

Today we begin a new series of messages from the book of Philippians. If you have your Bibles go ahead and open them to Philippians Chapter 1.

The book of Philippians, as is the case with most books in the New Testament, started out as a letter written to young churches in various cities. Philippians was written by the Apostle Paul to the church in the city of Philippi.

Philippi sat on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea and on a major Roman thoroughfare. As a result, it was a rich and busy place, one of the main centers of life in Macedonia, and consequently was “home” to the adherents of many different religions, from both east and west. It had the distinction of being a Roman colony.. It possessed a distinct civic pride because it was a Roman colony. It promoted Latin as its official language and hosted numerous Roman citizens.

I share that with you because though this is an ancient letter, the culture in which it was written is not all that different than ours. In fact, I sometime wonder if America will go the way of Rome.

Paul writes this letter from prison in Rome. It was about 60 years after the time of Jesus. He helped establish the church during his 2nd Missionary journey through the region, and then wrote this letter back to encourage them.

The theme of the letter is finding joy in the midst of struggle, hope in the midst of uncertainty, and maintaining a healthy faith in stressful and crazy times. I felt these themes could really speak to our hearts in the midst of the current unrest and cultural angst in our nation.

Right now we find ourselves in the midst of a pandemic that has presented us with unprecedented stress. We have highlighted occasions of racial injustice and senseless attacks on law enforcement officers. We also have riots and unrest in many of our nation’s cities, fires and hurricanes destroying different sections of our nation, not to mention a high stake presidential election.

Things are very strange and crazy feeling. So, now more than ever we need to be reminded how to have a stable, meaningful connection with Jesus. So, I'm calling this series: Healthy Faith in a Crazy Culture.

Let's read Paul's opening greetings in his letter...Read verses 1-8.

Paul opens his letter greeting them very warmly, lovingly, tenderly reminding them that he holds them in his heart. He longs for them with the affection of Jesus.

He also makes it clear that he is absolutely thrilled about how readily they have embraced Jesus and the Christian faith. And he really emphasizes that they are to keep growing as Christ-followers reminding them of a very encouraging promise, a promise you and I can wholeheartedly rest in today. He says, "...being confident in this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Phil. 1:6

That is such a reassuring verse. Dr. Wayne Spriggs mentioned this last week. It's one of my favorites verses because it reminds me that despite the setbacks from time to time God is doing a great work in me. It's his work. He's gonna see it through. Whew...so grateful for this!

With that said, we have to cooperate with his work in us. Later in Philippians, Paul encourages the Christ-followers to, "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil. 2:12-13). In other words, God is doing his part. And you and I can focus on doing our part in yielding and cooperating with him. As we do that, we will become what God wants us to be.

As Paul is affirming them, he's also regularly praying for them in this very process of growing as Christians.

Now, one of the things I've learned over the years is you can learn a lot about a person and what matters to them by listening to their prayers. And Paul's prayer in verses 9-11 reveals Paul's understanding of how our lives as believers can bring glory and praise to God.

Would you like your life to honor and glorify God? You're here today, so I would bet that every one of you in this room this morning wants that. We don't want our lives to bring disgrace to God, we don't get up every morning and think, "How can I make God look bad today?" We don't want our lives to be a downer for God. We want our lives to bring glory and praise to God.

And Paul's prayer tells us how this is possible. Let's read Paul's prayer: 1:9-11.

In essence Paul is saying: growing in your ability to relate to one another in loving, Christ-like ways brings glory to God. If you want your life to bring glory to God, one of the best ways to do that is to continually expand your ability to relate with others in more and more loving ways. Just as Jesus said: love God more and more...and love others more and more.

Now, many of you are familiar with the lengthy description of love Paul gives in 1 Cor. 13. Paul tells us all these beautiful things about love. And whether you're at a wedding or in your personal Bible reading, we come to the end of 1 Cor. 13, "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

And right there we typically stop reading, we stop quoting, but that is not the end of Paul's thought. It continues on into 1 Cor. 14:1 where he says, "Follow the way of love." He's just told us all these incredible things about love and now he says, "Follow the way of love." That word "follow" in the original has way more force to it than the English communicates. It literally means, "Chase it...pursue it...hunt it down...." It's actually the same word Jesus uses when he confronts Saul on the Road to Damascus when he asks, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" This is the positive use of that word and it calls us to hunt love down, relentlessly pursue it, chase it, accost it.

Never is the call to love as Jesus loves more relevant. Never have the challenges to this kind of love been more prevalent. Our culture is as divided as it has ever been.

Loving those who hold vastly different opinions than our own has never been more difficult or more needed. The vastly different impassioned

opinions and perspectives on wearing masks alone has many in our culture drawing lines and building walls, dividing even those within the church. Understanding what love looks like in these days is stretching us.

