

Gospel Prayer

Philippians 1:1-11¹

Introduction

Better Together: I'm a sucker for good sports movies (add Denzel Washington and *chef's kiss*). *Remember the Titans*?² Set in 1971 around forced integration of High Schools in Alexandria, VA. It's told with some cinematic liberty (a few fast linebackers didn't defeat centuries of racism with one successful HS football season) but the themes and appeal are undeniable (a group of misfit HS kids from VA, some from the white HS, others from the black HS, throw in a new QB from California and stir the pot). The high point of most sports movies is the halftime speech. In this case, the team is getting beaten badly in the first half and Coach Denzel starts in on some half-hearted platitudes: "Win or lose, we're gonna walk out of this stadium tonight with our heads held high. Do your best. That's all anybody can ask for." But the star player responds: "With all due respect, you demanded more of us. You demanded perfection. Now, I ain't saying that I'm perfect, 'cause I'm not. And I ain't gonna never be. None of us are. But we have won every single game we have played till now. **So this team is perfect.**" A *team*. Different players, different positions, different skill levels **but their success is not determined by individual skill but team performance.**

- We're stronger together than we are on our own. We were never meant to do this thing called Christianity by ourselves. We were called to work "together" for the advancement of the "gospel." **Our success rises and falls, not on individual skill, but on our ability to work together.**

Philippi: ¹¹ So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days (Acts 16:11-12).

- Roman colony, Mediterranean coast (modern Greece).
- Hodge-podge church planting team (Lydia, Demon-possessed, Roman jailor, Paul and Silas). Spiritually-minded entrepreneur, abuse victim, militar man, Jewish evangelists.
 - Went outside the city to Lydia. Saved the girl from abuse even though it got them beaten and arrested. Prevented the suicide of the jailor by not running away.
- This is a strange collection for a core team. They are ethnically, religiously, socioeconomically "diverse." They wouldn't understand each other at all.

¹ Παῦλος καὶ Τιμόθεος δοῦλοι Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ πᾶσιν τοῖς ἁγίοις ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν Φιλίπποις σὺν ἐπισκόποις καὶ διακόνοις, ² χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη ἀπὸ θεοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. ³ Εὐχαριστῶ τῷ θεῷ μου ἐπὶ πάσῃ τῇ μνηίᾳ ὑμῶν ⁴ πάντοτε ἐν πάσῃ δεήσει μου ὑπὲρ πάντων ὑμῶν, μετὰ χαρᾶς τὴν δέησιν ποιούμενος, ⁵ ἐπὶ τῇ κοινωνίᾳ ὑμῶν εἰς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον ἀπὸ τῆς πρώτης ἡμέρας ἄχρι τοῦ νῦν, ⁶ πεπειθῶς αὐτὸ τοῦτο, ὅτι ὁ ἐναρξάμενος ἐν ὑμῖν ἔργον ἀγαθὸν ἐπιτελέσει ἄχρι ἡμέρας Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ. ⁷ καθὼς ἐστὶν δίκαιον ἐμοὶ τοῦτο φρονεῖν ὑπὲρ πάντων ὑμῶν διὰ τὸ ἔχειν με ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑμᾶς, ἔν τε τοῖς δεσμοῖς μου καὶ ἐν τῇ ἀπολογία καὶ βεβαιώσει τοῦ εὐαγγελίου συγκοινωνοῦς μου τῆς χάριτος πάντας ὑμᾶς ὄντας. ⁸ μάρτυς γάρ μου ὁ θεὸς ὡς ἐπιποθῶ πάντας ὑμᾶς ἐν σπλάγχχνις Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ. ⁹ καὶ τοῦτο προσεύχομαι, ἵνα ἡ ἀγάπη ὑμῶν ἐπιμάλλῃ καὶ μάλλον περισσεύῃ ἐν ἐπιγνώσει καὶ πάσῃ αἰσθήσει ¹⁰ εἰς τὸ δοκιμάζειν ὑμᾶς τὰ διαφέροντα, ἵνα ἦτε εἰλικρινεῖς καὶ ἀπρόσκοποι εἰς ἡμέραν Χριστοῦ, ¹¹ πεπληρωμένοι καρπὸν δικαιοσύνης τὸν διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς δόξαν καὶ ἔπαινον θεοῦ.

² The story of how hundreds of years of racism were defeated by a few fast linebackers in one good football season.

- Their diversity is a great strength and an opportunity to demonstrate the gospel's power (what else could bring them together), but only if they can remain united in Christ.

