

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 11, 2008**

TOGETHER FOR THE GOSPEL

Philippians 1:1-11

I want to wish all of you moms (and moms-to-be) and grandmas a Happy Mother's Day. You are a blessing to your kids and to all of us, and we thank God for you. Since it is Mother's day, I'd like to begin with a story about a mother's affection for her child.

I will adapt a story by Actor Jeannette Clift George where she tells about a short flight she took from Tucson to Phoenix, Arizona. On the flight was an elderly woman seated with a baby girl who was her granddaughter. The woman said they were going home, and the child's mother was waiting at the airport for them. They had been gone for only a few hours, just overnight!

The little girl was darling and ready to greet her mommy. She was dressed in a white pinafore, with a little pink bow where there would probably be hair pretty soon. Every time anybody went by, the little girl would say, "Mama, Mama."

The grandmother had some fruit and a little Thermos with orange juice in it. To keep the baby happy, she kept feeding her through the flight, a little fruit and then a little juice. But it became a rough flight, the turbulence got so bad that even the attendants had to stay seated. All of the fruit that had gone down, came up and the child was a real mess! All over her hair and her pink bow and the white pinafore – I won't say any more, but you get the picture. The messy baby was crying, and she looked awful.

But the minute the plane landed, the child was fine: "Mama, Mama.," she said. There waiting was a young woman who had to be the mother, dressed in white slacks, a white shirt, carrying white flowers in a little green paper. The passengers on that airplane imagined what would happen. The young mother would run to that baby who now looked awful, get one glimpse, and keep on running, saying, "Not my kid!"

But she picked up her child, and hugged that baby and kissed that baby and stroked that baby's hair. She said, "Mommy's baby has come home. Mommy's baby is home." All the way to the luggage claim area she never stopped kissing that baby. The mother in her once pristine white slacks and white shirt with white flowers never stopped showing affection to that messy child. That's what you moms do, isn't it? Because they are your children, you show love and affection to them.

That's the way the apostle Paul felt about the church at Philippi. He loved them with deep and special affection. Verse 8 says, *God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.* He loved that church. The little congregation at Philippi was probably Paul's favorite among the many churches he had planted. Today, we will begin a series through Paul's letter to the Philippians to see what he had to say to this church he loved.

THE FACT OF PAUL'S AFFECTION

Philippians is one of the so-called "Prison Epistles," written while Paul was a prisoner, probably in Rome. It was written to Christians. That's what Paul means when he uses the word "saints." Not a special class of people who have been beatified and sainted because of their good deeds, but a congregation of people who trust Christ and have been set apart for the gospel. Please don't get confused by the word *saint*.

Here, Paul writes *to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons*. He was writing to all the Christians living in the city of Philippi, along with the pastors and elders and deacons who serve their church. If this letter were addressed to us, it would be to the believers in Christ at Faith Church in Kingstowne or Alexandria or Northern Virginia and it would make mention of our Session and Deaconate.

Philippi was a Roman colony situated up in the area called Macedonia. It was the first place Paul preached the gospel in Europe. You may remember the account in Acts 16: Paul and Silas came into Macedonia in answer to a vision from God. They first met up with a Jewish merchant woman named Lydia and led her to Christ. They continued to preach the gospel and ultimately, they ended up in a prison cell, where in the middle of the night they sat in stocks and sang praises to the Lord. An earthquake came and opened the prison doors, which gave them the opportunity to escape. But, instead of slipping away from the prison, Paul and Silas shared the gospel with the jail keeper. He believed, and along with his family, Lydia, and a few others, the Philippian church was born.

The occasion for Paul's letter came years after the founding of the church and sprang from their financial support of him as a prisoner in Rome. Their gift came from a church member named Epaphroditus, who nearly died in the treacherous journey from Macedonia to Rome.

In the letter to the Philippians, Paul does something he does not do with most of his other letters. Instead of stressing that he is an apostle of Christ, like he does in the opening words of other epistles, he simply says he (and his associate Timothy) are servants of Christ Jesus. The actual word is slave – someone who is owned by another person.

Though an apostle, he refuses to mention that fact. Rather, he calls attention to his role as a common slave, but gives the Philippian congregation, and its leaders, their appropriate titles of dignity. He doesn't need to point out his apostolic authority because he has a close and affectionate relationship with the Philippians. He models Christian love and affection, and by doing so, hopes that they will develop an attitude of unity and humility for themselves. We will see that as an important theme in this book.

We could say that Paul and the Philippians formed a mutual admiration society. The apostle writes that, because he loves these folks as he does, when he is at prayer he finds it easy to remember them with joy and he asks the Lord for blessing on their behalf.

Why is it, after all, that you moms and dads pray so much more easily for your own children than for others? Is it not because of the affection you have for them because you love them as much as you do? Well, that's the way it was for Paul. He found it joyful to pray for the Philippians. The

beautiful prayer he prays for them in these verses is an indication of his affection for them. He thanks God for them and makes a particular request.

Paul says that he longs for the Philippians with the affection of Christ Jesus. This statement is one we should consider. How do you long for someone with the affection of Christ? Well, Paul is speaking of his desire to see his friends and brothers again. But what does it mean to long for someone with Christ's affection? It means that the love and affection of Jesus for the Philippians is being expressed through Paul. Paul is a conduit for God's unending lovingkindness to the Philippian church. What a joy that must have been!

You remember what Paul wrote in Galatians 2:20: *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.* Well, that is the idea here. Christ lives in Paul and his love for the Philippian saints is Christ's love for them, expressing itself in and through Paul's heart. Paul feels about them in the same way that Christ does and for the same reasons.

When he longed for them he was only following the impulses of the Spirit of Christ within him. He was, as we say, thinking Christ's thoughts, he was feeling Christ's emotions. He really loved them with the love of Jesus.

THE REASON FOR PAUL'S AFFECTION

So why does Paul feel such a kinship and unity with the church at Philippi? What are the reasons for his strong affection? It is Christ's own love for them in him that moves him so deeply. That is what makes him long to see them and want to know that they are enjoying all the blessings of God. And we know that because Paul tells us why he feels so strongly – or, better, why Christ feels so strongly in him – for the Philippians.

We might be tempted to think this affection – being Christ's love in Paul, would have no reasons. It would be the mysterious but wonderful love of God for unworthy sinners, Christ's love for His enemies, a love that has no reasons.

But that is not what underlies the fondness that Paul talks about here. This affection has reasons. Though it is Christ's love, it is love that responds to and is being deepened by what the Philippians did! You see, Paul and the Philippians were together for the gospel. And that's what made Paul's heart burn with joy.

And he says it twice. First in verse 5 we read that they had a *partnership in the gospel from the first day until now* and again in verse 7 we read that they *share in God's grace with Paul*. Here, Paul uses the word *koinonia*, the Greek word for sharing or fellowship or partnership. Many of you are familiar with the Koinonia Foundation, an organization that provides material and financial assistance to people in our area. They get their name from this word that means sharing. When you volunteer your time or give groceries or write checks for financial support to them, you are participating in *koinonia*.

By *koinonia*, in the first place Paul means that the Philippians share with him a common experience of Christ's love. He remembered with joy the remarkable times they had shared

together as some of them came to live in Christ under his ministry. There is a special relationship that unites them, the unbreakable bond between a spiritual parent and spiritual children.

Look at what Paul writes in verse 6: *being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.* Paul was seeing the Philippians like a father or mother looks at his child. Not as they were at the time, but as they will be when God's work is done. He was looking at them with the eye of faith. He was absolutely certain that the Lord who began a good work in them was going to finish what He as the Lord had started.

There is the story of an artist who called a friend in and asked him to comment on a landscape he was painting. He said, "This is my masterpiece. It is beautiful." The friend said, "I guess I don't see what you see. It just looks like blobs of different colors to me." The artist said, "Oh, I forgot. I'm seeing it as it will be when it is finished. You are seeing it as it is now." This is what Paul was doing. He was seeing the Philippians as they will be when God is finished and he thanks God that it is going to happen.

And what a comforting verse this is. I have to confess that sometimes I get discouraged with myself, I am disappointed in not being what I ought to be. I fall short. But when I see the utter futility of depending on myself to get the job of spiritual growth done, this verse instructs me. I hope this verse helps you too. He who has begun a good work in you will keep at it – and keep on keeping at it – every day of your life until the Lord returns.

Paul wanted the church at Philippi to remember that they were partners with him in this work of God in their lives. They were together for the gospel.

Over the next few weeks, as we look at the book of Philippians, we will see that understanding this truth is the key to our having affection for other Christians. Every one of us is a work in progress. When we imagine what each of us will become, when we really believe that God is at work in us, we will learn to live in the humility and unity that Paul talks about.

But there was more to this *koinonia*. The Philippians not only shared in God's saving grace but they actively supported Paul in his ministry as an evangelist and defender of the faith. They had on several occasions sent gifts of money that enabled him to continue the work of preaching and building the church.

In Acts 16, after his first visit to Philippi, we see that Paul headed west to the another Macedonian town called Thessalonica. During three weeks of difficult ministry in that city, the Philippians gave material assistance several times. They had done so even when their own financial circumstances were difficult.

On later missionary trips, Paul went around urging the churches he visited to give generously to an offering for the people of Jerusalem who had come into financial difficulty. As it happened, because the Philippians had been so generous in their support of his earlier work, and because they had recently fallen on hard financial times, Paul was not planning to ask the church at Philippi to contribute to the offering. But, as soon as they heard about it, they insisted on contributing their share and, as we read in 2 Corinthians 8, they humbled Paul with the size of the gift they gave out

of their poverty. And now, when they heard of Paul's imprisonment in Rome they again took an offering and sent it by the hands of Epaphroditus.

Paul had no friends who were more faithful or people more eager to partner in his labors than these Christians in Philippi. And there was no better proof of God's work in them, than their participation, their *koinonia*, in his ministry. They were together for the gospel.

THE HOPE OF PAUL'S AFFECTION

But even in Paul's affection for them, he realizes that there is more. Look at his prayer in verses 9-11: *And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.*

He wants the love of Christ which is working in them to grow and increase without limit, to abound more and more. 1 Thessalonians 3:12 says the same thing: *May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.*

We might call this "love in action," love that abounds in real activity. As 1 John 3:18 says, *Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.* Without active love, affection that is more than just a smile and a bunch of words, our love is empty and our faith is dead.

Paul adds a couple of things to his prayer: knowledge and depth of insight. He is talking about a knowledge that is real, based on experience, a knowledge of God that is not a simply fixed set of theological facts but something that develops in our lives as we are obedient to God. So what does it mean to love with knowledge and insight?

First, we discern what is best, what is excellent. That is, we will put the proper priority on the things in our life. We will have our affections on the things that matter most, and not spend our time on trivia.

One of the weaknesses of our American Christianity is that we let our desires for comfort and pleasure rule our hearts. God's desires get out of focus and we lose sight of the gospel. We need to seek the knowledge of God and choose what is best for the gospel. We can follow the example of the Philippians and get involved in supporting the work of evangelism. Give financially to the ministries of outreach and missions. Join together to pray for the work of evangelism. Learn to share your faith with others and join in our outreach ministries. Invite your neighbors to our worship services and talk to them about Jesus. If we are to reach our community for Christ, we must be in it together . . . together for the gospel.

Second, when our love abounds with knowledge and insight, we will be pure and blameless and filled with the fruit of righteousness. The word "pure" means "without wax" or "sun-tested." In the ancient world oftentimes they made pottery that would develop cracks. In order to pass these off to customers as perfect pots, some of the merchants would fill the cracks with wax so the defect was not observable. But there was a way of find out. They put the item out in the hot sun

for awhile. If there was wax, the sun would melt it and the crack would become visible, so it was “sun tested.” Paul is saying that the Christian life ought to be one without hypocrisy, without wax, so constantly exposed to the light that is in Jesus Christ that it is continually Son tested.

This is where the gospel works in our lives, in the light of Jesus Christ. If in our lives before Him we hide nothing, and when our sin is revealed to us, we confess it, we are then pure and blameless. Then, we are filled with the fruit of righteousness, the fruit of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

CONCLUSION

The hope of Paul’s affection for the church at Philippi is that the gospel would grow in their lives and that the kingdom of God would be advanced in the world. As he says in his letter, Paul longs to keep on sharing in the grace of God and participating in the gospel with the Philippians,

You and I should long for that too. To join together for the gospel, to share with others God’s grace and to participate with others in the gospel’s work.

That is the way Christ’s love flows through our hearts to others. We must partner the grace of God and share in the work of the kingdom. Paul’s letter to the Philippians really is addressed to us.

My hope is that over the coming weeks we will learn from what the Holy Spirit spoke through Paul’s letter, so that Christ’s love will abound in us more and more.

If Paul were writing to the believers in Christ at Faith Church, he would passionately long for all of us with an affection that marks those who are partners for the sake of Christ.

So let us be in this great work of Christ, together for the gospel.