Thankfully, embedded in his prayer is more of his understanding of how we might pursue love and grow in our ability to love.

Paul says, “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you may be able to discern what is best...”

In other words, growing in your ability to relate in loving ways occurs as you:

Enhance your discernment.

This is where knowledge and depth of insight plays a key role.

Knowledge refers to having a firm grasp of spiritual principles that guide you in your relationships with one another and the world.

Depth of insight refers to moral and spiritual understanding and application of those principles.

Whether it's your spouse, your kids, or your neighbors and co-workers, growing in your ability to relate to another in loving ways hinges on your knowledge and understanding of God and his Word and his ways.

As knowledge and understanding of God and his ways increase in you, you are better equipped to make healthy and constructive choices about what you say and what you do and how you treat one another. Paul is teaching us that knowledge and depth of insight enhances your discernment about how you can love others well in the situations you find them.

Let me give you a specific example of how knowledge and insight of God's principles impact your ability to love well.

One of the most significant relational principles I know of in the Bible is the virtue of humility. Humility is literally called for, illustrated, encouraged, and recommended from Genesis to Revelation.

The Bible talks about humility frequently. But most people, including Christians are very fuzzy about what it really is and what it looks like. Do you know humility when you see it? Most of us don't. Biblical humility is much more than most people think.

Paul refers to it as a pro-social virtue forming the foundation of unity. This is because when you cultivate humility into your life and when you practice humility it enables you to relate in loving ways.

So, what are some of the observable characteristics of humility?

Understanding your place in the world: God's God—You're not.

Regular surrender and adoration of God—recognizing he's Lord of all

Listening to others carefully is a characteristic of humility

Considering the perspective of others

Displaying a learning attitude rather than a knower attitude

Choosing to serve rather than be served

Willingness to collaborate

Willingness to give others credit where due

Displaying patience

Willingness to set aside your preferences for another.

These are just a few of the characteristics associated with the virtue of humility which the Bible consistently calls us to. Growing in your knowledge and depth of insight, your understanding of and application of humility is part of how your love abounds more and more.

Now, as you practice the ways of God in your relationships, you establish a loving style of relating and you will realize increasing levels of purity and blamelessness.

9 "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you may be ... pure and blameless for the day of Christ."

Establish your purity and blamelessness.

Discerning what is best from God's Word and then actually doing it leads to purity and a non-offensive life. As you get to know God and as you get to know his Word and as you practice his teaching and mimic his love you develop a life that is more and more pure and blameless. In other words,

you won't be going around wounding people with your attitudes, your words or your actions.

Finally in the first part of verse 11, Paul reveals in his prayer that enhancing your discernment and developing your purity and blamelessness allows Jesus to develop the fruit of righteousness in your life which is essentially the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22 -- love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control.

Allow Jesus to develop the fruit of righteousness in your life.

This is where cooperating with the Holy Spirit who is actively working in our lives to make us more like Christ comes in. This is where relying on the Holy Spirit to fill you and empower you to live out the Christ life comes in.

Remember, this is a prayer of Paul. He's asking God to do something in us. He's asking God to increase our ability to love by enhancing our discernment, enabling us to be pure and blameless, and to fill us with the fruit of the Spirit or the fruit of righteousness. Paul's asking God to do this in us, but it calls for our cooperation.

Paul is confident that God will bring this growth process to completion, but we must cooperate. We must yield. We must do our part as God does his part.

Paul wants your love to abound. He wants you to have greater knowledge of love and a greater understanding of how to apply love to those in your life.

So, as your discernment in how to do that is enhanced, and as you grow in your ability to love others well, you enjoy increased purity and blamelessness, and Jesus is able to develop his fruit of righteousness in your life.

And then, Paul concludes his prayer letting us know that learning to love others in greater and greater ways brings glory and praise to God.

So, let's think it through again. As our ability to relate with others in loving ways abounds, more and more, we glorify God with our lives more and more and more. And so, it becomes a positive feedback loop: The more

you abound in love, the more you glorify God. And that is what our ultimate purpose and desire is.

Conclusion – So what do these verses call us to do?

Enabling your love to abound more and more starts with knowledge and depth of insight. Friends, this mean you and I have to keep ourselves exposed to God's Word on a regular basis—in our private times, in a small group context, and in a corporate gathering.

Notice I said, AND. We have to keep learning and studying and understanding how to apply and practice. And I believe it takes all three.

Are you keeping yourself exposed to God's word? If no, what one change could you make in your life to open your heart wider to God's word?

Restart your personal devotional reading times?

Join a small group or one of our Growth Groups?

Refresh your corporate worship service attendance?

This is worthy...because abounding love brings glory to God!!