

## **INTRODUCTION**

This is our final session of looking at the letter of Philippians. We read this now as a book of the Bible, passed down the centuries and generations of believers to us now. However, it began as a personal letter, from Paul to the believers he knew and loved in Philippi.

Letter-writing mattered to Paul because he knew that his time on Earth was drawing to a close and this was the only way he had left to pass on wisdom to those he loved. His letter is full of teaching, encouragement, personal updates and pastoral concern. Even so, we get the impression that there was so much more he wanted to say. Whilst he still had breath in his body, he would do all that he could to ensure that his beloved fellow believers were enabled to run their race of faith right to the very end.

This final part of the letter is primarily to thank the Philippians, but there are some points that we can take for granted if we just focus on that. So, this morning we will look at some of the key points that underpin the entire letter.

### **The heart of giving**

Firstly, how did Paul, a Jew of Tarsus, develop this close sense of family with the Gentiles of Philippi.

As a Jew, Saul (as he was in his early life) would have kept himself apart from the Gentiles. He lived in self-righteousness, knowing the law and keeping it to the letter. He knew, without doubt, that he was right before God. He knew, without doubt, that those who followed the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth were blasphemers who should be punished by death. Saul was present when Stephen was stoned to death for his belief that Jesus was the promised Messiah; and Saul approved of that killing. He was determined to continue hunting out followers of Jesus, persecuting and killing them.

Saul was proud of being born a Jew; proud of being set apart from other people because of his birth, heritage, education and religious law-keeping. But he did not know God's heart of love for all people, nor did he have love for others.

But then he met Jesus. Through personally encountering Jesus and being changed by the work of the Holy Spirit, Saul became a new creation – Paul. He was so transformed by the Holy Spirit that he was filled with love for the Gentiles – both for believers and those who were yet to believe. He knew that he was sanctified and saved by the sacrificial blood of Jesus alone.

Every attitude and characteristic in Paul had undergone profound change. Everything that he now valued and held dear was in Christ. He counted the things of his past as rubbish, because he had found that the only things of surpassing worth came from knowing Jesus Christ and living for Him.

He had earned nothing of what he had in Christ. It was all the gift of God's grace. He had received from God a heart of love for other people; people he would previously have shunned and despised. Out of this love from God, he poured out love to others.

Paul did not want to keep away from the Gentiles any longer: he wanted everyone he met to know the salvation and freedom he had found in Christ. Even enchained in prison, Paul knew that he was spiritually free and would live eternally with the one who had given him everything.

We may not have come to know Christ in such a dramatic way as Paul did, but we still have that same work of grace in our lives. We do not deserve God's gifts, but God has freely given to us out of the riches of His kingdom. It is only through Christ that we have become family, despite our differences.

The entire relationship between Paul and the believers in Philippi was based on this same shared faith in Jesus Christ. Because of Jesus, they were 'one in spirit and purpose;' partners in the Gospel. It was because the Philippians grieved for Paul in his suffering that they faithfully gave material and financial aid, both when Paul was in Thessaloniki and in Rome. It was because his heart was impacted that Epaphroditus committed himself to undertake a potentially dangerous journey so that he could deliver these gifts to Paul and help in any way he could. This love was the gift of God. It was at the root of their giving and it is at the heart of all giving that pleases God.

If Paul was making a point about giving that pleased God, we can also infer that some giving would not please God. Paul now knew that things he had previously done in God's name were not pleasing to Him; they were not fragrant offerings before God. For the Pharisees, giving was all about increasing their public image for generosity. They gave willingly, but without love for others. They gave liberally, but for their own glory and reputation. They had no recognition that their gifts might not be pleasing to God.

In contrast, we can turn to 1 Chronicles to find King David, sharing his desire to build a temple for the LORD in Jerusalem. It was God's will for a temple to be built; however, God made it clear that He had given that construction task to David's son, Solomon. Whilst David was not allowed to build, he was allowed to begin gathering the resources for the building project.

David's heart attitude mattered here. If David had been disobedient and built a temple anyway, no matter how glorious the building was, it would not have been a fragrant offering to God. If David had gathered resources with a sulky attitude of bitterness or resentment that he was not allowed to do what he wanted to do, it would not have pleased God. When

David looked over the resources for the temple, he could easily have felt complacent or arrogant about the bounty of his kingdom and all he owned, praising himself and not humbly thanking God for what he had.

But David genuinely sought to act for God's glory and not his own. He said,

"I know, my God, that You test the heart and are pleased with integrity. All these things have I given willingly and with honest intent." (1 Chron. 29:17a)

It is, perhaps, something that is easy to say but not necessarily true. Over many years of walking with God, David knew that the holiness of God was something to take seriously. He had learned that the name of God was to be honoured above all other things. He had learned this in the fields as a shepherd, in the wilderness as a fugitive and in the palace as king. He had learned it the hard way when his disobedience led to serious consequences. Is it any wonder that on this day, David stood in wonder, exclaiming,

"But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this?

**Everything** comes from You, and we have given You only what comes from Your hand...

O LORD our God, as for all this abundance that we have provided for building You a temple for Your Holy Name, it comes from **Your** hand, and **all of it** belongs to You." (1 Chron. 29:14 and 16)

David had some dramatic falls from God's ways so, no matter how great his worldly wealth and consequence, there was also the humility of knowing that it was God's grace that kept him.

