

October 18, 2020

WHEN THE GOSPEL IS ONE'S SINGULAR PASSION

Philippians 1:1-11

*(1 of 13 in a series through Philippians)*

In his excellent commentary on the book of Philippians, Gordon Fee writes, “It does not take much reading of Paul’s letters to recognize that the gospel is the singular passion of his life.”<sup>1</sup> I would add that one can even say that you don’t have to read beyond the first chapter of his letter to the Philippians to realize the gospel is the singular passion of Paul’s life. He speaks of the Philippians’ partnership with him in the gospel (1:5), how he is imprisoned for the gospel (1:12, 16), how he rejoices in the advance of the gospel (1:12), and how he strives to live a life worthy of the gospel (1:27). But as easy as this is to see in and say about Paul, it really is an extraordinary reality and one that is challenging for us. I say that because I imagine that all of us would want this to be said about us—that above all else, we were most passionate about the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

But in practical terms, what does this even look like? What is the fruit of making the gospel your treasure? What does it look like to have the gospel at the center of your life? Perhaps there can be a thousand answers to that question, but I simply want to point out three things that Paul’s passion for the gospel brought about in his life. And because I do not think that these things are unique to Paul, I want to point them out as qualities that the gospel produces in the lives of anyone who is passionate about the gospel.

But before we look at those things that a gospel-focused life produces, let’s orient ourselves a bit to this letter that we’ll be looking at over the next thirteen weeks. Paul had founded the church at Philippi probably about a decade before this letter was written. You may remember from our study of Acts that in Acts 16 Paul, Silas, and Timothy had gone to Philippi after Paul had a vision of a man in Macedonia saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” Well, Philippi is the main city in the district of Macedonia, and when Paul went there they soon saw their first convert—a woman named Lydia, about whom it is said, “The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul” (Acts 16:14). After this, Paul and Silas were thrown in prison, when there was an earthquake and the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were loosened, only the prisoners didn’t escape. This led to Paul evangelizing the Philippian jailer and his family. And we could go on, but this was the beginning of the church in Philippi. And at the time Paul wrote this letter, we’re about ten years later, with Paul imprisoned in Rome (most likely—he was imprisoned a lot, so it could be elsewhere). But, as we’ll see, if we judge Paul’s location based on his attitude in this letter, it would be shocking to find out he was writing from prison, and I think this too is connected with his passion for the gospel. So, what does it look like when the gospel becomes central in our hearts and minds? Let me name a few things.

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 82.

## The gospel leads to a focus on God

Let's see if I can make an argument about what I mean and why this is the case before I show you Paul illustrating this in our text. The gospel is the good news about what God has done for us in Christ Jesus when we were sinners and rightfully deserving of his judgment. In other words, the gospel is about God's grace to us. God sent his Son to live, die, and be raised for us so that by faith we—sinners—might have forgiveness of sins and eternal life. That is the good news, and it is the clearest expression of God's love for us, which he initiated as we were in sin.

On the other hand, as God's creatures, the greatest commandment that we have been given is to love God. We might say it is to love the God who has loved us when we were unlovable and demonstrated his love for us when we were still his enemies. Therefore, we can say that we are commanded to love the God who first loved us. In other words, our love for God is a response to his love for us.

Now, let's try to bring this together. When we hold the gospel close to our hearts, it both creates a recognition of God's gracious love for us and, in turn, produces in us a love for him. Consequently one who treasures the gospel is one who recognizes all good in his life as the gift of God's grace and love and is stirred, in return, to love God as well. This means that one who treasures the gospel feels thankful to God for all good things, recognizes all good things as coming from God's hand, and—in love—longs for God to receive the praise and glory he deserves. In other words, the gospel leads to a passionate focus on God, and that's what we see in Paul.

First, after his greeting in verses 1-2 he writes in verse 3-4, "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." Do you see where Paul's thanks is directed? We might anticipate him saying, "Thank *you* for . . ." but he doesn't. He says, "I thank *my God* in all my remembrance of you." In other words, because he recognizes God as the God of all grace and as the giver of every perfect gift, Paul thanks God for the grace he sees in the Philippians' lives. And this continues.

