

Praise, Poise, and Prayer

Philippians 1:3-11
David H. Roper

Some of you know who Allen Watts is. He popularized Zen Buddhism here in the West and is a very strong antagonist of Christians and Christianity. He says in one of his books that the thing he distrusts so much about Christianity is that it has a sheer genius for drabness and tends to suppress every bright emotion. I don't know who were the examples at whom he was looking. I have met Christians who *have* a sheer genius for drabness, and I know that when we walk in the flesh it is a very drab and deadening experience.

But I haven't found that my life in Christ is dull and drab at all, and I'm sure you haven't found that to be true either. There is a quiet enthusiasm and excitement and confidence about the Christian life that comes when you are walking in dependence upon Jesus Christ. I find that the Lord is always breaking out of the little boxes that I put him in and discovering new and exciting and creative ways to manifest himself. He is at the same time both predictable and unpredictable. He is predictable in that he is always true to his promises, and lie is unpredictable in that he always fulfills his promises in a way that I never anticipate. He seldom does anything the same way twice.

Many of you know Gib Martin, a good friend of mine, who is pastor of Trinity Church, in Seattle. About ten years ago Gib was on his way out to Palo Alto from Dallas Theological Seminary to intern with us for a summer. He got as far as Las Vegas and ran out of gas and had fifty cents in his pocket. He told the Lord, "Lord, you promised to get me to Palo Alto so it's your problem. I'm just going to trust you." I don't know what you would have done with the fifty cents, but Gib popped it in a slot machine and pulled the handle. He hit a jackpot and it was just enough money to get him to Palo Alto! When he arrived, he said he had chuckled all the way that he got here on the Devil's money. Now, I don't advocate that -- don't all of you run off to Las Vegas to get some of the Devil's money but it just shows you how creative the Lord is. You never know exactly what he is going to do.

That is the theme that I see running through the book of Philippians. This is Paul's point of view. As a matter of fact, the Romans had sent him to Rome, at Roman expense, in order to evangelize the Roman Empire. They didn't know that, of course, but they paid his way. And he saw his imprisonment, rather than as something that frustrated and inhibited him, as an opportunity to see God work in new and exciting ways. His attitude throughout the whole book is one of joy, confidence, and excitement about what God was going to do in Rome.

Last week, in our initial look at the book of Philippians, we saw in the introduction that Paul characterizes himself and other believers in two ways: we are first of all, servants, and secondly we are saints. We are servants in that we are intended to be mastered by Jesus Christ. Man was meant to be mastered by something. He will be mastered either by his moods, his emotions, his passions, his circumstances and the organization that he works for . . . or he will be mastered by Jesus Christ. He is never really free. He must be the slave of some agency.

Paradoxically, it is only when he is a slave of Jesus Christ that he is really free. He is free from all of the other things in life which tend to suppress and inhibit us and to keep us from realizing our manhood. Someone asked O. Hallesby one time why he became a Christian. He said, "I became a Christian in order to become a man." That is why we become Christians -- in order that we might realize our manhood and our womanhood, might be what God intends us to be, might be like Jesus Christ, the freest, most uninhibited individual whoever lived. But it all begins with an attitude of servant hood, a willingness to be a slave to Jesus Christ.

Then Paul describes us as saints, a word meaning "holy." That is our destiny, and it is our position right now. We are holy. We are "Godlike," in God's eyes. So certain is the process that God is working out in our lives to conform us to his image that he sees us right now as being as holy as Jesus Christ himself. Man has an almost insatiable hunger to be holy. I have found this true even in the most unmoral and irreligious men. Way down deep inside there is a great hunger to be Godlike. Augustine said, "Oh God, you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you." That is our condition, and in Jesus Christ that desire is met. He puts us on the road to holiness. We are declared holy because of all that Jesus Christ did for us on the cross, and the process of holiness is worked out in our lives because of his resurrection life in us today. That, briefly, is what we saw in the introduction.

The next paragraph, beginning with verse 3, deals with Paul's memories of the church in Philippi. As he thinks of them, two responses come to mind. One is a great sense of gratitude and appreciation toward them for all that they had done for him in his ministry. The other is that he is moved to pray. His expression of thanksgiving is given tons in verses 3 through 8, and his prayer in verses 9, 10, and 11. Let's look first at verses 3 through 5.