### **The grace of giving**

The Philippians gave willingly to Paul and, as a result, Paul assures them in verse 19 that 'God will meet **all** their needs, according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus.' It is a very simple concept, really. But, unlike the Philippians, the Corinthians struggled with giving. They had promised to give aid to those ministering for the Gospel but had not followed through on their promise.

In a letter to them, we find Paul addressing this. Paul encouraged them to give, not because he was in need or because he was angry with them, but because love-filled and love-fuelled giving was part of living in God's kingdom. It was the next teaching point for them. They knew it was good and right to give, but something was holding them back from letting go of what they had for the sake of others.

Firstly, Paul wanted to them to see giving as part of God's kingdom processes. God will not leave us wanting when we invest in His Kingdom purposes. This is not to say we should be reckless with our finances, but we should be obedient to God's calling.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

<sup>6</sup> Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.

<sup>7</sup> Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

<sup>8</sup> And God is able to bless you **abundantly**, so that in **all** things at **all** times, having **all** that you need, you will abound in **every** good work.

<sup>9</sup> As it is written: "They have **freely** scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever."<sup>[a]</sup> Psalm 112:9

<sup>10</sup> Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will **enlarge the harvest of your righteousness**.

<sup>11</sup> **You will be enriched in every way so that** you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.' (2 Cor. 9:6-15)

Paul encouraged them to trust in God's generosity and faithfulness, so that they would live in this flow of grace.

This is not just about financial or material giving. How could it be? The man who wrote this had nothing. He was in prison. He had a vast ministry base built entirely on personal relationship and letter-writing. He did not have a home, a regular income, a bank account or a pension.

Paul had nothing of himself. But Paul had received love and forgiveness from Jesus Christ, whom he had persecuted. Paul did not deserve anything; but was still given everything in Christ. Because he had received forgiveness, he was enabled to give forgiveness to those who assaulted and abused him. Paul was given righteousness and adoption as a son into the family of God, even though he did not deserve it, and was thus enabled to welcome others into God's family. All the intangible, priceless gifts of God's grace were poured out to Paul and from Paul to others: the gifts of God's goodness, strength, joy, grace, mercy, discipline, encouragement, wisdom ...

Secondly, Paul's words to the Corinthians reveal something important about giving. He wrote that he was sending Titus to them,

**'to bring to completion this act of grace** on your part. But just as you excel in everything –... see that you also excel **in this grace of giving.**' 2 Corinthians 8:6-7

We are to emulate God Himself in our giving, by giving as an act of grace. After all that we have received from Him, how, then, can we withhold gifts from others?

In 1 Chronicles 29:3, David referred to giving his 'personal treasures.' For him, that probably meant material wealth. But our personal treasures are the things that have an emotional cost. These are things that we know we *should* give but don't necessarily *want* to: things like love, patience, time, forgiveness...

It takes grace to give a patient response when we are tired and feeling short-tempered. It takes grace to give forgiveness to someone who has hurt us. It takes grace to give our time to someone when we have a lot to get done. We know it is good and right to do so, but it can be so hard to follow through on that. It costs us.

As we do not have natural reserves of grace, we need to keep going back to God to receive His gifts of grace. As we respond out of God's grace to us, we sow into God's kingdom and we will harvest righteousness.

### **The joy of giving**

Paul relinquished pretty much everything he had in life to follow Jesus's call on his life, including his personal safety and freedom, but counted himself rich and satisfied in Christ Jesus. He gave freely of his personal treasures of time, energy and devotion, for the joy that was before him.

For many years, I found Paul's writings difficult to engage with. It was only when I came to recognise Paul's heart as a teacher that I warmed to him, because I originally trained as a primary teacher. Paul's role was the same as mine: to impart knowledge, to share the source of that information and to live by example. He wanted them to 'press on towards the goal to win the prize ....'

Paul was a man who deeply loved God and who also deeply loved people. When believers went astray, it grieved him because he wanted them to know life in all its fullness and the joy that awaited them in the life to come.

But the Philippians gave Paul the gift of joy through emulating his grace-fuelled life. This was greater than any material gift. In Phil. 4:1, he called them, '**my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown...**'. To know that they were independently living the life he had modelled and were growing in steadfast, mature faith was the joy and crown to his life and work. His gifts of time and teaching through his words and example were bearing rich fruit in Philippi. He could trust that they would not fall away from Christ when Paul was no longer there to encourage and exhort them.

And just think, If Paul found joy in these things, how much more does God rejoice in these things?

## Conclusion

We call salvation God's *free* gift to us. And that is true in the sense that *we* have done nothing to deserve it or pay for it. But there was an immense personal cost to Jesus, who suffered poverty, abuse and death so that we could receive the riches of salvation and grace.

It is a gift of indescribable worth: it is a gift of eternal life, hope and joy. Out of the riches of His forgiveness to us, we are to forgive others. Out of the riches of His gifts to us of peace, truth, grace and love, faithfulness, goodness, kindness ...we are to give to others. Whatever God calls us to give, let us remember His grace to us and give for the joy set before us in His service.

As our response, I will read some words of King David's as our prayer, and we will then have a worship song so you can listen or sing as you want to, as your response to God. Let's pray.

"Praise be to you, O LORD, God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting.

Yours, O LORD is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendour, for everything in Heaven and Earth is yours.

Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom; You are exalted as head over all.

Wealth and honour come from You; You are the ruler of all things.

In Your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all.

Now, our God, we give You thanks, and praise Your glorious name." 1 Chron. 29:10-13

Amen.

**Response song:** When I survey the wondrous cross.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRfcehPOSU>