

Sermon Title: Phruitful, Phaithful, Philippians  
Scripture Text: Philippians 1:1-11 (Philippians #1)

Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 9-12-10

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This morning, it is our privilege to dive into something new. We are going to begin looking through the Book of Philippians, so I invite you to turn in your Bible to this wonderful little four chapters, usually referred to as the Book of Joy; there are several reasons why that is an apt description of it (e.g., Phil. 3:1; 4:4).

Imagine that a life-changing friend, mentor, and spiritual leader is falsely accused and imprisoned for preaching the Gospel. Imagine that he means so much to you that you have stood by him, you have supported him with every bit of encouragement and even financial support that you could muster. Over two years have gone by since he was imprisoned. You have sent another special friend to visit him and take news to him. And at long last, you finally get word back from him, carried by the friend you sent to encourage this great leader in prison. What you get back is what we know of as the Book of Philippians, and we are going to jump right in this morning, looking at the first 11 verses.

I'll give you a very brief introduction to answer the question, "Who?"—Who are the Philippians, and who wrote this book, and why.

And then a very simple "Hello" in Verses 1 and 2.

And then I'll capture a couple of phrases from Paul himself:

"It's only right"—Verses 3 through 8

and, "This I pray"—Verses 9 through 11

The first thing to ask is, "Who?" Who is this all about?

Philippi was located in Macedonia. If you can picture the northern part of the Mediterranean Sea, go northeast of Greece—where Corinth was, and is; northwest of Asia Minor—where Ephesus and all the cities of the first three chapters of Revelation are.

The original settlement was a place called *Krēnides*, which means "springs." Back in 356 B.C., the name was changed by Philip the Second—who was the king of Macedonia—when he enlarged the city with many new inhabitants and with a tremendous amount of construction; so, with a bunch of new people and a lot of construction projects, he first thought he was going to name it "Treasure Valley," but he thought better of it, and Philip named it after himself—humble man that he was; he called it "Philippi."

In 42 B.C., almost 300 years later, the Battle of Philippi was fought west of the city. It pitted Octavian, Antony, and Lepidus against Brutus and Cassius. Octavian prevailed, and the city was made a military colony for defending that region. Then in 31 B.C., Octavian defeated Antony in a power struggle between them, and Octavian raised the status of Philippi even more. So, because of its location, because of the military battle fought there, Luke actually noted its reputation in Acts Chapter 16, Verse 12, where he simply describes "Philippi" as "a leading city of the district of Macedonia." It was *the* place; it was the "hub," if you will.

The church at Philippi was founded by Paul during his second missionary trip around A.D. 50, early on in that trip (Acts 16:6-40). Philippi became the first city, technically, in Europe where Paul ever preached and founded a church.

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Philippi is famous for the incident recorded in Acts Chapter 16, Verses 9 through 40. That's where Paul and Silas had exposed the fraud perpetrated by some men who were taking advantage of a demon-possessed girl, using her to make money for them as a fortune teller. They delivered the girl from the demons, and basically stripped these guys of their way of living, and so they did what anybody would do: They started a riot, and they got Paul and Silas arrested.

Isn't it interesting that right behind what I've have said about Thessalonica—that that is probably the place where Paul, had he ever had opportunity to retire, I think that's the church he would have chosen as his favorite—Philippi would probably be a close second to that. Isn't it interesting that his two most favorite places that he writes to most fondly of all of his letters were places where he was run out of town and arrested?—Thessalonica and Philippi, in that order.

Paul and Silas were dragged into a mob scene. They were beaten, and then they were thrown in jail. God used a wonderful miracle to deliver them from their false imprisonment, *and* to bring the jailer and his family in Philippi to Christ. It was the jailer in Philippi who was the one who asked the famous question, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:29). You see, a jailer would probably pay with his life if he let people get away; and all of a sudden, with this earthquake—a very specific earthquake, mind you, which also released the chains of the prisoners—the guy woke up and saw that in the middle of the night, and said, "Oh, I'm a goner!" and then Paul said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute! Don't harm yourself! We are here. We are safe." And then the jailer said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

The church at Philippi was a diverse group of people from its very beginning. The first contacts there were two woman and a man—Lydia and her household—and right away, they included a Jew, a Greek, and a Roman: a businesswoman, a slave, and a civil employee.