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now.

As I mentioned last week, this little book is essentially a "thank you" note. Paul was writing to express appreciation for the gift of money which the church in Philippi had sent. This was a pattern. In chapter 4, verses 14 through 16, Paul writes,

Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction. And you yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs.

Paul had left on his second missionary journey not really knowing where his support would come from. He was dependent upon the churches. He could work from time to time at his trade of tentmaking, and there were times when he chose to do that because he wanted to make the gospel free of charge to the non-Christian community. But by and large he was dependent upon his fellow believers to support him. When he left Philippi and traveled south into Greece, without an appeal from him at all, they had been willing to support him, to give not just once but again and again to meet his needs.

Paul expresses appreciation for this because he sees it as an indication that God has begun a good work in their lives. When we become Christians, God begins immediately to reverse that acquisitive trend which has built up in us from birth, that tendency to grasp things and to reserve them for ourselves, and he begins to make givers and sharers out of us. Paul saw that this was happening to the church in Philippi. They were willing to give of what they had. This good work that he sees in them he attributes to God's activity in their lives. Notice verse 6.

For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.

There are three things that I want you to note about this verse. The first is that it is God who initiates the good work. There is nothing in our nature which predisposes us to choose God. Not one of us really seeks out God. Though we all may have a hunger for God, we don't really seek him out. It is God who hunts us down, who chases us and wins our hearts.

When Luke, in Acts, recounts the planting of this church in Philippi he mentions the merchant lady, Lydia, to whom we referred last week. He says that she responded to Paul's teaching. But prior to this he says that the Lord opened her heart to respond to the gospel. The Lord initiated the work in her life. It is the Lord who opens our hearts to respond to the truth. If he did not do that, we would never come to him. C. S. Lewis describes his own conversion as being "dragged into the kingdom kicking and screaming." Most of us can identify with that.

I heard the story recently of an ordination committee in the hills of Tennessee that was interviewing a backwoods preacher who did not have the opportunity to go to school. They were wary of him and wondered exactly what his position was on certain areas of doctrine, and so they asked him some questions. One was, "How did you become a Christian?" he said, "Well, I done my part; God done his part." Their Calvinistic instincts came forth and they said, "What do you mean, 'You did your part?' " And he said, "Well, my part was to run away from God as fast as my two legs would carry me, and his part was to run after me until he laid hold of me."

That is how we find the Lord. Our part is to run away. His part is to run us down, to open our hearts, and to woo us and win us with his love. It is God who initiated the process. We did not start it. It was not because we were religiously inclined that we came to him. It is because he sought us out and brought us to himself.

The second thing Paul says in verse 6 is that the one who has begun the process undertakes responsibility for its progress:

"He who has begun a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ." The Greek verb tense conveys the idea of a process which is taking place. God is working to accomplish the process and bring it to a perfect conclusion. He is at work in your life right now, working through the circumstances that you face -- through the hard things, the good things, through every area of your life -- working to conform you to the image of Jesus Christ. And he will *not* let you go.

When we were living in Texas, we used to drive down to the Big Bend country occasionally (the part of southwest Texas where the Rio Grande makes a big swing to the south). We used to swim across the river to some rocks on the other side. We'd crawl upon the rocks to dry and to watch the eagles overhead. The river flows through the Santa Helena Canyon there and the cliffs go straight up from the edge of the river about two thousand feet. The updrafts there enable the eagles to soar for hours without ever flapping their wings. And we'd lie there and watch them soar. They are the most majestic birds I've ever seen!

I didn't learn until much later that eagles do not naturally know how to fly. Fish know how to swim. Ducks can float, but for some reason eagles don't know how to fly. When baby eagles have grown to a certain size the mother eagle literally kicks them out of the nest. They tumble for hundreds of feet, flapping their little wings and trying to control themselves. The mother drops with them and at the last minute will swoop underneath and pick them up on her back. Then she'll take them up seven thousand feet and she'll drop them off again, and they'll tumble some more. You can imagine how panicked the little eagles are, flapping away. But sooner or later they learn how to fly. And, although it's a terrifying experience, the mother eagle is right there every flap of the way to protect them and to keep them from being dashed on the rocks down below.

You see, the Lord is going to teach you how to fly. He is going to make you like his Son. There will be struggles, and you will tumble, but you will learn, because underneath are those everlasting arms. That is why the Scriptures say in Isaiah 40 that he will bear us up on eagles' wings. He is always there to pick us up, to encourage us, to reinforce what he is doing, and to make certain that the process is fulfilled. He will not let us fall, in any ultimate sense.

The third thing that Paul says in this sixth verse is that God guarantees the outcome. "He who has begun a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus." He is going to accomplish what he set out to do. God is never half-baked about what he does. He carries every process out to completion. He has a goal in mind, and it is to produce the image, the character, of Jesus Christ in your life. And he will work until the day of Christ Jesus to accomplish that. So remember, the process is not complete today. It is probably not going to be complete tomorrow. It won't be complete until we see Jesus Christ. But it is certain; God will carry it to its completion.

There is a monastery northwest of Madrid which was built for the Franciscan monks, the order from which Martin Luther came. It was built about four hundred years ago at the request of the Spanish king. The architect designed arches which were so flat that when he saw them erected the king was afraid they would fall. So he insisted that the architect build pillars in the centers of the arches to support them. He complied very

reluctantly. After the king died the architect made it known that he had built all of these pillars a quarter of an inch too short. And I'm told that today if you are guided through this monastery the guide will slide a piece of paper through the space between the top of the pillar and the bottom of any arch. In four hundred years they haven't sagged one fraction of an inch!

Now, that is what the Lord is doing in your life he's building, He doesn't need any human aids, He doesn't need any pillars, he doesn't need you to prop it up. He is at work. What he is building is not going to sag - not a fraction of an inch. He is going to bring to completion what he has set out to do.

Verses 7 and 8 supply the ground of Paul's assurance;

For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me. For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

This is the evidence for the assurance that Paul has, It is essentially twofold: first he says, "I have you in my heart," and secondly, "In my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me." This is what he means: I know that you have been chosen of God, and that he is working in your lives to perfect the process that he has begun, because I see the marks of it in your lives. The Spirit of God witnesses through my spirit that you are children of God: "I have you in my heart." But not only that, he says, "I see the marks. I see that in my imprisonment, in lily proclamation of the gospel, and in my efforts toward confirmation, that is making secure those who have responded to the gospel [his work among the churches he had founded] you have been partakers with me. You have been identified with me in that process. You have given to support me. And you have done these things yourselves: you have been imprisoned for your faith, have been involved in evangelizing the unbelieving world, and have been a part of the process of building into the lives of believers. And because I see those marks, therefore I can be sure that God is at work in your lives. Those are the outward, visible marks of an inward work that God is doing in your lives."

What that says to me is that if I have no care, no concern, no compassion for an unbelieving world, and no desire to be a part of the process of building into the lives of other believers, then I really can have no assurance that I am one of God's own. You see, the marks of that call, and of the process that God is working out, are visible! They will show up as a desire to be a part of what God is doing in the world. But if I am oblivious to that, if I really don't care, if I am indifferent and have no desire to be a part of it, then I cannot be sure that

Jesus Christ is really my Lord. But this is Paul's assurance regarding the Philippians: "I see these marks in your lives, and therefore I know that God is at work."

Then in verses 9 through 11 Paul turns to prayer. Does it strike you as strange that though Paul has already said that God is sovereign and that the process really operates apart from any human aid or intervention, nevertheless he prays that the process will be carried out to the end that God has designed? Here you have another example of the teaching of Scripture that God is both sovereign and that we are responsible. There is NO way that we can bring these two points of view together. The truth is not somewhere in the middle. The truth is that both are true. God is sovereign; he will carry out the work to its completion. And it is also true that we are involved in the process. So Paul prays that, that process will be carried out:

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

This is essentially a prayer for growth. It takes a figure from the world of agriculture. You are to grow as a tree grows. The growing point is love. >From it emerge lateral growths, and then eventually a profusion of blossoms and fruit as the end of the process. But the first priority is love, He prays that their love may grow

greater and greater, and abound. The Greek word that he uses for love is agape -- God's love, the kind of self-giving love which characterized Jesus Christ, John said, "This is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins." It is that kind of love, the sort of love which gives, with no strings attached, It is not an emotion: it is a commitment of the will to seek the very best for the object of the love. Paul says, "That is the kind of love I want to see grow in your lives. I want it to increase and abound,"

How does your love grow? Paul indicates two ways: in knowledge, and in discernment. The Greek word translated "knowledge" is a word which means to be "on top of" the truth, to "have it down cold," to know it fully, to have entered into it experientially, to understand it completely. And the word for "discernment" conveys the idea of making accurate decisions, of being able to make correct moral choices. His point is: "I want you to grow in love, And the way you grow in love is by knowing the truth of God's word, having it down cold, and being able to put into practice the things that you know, in order to make sound judgments about life." Paul says that if you do that, your love will grow.

That tells us something about love. Again, love is not an emotion, not some feeling we have for one another, Love is righteous living. Love is seeking the very best for the object of that love. It is doing what is right in regard to that person. And the only way we can know what is right, and therefore loving, is to know God's word and to use it to make moral judgments. You and I must go through every day making dozens, perhaps hundreds, of choices, and we want to make the most loving choice possible. How do we do it? Well, we do it on the basis of the word of God, by knowing it and using that truth to discern rightly. Some choices are very easy, they are cut and dried; others are not so easy, hut they can be solved through applying the principles of Scripture. So Paul says that if you know the Word, and use it, then your love will grow.

And the result, he says in verse 10, is that you will "approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ." The word for "approve" means "to test out and experience," and the word for "excellent" means "the things that really count." Do you want to know what the priorities are? Do you want to operate according to the first things in your life, the things that really count? Do you want your life to mean something in the world? "Then," Paul says, "know the word, know how to use it. The result will be loving action, and you will therefore do the things that are top priority, the things uppermost in God's mind."

"And," he says, as the New American Standard Version has it, "you will be sincere and blameless," or "pure and blameless" if you are reading the Revised Standard Version. The Greek word translated "sincere" or "pure" means "tested by the sun." There were unscrupulous merchants in Paul's day, as there are now. It was the frequent practice of pottery salesmen to disguise broken wares. If a vase cracked they would fill the crack with wax and paint it over so that it would appear from the outside to be whole. But if the buyer took it home and put it in the oven it would break. So the consumer advocates of that day, the Good Housekeeping people and the Ralph Naders, would take vases that were on display out into the sun to test them. When the heat of the sun beat down on the vase the wax would melt and the vase would be disclosed for what it was: insincere, impure. As a matter of fact, our word "sincere" comes from the Latin "sincerus," which means "without wax." So this figure has endured. And Paul says that you will be exactly that way - without wax - whole, complete, honest, genuine, the real thing.

He also says that you will be blameless. That is, you will not cause others to stumble. That is what the word means. You will not be a stumbling block. People won't fall over you. You won't offend unnecessarily and thereby cause problems. You won't fragment relationships and break up what God is building in the lives of others.

So this is what Paul prays for. He prays that our love will grow. How will it grow? Well, as we grow in knowledge and discernment, as we grow in understanding of the Word, then we will be able to make correctly these sometimes subtle decisions which have such enormous impact on the lives of others. And as we learn to apply the Word to various situations the result will be that we will do the things which really count. Our lives will not be spent aimlessly, meaninglessly. We will be pure, whole, and without offense; we won't cause others to stumble.

Notice that Paul says that it is not until the day of Christ that the process is complete. This is the same

termination that he mentions in verse 6. Here he says that God is going to carry the process through until the day of Jesus Christ. Here he prays that the process will work in our life until the day of Jesus Christ. So the harvest is not at the end of this meeting. It is at the day of Jesus Christ. He is at work, and thus we also are at work to accomplish the result that God intends.

There is one further note in verse eleven. Paul ties it all together with this amazing clause, "having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God." Are you staggered by all this? I am. How can I possibly put all this into practice, and be filled with the fruit of righteousness? How? Through Jesus Christ. To go back to our metaphor from the world of agriculture, it is the upsurging of inward life that produces fruit. And so, in our own lives it is the inward life of Jesus Christ, moving up through us, which produces the fruit that God is after, the fruit that we look for in our lives.

Father, what a great sense of contentment it brings to us to know that you are at work in our lives both to will and to do of your good pleasure. We thank you that this process is going on in our lives and that the product is assured. And thank you, Father, that we can be involved in the process. Give us a will to know your word, and to apply it We thank you for the power which is available to enable us to act upon it, and to be what you intend us to be, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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