Thesis: Writing a paper in school, you must have a clear thesis (a main point). This letter has a main point: ²⁷ Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel (1:27). We'll talk specifics of this verse in a few weeks when we get to it

- Why would he call them to unity? Because disunity was a problem. And he loved them enough to help them fix their problem. He loved this church enough to have his whole ministry judged by their record. But he knew their relationships were fractured by rivalry, jealousy, vanity, selfishness, and personal differences.
 - Church would be easy if it weren't for the people.
 - You know what you get when you have two Baptists together? Three opinions.
 - Man rescued after stranded on a desert island. His rescuers notice three huts and asks what they are. #1 House. #2 Church. #3 Church I used to go to before I had a disagreement with the pastor.
- Because of sin, we are prone to fracturing, enmity, competition, jealousy, and strife.

Others Focused: Everything flows into and out of this main point. Even these *introductory words* illustrate this main point. Every aspect of the letter demonstrates Paul's themes, even the introduction. ¹ Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

- Doesn't start with his qualifications, i.e., apostle (e.g., Gal, Eph, Col). He doesn't demand respect. He comes as a servant. If he is going to call *them* to humility like Christ (cf. 2:5) then he must be humble (*contra* Rev. Dr. Bishop Pastor Overseer).
- He describes himself and Timothy (his son in the faith) as co-laborers, both as servants, elevated to the same position (*contra* controlling leaders who are afraid someone might outshine them; positive example, John Ewart).
- He address the *saints* first (not the big wig overseers and deacons).

Everything he does is a reminder of humility. He is others-focused.

Intercessory Prayer: He starts his letter with a prayer, but it is a **prayer for others** (i.e., intercessory prayer). We are **selfish pray-ers** (even though virtually all NT prayers are intercessory). Rather than praying for the glory of God, the good of others, the lost and hurting, we spend all our time asking God to give us things (e.g., "want monster").

- This week, God has impressed on *my* heart, as I prepare to teach Paul's prayer, that I would *pray* it for you! As you hear these words, by God's grace and in the power of his Spirit, know that I pray and feel this *for you*.
- It is such a privilege to lift someone up in prayer.

1. Prayer of Confidence (vv. 3-6)

³ I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ 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.

God's Glory First to Last: This section talks about Paul's thankfulness for the Philippians (talk more about in the second point), but it starts with God (I thank my God, v. 3) and ends with God (to the glory and praise of God, v. 11).

God Confidence: ⁶ And I am sure (confident) of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

- Paul's confidence is not in the Philippians' hard work or his own apostolic power but in the God who never fails.
- Have you ever started something you didn't finish? DIY, book, class, sport, learning an instrument, etc. God doesn't start anything he won't finish.
- If your hope is in yourself, then your confidence will always be limited. You know that you are not perfect, you fail all the time. But if your hope is in God then you can be completely confident.
 - We can live with "confident certainty" because the center of our hope is not "in human abilities or achievements but in the character and acts of God" (Hawthorne).
- My friend planted is a church planter in Denver, Colorado. He said one of the keys to planting a church is "not leading in fear, but leading in confidence that God is building his church." Jesus said he will build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.
 - This gives me hope as we plant a church in Philly. On my own, the whole thing will fail and fall apart. But it's not up to me. I can **work hard** not in the knowledge that my hard work will guarantee success but in the confidence that God began a good work that he promises to complete!

Eschatological Hope: Paul continually has his hope on his final destination (the day of Jesus Christ, v. 6; the day of Christ, v. 10) He talks about dying being a win because he will be with Christ. **It's baffling how many people live their lives as if they won't one day stand face-to-face with their maker.**

- This always makes Paul work harder. His confidence in God doesn't cause him to be lazy or tentative, but to be eager and strive harder.
- Confidence in God fuels our work for him. If we fail, no big deal because he never does. If we mess up, no big deal because he never does. If we say the wrong words, he'll still get the glory.
- If we keep our eyes on Jesus we will work harder, with more joy, than if we focus on ourselves (which pushes us to hedge our bets and minimize our risk).

Application: Do you have confidence that God will finish what he started? Do you have confidence that God is doing something in and with your life?

- Confidence is not “an autonomous, self-generated virtue.” (Bloom). Confidence comes from faith, from trust, from seeing God’s character and actions and responding accordingly.
- The gospel reminds us, it is not the *amount* of our faith that saves (or even sustains) us but the *object* of our faith. A little faith in Christ is infinitely more secure than all the faith in yourself or the things of this world. “If we are faithless, he remains faithful — for he cannot deny himself” (2 Tim. 2:13). “For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39).
- *He Will Hold Me Fast:* When I fear my faith will fail / Christ will hold me fast / When the tempter would prevail / He will hold me fast / I could never keep my hold / Through life’s fearful path / For my love is often cold / He must hold me fast.

