

January 3, 2021

A PICTURE OF THE BLESSINGS OF BELONGING TO CHRIST

Philippians 2:19-30

*(7 of 12 in a series through Philippians)*

I've mentioned before that a tradition our family has on Christmas Eve is to gather together and share three things for which we are particularly thankful for in the year that we've just gone through. We did that, of course, just over a week ago, looking back at things we are thankful for in 2020. And as we were sharing these things it hit me how beneficial this exercise of giving thanks was. I thought about it as one of my children was expressing thanks for the extra time we'd had together as a family both during the lockdown weeks as well as a recent time when our family had to quarantine. Honestly, I was completely caught off guard by this. If you'd asked me—or really most people, I imagine—about this pandemic-filled year, it might feel like the pandemic itself gave us almost nothing for which to give thanks. You might think that our little family tradition of giving thanks would have been more difficult to pull off this year than most. And yet, it was precisely the circumstances forced by this disease that we were giving thanks for. We were thanking God for the time the pandemic gave us to spend together as a family.

And, as I've noted, it was in that moment that I realized again how beneficial this exercise of giving thanks was. Without taking the time to actively consider things for which we were thankful for in the last year, we might have overlooked this blessing of time that we'd been given to spend together as a family and instead only chosen to focus on all the difficulties, tragedies, and loss that 2020 provided. The reason, of course, is because without prodding our hearts to consider why we should give thanks, we simply drift toward dwelling on things about which we want to complain.

And the same can be true for us as believers and as a church community. We can be oblivious to some of the blessings for which we should be giving thanks—both as individual believers and as a church—because we simply do not take the time or put forth the effort to actively consider things for which we should be thankful. But here is where working through the biblical text helps us so much. The text forces us to pause, consider what it's saying, and think through how we need to think and live in light of it. And as we come to Philippians 2:19-30, I believe the text forces us to consider blessings for which we should be thankful. So what I want to do this morning is draw our attention to blessings that are part of the Christian life, things for which we should be thankful. But I think that as we consider these things for which we should be grateful, we'll also find ourselves challenged to change some aspects of how we're living our lives. My approach then will be to note three things from this text that God does for believers so that we might give thanks and more closely align our hearts with his will. The first of these is that God creates within us love.

**God creates love within us**

This reality that when God saves us—giving us a new heart and putting his Spirit within us—he creates love within us is the clearest theme that runs through this text. In one sense, we might think that we’ve entered the most mundane section of text in this letter to the Philippians. After all, Paul is simply letting them know that he’s going to send Timothy to them since he is unable to come to them himself (since he is in prison), that he hopes to come to them soon himself, and that he’s sending Epaphroditus—who had delivered their care package to Paul—back to them. In many ways, Philippians 2:19-30 reads like any letter in which one person is informing another of his or her future planning. It sounds a bit like those conversations all of us have around the holidays when someone says, “So what are you doing for Christmas?” and you answer with dates, places, and people you’re visiting as you share your travel plans. This text is quite similar.

But if you look into the details of all this planning and moving that Paul lays out, you see something spectacular. What is on display in these verses is the amazing work of love that the Lord has created in the hearts of everyone mentioned here. It’s actually a bit difficult to follow, simply because it fills nearly every phrase, so let’s see if I can lay out the connections of love.

- Paul loves Timothy and has mentored him as a son would a father (v. 22)
- Paul loves Epaphroditus and 1) is relieved his illness didn’t kill him lest Paul have “sorrow upon sorrow” (v. 27), wants the Philippians to receive him with joy when he comes to them and honor him when he arrives (v. 29), and wants to receive word of Epaphroditus’s safe arrival so that he may be “less anxious” for his well-being (v. 28)
- Paul loves the Philippians and therefore wants to send Timothy to them soon so that he can hear they’re doing well and be cheered by that news (v. 19)
- Timothy loves the Philippians and is “genuinely concerned for [their] welfare” (vv. 19-20)
- Timothy also loves Paul and so “served with [him] in the gospel” as a son would a father (v. 22)
- Epaphroditus loves Paul and risked his life to bring the care package to Paul (i.e. “to complete what was lacking in your service to me) (v. 30)
- Epaphroditus loves the Philippians and is distressed because he knew the Philippians heard he was ill and were distressed about that, and he wanted to be able to go to them and let them know he is fine (v. 26)
- The Philippians love Paul, which is why they sent Epaphroditus to Paul with a care package to meet his need (v. 25)
- And the Philippians love Epaphroditus and so were distressed when they heard he was ill (v. 26)

So, if you’re keeping score, you can say that everyone loves everyone to the degree that they’re willing to die to help one another, distressed even at news of each other doing poorly, are distressed that others feel distress, and are eager, if possible, to be together again.