So this church doesn't have exactly the same history as other churches. There was not as sophisticated or as developed of a Jewish community there—not even enough Jews for a synagogue, apparently. And so it was a little bit different than some of the other first-century churches.

This letter that we call "Philippians" is one of four in the New Testament that we call "Prison Epistles." The reason we say that is that they were written while Paul was in prison. Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon—those three, plus Philippians, were written during Paul's first imprisonment in Rome. The other three were apparently written in A.D. 61, early in Paul's imprisonment there. Then, Philippians was written about two years later, at about the *end* of his imprisonment, in A.D. 63. When we get to Chapter 1, Verse 26, we will see that Paul says he expected to visit Philippi again soon, so we surmise that when he wrote this, he had some reason to believe that he was soon to be released.

We won't explain it now, but just to give you the bigger picture: Paul was released from that imprisonment; he traveled again for a while, wrote the later of his epistles—the Pastoral Epistles—and then was imprisoned again, and killed the second time.

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This book is a Thank-You Letter. That's the best way to summarize it. Paul is thanking the Philippians. He is commending them for their generosity in supporting him financially and in moral support in his ministry and especially in his imprisonment. It was the church at Philippi that sent a man named Epaphroditus to Paul with a gift from their church—Chapter 4, Verse 18 refers to that—and with instructions that Epaphroditus was to help Paul however possible. Paul wrote the letter to send back to Philippi with Epaphroditus.

So, that's the "Who?"—it's the Apostle Paul writing to his Christian friends in the city of Philippi.

Let's dive in and look at the "Hello" part of it.

There is nothing particularly difficult about the opening passage of this book, so I'm going to bite off 11 whole verses this morning. Don't get spoiled—we are not going to knock out the book in a month, as we might if we kept going at about that rate. But we are going to have some very obvious great applications from this.

Chapter 1 begins this way: Verses 1 and 2—"Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (NASB-1995—and throughout, unless otherwise noted)

Standard greeting in every letter Paul wrote: "Grace and peace"—he always sends those things as part of his greeting.

He mentions "Paul and Timothy." Timothy was *not* in prison with Paul, but during this part of Paul's imprisonment, Timothy was with him; he was in Rome, and apparently visiting Paul regularly.

Paul was a minimum-security prisoner. It seems that he was under house arrest, and he was allowed guests frequently (Acts 24:23). It even refers to him staying in "rented quarters" (Acts 28:30), so it was sort of like, "Don't leave town until we have disposed of your case." Many came to him during that time, and he wrote at least these four books of the New Testament.

So, when you see him writing, it's *always* "Paul and Timothy," "Paul and Silas," "Paul and Barnabas," "Paul and Titus," "Paul and Epaphroditus," "Paul and Silvanus"—it's always *and* somebody." In all the ministry you see in the New Testament, in all the examples we have of the founders of the churches of the New Testament—*always*, discipleship and teamwork are at the core of it. Any ministry Paul did, he *always* took somebody with him. *He* was always the one in charge, mind you (1 Cor. 12:28; cf. Jn. 13:20; 1 Cor. 9:1; Eph. 2:20; 1 Tim. 2:7). There's no doubt. I mean, whenever Paul was in a group, and there was an opportunity to preach, Paul preached (Acts 14:12). Just like whenever Peter was in a group, and there was a chance to preach, Peter preached. There was always a leader among the leaders, but Paul *never* did it on his own; he *always* had someone with him, he *always* had a team, there were *always* others with him that he trusted, there were *always* people with him that he was training (e.g., Rom. 16:3, 9, 21; cf. 2 Tim. 2:2).