In verse 6 Paul has just spoken of this rich grace that he's seen in the Philippians' lives, and he wants to note that he believes this will continue in their lives, but he doesn't express this in terms of confidence in their ability. He expresses this in terms of his confidence in God. He writes, "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."

In other words, Paul knows that if the Philippians are walking in grace it is because the Lord began that work in them, and as he watches them live out this life of grace, he only grows more confident that they do belong to Christ. And if that is true, then, he is confident that the Lord will preserve them to the end. He who called them and justified them will glorify them. And so

not only is his thanks directed to God in regard to the Philippians, but his confidence is in God in regard to the Philippians' perseverance in faith.

And finally, as he prays for them in verses 9-10, he prays for them to the end that they will be to the "glory and praise of God" (v. 11). This is Paul's recognition that God's saving work in individuals is done to the end that we might be to the praise of God. This is why when Paul speaks of the saving work that God has done in and for his people in Ephesians 1:3-14, he begins it with the words, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" before talking about all that God has done for us, and then, after he has spoken of these things ends with the words, "to the praise of his glory." Our lives are to lead to God's blessing and praise and glory.

Do you see then how Paul—because the gospel is about God's loving and gracious and initiating activity in our lives—is consumed with a vision of God? If there is good, God is to be thanked. If there is hope, it is because we can have confidence in God. And if there is reason to praise, then God is the one who should be praised. The gospel leads to a focus on God in our lives.

And so it's worth asking if this is true of us. Do we find ourselves thinking much about God? Are we moved to thank him and praise him when we see good things because we know he is the giver of every good gift? Do we express confidence in him as we walk through life? Do we praise him in all things? Does God occupy our thoughts? If not, then maybe we need to pray for the gospel to take deeper root in our hearts. One thing the puritans used to say is that if your mind drifts from thinking about God when you are trying to pray, maybe it is a sign that you need to be thinking about him more often. But perhaps we might say that it is equally a sign that we need for focused attention of what he has done for us through his Son in the gospel, for the gospel creates a Godward focus in our lives. But let's continue on. We also see that the gospel leads to love and unity.

### **The gospel leads to love and unity**

When we go back to verse 3 and see Paul thanking God as he remembers the Philippians, we will specifically see that it's because the gospel has brought about love and unity. Here's what Paul writes: "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."

What Paul identifies as the reason for which he is thanking God is their partnership in the gospel. What is he talking about? Well, we get a least a slice of what he's referring to later in the letter when Paul writes in 4:15-16, "And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again."

Now when he says "in the beginning of the gospel," I think he's referring to the beginning of their Christian lives. In other words, Paul is saying, "From the time you first heard the gospel and believed." It's the same thing he's saying in 1:3 when he says, "from the first day until now."

What have they done from the moment they first came to faith? They partnered with Paul in the work of advancing the gospel. They helped meet his financial needs so that he could move forward in preaching the gospel. They no doubt continued testifying to the gospel themselves. They, in essence, said to Paul, “We’re with you in all that needs to take place for the gospel to advance.” And now Paul says that when he thinks of the Philippians, he finds himself thanking God for the partnership they have in advancing and upholding the gospel.

And he continues this note, saying in verses 7-8, “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.”

When Paul says “it is right for me to feel this way about you all,” I think he’s referring to everything that he’s written to this point. It’s right for him to thank God for them. It’s right for him to pray for them with joy. It’s right for him to have confidence that God will preserve them. Why? Because he’s seen so much grace in their lives (notice how he says “for you are all partakers of grace with me”), and this has led to a deep love for them, which is why he says “I hold you in my heart” and “I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.” In other words, when two people make their lives about the gospel, there is created between them a love and unity. And the gospel alone can produce this kind of unity. We do not forge our unity as believers around things that are too weak to hold us together across all kinds of divides. Our unity is grounded in the gospel. D. A. Carson is right to say, “On the face of it, nothing else is strong enough to hold together the extraordinary diversity of people who constitute many churches: men and women, young and old, blue collar and white, healthy and ill, fit and flabby, different races, different incomes, different levels of education, different personalities. What holds us together? It is the gospel.”<sup>2</sup> And not only does it hold us together, but when we see another love the gospel it raises our affections for them. In fact, Paul sees those affections we have for our brothers and sisters who love the gospel as the very affection of Christ in us. That’s what the gospel does, and it’s why we try to make it our focus as a church.