Some of you come in here tonight and think, “I’m never gonna get this right. I’ve messed up too much.” And you’re right. You’re not gonna “get this right,” but **God is**. God started the work in your life and he’s going to finish it.

- Sometimes we strategize too much and desire God too little, we rely on programs not prayer and trust our ability and not God’s (story of Ms. Roberta call, couldn’t do it on my own, God did it).

2. Prayer of Affection (vv. 7-8)

⁷ 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. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Thankful: Paul’s attitude is confident in God and thankful for this special church.

- He views each member of this congregation as a **gift from God**. ³ I thank my God in **all** my remembrance of you, ⁴ **always** in every prayer of mine for you **all** making my prayer with joy. “Paul is not being thoughtlessly repetitive but deliberately emphatic” (Silva).
- The Christian community is a gift from God: “The Christian cannot take for granted the privilege of living together with other Christians.” The community of God’s people is to be embraced and welcomed, warts and all. It isn’t just about loving God it is about loving the people of God.
- Are you thankful for the people God has put in your life? This kind of attitude toward other people is both an **overflow** and a **choice**. It is an overflow of your own experience of God’s love and a choice to trust God more than your feelings.

Koinonia: Specifically, Paul has reason to rejoice because of your partnership (κοινωνία) in the gospel from the first day until now and partakers with (συγκοινωνούς) me of grace (partnership, fellowship, participation, etc.).

- Yes, they partnered with him financially. They didn't abandon him. They supported his ministry. But, most importantly, they participated spiritually in the experience of God's grace. They are united by a deep bond in Christ.
- "Christian community means we belong to one another through and in Jesus Christ."
- There is a deep unity the world doesn't understand that comes from a shared experience of salvation (gospel), a shared life found in Christ (community), and a shared mission to take the name of Jesus to every corner of the globe (mission).
- The gospel has to be the center of what unites us. It's what keeps the church from being a "like me" club. We are not looking for external uniformity, but internal unity. What holds us together are not common interests, hobbies, politics, tradition, experiences, but always and truly the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church will never be a priority if Christ is not your treasure. You will not love God's people if you do not love God.

Don't Abandon: Such a unity won't be swayed by the winds of cultural change or the spectre of bad news or moments of personal frustration. They didn't abandon Paul when he was imprisoned. They didn't give up on him in the hard times.

- This is what real partnership (κοινωνία) looks like. It's bearing each other's burdens (Gal 5:2). What happens to one of us, happens to all of us.
- I must love the community of God as she is, not as I wish she were: "God hates wishful dreaming because it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. Those who dream of an idealized community demand that it be fulfilled by God, by others, and by themselves. They enter a community of Christians with their demands, set up their own law, and judge one another accordingly. They act as though they have to create the Christian community, as if their visionary ideal binds people together. When things do not go their way, they call the effort a failure. When the ideal is destroyed, they see the community falling apart. So then they become, first an accuser of the brethren, than an accuser of God, and finally a despairing accuser of themselves."
- God has called us not just to individual discipleship but a common life in Christ. We are called together as the people of God.

Affection: This is only possible through the love of Christ (I hold you in my heart; I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus). It takes forgiveness, humility, and grace but it is "love which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Col 3:14). Are you praying for people in your church? It's hard to be mad at someone you pray for.

- Do you love the "idea of church" or the actual people in your church? Are you suffering and struggling in silence or are you leaning on the community of saints God has put in your life.
- You *need* the local church. It's not an obligation but an opportunity.
- True gospel community is a powerful apologetic to a watching world.
- True gospel community is a powerful tool to advance the gospel.
 - A rising tide lifts all ships. A win from one of us is a win for all of us.

3. Prayer for Overflowing Love (vv. 9-11)

⁹ And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Overflow: The love so necessary to unite the church is the thing Paul prays would overflow in their lives (that your love may abound (περισσεύη) more and more).

- What kind of love? Love for God, love for one another, love for the lost.
- This is the idea of “abounding” love (περισσεύη), the kind of love that is present in excess, so full that it overflows its boundaries (O’Brien).
- Life in Christ is abundant, overflowing, rich (“more and more” only intensifies the picture).

Source: God is the source of our joy and love which overflows into everything we do. If you are not connected to God you will not be able to generate enough love to serve others (spiritually malnourished, eat one meal a week, not strong enough to “run the race”).

- Jesus tells us to “abide in him” (remain in him) and we will “bear much fruit.”

How many of us are wondering where the fruit is (the overflowing love of God) but aren’t abiding in Christ? Is your love of God overflowing so much that it touches every person you meet? Or are you so spiritually empty that you have nothing extra to give anyone?

- Every ineffective, sinful moment of my life and the lives of those I’ve counseled has coincided with distance from God. It is, in my experience, impossible to be overflowing with the fruit of God’s righteousness while failing to meditate on Scripture, neglecting communion with God in prayer, and avoiding gathering with other believers in your local church.

What Does Overflowing Love Produce?: How should that love manifest? In “knowledge and all discernment.”

- cf. Eph. 4:15, “speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head — Christ” (context of maturity, similar to Phil. 1:9-11).
 - “Power without love is reckless and abusive and love without power is sentimental and anemic” (MLK, Jr.).
- “Nothing perhaps is more harmful than the easy good nature which is willing to tolerate everything; and this is often mistaken for the Christian frame of mind. **Love must fasten itself on the things which are worth loving**, and it cannot do so unless it is wisely directed” (Scott). It is not loving to approve of someone’s lies (including the lies you and I tell ourselves).
- Indiscriminate love is not real love. Love must be married to truth, if not it will become trivial, empty, and sentimental, or preferential, harsh, and opinion-driven. **True, godly love is filled with the truth of God’s Word. Our knowledge should always cultivate love and our love should always result in God-approved truth.**

Discern What is Best: The result of this kind of love (i.e., knowledge and all discernment) is "so that (for the purpose or result that) you may approve what is excellent (i.e., what is best)"

- Choose what is vital. Determine what really matters. Many people struggle today to prioritize what really matters (e.g., video games, fashion, hobbies, social media, etc.).
- There are a lot of things you *could* do with your time and energy. The question is, what is God's best?
- For many of us, the enemy of great isn't bad, it's good (or good enough).³
 - "One of the things that I think I've learned in all of this is that good enough is a really serious problem. So if you just flat out fail, if you do something and it just doesn't work at all, you can look at it and say, 'So that was a fiasco. Let's do something really different.' If you do something and it kind of works, it works well enough to support what you were doing, it generates enough revenue to keep the lights on, you tend to get really attached to it even if it was a pretty lousy solution" (Ethan Zuckerman, *Reply All*). That sounds like some of us in the church.
- "The purpose of love increasing in knowledge and [discernment] is so that we might be able to distinguish the really important issues in our lives together and act accordingly" (O'Brien).
- Sometimes Satan's greatest tactic is not to get us to do what is bad, but to get us stuck in doing what seems good enough.

What is the most important thing in your life? What do you give your time and energy and attention to? What identifies you? Is it the gospel?

- Filling your life with "good" things is no substitute for the best thing (i.e., living for Christ).
 - If you're search for the "good life" neglects God himself as your highest good, then you will find, *at best*, pleasure that is temporary and fleeting and, most likely disappointing and unfulfilling (Ps 73:25-28).
 - Story of man escaping fire but dying when he went back to get his phone.
- We are in battle of cosmic importance and yet we are amusing ourselves to death. We are addicted to social media but apathetic to the Word of God. We prioritize every hobby but ignore the people of God. We sacrifice for all sorts of creature comforts that keep us from communing with the living God.
- We have a lot of churches that do just good enough to keep the lights on but are not doing their *best* for the kingdom of God. We have a lot of Christians ('so-called') who do just enough to assuage their guilt but never truly find God's best. They never risk anything for God.

God's Glory: ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

- Because God is the one who finishes what he started, because he is the one that "fills" us, then he is the one who gets the glory.

³ cf. Voltaire via Jim Collins via D. A. Black.

- Paul's ultimate goal is the "glory and praise of God." Our ultimate goal, in everything we do is to show how great and glorious God is.
 - So, when we overflow with God's love, it proves that he is finishing what he started. When we prioritize his best rather than our preferences, it proves that he is working. He gets the glory from our lives.
- Unfortunately, a lot of us are not seeking God's glory but our own. We are little glory thieves (*Fool Moon Rising*). Rather than trusting that he will finish what he started we either trust ourselves or we worry that he can't make it happen. Rather than trusting his best for our lives we settle for our own little temporary comforts.

Conclusion:

I think this is Paul's hope and the pressing question for us. Is God receiving all the glory from your life? Before you answer too quickly, consider your hope (is it in God or in yourself or in something else). Consider your priorities (are they God's or your own). What needs to change to make it happen?