

# Growing in Love

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, again, let me welcome all of you who are here, especially those who are here for the first time. I'd like to open just by asking, or rather posing a question. What does it mean to love people well?

When you think about being the kind of person who loves others well, what does that actually mean? It's a simple question, and it sounds pretty straightforward, but in fact, if you think about it, the way we answer that question reveals a lot about our deeper beliefs.

It reveals a lot about what we believe about human identity, and the purpose of human life, if there is one, about what life is all about, what we believe about God, what we believe about reality, what we believe about epistemology.

It's a very loaded question, and that's the question that we're going to consider a bit tonight.

together. We started a series a couple of weeks ago called The Joyful Life.

It's a series where we're looking at Paul's letter to the Philippians. A lot of reasons that we're looking at this letter, it really feels like a letter that could have very specifically been written to our church.

[ 1 : 13 ] It is so directly applicable to the kind of community that we have here. But one of the major themes in Philippians is the theme of joy, and it's the theme of inexplicable joy, the kind of joy that can exist regardless of circumstances.

So that's what we're going to follow. We're going to follow that thread together through this letter.

And last week we looked at how this kind of inexplicable joy is rooted in an identity that is defined by God's love, that what it means to be a saint is not anything that we do or think or say.

What it means to be a saint is that God has set his love on you, and that love defines you. And so this week we're going to continue looking at that love, but we're going to look at what that love looks like in our lives when we are the ones loving others in the same way that God has loved us.

And so that's why we're going to look at Philippians chapter 1, just verses 9 and 10 and 11. This is a prayer that Paul prays. It's one of my favorite places in the New Testament because it's one of the best summaries of Christian growth.

So it's one of the best summaries of what Christian growth is, what it means, what it looks like. And what we see is that Christian growth means growing in love.

[ 2 : 31 ] So to grow as a Christian, it means at its core to grow in love, and that's the essence of Paul's prayer for the Philippians. But that might not mean what we think it means, and so that's why we're going to consider this together tonight.

So we're going to see two things. We're going to spend most of our time looking at how we grow, how love grows, and then at the very end we'll look a little bit at how we know that that growth is happening.

So how we grow and how we know that we're actually growing. So let's pray for the Lord to lead us. Our Father, we ask that, Lord, as we consider your word, we recognize that our greatest hope, our greatest joy is that you're here present with us now, and that our hope doesn't rest in human wisdom or human thoughts or human ideas, but rather it rests in your presence and all that you're doing in our midst.

So we pray that, Lord, as you're here, that you would speak, that these spoken words would merely be a faithful revealing of your written word and that that would in turn reveal to us your living word, that we would see Jesus more clearly.

We pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen. Amen. So first of all, how love grows. How do we grow in love? And this is what verse 9 is all about.

[ 3 : 55 ] He says, And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment. With knowledge and all discernment.

So there's a tree planted in front of our house, and this tree is a little sort of sapling, and so on either side of the tree there are two wooden stakes, and the stakes have wires that connect to the tree, and the job of those stakes is to stabilize the tree.

It just has a little root ball, and it needs to be stabilized so that that can turn into a root system, and these stakes help stabilize the tree in the wind and the various weather that we have here in D.C. so that it can grow tall and straight and get a good, well-developed root system.

And in many ways, Paul's prayer can be thought of like this tree. So the love is like the tree that's been planted in our hearts.

And Paul is saying in order for that to grow straight and well, in order for it to be deeply rooted in our hearts, it needs a couple of supports. It needs things to shape it and guide it and direct it as it grows.

[ 5 : 04 ] Knowledge and discernment. And so these are the things that we're going to look at. First, we'll look at love itself, and then knowledge and discernment, and then how it all works together. As we look first at love, love is the thing that is the, that's the actual thing that's in question here.

That's the actual thing that defines our growth as Christians, and that's because love is the litmus test of a Christian. It's the litmus test. It's not your politics.

It's not your morals. It's not your worldview. It's the presence of God's love in your life. The Bible says again and again that love is the central defining characteristic of Christians.

And that's because Christians are people who, by definition, they're people who, or for whom God's love has broken into their lives, and they've encountered it, and it's changed them.

So Christians are people to whom God is saying, I love you so much that I've sacrificed everything so that you could belong to me. And Christians are people who have received that love.

[ 6 : 14 ] And when you experience that kind of love, it gets planted in your heart, and it's a unique kind of love. It's what Paul calls the affection of Christ. It's the love that comes from Jesus.