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That kind of partnership accomplished *several* important things, and it should affect every ministry you do. If you take on the ministry of bringing the marshmallows for the campout of the second grade class, be training somebody; be showing somebody how you do it; have somebody to back you up. "Well, if I can't do this, could you do it for me?" *Always* be working with someone. You will find that it is in serving alongside someone else that you make your very best friends. We will see, in the next few verses, how that applied to Paul and the Philippians. They had served side by side, and hence they had become very close.

When you do that, there is always accountability (e.g., 1 Cor. 16:3-4). When someone is involved with you in spiritual things, it is far more difficult to let things slide. You bolster each other (Prov. 27:17; Ecc. 4:9-10; Col. 4:11). The job gets done, and the standards remain higher when somebody shares it with you.

I can tell you that in all the situations I know of pastors and other Christian leaders falling into moral sin—and I know a whole lot more of those than I wish I knew—*always*, there is a common denominator: In *every case*, the people isolated themselves from real accountability (Prov. 18:1), and they felt they could handle themselves without it (Prov. 14:16)...and they were *all* wrong.

*Always*, when you serve the Lord, serve with someone else. You say, "I don't have anybody else to serve with me." *Pray* for somebody else to serve with you. *Ask* somebody else to serve with you.

When you do that, there is also multiplication: When each one reaches one other person, the Church multiplies; ministries grow, ministries spread. People get their very best training by getting it on the job, watching someone do it. I can tell you without any doubt: I consider my seminary years, and all the rigors of the academics of that, of just about equal value with the fact that I spent those years immersed in ministry with people who knew a lot more than I did at that time. That is a very valuable thing, to multiply it.

"Paul and Timothy"—*always* a team. "Paul and somebody." "Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus"—they understood: He is Lord, I am the servant; I'm the "slave" (Eph. 6:6)—"To all the saints in Christ Jesus." That is who this book is addressed to: "all the saints in Christ Jesus"—yes, originally, "who are in Philippi," but it's a very short leap from there to you. Your identity, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, is that you are a "saint." One of the worst ideas ever foisted upon the Church of Jesus Christ is the one that says that "saints" are only a select few spiritual heroes of the past, to which a certain mythology is attached. A "saint" is—I hate to pop your bubble, but look around the room: You are in a room full of saints (cf. Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; Rev. 14:12). They don't have to be carved images to be saints; as a matter of fact, they *should not be*.

You are, in Christ, made holy! The word translated "saint" simply means "holy one" (cf. Heb. 3:1). You are made holy by the righteousness of Christ (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 10:14), which is "credited" to your account (Rom. 4:5; cf. Phil. 3:9), "by grace...through faith" (Eph. 2:8; cf. Rom. 3:24, 26). We are *all* "the saints" (Rom. 8:27; 15:25; 2 Cor. 1:1, Eph. 3:18; 6:18; Heb. 13:24; Jude 3; etc.).

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This is written "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi" and, by extension, at Boise and at every other place where the saints gather (1 Cor. 1:2). And he interestingly includes this little phrase, unique to Philippians; he doesn't put this in other epistles: "including the overseers and deacons." He refers there to the only two offices that the New Testament specifies for leadership in the church.

The first one is here called "overseers" (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:1; Titus 1:7). "Overseer" is a word that is translated "bishop" in the older translations. It is used interchangeably and synonymously with the other words "elder" (Acts 14:23; 20:17; 1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:5; Jas. 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1) and "shepherd" (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2), or, "pastor" (Eph. 4:11)—"pastor" is the Latin word for "shepherd." "Elder," "Overseer," "Shepherd" are three terms for the same office. "Elder" describes the person in terms of maturity, the recognized qualities of leadership. "Overseer" describes the responsibility of the office, to watch over—to oversee—the affairs of the flock. By the way, the concept of a "bishop" as a leader of a *region* is *not* in the Bible. It might *work* in practical reality, but it is not a category of leadership that the New Testament requires. So, "elder" is the character of the man. "Overseer" is his job. "Shepherd" describes another aspect of the responsibility of the office in terms of the attitude and the technique with which you have to fulfill the job (e.g., Jer. 3:15; 23:22), under the guidance of "the great Shepherd" (Heb. 13:20; cf. Jn. 10:11-18): caring for the flock; overseeing things; managing things, if you will; directing; but always caring for the individuals (Jn. 21:15-17).