Now, we could look at this and say that Paul, Timothy, Epaphroditus, and the Philippians are some kind of exceptional group. But I think it’s more biblical to say that this is a picture of what the Lord does in the hearts and lives of his children. Think, for example, of all the ways the Lord

speaks of love at the center of the lives of believers. The first fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22 is love. Paul summarizes Christian obedience in Galatians 5:6 as “faith working through love.” When we’re exhorted to desire earnestly spiritual gifts for the edification of others, we’re first told to “pursue love and earnestly desire spiritual gifts (1 Cor 14:1). Jesus tells us that the world will know we are his disciples by our love for one another (John 13:35). If it is then true that the first fruit borne by the Spirit’s presence in our lives is love, that obedience requires faith working through love, that the life of a believer is the pursuit of more love, and that Jesus can say that love is the marker to the world that shows we are his disciples, then is it more likely to say that what we’re seeing in our text is an exceptional display or to say that this is what takes place in the lives of believers? I think it’s the latter. When the Lord saves us, he creates love within us. And that’s what Paul is demonstrating here. He’s laying out his plans, but more than that he’s holding up a picture for the Philippians. If there is division in the church at Philippi—and we know there is—then Paul is reminding them to fan the flame of love that the Spirit has put in their hearts for other believers.

Let me say two things to us about this. First, I think you all know what I’m talking about in your own experience. Tom said to me on Monday that he almost stopped in the middle of his sermon last week just because he was looking out at you all and thought about how much he loves you. I resonate with that, and I imagine you do too. Much of my morning prayer time each day leads to me aiming to pray for you but ending up spending much of that time thanking God for you because I find my heart drawn out to you with great affection. Let’s not take that for granted. That’s a gift of the Spirit in our lives—the main gift the Spirit gives us! And let’s make sure to fan the flame of that love and not let it grow cold. If we might think of it as a fire started by the Spirit, let’s not let it die down or die out, but let’s work to keep fanning it into greater and great flame.

Now, that’s one thing the Lord does in the life of a believer—he creates love. But that’s not all. This text also reminds us that God gives us a family.

### **God gives us a family**

The idea that believers are related to one another as a family actually started with Jesus. You’ll no doubt remember the scene. Someone approaches Jesus to note that his mother and brothers are wanting to speak to him, and he answers, stretching out his hand toward his disciples, saying, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matt 12:49-50). In other words, those who belong to the Lord are family. Again, this is Jesus’ idea, not some twenty-first century creation.

And you’ll note in our text this morning that Paul picks up on this idea from Jesus and applies it strongly. First, he speaks of Timothy, noting his appreciation and love for him, saying, “But you know Timothy’s proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel” (v. 22). When Paul speaks of how Timothy has served with him, he speaks of him as a son with a father. And this isn’t exceptional. He begins the letters of 1 and 2 Timothy referring to Timothy as “my true child in the faith” and “my beloved child.” And he doesn’t stop there. When Paul

tells them that he's going to send Epaphroditus to them he says, "I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother" (v. 25). He will go on to refer to him as his "fellow worker and fellow soldier, . . . and minister to my need, (v. 25), but he first title is "brother." And we know that Paul thinks of the Philippians this way as well since he wrote in 1:12, "I want you to know, *brothers*, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel." And just as a reminder of who we are dealing with when we talk about Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus, let's consider the background of these individuals who think of themselves as family. We know Paul was raised in a strong Jewish home. Timothy was the son of a Greek father and Jewish mother (Acts 16:1). And Epaphroditus most likely was named for the goddess Aphrodite by pagan parents who hoped this would invoke protection over their son.<sup>1</sup> In other words, there is very little that might connect them worldly or culturally speaking. This is a very unlikely group for Paul to refer to one as his son and the other as his brother. But this is what happens as we come to Christ.

When we become followers of Jesus Christ, we're not only given love to be poured out toward one another, we're also made part of a family. It doesn't matter whether you have any living biological family members or even know who your biological family members are. If you're a believer, then you're part of a family in the church. And this isn't some second-class family that we can take comfort in if we don't have real, true family, knowing that it's a poor substitute for what others get to experience who have "real" families better than ours. No, this is the most real, truest, and eternal family. I've told my own kids more than once that one of my most earnest prayers for them has been to see them firmly rooted in a local church because I want them to know a family long time after I'm gone. And what a gift I can point them to in saying, "Behold, your fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters." To the one who feels alone, "Behold, your family."

And let me urge you not to neglect this blessing. Seek out deeper relationships with men in the faith as fathers, women as mothers, and invest in others as children. Encourage one another as brothers and sisters. You are not alone. I know there has been loss for some of you this year. The next year will be more of the same, and this will continue until the resurrection. Family members will be lost. But the Lord has made all of us part of a family, a real family. Thank him for it, and let us seek to take full advantage of it in this year.

