



PHILIPPIANS 1:1-11

deciding what really matters

Lesson Focus

God calls us to grow in love, knowledge, and discernment so that we may live in right relationships with Him and others and make decisions that reflect what truly matters.

Lesson Outcomes

Through this lesson, participants will:

1. Students will identify Paul's expressions of gratitude and partnership with the Philippians.
2. Students will understand how love enriched with knowledge and discernment leads to righteous living.
3. Students will reflect on how God's ongoing work in their lives shapes their relationships and decisions.

Catching Up on the Story

The City of Philippi was an important Roman colony in the region of Macedonia. The Apostle Paul likely planted the church in Philippi during his second missionary journey, which is documented in Acts 16:11-40. Philippi enjoyed a close relationship with the Roman Empire, as many Roman military veterans called it home. These veterans and their families enjoyed all that Roman citizenship had to offer and were proud of their status as citizens.

After departing Philippi, the church and its members were never far from Paul's mind. Paul enjoyed a close, familial relationship with the Philippians, which is evident in the tone and content of the letter. At least part of Paul's affection toward the Philippian church was due to their constant care for the faithful, even those not living in Philippi. In this way, the Philippians were true partners with Paul in his work to spread the Good News of the Gospel throughout the known world.

Paul writes to his friends in Philippi with deep gratitude. Unlike Paul's letters to the Corinthians, Paul does not seek to correct errant behavior but to

encourage the Philippians to continue on their current path. Paul is confident that the Philippians will continue to grow in maturity and faithfulness as time passes. As we read Paul's letter to the Philippians this Lent, we share in Paul's confidence that the one who has begun the work of salvation and transformation in us will not abandon us but continue to work on, in, and with us so that we become mature believers.

As always, when we read one of Paul's letters, we must remember that we're reading someone else's mail. While we can make some educated assumptions about who the Philippians are, we don't know the whole story behind Paul's writing. Paul would want us to read this letter today with one eye on Jesus and one eye on the peculiarities of the place we live and work.

The Greeting

We generally begin letters (emails or whatever messaging platform you use) differently than was common in Paul's day. Letters began by first introducing the sender(s) of the letter. This letter is from Paul and Timothy, who identify as "slaves of Christ Jesus." In other letters, Romans, for instance, Paul made a point to establish his authority as an Apostle. By not doing so here, we can safely assume that Paul's relationship with the Philippians is strong enough for them not to need the reminder about the authority with which Paul writes (Craddock, 11).

Paul's name isn't the only one that graces the beginning of the letter. Timothy, one of Paul's missionary companions and helper, is also listed. Because the letter is written in the first person singular, we can assume that while Timothy had a hand in the letter, he was not its primary author. Generally, Paul worked with others as a team during his missionary adventures (Craddock, 11).

The letter is written to "all those in Philippi who are God's people in Christ Jesus, along with your supervisors and servants" (CEB). Other translations render the opening phrase "all the saints in Christ Jesus...with their overseers (or bishops) and deacons." The moniker "saints" is often used by Paul to designate those who now identify as God's consecrated people. Unfortunately, today, we often give the title "saint" to someone we believe displays extraordinary spiritual and moral virtue. A saint is someone who has given themselves in faithful service to Jesus and the mission of God. In a word, a saint is simply a Christian. The CEB's "supervisors and servants" rightly communicate the relative importance of those bearing such titles. Again, we have projected back onto Paul our understanding of words like bishop and deacon. It is unlikely that the positions that emerged in subsequent versions of the early church were in place in Philippi at the time of Paul's writing. It is more likely that Paul was using the language the Philippians used in their everyday life in Philippi. "Bishop" and "deacon" were widely used in that culture to refer to "overseers or superintendents and servants or attendants"

filter through which we read scripture and the world. Loving, intelligent discernment is a slow slog fraught with conflict, but it is well worth the effort.

Finally, as we do the above mentioned items, our ability to live in righteous relationships with God and our neighbors will strengthen and grow. As we begin Lent, let us examine our lives, confessing and repenting of things that get in the way of living righteously with God and others.

Discussion Questions

Read the text aloud. Then, read the text to yourself quietly. Read it slowly, as if you were very unfamiliar with the story.

1. What stands out about how Paul begins his letter to the Philippians?
2. Why do you think Paul emphasizes his gratitude for the Philippians' partnership in the gospel?
3. How does remembering God's past faithfulness help us face challenges today?
4. Paul is confident that God will complete the work He started in the Philippians. How does this encourage you in your faith journey?
5. What do you think Paul means when he prays for love to abound "in knowledge and depth of insight"?
6. How can we balance love and discernment in our relationships and decision-making?
7. What might it look like to "decide what really matters" in your daily life?
8. Paul talks about being filled with the fruit of righteousness. What does this mean for how we live with God and others?
9. In what ways does your faith community support and partner with you in living out the gospel?
10. As we begin Lent, what steps can you take to grow in love, knowledge, and discernment?

Works Cited

Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: J. Knox Press, 1985).

(Craddock, 13). As the surrounding culture in Philippi would have used them, the terms were clerical and administrative in nature. Simply, Paul addresses everyone who finds themselves followers of Jesus. Paul often offers a warm blessing: "May the grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you."

Gratitude for the Past (1:3-6)

The first 11 verses of the letter express Paul's gratitude to the Philippians. This opening section can be divided into three sections, dealing with Paul's past, present, and future thankfulness for his friends. Paul begins by expressing his gratitude for the Philippians' past faithfulness.