The other group is the "deacons" (1 Tim. 3:8-13). The word "deacon" means "servant" (Rom. 16:1). The "deacons" are those men officially chosen from within the congregation to serve the flock, under the direction and leadership of the elders in whatever capacities might be needed. Philippi, as a developed church, had "overseers" or "elders," and they had "deacons." Generally speaking, the elders are responsible for the spiritual guidance, the teaching, the leadership of the church; the deacons are responsible, as directed by the elders, to manage the day-to-day physical needs and whatever services need to be performed (Acts 6:1-4).

Obviously, these groups work closely together; there is a lot of overlap, there is a lot of cooperation. You are welcome to read our church bylaws to find out how we try to apply what the New Testament teaches about the elders and deacons.

So, this is from "Paul" and his current ministry partner, "Timothy, bond-servants"—slaves of "the Master," the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 2:21)—"To all the saints in Christ Jesus"—including the leaders—"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (vs. 2).

"Who?" "Hello." And now: "It is only right."

I'm going to take a wild guess that you prefer to be loved. I think everybody does. This next section is a wonderful bit of very practical insight which, if you apply it correctly, will cause you to be remembered fondly, will cause you to be appreciated, will cause you to be the reason that people give thanks, and it will bring joy to other Christians—*especially* "the overseers and the deacons."

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Paul writes this: We will pick it up at Verse 3—"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now" (vss. 3-5).

There is the key—that last phrase: "You have been *participating in the gospel*." "Participation" is that word *koinōnia*, which we usually translate "fellowship." It means "partnership"; it means "a mutual relationship in which both parties participate and receive benefit." When Paul thought of the church at Philippi, he thought of *partners in the Gospel*. It was with the *goal* of spreading the good news about Jesus Christ—that is what their friendship was all about; that is what their partnership was all about.

They supported Paul financially, since he travelled around. They served alongside him every way they could. They were encouraging. They were supportive. And through the rest of this book, you will get a good idea how much they came to mean to Paul because they were committed to the right thing.

And along with their "participation in the gospel," notice this: They *persevered* in pursuit of the Gospel ministry. Notice: "from the first day until now." Pop quiz: When was the Book of Philippians written? Probably about A.D. 62 or 63. When was the church in Philippi founded by the Apostle Paul? Roughly about A.D. 50. So, 12 or 13 years had gone by. And what he knew about the Philippians was: They *persevered*. Ministry that makes a difference comes from people who don't quit—who hang in there, who get the job done (2 Cor. 4:1, 16; Gal. 6:9; 2 Tim. 4:7).

Now, the stage is set—one of my favorite verses. You know I have a lot of those, especially the ones I'm studying this week. But you will recognize this one: Chapter 1, Verse 6—"For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus." That's the verse that provided the words for that song we have been singing frequently as our benediction. I call it the "He-Who" song: "He who began a good work in you *will* complete it."

The word "confident" means "permanently persuaded." Paul had no doubt about this. And the "He" in "He who" is obviously God. Think about this, my friend: If you belong to Jesus Christ by faith, "God is at work" in your life—personally, individually, and with a unique purpose in mind (Phil. 2:13; cf. Ps. 138:8; Jn. 6:44-45; 15:2b, 16; 2 Thess. 2:14; 1 Pet. 2:9). You are a *special project* of God (Ps. 139:1-18; Jer. 1:5; 31:3; Matt. 10:30; Rom. 8:28-29; Gal. 1:15-16; 2:20; Eph. 1:4). We, collectively, as one local church, are a *special project* of God (Eph. 3:21; Rev. 2:1).

When he says the word "began"—"He who *began* this"—there is actually a form of this word here that makes it emphasize, again, God's personal focus on you, that you *are* a special project of His handiwork (Matt. 13:11; Jn. 6:37, 65; Acts 3:16; 13:48; 16:14; 18:27; 2 Thess. 2:13; Heb. 12:2; Jas. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:21a).

