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CHURCH**
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1. Total Unity

Philippians 1: 1-11

It was nice being at home over the Christmas holidays, but I was so excited to come back to church. In this passage it says that Paul rejoiced when remembering the Philippian church. I'm not Paul but I feel a similar warmth and affection for King's Church and everybody here. Paul opens with thanksgiving, rejoicing and prayer – which is how we should open our year, too.

Paul uses a standard structure for opening a letter, with a fairly formal way of greeting people and outlining the themes of the letter. However, he infuses every element of it with the gospel, making what could have just been a dry opening statement into a passage that is rich with theology. Paul doesn't waste a single word. Verse 2 is just one sentence, but it is in a sense the Gospel! This is his summary of themes, but in doing so he is also celebrating the church in Philippi. The qualities Paul celebrates in the Philippian church reflect unity, which is something we should always be aiming for.

Totally United in Community

"Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons, Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy."

Immediately from Paul's introduction we see a view of leadership that totally undermines any sense of it being hierarchical. Paul, the man who wrote the majority of the New Testament and established churches throughout Europe, describes himself

with no pomp and circumstance, but as a servant. Contrast that to the way Donald Trump or Alan Sugar would enter a room.

Then he addresses the letter to all God's saints, as well as the church leaders (overseers and deacons). Notice the priority order there – no chance for pride when you are just an “as well as”. This is a letter aimed at a community. Not that it doesn't respect leaders – we know from Paul's writing that he honours church elders. It's just that it is not a status symbol.

We're all leaders in some way, but that is not a position of superiority. When we get this in our head, it changes our thinking about what church leadership should look like.

The phrase “*all the saints in Christ Jesus*” should change our idea of what a saint is, and also show us a bit of the communal nature of this letter. The idea of a saint is someone who is holy and set apart – that's true, except that's all of us who have been accepted Jesus forgiveness. Some Christians do things worthy of celebration and respect, but that's only by the power of Christ. We're all saints.

Paul really likes the Philippians! Look at this convoluted last sentence: “*Always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy.*” What on earth does that mean? The thanksgiving that he mentions in verse three is tripled. Every prayer. All of them. Always.

Later on in this passage, Paul's prayer turns to petition, he's praying for God to work more in them. The rest of the letter has doctrine and theology to unpack. But he starts with thanksgiving, and this passage suggests that he does that in every prayer, which seems to be a lot of the time. Do we pray regularly for King's Church? And if we do, do we open our time by thanking God for the church? Paul models that we should.

Totally United on Mission

“...because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. 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.”

One of the reasons he is so thankful is that this church have been relentless partners in the Gospel. Part of their partnership is in a financial gift that they have sent to Paul in prison. Paul relied on the generosity of Christians. I know that as a church we give to

evangelistic causes, supporting the work of people who seek to share the Gospel. That's one form of partnership and it's great. We can't all tour the country seeing dozens saved every week. Paul would cheer on and celebrate this kind of partnership.

There's more to it than that, though. They are defenders and confirmers of the Gospel. Paul didn't spend his whole time in Philippi, he was travelling. Their partnership must have been in everyday evangelism, in their work places, with their neighbours.

There's a strong chance that the Philippians suffered – it says later on that they are partakers in grace in his imprisonment. The grammar of this could actually suggest that Paul knew Philippian Christians who were similarly persecuted for their defence and confirmation of the Gospel.

Paul talks about God completing a good work in us. We'll hear more about this when we reach the famous passage about working out our salvation in fear and trembling. It's interesting to note here, however, that the good work Paul emphasises is being done in us, not through us. The participation in the Gospel is not the most important thing about our salvation. It's the work God is doing in us, and out of that comes our participation in the Gospel.

Mission is not cheering from the sidelines as a select few share the Gospel. It's a communal, local calling of every church. That's how we partner in the Gospel.

Totally United in the Gospel

"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 defence and confirmation of the Gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus."

People love to bond over shared experiences. If you met someone new for the first time, chances are the first thing you did in that conversation is to find something in common with them. It's most exciting when you find someone who shares your passion that not many other people do. I wrote my university dissertation on an American author called Willa Cather that no one else has heard of. When I meet someone else who is a big fan, it's like finding someone else who is part of a secret club.

Yet the most powerful experience, the defining aspect of who I am, is not the bands I listen to or the films I watch. It's the forgiveness of Christ and the transforming power

of His Spirit in me. It's such an incredible event to take place that when you meet other Christians, you immediately have the most powerful connection with them. They are part of this same global family and have also experienced the phenomenal grace and forgiveness of Jesus.

