but the church at Philippi is a personal colony of Christ the Lord above all." Another says, "Paul then is appealing to the kind of sense of belonging that can be called citizenship." Some want to restrict this idea to the idea that Paul is challenging them to live their Roman citizenship in a manner that can be seen as a gospel-kind of living. And while this is true, others and myself see this as a broader metaphor for what living involves. It involves allegiance, work, consideration, commitment to something (the state) and someone (fellow citizens) outside of themselves.

When we go back to verses 3 through 11, we see this concept being introduced to us in this section. This unit, from the perspective of first century Greco-Roman letter writing is the thanksgiving/prayer/health wish. Paul uses this convention as a rhetorical "exordium" where one gains rapport and introduces themes to be elaborated fuller in the body of the letter/discourse. As we unpack these verses this evening we will do so with the view of identifying the relational impact Paul intends to have result from the remainder of the letter.

Children

With respect to children, it is important for them to learn models for living early in their lives. Many of our children's attitudes toward relationship are established before they enter their teens. This reinforces the idea that we need to develop the appropriate skills and attitudes early especially when we are entering something new. When you are experiencing a new job or skill, taking on a new hobby or interest, it is extremely important to start with the proper direction rather than learning bad or inadequate habits that will detract from your ability to advance in this area. All of us enter the Christian life as "newborns", entering a new "creation" and direction. So in essence what is true for natural children is also true for us as spiritual children. Children of all ages need hearts that are cultivated, given both direction and modeling, a concept Paul also uses in the letter to the Philippians in chapter 3 and verse 17.

Let us then approach the text this evening, Philippians 1:3-11, with this desire; that we see more clearly God's design for relationships as citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

Partnership (vs 3-5)

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

From the very outset in this first sentence in the ESV (a clause of the full sentence that runs to verse 8 in the original), we see several relational terms presented.

Memory

The apostle Paul tells the Philippians he is thankful for them when he remembers them. Memories of his time in the city; in his hearing of reports and sending them encouragement while away, brings a joyful sense of thanksgiving. But there is a subtle ambiguity in the structure of the phrase may be intentional. It could also be translated "I give thanks to God for your every remembrance of me." Their gifts to him, tokens of their remembrance, and his prayers for them as the equivalent, are important aspects of relationship. Neither Paul nor the Philippians have a view of the other as something that happened in the past that is gone and to be merely used as instruction or mere "experience." Their relationship stays intact and important as they hold and foster this memory.

Prayer

This memory however is connected to another relational concept. He prays for all of them. His prayers have a personal note to them. He does not merely pray “about” them, but actually for them. And the emphasis here is in the plural. It is not just collectively that he thinks of them (although that is true) it is as individuals in that collection that he joyfully lifts up to the Father in prayer.

Partnership

And lastly, Paul’s joyful prayer is because he and the Philippian believers indeed are in a real and vital partnership after all. The word behind “partnership” is well known in Christian circles as it is used to express a Biblical idea of relationship. It is the term “*koinonia*.” This word “connotes a variety of close relationships involving mutual interests and sharing. Marriage and family relationships, friendships, business partnerships, common ownership of property, citizenship, and religious organizations were all considered examples of *koinonia* in Paul’s day. Paul’s six references to this word in this letter (1:5,7; 2:1; 3:10; 4:14,15) draw from these various nuances of *koinonia* and to contribute to the development of [this concept].”

But he also grounds this relational perspective to a concrete intention. Paul is clear to state the partnership is involved with, engaged in, and has its meaning in terms of “the gospel.” His vital relational concerns are focused and purposeful. The idea of their partnership involves both their acceptance and belief in the message of the gospel and their activity in its propagation. They were committed believers in the face of stiff opposition and persecution as well as faithful in their personal proclamation and support of Paul’s travels. For Paul, the gospel is the overarching context for God’s working. It is in the power of the Gospel that God is creating worshippers because of redemptive work of the Son, who then in turn, bring and build glory for his sacrifice and love.

And still this intentioned relationship is noteworthy because it brings a true and growing joy. Gospel relationships should include an emotive content. The change wrought in our lives because of the gospel involves the entire “heart.” It engages the entire man, his intellect, emotion and will. Acceptance and participation in the gospel is not mere formality.

This first clause is loaded with impact for viewing what he will later elaborate on in detail. The Philippians and all subsequent readers are confronted with vision of relationship that is grounded in the work of God in the gospel that brings unity, joy and purpose and we haven’t even finished the first sentence!

Partakers (vs 6-8)

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. 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. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Confidence

Moving on in the text, Paul continues this idea of relationship further demonstrating that it involves a participation in something bigger than ourselves. Paul is still emphasizing the relationship perspective here, now with the term “partakers” that we seen in verse 7. He is confident in the cohesiveness, the tightness of the partnership because inherent to the idea of this “partnership in gospel” is a view that functions from the perspective of the “whole”.

Paul says that he is “sure of this.” He has a sureness based on God’s work in us. We act because he is acting. We become and express what we are. We all have been let down by our human weakness. Our own inability or the inability of someone near to live up to the benchmark standards we often set. Paul too, no doubt, has had someone humanly “let him down.” But Paul views life not through a lens of personal gain or situation but from the perspective of God’s accomplishing His purposes. He knows that in the tumult of life, the faithfulness of the Philippians is because “he who began” this good work, will indeed “bring it to completion” perhaps only recognized as such “at the day of Jesus Christ.”