And here is a great promise. A statement of fact: "He...*began* a good work in you..." A promise: "He...*will perfect it* until the day of Christ Jesus." The word "perfect" means "to complete," "to bring it to its goal" (cf. Heb. 12:2, 23; 1 Pet. 5:10).

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You might, at any given time, decide that you are tired, that you want to give up; but God *never* gives up on you (e.g., Ps. 37:24, 28; Is. 41:10; Jn. 6:39; Jer. 32:40; Lk. 22:31-32; Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25; 1 Pet. 1:5). So perfect is His love, so patient, so *persistent* is His strategy that He works in you and with you and through you, *even in* the times that you want to give up—maybe *most dramatically* in those times (e.g., 1 Kings 19:4-18; Acts 18:9-10; 23:11).

God *will* work in you, my friend, in Christ! So, why fight it? Why make yourself miserable? It's like giving the puppy the bath after it *delightfully* rolled in something it thought was really wonderful to roll in. They don't like it! The more they fight, the worse it is for them! But you win, right? Don't fight what God is doing in your life (Jn. 15:2b; Heb. 12:5-11). If He is leading you, if He is giving you a test, *embrace it!* Do what He wants you to do. What does He want you to do? Well, obey His Word and follow "the desires of your heart" (Ps. 37:4)—you'll find what He wants you to do (Heb. 13:20-21). He "*will perfect*" what He is doing in you "until the day of Christ Jesus"—which refers to the return of Christ (1 Thess. 4:16-17), or you going "home" to be "with" Him (2 Cor. 5:8). God will continue to work in you until the product is finished (Jn. 6:39, Rom. 8:30; 1 Cor. 1:7-8; Jude 24). Don't squirm. Don't fight. "I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you..."

Now, here is a theme that we saw in First Thessalonians. Did you notice how, side by side here, is the human side of the Christian life: He said, "your participation in the gospel from the first day..."; and then, the divine side: God will continue to "perfect" you "until the day of Christ Jesus."

And let me tell you, friend, those two are not equal. Your salvation is the work of God (Jonah 2:9). The disciples asked, "Who can be saved?" and Jesus said, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:25-26, NKJV). But then He "calls you" (1 Thess. 5:24; cf. Jn. 6:44; Acts 16:14; 1 Cor. 1:9, 24; 7:22a; Gal. 1:15; Heb. 9:15; Jude 1), and you choose to follow Him (Jn. 6:37, 45; Acts 13:48). And He asks you to be faithful in your "participation in the gospel" (cf. Eph. 4:1; Col. 3:15; 1 Pet. 1:15; Rev. 17:14). But He says, "*I will continue to 'perfect' you.*" God's contribution is amazing! It is *wonderful* (Deut. 30:6; Jer. 32:40; Ezek. 36:27; Phil. 2:13; 1 Cor. 1:30).

I just picked this up from one of the commentators who got to this point and kind of waxed eloquent: "God's part of your Christian life is that He provides a 'faithfulness' that will never be removed (Lam. 3:23; 1 Cor. 1:7-9). God provides 'eternal life' that will never end (Jn. 10:28a). God provides a 'spring' of 'water' that will never cease to bubble up within the one who drinks of it (Jn. 4:14); from you 'will flow rivers of living water,' said Jesus (Jn. 7:38). God's part of your Christian life is that it is all a 'gift' that will never be lost (Rom. 3:24). God's part is to provide a 'hand' out of which the Good Shepherd's sheep will never be 'snatched' (Jn. 10:28b-29). God's part is to provide a chain that will never be broken, from His choice of you in eternity past (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:4; 2 Tim. 1:9) to your glory with Him in eternity in the future (Rom. 8:30; Eph. 1:13-14; 2 Tim. 4:18). God's part of your Christian life is that He gives you a 'calling' that will never be 'revoked' (Rom. 11:29). God gives you a 'foundation' that will never be destroyed (Prov. 10:25), and God gives you an 'inheritance' that will never, *ever* 'fade away' (1 Pet. 1:4)."