Whatever the nature of Paul's relationship with the church in Philippi, we know he often prayed for their growth and well-being. By remembering the Philippians in his prayer, Paul is constantly reminded of his joy-filled relationship with them. Remembering or remembrance is a common theme throughout the Old Testament. Israel is often reminded to remember all that God has done for them in the past. For Israel and Paul specifically, it was "his legacy as a Jew to survive and even flourish in painful difficulties by remembering Abraham, the exodus, the temple, and the promises [of God]" (Craddock, 16). The remembering Paul does inspires hope, confidence, and joy in God's continued faithfulness. Paul is filled with joy because he continues to remember and see God at work within the lives and hearts of his friends.

What makes Paul's thankfulness all the more special is that his past relationship with the Philippians focuses on their partnership with him in service of proclaiming the gospel. Paul makes it abundantly clear that the Philippians did not start slowly after accepting the gospel but "have been my partners in the ministry of the gospel from the time you first believed until now."

In verse six, the future leaks a bit into the past as Paul expresses his confidence that God will surely finish what God began in the past. Paul's confidence is rooted in his remembrance of God's past faithfulness to Israel. Paul's confidence in God's commitment to the Philippians should comfort us as well. First, we can find comfort in Paul's words because we, too, can confess God's faithfulness in the past. The lives of the saints (in Paul's use of the word) who have gone before us, our grandparents, our parents, aunts and uncles, and so on, have borne witness to God's continued faithfulness.

Secondly, we find comfort in Paul's words because it recognizes the incomplete nature of the Philippian's journey. Yes, Paul speaks in glowing terms about his friends, but he knows they have not yet "arrived" at what they one day will be because of Jesus. There's always a tendency to look at our lives, failures and slip-ups, and believe that we're somehow less than other,

more mature Christians. There will always be those who are further along the path than us, but that doesn't mean God isn't still working in us for our growth and maturity. Where we are in our faith journey is where we are, and we can take comfort in the knowledge that God's grace will never abandon us.

Gratitude for the Present (1:7-8)

Verses seven and eight give us more insight into Paul's current predicament. It is widely believed that Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians from a Roman jail. It appears that Paul has found encouragement and sustaining willpower through his prayers of thankfulness for the Philippians. The stress of these verses falls on the Philippian's complete identification and participation with Paul in both the joys and hardships of proclaiming the gospel. The phrase that gets translated as "my partners" is a redundant expression reflecting how completely the Philippians have identified with Paul and his mission (Craddock, 18).

As in Paul's day, the reality surrounding living a faithful Christian life and participating in the spread of the gospel can be a lonely undertaking. The need for supportive companions to partner with us in living faithfully and participating in the mission of God in the world is paramount. There is no such thing as a solitary Christian. The embodied nature of our faith requires that we live in covenant faithfulness to each other in good and bad times. Paul is grateful because he has found such faithfulness in his relationship with the Philippians.

Gratitude for the Future (1:9-11)

Paul turns from his gratitude for the Philippians to his hope and prayer for the future. The content of Paul's prayer for the Philippians, as time progresses, is an enrichment of knowledge and insight-filled love and a filling with the fruit of righteousness.

First, Paul prays that his friend's love "might become even more and more rich with the knowledge of all kind of insight." Paul hopes the Philippian's love will be joined to knowledge and insight. At this point, we must expand our understanding of love. The kind of love for which Paul prays is not a romantic or emotionally driven kind of love. That's not to say that romance and emotion have no place when talking about love; they do. Instead, we must combine our heads and our hearts if our love is going to be as rich and complete as Paul hopes it will be. Most of today's romantic comedies or Hallmark Christmas movies would look different if their characters truly sought to enrich their love with knowledge and understanding.

In verse ten, Paul explains the reason for his prayer that their love might be enriched: to allow them to make tough decisions about how to act and live responsibly and maturely as Christians in this world. Paul understood that we

need both our hearts and our heads if we're going to live well in this world. Unfortunately, some Christians today swing to one side or another in the head/heart divide. Some might say that it doesn't matter what we do as long as we're loving while we do it. On the other side, some might say that the plain direction given to us in Scripture is absolute, which curtails their ability to express truth in love.

The truth is the same for us as it was for Paul: Our love must be informed by our heads and vice versa. In this way, we will grow in our ability to "decide what really matters..." As Paul traveled the known ancient world, I'm sure he understood that not every place was the same. He understood that his friends in Philippi and other places needed to understand how best to communicate and live out the gospel.

Second, Paul prays that his friends would be "filled with the fruit of righteousness." Righteousness is a relational term describing a relationship as being in a state of unity, peace, and wholeness. Paul prays for this righteousness from Jesus so that the Philippians can live in right relationships with God and those around them. Righteousness always has two movements: a vertical one (between God and us and us and God) and a horizontal one (between us and those around us). Paul prays that his friends might be filled with righteousness in both movements.

So What?

Paul didn't write his letter to us, but that doesn't mean we can't learn much from it as we journey toward Lent.

First, we can pray that we will remember God's past faithfulness and redemption, both for Israel and for us and our community of faith. Our remembrance of God's faithfulness should strengthen our joy and sustain us as we travel through life.

Second, when we feel small and insignificant or like we're constantly failing miserably, we can have confidence that the work God has started in us, God will bring to completion. We are, and perpetually will be, a work in progress. However, we can't use our in-progress status as an excuse to behave badly.

Third, we are God's partners in God's work in the world and each other's partners as we seek to live faithful, missional lives. Our faith is always a group endeavor.

Fourth, we must remember to keep our heads and hearts connected. Our ability to live faithfully in this world is tied to our love for others and our ability to patiently discern the world around us and how best to communicate the Good News in that context. This means that the love of Jesus Christ is the