Grace

The sureness is based on his understanding of God’s work in the presence of our work. For Paul sees the work that the Philippians are “partaking with” involves the presence of grace. God’s goodness, often in spite of our weakness and failure is the energy that enables the work to persist. Paul sees grace in operation even in his current imprisonment. His circumstances are not seen as an indication of God’s failure or fickleness, on the contrary, it is continued evidence of God’s presence and plan in the complexities of his providence. In fact his elaboration on the idea of partnership (sharing here is another term related to koinonia) is indeed likely focused on the “benefits” of suffering. This is a very hard concept to grasp. We are trained to think of benefit only in victory. Winners leave the field with smiles and heads held high. Losers feel pain and sorrow. Each of the New Testament writers (not merely Paul) view the living in this world’s experience as process, the victory is yet to come (remember our very recent reference to “the day of Jesus Christ.” The apparent losses are not to be seen as defeat, but rather training and discipline to accomplish the purpose we remain in this era of redemptive history. Grace is the strength to endure in and through our difficulties, not the avoidance or temporary release from them.

Affection

And again he is not a passively or stoically enduring this situation, merely expressing his need for “help” or support. He expressed a deep affection, an emotional connection that is exemplary in our understanding of this relationship. Paul “yearns” for them, he longs to experience their relationship in a real and vital way. Keep in mind this is not because they have all the same “personal interests,” the same “backgrounds,” the same “tastes in music, food or literature,” but because they are his partners in the gospel. Not just some of them, but all of them. Five times we find the word all in the ESV here as well as other inclusive terms like “every,” “from the first...until,” and “began...completion.” This relationship he desires is comprehensive and complete.

Perfection (vs 9-11)

And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

As we move forward in the section, we eventually see the content of Paul’s prayer for those in this relationship, his partners and partakers. This is his vision for completeness for perfection in relationship.

Love

He first of all prays that their love would abound. Love is essential to grow to build and maintain a true partnership. The citizenship that he is encouraging is not one of merely being on a list of “registered voters” or in the church context, “on a membership list.” It is that, but it also involves a tie that is characterized by love. Love is a relational term, a concept that Paul expects to be in a continual growth dynamic. It is to be present in abundance and to be increasing in that abundance.

Knowledge

Paul also prays for a growing understanding. He calls it here a “knowledge and discernment.” It is important as we move in the work in which God has called us, that we do so with insight and wisdom. There is no dichotomy between love and truth in Paul’s worldview. These two ideas are intimately connected. For Paul this knowledge is a growing understanding of the person and work of Christ. It is the vision of the plan and purposes of God for the world. Love for Paul has its growth intimately connected to this knowledge. Knowing God and His love in

Christ is the source of true love. One commentator says it this way: “When the domain of knowledge is devoid of love, knowledge has no value. But when love abounds in the domain of knowledge, knowledge then serves the goals of love and love multiplies.” But this idea of knowledge includes discernment. The idea of discernment or insight guides and aids in the “doing.” It is the wisdom to do the right thing and say the right words in various circumstances and contexts. “Without insight, love does not know how to express itself with actions and words that are appropriate to each situation of life. Often love asks the question: I desire to love these people with such great needs, but what should I say and do to meet their needs? Only by insight does love have the direction to act wisely in ways that give healing, joy, and life to those who are loved. The combination of knowledge and depth of insight unites a personal knowledge of Christ and a practical understanding of people. Knowing Christ and understanding people are both necessary for love to abound more and more.”

Righteousness

This coupling of love and discernment should lead to increasing righteousness. It will approve what is excellent and be characterized as pure and blameless. The ethical nature of relationships will be evident. These relationships will be in alignment with what can be seen and understood as excellent and pure. Often in the counseling room there are those trapped in inappropriate relationships. Frequently there is some justification based on emotion or circumstances. “We wouldn’t feel this way if God wasn’t behind it” or “I must be made in this manner to have this orientation.” Love is grasped to hide many relationships and actions. Paul finishes his prayer by grounding this abounding love in its results, that are identifiable and discernable as righteous.

Conclusion

Let us bring this to a functioning conclusion, in particular to parents, but to anyone who should build and encourage the growth of godly relationships to others.

First, recognize that relationship is an essential part of life, especially for those who claim to follow Christ. We must both teach and model this concept. Participation in collective Christianity in both sharing and receiving contexts, especially among the local assembly should be practiced and encouraged. Gathering for worship, in groups to learn and discuss, in flocks to pray and encourage, these should all be activities that serve to develop and teach relational living.

Secondly, keep the foundation of relationships visible. The Gospel is the ground of our relationship. We have this connection that brings together all walks of life. Do not merely engage Bengals or Buckeye fans, NASCAR watchers or scrap-

bookers. Do not limit your conversations to those who homeschool or public school. Other texts in the New Testament stress this cross-cultural and cross-generational aspect of Christian living. This is one of the reasons at Clearcreek Chapel there is an intentional avoidance of typical "life-stage" segmentation that occurs in churches. This does not mean that there is not situations that lend themselves to that approach, but it takes effort to build the broader context of relationship that is not dependent upon commonality other than the work of the gospel.

Lastly, work in seeing the need to have knowledgeable and wise relationships to provide and share the message and power of gospel to both unbelievers and professing believers alike.