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But notice, all of that is not for just anyone. You don't just get this by *wanting* it; it's not just because you want to have it good. This is how God preserves those who are committed to "participation in the gospel." This is how God preserves His own for *service*. If you belong to Him, you will be part of what He is doing. If you are *not* part of what He is doing, it is legitimate to ask if you really belong to Him (cf. Matt. 7:21; Lk. 8:15; Jas. 2:14-26; 1 Jn. 2:4; Rev. 14:12; 17:14b). Paul said he was confident of God working in the lives of his good friends in Philippi *because* they shared with him in the Gospel.

Now, to the words that I plucked for our outline: Verse 7—"For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me."

It was the friendship. It was the partnership. It was the true fellowship in serving Christ. *That* is what got him so close to these people! "It's *only right* that I feel this way, because we are inseparably linked together in Christ!" I love this: He says, "You all are partakers of grace with me"—another occurrence of a form of the word *koinōnia*. We are *partners* in this. The basis for confidence in God at work in somebody else's life is the same as the evidence for *God* being at work: Are they doing the things that God does?—they share in the right things, they accept partnership in the work of Jesus Christ for the spreading of the Gospel (cf. Matt. 9:37-38; 12:30; 28:19-20; 2 Tim. 2:10).

"You all are partakers"—and I love the way he puts this—"of grace with me." Paul was not one to go around and put up plaques: "This church founded by the great Apostle Paul, A.D. 61"—he didn't do that. He said, "By God's grace—*by God's grace*—we are partners, and to Him be the glory."

Verse 8—"For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus." I don't know his exact itinerary, but I know that when Paul got out of prison in Rome, he *wanted* to get back to Philippi. He *wanted* to get back to Thessalonica. I know he wanted to get back to *all* those places, but *these* were the ones where he had left his heart there.

If you want people to love you, if you want people to appreciate you, figure out what the Philippians did to make Paul feel this way toward them. And it's not very hard: They stood by him in the hard times, and they worked side by side with him in the good times. Why, it's kind of like what Jesus said in Matthew 7:12—"Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (NASB-1977).

Why did Paul have such a kinship for these people? Why did he have them "in" his "heart" all the time, he said? Well, they were reaping what they had sown in their friendship with him. Galatians 6, Verses 7 and 8—"Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life."

Paul's words to the Philippians were nothing more than them "reaping" what they had "sown" by how they had treated him.



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"Who?"—"Paul and Timothy," writing "to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi."  
"Hello"—"Grace to you and peace..."  
"It is only right for me to feel this way about you" because of our fellowship in "grace."  
And then, a wonderful prayer: Verses 9, 10, and 11.

I have to say, here comes another favorite verse, at least for this week. These next three verses tell us, in a nutshell, how to pray for each other. Often I get, and you get, detailed prayer requests; and we *do* do our best to "bear one another's burdens" (Gal. 6:2), to "pray for one another" (Jas. 5:16). We get requests for this or that illness—we pray that the doctor will find every cell of the cancer; we pray that this test will be negative; we pray that all the details will go just right; we pray for Aunt Martha to have peace through the trial. You know what I mean. Those are the details of life! It is *good* to bring those things before the Lord (Ps. 62:8; Lk. 18:1; Eph. 6:18). It is a reflection of our faith that God knows all that we need, and He indeed can and does work in the details of every situation (Eph. 1:11b).

But the fact is, those are *not* the things that I think we need to pray most diligently about, to spend most of our prayer time working on. Scripture tells us that God knows all about what we need before we ask. I have never prayed about a specific situation, and God said, "Really? I'll get right on that! I didn't know!" But sometimes we pray as if God is as shocked to hear the news as we are, right? He understands all of that. Jesus said that! He said: "Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him" (Matt. 6:8). Go ahead and ask! *Talk* to Him about it! You will be amazed how, "by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving letting your requests be made known to God" leads to "the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, guarding your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (cf. Is. 26:3) Those are good words! We ought to put those in the Bible! Where did they come from? Oh, yeah—Philippians Chapter 4. Can't wait to get there, but we have to.