And finally, God not only creates love in us and gives us a family, but he also provides for us discipling examples.

### **God provides discipling examples for us**

Perhaps we still are wondering why Paul would throw this portion of text into the middle of his letter. Wouldn't it make more sense to mention that he's sending Timothy to them as well as Epaphroditus at the end of the letter? That's what he often does in every letter. He will wrap

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Johnson, *Philippians*, Reformed Expository Commentary, 180.

them up by sharing travel plans. So why interject this news about these men and what they're like—Timothy with genuine concern for their welfare and Epaphroditus as an honorable man who willingly risked his life to bless Paul—at this point in the letter?

I think the answer is because without saying it explicitly in our text, he is holding up these two men as models or examples of what he's been saying to the Philippians. He's told them to consider others as better than themselves and to look out for others' interests. And he's told them to not grumble or complain so that they might shine as lights in the world. He's ultimately pointed them to Jesus as the truest example of this. But they've not seen Jesus. They've not sat and watched him when he got bad news or had a difficult day. But they have seen Timothy. And they have seen Epaphroditus. And they have seen Paul. And that's what I think Paul is doing here. After telling them to consider the interests of others and count others as more significant than themselves, I think he's now pointing to these well-known men to say, "And here is an in-flesh example of what it looks like. Timothy is genuinely concerned for your welfare. You know he is. You've seen him. Epaphroditus was willing to risk his life for your sake. And both these men prize you so much they're willing and eager to come to you. Think of how these men live and imitate them. Follow their example."

Adding support to the idea that this is why Paul brings up these two men we read just a few verses later in 3:17, Paul saying, "Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us." Paul is holding up himself and these men as discipling examples for the Philippians.

And this is one of the key ways that discipleship works. D. A. Carson has asked, "How did you learn to pray? Why do Canadian children speak with Canadian accents? How do new Christians learn to talk Christianly, give, and develop godly habits of life?" Isn't it in the context of a local church where we are able to observe how mature Christians excel in these areas?<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, this is how most of us are disciple in the faith, isn't it? We pray by listening to others pray. We learn to give by watching others give and talk about God's faithfulness. We witness by watching others witness and hearing the testimonies of how others witnessed to them. If you're a believer then the Lord has brought you into a family that loves you and wants you to grow in Christ-likeness. So learn from them. Learn to imitate your fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters. That is what discipleship looks like.

I've often told my children that the most important things they'll learn in life won't come from conversations with their peers but with older, more mature believers in the faith. I got to see this in action a few weeks ago as we gathered for small group, and not only did I benefit from hearing older men and women in the faith share how they're thinking about and applying Scripture, but I listened as my children spoke up, noting how they were learning from the wisdom of these fathers and mothers the Lord has given them. This is, I will note, one of the

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<sup>2</sup> D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers*, 69-72.

reasons we attempt to make small groups very inter-generational. We want this to be an opportunity for us to learn from and imitate others in the faith. Again, this is the Lord's design.

The day I was preaching Barbara Perry's funeral, my parents came down. Before the service started, they were sitting over there to my right, by the windows. I sat down in front of them, and my dad leaned up and said, "I told your mom that if you can make it through this funeral then I'm confident that you can make it preaching mine." And I thought, "He's right." What he recognized was that this precious woman who had been a faithful presence in my life since I was a young college student had been to me a mother, and she was one who had taught me so much of what it means to live as a believer, simply by modeling it in front of me. She provided a discipling example. And that is the Lord's design.

So in light of this design by our Lord, let's strive to be discipling examples to others. You don't have to have the latest discipleship manual to teach another how to live as a Christian. Just invite them into your life to observe you and walk alongside you, and illustrate for them how you interact with your spouse, children, your neighbors, and fellow church members. Let us say alongside Paul, "Join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us" (3:17). And if you think, "But I so often mess up," then my response is, "Good." Someone is going to have to model repentance and confession. It doesn't come naturally to us to do this well, and so the Lord—by design—gives us opportunities to model that for others. That's part of the discipling process.

Let us look to other, mature Christians and focus on how we might imitate them in the faith. My prayer is that years from now many of us in the church would be able to say, "I learned how to walk as a Christian in this and that arena of life by watching some dear saints whom the Lord put in my life as fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters." And may many of us strive to be those who have many children in the faith.

The start of a year marks a time to look forward, but it is also a time to look back and consider our blessings. And this text allows us to consider our rich blessings in Christ. Not only has he lived, died, and risen from the dead for us, but he also has put love for one another in our hearts, made us part of a family, and given us the blessings of both being and having discipling models. Let us then live—as Paul has stated—in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ in this year. And let us give thanks for those blessings now as we come to the table. Amen.