And you know, I was thinking about this kind of love and how this defines Christians in Christian communities, and I was thinking about our community. And I was just struck, as I thought, as I thought about us, I was struck by how much love there is in this community.

If you're new to this community, if you've not been around a while, I'll just tell you, this is an extremely loving community. You know, just today, we were in a pinch. We had things that we had to do after the morning service and before tonight, and we had to get them done, and we couldn't have our kids with us.

And somebody stepped up with less than a day's notice, happily stepped up, said, yes, absolutely, I would love to keep your kids. I mean, that's an amazingly loving thing to do. We were so encouraged by that, right?

And regularly, I'm hearing about people, you know, just this week, I heard about people who needed to move, and they were going from one apartment to another, and like a dozen people from the church showed up to help them move boxes and clean out their place.

[ 7 : 18 ] I routinely hear about people giving rides to each other to the airport at 5 a.m. I mean, there's Uber, but they do it anyway because they're that loving, right?

I hear about people giving clothes and money and cars to other people in the church who need it. This is an incredibly loving, incredibly supportive community.

People really care about each other here. So the love of Christ is, I believe, has been firmly planted in this community, and so the question becomes, how does that love grow?

And Paul would say to us, I think if he was here, we need two things. We need knowledge and we need discernment. These are the things that we're maybe lacking to some degree. So the first thing is knowledge.

And this is a very specific word for knowledge. The word is epinosis. You don't need to know that, but you need to know that it's a specific word that means biblical knowledge. It means theological understanding.

[ 8 : 16 ] It means having what the Bible calls sound doctrine, right? So there are some people who say, and I have this conversation a lot, well, I don't go into all for all that doctrine stuff.

I don't care about all that. I just want to love people like Jesus did. And really what you see here is that you can't love people like Jesus did without having sound doctrine.

Who is Jesus? That's doctrine. What does it mean to love? That's doctrine, right? You need sound doctrine. So Paul's saying this is a part of what we need to grow in love. But the question becomes,

what's the relationship?

In other words, what is biblical knowledge and theological knowledge, what does that have to do with love? And this brings up a key point. For Christians, growing in love doesn't mean loving more. See, this is my prayer most of the time. Please, God, help me be more loving. Help me be more loving. And by that, what I normally mean is, help me feel it more. Give me the kind of neurochemical cocktail necessary to make me feel that love.

[ 9 : 25 ] But that's not what Paul's talking about. In other words, growing in love is not about loving more. It's about loving well. It's about loving well. Which means we are called to test our feelings using our knowledge of God's Word.

to test our feelings, to evaluate them against this other standard. Now, when I say that, I realize that this is becoming, as we look at it, more and more countercultural.

You know, the idea of testing your feelings is radically countercultural, right? Because we live in a society that says what? Follow your heart, right?

Trust your feelings. Trust your feelings. The idea being that our feelings, our hearts, will lead us faithfully to truth and to flourishing and to fulfillment.

The problem is we just need to have the courage to follow them. So this is the prevailing wisdom in our culture. And increasingly, as I kind of look around and I have lots of conversations about this with people, it seems as though feelings are becoming a kind of stand-alone source of truth.

[ 10 : 39 ] Feelings alone determining what's true. I have a friend named Dale Keene who's a college professor up north and he had, after class one day, he had a young woman approach him and say, Dr. Keene, can I ask you a kind of a weird question?

And he said, okay. He gets all kinds of weird questions. And she said, well, okay. Okay. What does it feel like to be a woman?

And he thought about it for a long time and he said, I don't really know. Which I was like, great answer. That's the only answer you should give.

He said, I don't know. And then she says, okay. Well, what does it feel like to be a man? And he thinks about it. He says, I don't really know. And she says, well, what does it feel like to be a horse? And he says, well, I definitely don't know. And she says, well, I think I'm a horse. Because when I look around at all of the things that I identify with, I most identify with horses.

[ 11 : 44 ] So I must be a horse. And she was being serious. And the reason that he told me this story is the point that he was making is that he had no idea what to say in response.

And moreover, he felt as though any response, any question that he might ask would most likely be deeply offensive to her. And so he said nothing.

It's interesting, isn't it? It's as though feelings have almost taken a kind of divine status. And to question them is almost an act of blasphemy. So he said nothing.

So the question that we should be asking is, first and foremost, not theological. It's actually very practical. The question that I want to ask is, does this actually work? Does it work?

Do the feelings do what we think they're doing? Right? So you tell me. I'm just going to be honest about my heart. And you tell me. Let me tell you about my heart.