But if you ask me to pray for you—in *any* circumstance, no matter what it is—I know for sure that I can *always* pray for you according to the will of God, asking what is best for you for the glory of God, if I pattern my prayer after this one. Let's look at it, starting at Verse 9:

"And this I pray"—I don't care *who* you are; if you ask me to pray for you, *this* will be part of my prayer—"that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment..." Those are three great words to put together: "love," "knowledge," and "discernment." "Love" is that generic reference to the love of God that He gives to us in Christ (Rom. 5:8); and your love *for* God, and your expression of His love in terms of how you share it with the people around you (Eph. 5:2; 1 Thess. 3:12; 1 Jn. 4:7).

And it is *always* right to pray that God's love will *abound*. A synonym for the word translated "abound" would be "overflow." And if you think somebody is on the right track, say, "Atta Boy!" or "Atta Girl!" and pray that their love will overflow "more and more"—relentless progress! If you are not loving people better than you were loving people last month, you have not grown spiritually. There is no such thing as absolute Christian maturity (Job 17:9; Ps. 84:7; Jn. 15:2; 2 Cor. 3:18; Phil. 3:12-14; Jas. 3:2a; 1 Pet. 2:2;

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2 Pet. 1:5-10; 3:18; Rev. 2:19). There is no such thing as absolutely perfect Christian love; it should *always* be growing—you can *always* get better and better (1 Thess. 4:9-10; 2 Thess. 1:3). We are blessed to have a congregation with a reputation for loving. May we *never* say, "Okay, we have *that one*. Now, check it off the list; let's move on to something else." *Always* abounding "still more and more" in the love of God. Not *feelings*, not squashy sentimentalism, but it's a love that is *action* (1 Jn. 3:18), doing what somebody else needs.

And it is "love" rooted in "knowledge"—"that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge..." "Real knowledge" is an interesting word. It's the usual word for "knowledge"—the word *gnōsis*—and it has a prefix attached to it: *epignōsis*. It means "to have knowledge with a purpose"; "knowledge beyond facts," if you will; knowledge of how to "abound" in "love," and to grow in "discernment"; knowledge that makes a difference in how you live (Jn. 13:17).

That is why I think he attached this phrase: "and all discernment." The word "discernment" was originally used to describe "perceiving something with your senses"—"It *feels* warm in here because I sense that." Well, it came to be developed into a word with great spiritual significance. It came to be used for understanding realities related to practical application of the knowledge of God's Word (Prov. 2:9; Hos. 14:9); and we think of "discernment" as the ability to distinguish between "truth" and "error" (1 Jn. 4:6; cf. Ezek. 44:23; Heb. 5:14).

Friends: *I know God's will for your life!* I don't care *what* your plans are this week, *I know God's will for your life!* He wants you to get better at demonstrating His love. He wants you to increase your knowledge of His truth. He wants you to get better and better at discerning truth from error. That is *always* God's will—*always!* (1 Tim. 4:15)

But there is *more* to this wonderful prayer: "This I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment"—Verse 10—"so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ."

Here is how you can tell if you or anyone else is making good progress in spiritual life: "approving" the right things.

"Approving" means "to approve by testing"—to *understand it*.

And "the things that are excellent"—"excellent" comes from a word whose root meaning is "to differ": that you understand the things that stand apart, that stand out as worthwhile; things that are vital. "Excellent" is a perfect translation.

"So that you may approve the things that are excellent, *in order to be...*" You see, as you grow in "love" and "real knowledge" and "discernment," and you are better and better at "approving the things that are excellent," how will you be described? "Sincere and blameless." "Sincere" means "genuine"; "blameless" means "without stumbling," or, "without causing to stumble."

