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Philippians 1:1-11

First Message

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THE LOOK OF LOVE

SERIES: FRIENDS, MENTORS AND ENEMIES

I. Introduction

A. Message Setting

Imagine today that you awoke this morning to the shocking news that the President has decreed that his term is to be for life. Not only that, he is above the law of the land and, truth be told, is a superior form of man, perhaps even god like. More shocking still, the House and Senate have backed him, the Supreme Court seems likely to as well, and in general the U.S. population is favorable. All that is good in the Republic is due to his wisdom and beneficence, and those who oppose this notion are to be questioned in their patriotism and loyalty to the nation. Those who stand in opposition just might find that their companies are not able to book as many orders, sell as much software and compete for as many contracts. Lawyers, physicians, plumbers and electricians who profess loyalty to another begin to notice that their phones are not ringing as often. Produce managers at the market find that, surprisingly, the union will not accept their renewal dues and their hours are consistently shrinking.

Additionally, you've noticed that some in Christian circles are stirring up dissension. Something about the amount people are giving and whether they are stepping up with a large enough percentage of their income. There are those who have come around and started saying that if you are not willing to commit to a certain percentage, you may not truly be saved and accepted by God. You need to do the right things and embrace the traditions to make sure you qualify.

Disturbing thoughts, aren't they? Difficult to imagine, at least in our world today. But for believers in first century Philippi, scenarios of this nature were reality. They not only lived in a world in which they faced enormous pressure for allegiance to another, but also strife from within the church from those who claimed that the atoning work of the cross was not quite sufficient for salvation. Having no scriptures yet detailing the life and ministry of Christ, and a canon of letters of guidance and instruction from those who knew him intimately, the Philippians were faced with muddling through, trying to sort out right from wrong, clinging to what they had been taught by Paul, Silas and others.

So they dealt with the enormous question, Can allegiance to Caesar and the gods of Rome coexist with the worship of Jesus Christ? If not, I'm likely to get locked out of my trade guild, get shut out of the marketplace, lose friends and family members and possibly even my life. In addition, is my confession of Jesus as Lord really valid without embracing the traditions and customs of his people the Jews? Some say no. Who do I believe?

B. Ancient Philippi

The city of Philippi lies on the eastern plain of Macedonia, north and slightly east of Athens. By the first century it had been inhabited for over 300 years and had become a colony of Rome. Philippi's population consisted not only of the descendents of the original colonists and settlers, but by large numbers of retired soldiers, both

Roman and those conquered by Rome. They tended to hold a fierce loyalty to Rome and the emperor.

So Philippi was an important city that stood on the critical link called Via Egnatia, the connecting highway between Rome and Byzantium. It had gained prominence due to its strategic location as well as its command of a great fertile plain and gold mines in the mountains to the north. It was the first city of Europe to be evangelized with the gospel. Additionally, it seems as though this was Dr. Luke's home city, and in fact it had a well-known school of medicine. Acts 16 chronicles the wild adventures of Paul and Silas as they brought the gospel to Philippi. It's a wonderful story of how the church was birthed in Philippi. But years later, all is not tidy and neat. Reality is, it is difficult and messy being a Christian in first century Philippi, kind of like today. Paul loves these people dearly. In fact, he is passionate about his brothers and sisters in Philippi, and as a result, he writes a letter from prison, likely a prison in Rome late in the year 62. This letter stands as a tremendous source of encouragement, guidance, warning and appreciation for them. That's why I am calling this series in Philippians, "Friends, Enemies and Mentors."

C. First Century Philippi and the Roman Empire¹

So what was it like living in first century Philippi? What kind of social, political and spiritual issues and challenges did believers face in the Roman Empire? First of all, we need to understand that ancient classical cities were considered to be homes for deities. What made a city in ancient Rome were the shrines and temples dedicated to the worship of deities thought to hold and have bestowed power on Rome for the rule of the world. What characterized ancient gods were not compassion and a desire for the good of people, but power. If the gods had bestowed power on Rome, then it would stand to reason that the best life strategy was to scramble and build temples and cultic practices that gave honor and worship to those gods. It's an age-old strategy; you go with the horse that's winning! Not only that, but cultic practices then became a significant source of income.

So the more powerful one was, the more one was seen as having received the favor of the gods. In fact, by this time in the Roman Empire, the emperors had begun to receive, even encourage the populous to view them as divine beings worthy of worship. Meanwhile, for rank and file men of the empire, any show of care or compassion was the antitheses of power and a show of weakness and even injustice! To care for people who suffered was to intervene in the gods' administration of just due.

So into this environment comes a movement of men and women who not only mercifully care for each other as well as those outside of the movement, but they are centered on and worship one who came from a humble village, in a subject land. This one, Jesus, never held an office of power or influence, and worse, suffered shameful death on a cross. "You follow who? He did what? You've got to be kidding me!"

