

Letters From Paul – Session One

Dear Philippians: It's All About the Fruit

Philippians 1:1-11

To Paul, Philippi would have been a very pagan city. The Greco-Roman city was known for “diviners of spirits,” or soothsayers, copious Greco-Roman pagan ritual practices and a pronounced negativity towards the monotheism and ethical practices of the Jews and followers of Christ.

Paul referred to his ministry era as “a crooked and depraved generation.” His ministry was both evangelistic and discipleship-centered. He urged his readers to live above the fray and to be a light to the moral darkness that surrounded them. He made it a binary equation: Life/society/world was evil and corrupted; the reality of the Gospel can heal and change the world. Here's the key: We the people of God must apply the Gospel *within* our lives for its healing affect to take hold. This was Paul's rallying cry for the new church, especially the church in Philippi.

For the past several weeks we have focused on living in the balance between right belief (orthodoxy) and right living (orthopraxis). Good theology propels *good living*, or right-living and we are in a much better position to put these two together than our Philippian counterparts. The early church was literally learning on the fly and doing so in a hostile environment. We, on the other hand, have two thousand years of developed theology to assist and guide us. That said, we should seek to learn and discover new spiritual truths every day. So here we go...Paul's letter to the church in Philippi.

I thank God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now (vv. 3-5).

Paul was the quintessential pray-er, especially intercessory prayer. He prays for his churches and his ministry partnerships. He speaks to the union they have forged, a ministry of union/partnership with a goal of reaching Philippi with the gospel message.

I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ (v. 6).

Paul says he prays with great faith for the church, specifically God's work in the continuing faith maturity in and among the believers in the church. Paul succinctly teaches that spiritual maturity is a journey, a long and deliberate journey, that plays out over the entirety of a believer's life.

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight (v. 9).

What does this look like? Well, very much like the orthodoxy and orthopraxis we've majored on recently. Our beliefs and our actions merge to provide a life focused on growing in spiritual maturity. It's very much a "knowing what to do and actually doing it" system. Spiritual insight must be in place for "right-living" to be part of our lifestyle.

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless (vv. 9-10).

Paul prays for the Philippian believers to continue to grow in their love for each other, for the Gospel to be spread and for the continued increase of spiritual insight. Why? Well, spiritual insight is wisdom, supernatural wisdom, which is the gateway for a life of productive ministry. If their insight continues to grow, they will be able to choose "the most excellent way," a life of pure living. What would this look like?

Having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of Christ (v. 11).

The maturing believer will be filled with the fruit of righteousness (or that's the ideal). Jesus modeled the fruit of the Spirit and of righteousness. Paul doesn't go into detail on the fruit of righteousness in this letter, but he does devote significant attention to the fruit of the Spirit in the letter to the Galatians. Different terminology but basically the same fruit, or lifestyle of right-living. The fruit of the Spirit or righteousness are the same virtues, positive and edifying character traits that identify a Christian by how they comport themselves day to day.

So, I suppose you can judge a book by its cover? That's the reverse of an old saying that suggests that the outside, or cover, does not indicate with accuracy what's on the inside. I'd say this is true in a qualified way. What people see from the outward exhibitions of a Christian's life does indicate what's on the inside of that believer. This is a "good fruit" versus

“bad fruit” equation. Value judgments are quite real, especially when people are evaluating the quality of a Christian’s lifestyle.

Are we supposed to judge people? No, but we do, everyday and in many ways. One can’t help but to form a first impression/opinion of someone else. If the other person is a Christian and the first impression is suspect, damage has been done to the Kingdom. Paul realized this so he dedicated his life to not leading people astray due to less-than-spiritual-statements and undisciplined actions. It’s natural that he expects his readers to follow suite. A focused, disciplined life built on divine wisdom and self-sacrificial living will produce excellence in Christian witness. And, Paul made it all very practical, although we must travel to Galatians to finish up this lesson.

In Galatians Paul uses a “but rather” approach in writing on the fruit of the Spirit. Before listing the fruit, he begins by reducing the entirety of the law down to the singular “Love your neighbor as yourself” (5:14). The Passion Translation reads:

For love completes the laws of God. All of the laws can be summarized in one grand statement: “Demonstrate love to your neighbor, even as you care for and love yourself.”

So, you/I/we matter. God loves us immensely. We should allow ourselves to feel loved by God. It’s O.K. to live into how much God loves us by feeling loved and loving ourselves. Paul teaches that we cannot and will not love others until we first love ourselves.

Next Paul lists all of the “other” fruit that will result if we choose to live selfish, natural lives that are outside God’s will. The Passion translation refers to this as the *self-life*.

The cravings of the self-life are obvious: sexual immorality, lustful thoughts, pornography, chasing after things instead of God, manipulating others, hatred of those who get in your way, senseless arguments, resentment when others are favored, temper tantrums, angry quarrels, only thinking of yourself, being in love with your own opinions, being envious of the blessings of others, murder, uncontrolled addictions, wild parties and all other similar behavior (5: 19-21).

Paul is firm with the Galatians that though they have freedom to choose self-life pursuits it is not in the best interests of the church or the Kingdom for them to do so. Nothing good flows from his “bad acts” list. He goes on to say:

“Haven’t I already warned you that those who use their freedom for these things will not inherit the Kingdom of God?” (5: 21b).

He next lists the fruit of the Holy Spirit that he sees as Divine love in action being manifested by the individual believer.

But the fruit of the Spirit within you is divine love in all its varied expressions: love that overflows, peace that subdues, patience that endures, kindness in action, a life of virtues, faith that prevails, gentleness of heart and strength of Spirit (vv. 22-23).

Doesn't seem like a real choice does it?

Living a life of peace, love, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control or allowing the very short-lived impact of the fruit of the self-life to open the door to sexual immorality, lustful thoughts, chasing after things rather than God, temper tantrums, angry quarrels, envy... and the list goes on and it gets worse.

Takeaway:

1. The church was created to reach, teach and disciple away from the natural negatives and toward the spiritual aspects of living. Away from the bad and toward the good is both our mantra and our struggle.
2. We are the book's cover. What people see is how they judge the entire book (of our life) and not just one book, the entire library. If I'm having a bad day/week/season I can portray a bad model for Christianity. The value judgment won't stop with me, the individual Christian, it will be extrapolated to the whole of Christianity.
3. Life is better when lived in the Spirit. Gentleness over anger? Selfless love over selfish ambition? A disciplined life in the Spirit over a life lacking self-control?

It's possible we make this more difficult than it needs to be. It's a binary choice that must be made each day. Self-life or life in the Spirit by the Spirit bearing the fruit of the Spirit?

Paul prefers life in the Spirit by the Spirit bearing the fruit of the Spirit.

Or put another way... be the Book Cover and the Book!

Amen and Amen

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