I hope you’ve experienced this reality. I remember reading Paul saying to the Galatians that he knows they would have plucked their own eyes out and given them to him if they could, and I thought, “Good grief, Paul, think a little much of yourself?” I thought I’d never speak that way. Then, when our family spent a couple of years in Louisville, I remember sitting and listening to Ryan Fullerton at Immanuel Baptist Church preach one morning, and he was simply holding up the glory that we are justified by faith alone in the work of Christ alone, and I found that my heart was not only drawn in love to the Lord but also toward this brother who was proclaiming the gospel. And in that moment it hit me. Paul wasn’t saying that he knew he was worthy of the Galatians’ love and affection; he simply knew that when someone upholds the gospel before you it creates the very affection of Christ in our hearts for them, and that is a beautiful reality when you can see it in a church full of people who treasure the gospel. So, let’s pray that we’ll grow

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<sup>2</sup> D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 19.

more and more in our love for the gospel and, consequently, in our unity and affection for one another.

Now, let's look at one more thing the gospel does. The gospel leads to us making gospel-advancing prayers.

### **The gospel leads to gospel-advancing prayers**

Look at Paul's prayer in verses 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 praise and glory of God."

And with that prayer we've come full circle. The gospel opens our eyes to the love of God and produces love in our hearts—for both God and others. And Paul has seen that in these Philippian believers. But he wants that love to abound more and more, and the reason is because he knows that love in our hearts is the foundation of every good work. This is why Paul could write to the Galatians, "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal 5:14). If you love your neighbor, you won't steal from him, or murder him, or bear false witness against him, or go after his wife, or covet what is his. You see, love is the foundation for good works. This is why Paul is praying that their love may abound more and more. He wants them to live holy lives.

But, on the other hand, he isn't simply talking about anything termed "love" or some kind of ignorant affection, if you will. He longs for their love to grow "with knowledge and discernment." As they grow in love, he wants them growing in their knowledge of the Lord and his Word. As they grow in love, he wants them to grow in their discernment of right and wrong, or what is good and best. And the reason he wants their love to abound with knowledge and discernment is "so they [they] may approve what is excellent and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness (v. 10).

This sounds remarkably like Romans 12:2 where Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." On that text I argued that what Paul is telling us is that as we continue to renew our minds to what God has revealed to us as true, good, right, and beautiful, we will find ourselves seeing what God has spoken of as good and will see it as good. Over time, we will train our minds and hearts to begin to see what God approves of as good in our own minds as well. In other words, our minds and desires will grow into conformity to the Lord's will so that we approve of what he has deemed good.

That is what Paul is noting here. As our love abounds with knowledge and discernment, our hearts and minds are conformed to the heart and mind of our Lord in such a way that what is good and excellent seems good and desirable to us. We "approve [of] what is excellent." And as

we desire what is truly good and act on it, we are walking in good works so that we live God-honoring, gospel-advancing lives.

But what I don't want us to miss is that this is a prayer. Paul began verse 9 saying, "And it is my prayer . . ." In other words, the gospel has done such a work in Paul's own heart that as he prays for others, he prays in such a way that his aim is for things in their lives that would advance the gospel. He's not primarily praying for their health or wealth, for example, though there's nothing wrong with praying for healing or that someone would get a job or be able to make their mortgage payment. But what he prioritizes are those things that will most further and advance the gospel in this world. And as he contemplates those things, they shape his prayers.

That's what I want us to long for as well—to pray gospel-advancing prayers. And one way we can do that is to study Paul's prayers, for example, or places where God shows us his desire for us as his children and pray accordingly. Oh how we might see greater growth and joy and unity if we began praying for one another to abound more and more in love and knowledge and discernment so that we might approve what is excellent and so be pure and blameless. And as we do so, recognize—as we began—that it all "comes through Jesus Christ" and so all glory and praise should be directed toward our God. May we do that now as we come to the table. Amen.