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Spiritual growth is what allows you to see the bigger picture when you look at a set of circumstances (Prov. 14:6; 28:5b; 2 Cor. 4:8-11; 6:4-10). A spiritually mature person is one who recognizes things that are good for you, and things that are not good for you—knows the difference, makes the right choices (Rom. 12:9b; 16:18; 1 Thess. 5:21); investing your time and your money and your energy in things that matter the most (Matt. 6:19-20; Lk. 16:9); recognizing which friendships and which associations are good for you, and which ones are not (Deut. 7:3-4; Prov. 13:20; 22:24-25; 1 Cor. 7:39; 15:33; 2 Cor. 6:14-18). Spiritual maturity has to do with appreciating things of value and importance, and ignoring things that are a waste of time (Ps. 101:3; 119:37; Prov. 12:11b). Spiritual maturity has to do with cultivating a reputation for *loving good things* (Ps. 1:2; 34:13-14; 112:1; 119:97, 163; Mic. 6:8; Rom. 7:22).

Another treat is waiting for us when we get to Chapter 4: a great commentary on what is "excellent" for you to "approve." We will see how Paul applies this, but it applies to a whole bunch of things; he has a very specific reason for listing this in Philippians 4:8-9, but he says this: "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence"—same word we just saw—"and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on *these* things." (NASB-1977) So that is what you *think* about. Then he says: "The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you." *Think* about the right things, *practice* the right things, and you will be amazed how God uses you to *do* the right things! (Jos. 1:8; Ps. 1:1-3; Jas. 1:25)

Then the conclusion of this prayer: Verse 11—"having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."

"Having been filled with the fruit of righteousness" has to do with what God has put within you. Romans Chapter 5, Verse 5: He has given you "the Holy Spirit" by which "the love of God" is "poured out within our heart." By your relationship with Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit, all the good you do is the way that you express the life of Christ *in you* (cf. Jn. 15:5).

And the result is "to the glory and praise of God." (cf. Heb. 13:20-21; 1 Pet. 4:11)

I don't know what you face, coming up tomorrow morning. But I know God's will for your life, and I can pray for you: "I pray that your love may abound still more and more in *real* knowledge and *all* discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ" when, *for His glory*, He finishes the work that He "began" in you!

Friends, if that is what you *want*, you are wanting the right things! If that is *not* what you want, if the thought of that kind of work of God in your life is foreign to you—things like *really* changing you (2 Cor. 5:17) and *using* you and causing your life to make a difference for His glory—then you need to start the adventure! You need to *begin* the process. You need to let God begin the "good work in you" so He can "perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."

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You need to go back and listen to the question and the answer that was asked by the Philippian jailer, and answered by the Apostle Paul: Acts Chapter 16, Verses 30 and 31—"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they—Paul and Silas—said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

If you have not ever made the decision to say, "God, I understand that I am a sinner. Please forgive my sins. Send Your Son Jesus Christ into my life, to be the Lord of my life, and to begin to make me over into the person that You made me to be."—If you have never done that, I beg you; using the Apostle Paul's words, I "beg you...be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20). "Be saved" (Acts 2:40), have your "sins forgiven" (Lk. 5:20; cf. Lk. 24:46-47; Acts 10:43; Col. 1:13-14). God will begin "a good work in you" the moment you make that commitment, *and* you can join in with the rest of us: He *will* perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."

The "perfecting"—it's not done. I invite you to follow me around for half a day—you will know *for sure* that perfection is not here, yet (Phil. 3:12-14). But He *will* keep perfecting it *until the work is done* (Ps. 138:8; 1 Cor. 1:8-9; 2 Thess. 2:14).

Let's pray:

*Heavenly Father, thank You for Your great grace to us in Jesus Christ—that He has saved us, not on the basis of any good deeds that we have done, but all by His grace and for His glory. Father, I pray for Heritage Bible Church, I pray for everyone here this morning, that You will cause our love to abound. Oh, we have seen so much. We pray that it will "abound still more and more." I pray that we will grow "in real knowledge and all discernment." Father, I pray that we will be known for those things that we "approve" that are "excellent." May You cause those excellent things to be on display in our lives. I pray that we will be "sincere and blameless" for all the tasks You have for us, "until the day of Christ," when You call us home, or You come to take us to be with You. Thank You, Father, that we have, because of the finished work of Christ, been "filled with the fruit of righteousness through Jesus Christ." I pray that You will continue this work in us, for Your glory and for Your praise, in Jesus' name. Amen.*