We are called to love everyone, and many other letters and even parts of Philippians are about loving the people around us. But here Paul has reserved some special affection for his fellow brothers and sisters, his fellow people in Christ. I think that's ok. I think it's good to honour the work that God is doing in other people. This isn't to boast – it's to turn our praise back to God, who is the one doing it all anyway. To an extent, we should meet Christians and see them differently – as fellow partakers in the gospel, as soldiers in the battle alongside us, as our brothers and our sisters.

The same grace that saved you is the grace that saved Paul, that saved Martin Luther and also Martin Luther King. This is not an exclusive club – grace is all encompassing and for everyone. It's a way into the best, most diverse and constantly improving community there is on earth!

Totally United in Love

"And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment."

Paul changes his prayer from thanksgiving for the church, to petition for them, yet the topic remains the same – the centrality of Christ and the outworking of that in our lives. What does it look like for God continuing the good work in us until the day of Jesus Christ? It's that we learn more and more how to love each day. To abound is from the same route as abundance – it just means to have lots of. So his prayer is that the church will have lots of love.

Love is not a sentiment, it is an action. For Paul, it was knowing that they were praying for him, that they had sent money and people to be with him. We know what love looks like from the famous wedding passage – love is patient, kind, truthful, hopeful, not boastful, arrogant, rude or envious. Our united community in the church should express all of these qualities. It's not always obvious the best way to express this love because the term has become quite watered down in our society – that's why knowledge and discernment are needed. Love isn't easy or even our default setting, which is why we need to pray for it to abound more and more, and for it to express itself as actions.

People often use the phrase *“God’s plan for the earth is the church.”* Here’s why: The love of God, which is between the three parts of God, but also between God and his people, is best expressed in the church. If the hope of the earth is God’s love, then the church is the way in which God’s love is expressed. That’s a responsibility, but also a calling and a reason for existence.

Totally United in Christ

“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.”

This is the big finale of just the opening to the letter. All the ideas we’ve seen dotted throughout this introduction will turn up again. One of the main themes that Paul writes about in Philippians is the centrality of Christ to everything. From his opening words, *“servants of Christ Jesus,”* and his description of the church as *“Saints in Christ Jesus in Philippi,”* Paul has brought every single part of his writing back to Christ.

Looking back at the passage, we can see:

- Servants of Christ Jesus
- saints in Christ Jesus
- Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ
- bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ
- I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus
- be pure and blameless for the day of Christ
- fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Community, mission and true, Godly love are all only made possible by Jesus Christ.

This last section of the introduction calls the Church in Philippi and, in this case, all Christians, to *“Approve what is excellent”* and *“be filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Christ Jesus.”* This is a high calling, and one that we are incapable of doing ourselves.

Unity is not the default setting of Christianity. We were designed to be united with God, yet we rejected him – all of us did – yet we chose independence and a warped idea of freedom over the true freedom that comes with living as God intended – in relationship

with him. The fallout of that is that we are often self-serving. Unity and self-interest tend to work against one another, and you can all guess which is easier.

But when Jesus died on the cross, in spite of being the only person who has ever lived wholly for something other than himself, he took on the punishment for our rebellion, our selfishness and, in doing so, allowed us to have our relationship with God restored. He also sent his Spirit to live in us, so we have God in us on earth.

This is the context through which we understand love, mission, community and grace.

True unity is only possible through the saving and redeeming work of Christ. It tells us to pursue excellence, purity and blamelessness. The most excellent, the most pure and the most blameless person ever was Christ.

This is an ongoing process and the end game is the day of Christ. Until then, it's like we've had a new heart of flesh installed in the place of a heart of stone and it is only slowly pumping this new, fresh blood around our body. It'll take our whole life to flush out all the old dust that our old heart of stone pumped around, but the longer it's at work in us, the more it takes effect.

That's what the fruit of righteousness is – it's Jesus at work in us, making us pure and blameless, teaching us to love more and more. It's only possible by Jesus.

Questions

- What are you thankful for as we enter the New Year?
- How do you think we create a community, not a hierarchy?
- What does unity in mission look like?
- Does seeing all saints as united in grace change your perspective of other Christians?
- What does it mean for love to abound more in our lives? In our church?
- What role does Jesus play in our understanding of unity?



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