[ 12 : 46 ] If I'm totally honest, my heart is continually trying to convince me that I'm the most important person in my life. More important than my wife.

More important than my kids. And no offense, but way more important than you. I'm just being honest. So my heart is constantly trying to convince me that when I come home in the evening, that it is more important for me to lay down on the couch and read my iPhone than play with my kids who haven't seen me all day.

My heart says, absolutely. That's what you should do. Right? My heart is constantly trying to convince me that winning an argument is more important than ensuring that my wife feels heard and understood and loved.

If I have to employ sarcasm, if I have to stonewall, if I have to employ any sort of underhanded tactics, it's okay because I just need to win.

My heart says, go for it. No holds barred. No. Right? My heart is constantly trying to convince me that protecting my ego is way too important to admit my mistakes.

[ 14 : 01 ] Even when I know that I'm wrong. My heart says, nobody else has to know. So this is what my heart, this is the dialogue that I have with my heart on a daily basis.

And so the question is, should I really accept and follow those feelings? No questions asked. You know, Jeremiah 17.9 paints a very different picture of the heart.

It says, the heart is deceitful above all else. It's deceitful above all things and desperately sick. And then it says, who can understand it?

So have you ever seen Pirates of the Caribbean? Yeah. Last week, kids' movies. This week, kids' movies. I told you, we watch a lot of kids' movies. Pirates of the Caribbean. I can't remember which one it is. But Captain Jack Sparrow, Johnny Depp's character, has this magic compass.

And the compass is special because it doesn't point to true north. Rather, it points to whatever it is that the owner most desires. Right?

[15:06] Whatever the owner of the compass most desires, that's what it points to. It says, this is true north. And I remember thinking, that's exactly how my heart works. That's a great picture of my heart.

My heart says, whatever you most want, whether it's to appear successful or to feel important or to feel like you're making a difference or to feel worthy or to feel pleasure, whatever that is, my heart is the voice that says, that is true north.

Meaning, we're going to evaluate everything else by that standard because that's most important. Right? So in the words of Philip Melancthon, who was a 16th century reformer, he said, what the heart desires, the will chooses, and the mind justifies.

What the heart desires, the will chooses, and the mind justifies. What does this mean? It means nobody has to tell me to follow my heart. Like, I don't need, I need to hear a lot of things.

That's the one thing that I don't need to hear. Because most of the time, my heart feels like a speedboat. And I'm like the guy who long ago lost the water skis. And I can't let go of the rope.

[16:15] And I'm just being dragged through the water. That's what it feels like. And if I don't question or challenge or in any way push back, that's all that's going to happen in my life. So what Paul's saying here is that our feelings are not to be automatically trusted.

They need to be tested first. Right? So awareness is great. Emotional honesty is great. All these things are great. But we shouldn't take these things uncritically.

We need to test them. So in other words, instead of defining true north by our desires, we need to define our desires by the true north of God's word.

And that's where the role of knowledge comes in. Our hearts are not meant to be followed. They need to be led. Right?

Jesus is the one we're called to follow. So this is what Paul's getting at. But here's the thing. We can have a lot of knowledge. You can have a lot of education. You can have a lot of theological understanding.

[17:18] And that doesn't automatically result in any change or growth. It's only good to the extent that it's actually been applied to our lives. And that's what Paul's getting at when he talks about, so we talked about knowledge.

Now Paul's talking about that has to be paired with discernment, the other stake in the ground. So what he's saying is this. I'll show you what I mean. There's two ways to know something.

Right? Think of a neighborhood. Okay, there's one way of knowing that neighborhood that comes through looking at a map. Right?

So you get your Google map and it shows you where you are and you look at all the streets and you memorize the street names and you can learn it that way. You don't even have to have ever been there. And there's another way of knowing that neighborhood that can only come by walking the streets.

Right? Think about the neighborhood that you grew up in. You probably never saw a map and yet you knew that neighborhood.

[18:26] And if somebody said, hey, how can I get from here to here? You knew exactly the best way for them to go. But you may not even remember the street names. It's because that knowledge is stored in your body and it was built into you because on a daily basis you were walking and running and biking and driving those streets.

And so you can navigate with your eyes closed. So the point is this. Most of us know, most of us have knowledge, biblical knowledge, theological knowledge, in the first category.

We know it like you know a map. But what Paul's saying is you need to have this kind of knowledge in the second way. It needs to be built into you and discernment is the thing that makes that

happen.

Discernment is what allows us to take that knowledge and build it into our lives on a daily basis through habitually living it out.

So taking the examples from before, my heart tells me it's more important for you to lay on the couch than it is to play with your kids.

[ 19 : 39 ] It's more important to read your iPhone than it is to play with your kids. That's the most important thing. And God's word would tell me you need to put your kids first. You're called to be their dad. You're called to love them.

You're called to encourage them. You're called to put them before yourself. And discernment means I look at this and I look at this. And discernment means actively choosing against this and actually choosing this.

And at some point discernment means I get up off the couch. Right? That's when it becomes real. I actually get up. I actually put my phone away. I've told you about the time that Maddox took my phone one time, took it, looked at it, looked at me and dropped it in a cup of water.

And he was like two. Yeah, I still haven't learned. Right? So when I'm in an argument with my wife, not that that ever happens hypothetically when we're in an argument.

My heart is telling me you need to be defensive. You need to be sarcastic. You need to be do whatever you can do to win. And God's word tells me you need to love her like Christ loves you.

[ 20 : 45 ] You need to love her sacrificially. You need to put her flourishing before your own. You need to be the first to admit your sin. You need to be the first to lay your arms down. You need to ask for forgiveness.

Right? And so discernment means I look at this and I choose against it and I look at this and I shut the heck up. And I listen to what she has to say. That's discernment.

And this is an art that is cultivated over time. Listen, the great thing about this word is it doesn't convey wooden simplistic obedience. All too often, I think Christians, we proof text people to death. Right? Well, just here's what the Bible says about this. That's knowledge without discernment.

Right? Discernment is an art. It requires wisdom and nuance and tact and subtlety and a sense of context and sensitivity.

It requires wisdom. To know how and when and in what ways to apply the knowledge of God. This is what, you know, sometimes pastors talk about the difference between a theological response and a pastoral response.

[ 21 : 54 ] We confuse the two. Discernment. So discernment. So discernment, you may think of it this way. Discernment is the art of applying God's black and white truth in a gray world. Where you're not compromising the truth.

But you're not ignoring the fact that life is incredibly complicated. So all together, the way this all works is this. Paul's basic prayer is this.

That our love, that we would grow both in having a general knowledge of the things of God. And a specific knowledge and an ability to apply that in daily life. And the key is we need all three.

They all need to grow in proportion to one another. So what do you think, what is love without knowledge and discernment? It's just kind of shallow sentimentalism, right?

What is knowledge without discernment? Well, it's wasted, frankly. What's discernment without knowledge? Probably impossible, right?

[ 22 : 57 ] What is knowledge and discernment if you don't have love? It's probably going to be soul crushing to somebody. Either you or somebody you're trying to love.

The point is we need all three. So this is how we grow. They all have to be growing together. In order to grow in love, you need to grow in knowledge. In order to grow in love, you need to grow in your ability to apply that knowledge in your life and the lives of people around you.

That's what it means to grow in love. And so the next question is, how do we know that this growth is happening? And this is where Paul says in verse 10, So that you may approve what is excellent and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.

Filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God. So in other words, what he's saying is this. We know that we're growing when we see three things. Change in character.

That's the word pure, to be pure internally. Change in your conduct, how we act and what other people see in our lives. That's being blameless.

[ 24 : 02 ] And then the third thing is really key. We become more and more able to approve what is excellent. What this essentially means is this. That the more we're growing, the more our priorities are reflecting God's priorities.

The more we grow, as Augustine would say, St. Augustine, the more our love is rightly ordered. We are approving and valuing and assigning worth to things in the way that God would.

That's what it means to grow in this way. So in the previous examples about my kids and wife, to go back to those, growth means coming more and more and more to value God's definition and God's call on my life than whatever immediate satisfaction I may gain from doing what I want to do.

So that's what growth would look like on a practical level. So this is how we grow in love. Let me give you another image that might help. It's taking the kind of tree and steak image and taking it a little further.

Did any of you see this viral video that went around this week of a son? And every time I think about it, I get choked up. There's a little boy who can't walk. Anybody see this video?

[ 25 : 09 ] And the dad, so I think a few of you did, the dad builds this special harness that allows his son to be strapped to his body. So his body and his legs and his feet are all strapped to his dad.

And they go outside and there's kids running and playing. And the dad is giving his son the experience of walking and running and playing with these other kids. And the look on this kid's face is pure, unadulterated joy.

He is full of joy, radiating joy. And I think this is a lot of what Paul is calling us to. He's saying, if you want to know what it feels like to love the way Jesus loves, then you need to harness yourself to Christ.

You need to harness the way you love, harness the way you conduct yourself, harness the way you relate to other people, harness that to Christ. And we do it through knowledge and discernment.

And the idea is that over time, we gain a feel for what it's like to move and to interact and to love like Jesus does. And it's hard at first. It's unnatural.

[ 26 : 15 ] But over time, it becomes more and more natural feeling. It becomes a kind of Jesus-shaped instinct. But it can only come by harnessing ourselves to Christ through knowledge and discernment.

So I want to get real practical here, just as we're closing. And I want to think about a couple of implications of this as we think about our own community. The first implication is this.

Mature love. Mature love does not equal unconditional tolerance and acceptance. It doesn't.

When a good friend of yours is in a relationship and they're dating somebody and it's an unhealthy relationship and you have concerns about it, if you simply say, well, I don't want to make waves.

So all you say is, hey, so happy for you guys. That's actually an immature love. That's shallow sentimentalism. Mature love actually means being willing to ask the hard questions.

[ 27 : 25 ] Mature love means being willing to put the welfare of your friend ahead of your fear of rocking the boat. Mature love isn't meant to be lived out without knowledge and certainly discernment and sensitivity intact.

You should certainly make sure that your words match the strength of your relationship. The stronger your relationship, the stronger your words can be. Right?

But that works both ways. You shouldn't use stronger words than your relationship warrants, but you shouldn't use weaker words than your relationship warrants. Right?

So mature love recognizing that sometimes it's worth risking the friendship for the sake of your friend. And that's a hard call to make. I've seen people make that call and I've seen extraordinary things happen.

I've seen people make that call and hard things happen. You know, in my own life, in my own life, I had a really good friend years ago in this exact situation.

[ 28 : 31 ] It's why I thought of the example. And I did take the risk of questioning and saying, I'm not sure if this is the best thing. I think you guys should wait. And I lost the friend. And to this day, it breaks my heart.

To this day, I grieve it. Because, you know, we're still Facebook friends. Whatever that means. And it's hard. But I'll tell you, it's nothing compared to what I've seen when people don't take that risk.

It's worth it every time. That's what mature love means. Mature love also means this. Mature love says, I want the best for you, even if it costs me.

I want the best for you, even if it costs me. So at the risk of oversimplifying, and I know this is going to sound very simplistic. I think that when I look at relationships with friends and coworkers and roommates, and if you're married, your spouse.

If you have kids, your kids. I think that all of our interactions, all the little kind of exchanges that we have throughout our days and weeks, I think all of that can be boiled down to one decision that we are making over and over and over and over in a thousand different ways.

[ 29 : 45 ] And that's this. Either we are saying in that moment, I want you to grow and to benefit, even if it costs me. Or we are saying, I want you, I want to grow and I want to benefit, even if it costs you.

Right? So when I flop down on the couch with my iPhone, what I'm actually saying is, it's, I want to benefit and have this time to myself, even though it's going to cost you time with your dad.

Right? When I'm defensive and angry and try to win arguments with my wife, what I'm really saying is, it's more important for me to feel right than it is for you to feel loved.

I want to benefit at your expense. So mature love says, I want you to benefit, even if it costs me.

And mature love is willing to sacrifice to see that happen. And friends, the way that we know this is very simple. It's because this is exactly how Jesus loves us.

[ 30 : 50 ] Right? It's exactly how Jesus loves us. Jesus does not benefit from knowing us. Okay? We don't bring anything to the table.

Right? Jesus doesn't, he's not waiting for us to kind of fulfill our end of the bargain. Right? There is absolutely no gain. He doesn't need anything from us.

And yet, he's the one who looks at us and says, I gave up everything so that you could belong to me and be with me for all eternity. I did it all for you.

To see you become the men and the women that I created you to be. Whatever it takes to see that happen. And the reason he does this is very simply because this is what love does.

This is what mature, real, divine love looks like. So our prayer is that that same love, as it's been planted here, would grow more and more and more to reflect the character and the nature of the love that we have in Jesus Christ.

[ 32 : 02 ] Let's pray. Our Father, we recognize that our hope, again, is not in human words or wisdom. But it's in your word and the power of your spirit to implant that word and to make it grow.

And so we pray that as we come more deeply to understand your words tonight, that the result would be that we grow in love. That this community would be marked more and more and more. not just with an abundance of love, but an abundance of Christ-like love. Mature, vitalized, healthy love. Love that reflects this supernatural love that has broken into the world and given us new lives and new hope.

We pray this for our good Lord and ultimately for your glory. In your Son's name. Amen.