But it didn't even stop there. Given that Rome thought its power came from the gods, they made sure that they were pious worshippers of those gods. Followers of Jesus now enter the scene and reject the local gods, becoming not only quite uncitizenly but rebellious against divine law. Interestingly, Christians were seen as atheists for their refusal to worship the pagan deities of the day. The gods had welcomed Rome; to reject them was seen as a crime against humanity and willful rebellion against the social and political order.

First century Christians lived in a violent world of desperately overcrowded cities. The gods did not care for you – you went to the gods to arouse them to favor, to make a deal, to appease them to act favorably on your behalf. The idea of a god who might actually care about you simply did not exist. So much of life was then reduced to fate, with gods intent on harming humanity. It's no wonder that the occult became so prevalent – charms, incantations, temple prostitution, sacrifices, sometimes of your own children, and so on. You'd do anything to try to protect yourself. Social stratifications were strong and clear – if you were a slave, obviously the gods did not regard you, nor should you be by men. Girls and boys could be easily sloughed off into prostitution, women were often objectified for sexual gratification, and marriage was little respected.

So into this world bursts the story of a man named Jesus, and for the first time the world learns of a God of compassion who doesn't give you what you deserve but instead extends mercy and grace. He is a God who loves marriage, loves people regardless of age, social status, gender, culture, nationality, and wants to bring restoration to humanity, not capricious evil. Here is a God who is aroused to compassion out of boundless love and commitment to his creation, not out of the schemes of a scared and self-serving humanity.

This warm letter of profound love about a God who passionately cares for humanity is radical stuff! As we dive in, we'll find it contains deep love, great encouragement and important instruction that is every bit as valuable to us today in the twenty-first century as it was for believers in the first. So let's open up Paul's letter to the Philippians.

II. *The Look of Love* – Philippians 1:1-11

A. Greetings – Letter Introduction - 1:1-2

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Phil 1:1-2 NIV)

Paul begins with a typical, classic form of greeting in which the sender of the letter is immediately identified. Unlike today's convention in which we leave the reader to guess until the end, Paul identifies himself up front, along with Timothy, who was likely his secretary on this effort, and well known to the Philippians. Notable in this greeting is that, unlike his letters to the Romans, Corinthians and others, Paul does not include a reminder of the fact that he is an apostle of Jesus Christ. Instead, he simply identifies himself and Timothy as servants of Christ. So immediately we get a sense that this letter is different. Paul does not feel the need to remind them of his authority as an apostle, and there is a sense of warmth and friendship. Paul and Timothy come as humble servants belonging to and serving Christ and Christ alone, to a people living in a Roman colony devoted to an emperor with claims to deity.

In short, this greeting is the first of many indicators of the convention of letters of friendship in the ancient world. This letter is predicated on the mutual goodwill of both Paul and the Philippians,

and their partnership in the gospel. Look at how the apostle continues:

To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: (1:1b)

All are saints and servants together with Paul and Timothy who serve Jesus Christ, regardless of position in society or in the church community. Whether overseers, probably those responsible for administration, hospitality and pastoral care, or deacons, those set aside for service and oversight, all are equal and important in the body of Christ and the life of the church.

Paul concludes his greeting with the words *charis*, grace, and *eirene*, the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew *shalom*, and in doing so gives the gospel in a phrase!

B. The Prayers and Heart of Paul – 1:3-8

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, 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. (1:3-6)

Right where convention would anticipate words of wishes for good health, Paul instead inserts words of thankfulness for his Philippian friends and for what God is doing in their lives. Anticipating much of what is to come later in the letter, Paul, who is in prison at this time, expresses delight and gratitude for their partnership in the gospel, and alludes to his prayers of petition for their continued fruitfulness as servants of Christ. He is so passionate about the Philippians that he thanks God at every turn, every remembrance with his God who is deeply personal and intimately involved in the lives of his people. He is profoundly thankful and appreciative of their partnership with him in the gospel. This is why corporate worship and fellowship are so key. We need the encouragement and joy, the affection and sense of partnership that come from fellowshiping together and sharing what God is doing throughout the body of people gathered here at PBCC.

I know of what Paul speaks. Hardly a day goes by that I don't think of and pray with appreciation and joy for the team of folks who walk with me in ministry to Jr. Highers. I can't imagine the overwhelming prospect of caring for nearly 100 Jr. High kids alone.

We see also that Paul's bounteous joy and thanksgiving for them comes out of a profound appreciation for what YHWH is doing in their lives. He views the Philippians through God's eyes – delight in these who have become believers in and servants of Christ. Joy is at the heart of Paul's Christian experience, and the work he observes in the Philippians brings him joy that transcends present circumstances. So he gives thanks because the gospel is the consuming passion in his life.

Not only is Paul passionate about their current lives and work as servants of Christ, he is excited about their future and the journey on the way. Paul always has one eye on the goal, the consummation of all that YHWH is about through his Son and the working of the Spirit. So he reminds the Philippians, God is not finished; he's only getting started! Whatever hardships, whatever victories, whatever setbacks, YHWH still has great work to do in you and he will be faithful to complete it. A day is coming, the day of Christ Jesus in which all will be fulfilled, all will be put to right, all will be complete. So live with an orientation that recognizes that Christians are a people of the future which has begun in the present. We are citizens of Heaven

now, tasting of that reality as God prepares us for that glorious day when we fully enter in, never again to be burdened by the realities and vicissitudes of life in a fallen and depraved world.

The Prayers and Heart of Paul (cont.)

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. (1:7-8)

Is it any wonder Paul rejoices in spite of his imprisonment? The church in Philippi is like a child to him – labored over unto birth, nurtured through the formative years, and now rapidly maturing in faith despite some issues, and still in need of encouragement and guidance. Is there anything that grieves our hearts more than when our children walk away from the faith, or that causes greater joy when they embrace relationship with Jesus as their own and mature in that saving relationship as adults? Not only have the Philippians embraced the gospel, they have become defenders – they are fighting the good fight in a world that opposes everything for which they stand.

I had the privilege of traveling with Bernard and Sue Bell and several of our PBCC interns to Turkey and Greece just last month. Our hotel in Athens had a rooftop terrace with a wonderful view of the Acropolis and some of its temples. I have dreamed of visiting since I first saw pictures as a child. All lit up at night, it was a glorious sight – of a dead civilization. It's a pile of rocks! Yet the church of Jesus Christ thrives today around the world, a living, breathing organism that is God's presence on earth. We are God's agents, commissioned to love people and speak his truth, regardless of obstacles. Those we face are no greater and no less than Paul and the Philippians.

Note Paul's word of grace in verse 7. He considers it grace to serve Christ whether he does so chained in prison, or freely roaming, defending and confirming the gospel. We have been graced not only on account of Christ to believe in him, but also to suffer for his sake. As we send out missionaries, are we content to send in our gift and well wishes, or will we also step out and live as missionaries at HP, Apple and Google, in Willow Glen, Cupertino Hills and Los Altos, at DeAnza College, San Jose State and Monte Vista High, at music camp, summer school and Cupertino Little League?

Paul ends this line of thought with a word of longing, in a way that expresses his deep concern for them that they remain true to the gospel. He carries a burden that they stay true to their calling and commitment, and he wants them to understand how deeply he loves them. Like Paul and his care for the Philippians, if our testimony to the world is not enconced in love and compassion, then it becomes only so much noise.

My friend and PBCC missionary Jonathan Zingkhai is Recovery Program Manager at City Team Ministries in San Francisco. When he first arrived in San Francisco, Jonathan discovered that in years of operation, not one man had graduated from the program. In the years since, dozens of men have graduated, having conquered all manner of addictions while learning life and work skills and most importantly, coming face to face with Jesus Christ. I asked Jonathan what the difference was. He replied, shrugging his shoulders, "the men didn't feel loved, I just started loving them." The Philippians don't feel like a project, another notch in Paul's evangelical belt. They feel passionately loved by this small wiry man from Antioch who brings the good news.

Paul now reveals the nature of his concern for them. In verse 9, he tells them of his prayer of petition for them:

C. Paul's Prayer of Petition – 1:9-11

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. (1:9-11)

Paul's heart is to foster a church that is growing and mature, overflowing with fruit, affected by Christ to the glory of God, and presentable to Jesus at his return. Notice there is nothing here to do with legalism and self-works. It is the work of Jesus through them that is of value – righteousness that marks one who belongs to Christ, the kind of righteousness that comes through Christ. It is manifested in a love born out of knowledge and grace and the sanctifying work of the Spirit. It is the truest, purest love, not arrogant or condescending, but true and reflective of God's character, with no underlying motives or agendas.

When our priorities are straight, the fruit, will follow – it all begins and ends with love! It was God's love that reached out and created a people for himself to be a conduit of his love to humanity. It was pure love that moved him to take the form of man and suffer unspeakable injustice so that the chasm between God and man might be bridged.

Paul goes on to exhort the Philippians that their love may abound increasingly in knowledge and depth of insight. He is speaking of a sober kind of love that places high value on a person, actively seeking the benefit of others.² The word knowledge here intimates a sense of experience or personal relationship.³ The word for depth of insight likely means a sense of wisdom, wisdom from the Spirit that starts with love and yields what comes next in Paul's argument: discernment as to what is best and pure and blameless.

So, putting it all together, Paul is saying, this is the look of love. It starts not with law and the works of man, but with a sober, respectful, valuing love that is characterized by knowledge and insight as to what is true and important. This overflowing love leads to discernment as to what is best and essential for the life of the community of Christ. And this love has eschatological vision – it is experiencing God's kingdom in the present, but anticipating the day of Christ when all will be fulfilled. What's it look like? The fruits of righteousness that come through Christ. The end? The glory and praise of God.

In closing this morning, I'd like for us to consider three principles drawn from our text.

III. Reflections

A. In whatever Philippi God has placed us, we are all first and foremost Servants of Christ – it is the greatest title we can carry. Paul longs for us to understand that the future has begun in the present. While the fullness of the new heavens and earth are yet to come, we are nevertheless already citizens of Heaven, carrying the assurance that our future is secure. My hope is that we can begin to have a new lens, a new vision in which we see ourselves first and foremost as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven and servants of Christ who happen to be earthly citizens of the United States, given work as engineers, teachers, sales reps, mechanics, students, moms, dads, coaches and more.

May we set aside our rights as Americans to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” and exchange them for the life, liberty and joy, which are eternal gifts from God and are not dependent on the survival and laws of our nation. We are called to lead by service in whatever Philippi God has placed us – initiators of care, service and humility. This type of leadership is no respecter of person or position and anyone can lead out. Will we, like our Lord Jesus, set aside our own desires and empty ourselves for the sake of others? This is what it means to Paul to know Christ and lose all things – all else is garbage.

B. I also long to see us be transformed in our thinking about hardship and risk. As Americans, we have to ask if we have not fallen into what I call the gospel of the Declaration of Independence and its definition of life: liberty and the pursuit of happiness! Don't get me wrong, it is a wonderful document and it's a privilege to live in a country founded on such democratic and visionary principles, recognizing the dignity of all mankind. But it is not the gospel!

The gospel is the gospel, and as followers of Jesus we are commanded to give up our rights, not demand them. We need to embrace the reality that to receive opposition, to be in chains, to have opportunity to defend and confirm the gospel is a blessing, a gift. Paul states, whether in chains or free to be out and about defending and confirming the gospel, it's all grace! Not that we make it our goal to be tossed into prison or prove ourselves so obnoxious that people can't help but oppose us, but will we contend for the gospel with such a level of joy, vigor and integrity of message? Will we take time from our agendas at work and school and from our own priorities to care? Will we be so bold as to ask co-workers if we can pray for them – right now, in the conference room? Will we dare to invite a co-worker to lunch as ask if they'd like to spend some time studying a gospel together?

Perhaps rather than dreading the release of such films as the “Da Vinci Code,” we can rejoice that it is another opportunity to share the gospel in a setting and environment in which people are excited and interested in such matters. We hold so tightly to the things of this world and we so fear the ridicule of others because of our allegiance to Jesus. But look at the glorious and magnificent civilizations in which Paul traveled. What is it that lives on? The community of Christ thrives around the world today, while those civilizations that abused Paul and the Philippians are dead. What makes us think that things will be any different in our world? We can pursue the world's vision of life, liberty and happiness, or we can give up our lives in order to gain them, experience liberty from enslavement to sin rather than the liberty to do what we think brings happiness, and be flooded with the joy that can only come from resonating with our Heavenly Father, living in devotion to and communion with him as we were created to do.

C. Finally, may we cease striving to be people of perfection and human performance and become first and foremost people of love. We are called to have a radically transformed view of people. As God has invested in us, so he desires to invest in those around us – and he desires to use us as agents of those investments. What a privilege! If we are not willing to love, to allow God to change our view of people, then we are only making so much noise and taking up space. Paul's deep yearning is that our love would abound more and more – first for each other in the body, and then for those in the community, all those with whom we come into contact.

When you know Christ, you know the one who emptied himself out of love for us. When you live life in devotion to Christ, you cannot help but become more like him, the ultimate lover of people. YHWH has entrusted people to our care, no matter where we are or what we do with our days – kids, spouse, employees, patients, clients, customers, parishioners, students, neighbors. They all need one thing more than any other: overflowing love. This is what Paul means by the fruit of righteousness. It doesn't look like a perfectly behaved person – it looks like one who boasts in Christ, who is willing to be a self-emptying servant, one who lives in devotion to Jesus. Will we be vessels of the love of Jesus, even today?

¹ Drawn significantly from the work of Rodney Stark in, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), and from Rikki E. Watts in a series of lectures delivered to the 20's Ministry at Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino, 2005

² Fee, Gordon F., *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 99.

³ Fee, 100.

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