

A Prayer for Progress

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Date: 19 June 2022

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[0 : 00] Now we turn to the preaching of God's Word. Today we continue our series as we walk through the epistle of Philippians. We're going to be in chapter 1, verses 9 through 11 today.

As we get going, though, there was a book that came out a couple years ago. It was called Open, the Story of Human Progress. And it focused on the progress that has been made over the course of the history of mankind.

Especially focusing on the last century where we have seen just incredible changes happen. Where we see global hunger has been significantly reduced. Child mortality, extreme poverty to levels that have plummeted.

And alongside that, achievements that have been happening. Advancements in technology and in science that have brought unprecedented wealth and opportunity to the world. But in the book it was talking about, even though despite we've seen this progress, there's still this tension that we experience.

Because man, as the author says, has this double nature. This, we are both traitors and tribalists, the author said. And so we have this desire for cooperation, but we also have this desire for belonging.

[1 : 11] And the two can come in conflict. And so as traitors, it says that we are curious and adventurous people. We desire to communicate and work with one another for mutual benefit.

On the other hand, as tribalists, we are suspicious of one another. And we can be hostile toward one another. We are quick to divide the world into two camps of us versus them. And so based on this analysis, he says that the greatest advancement that we have seen in human history comes from when societies act as traitors.

When there's this great openness in society. Where we see cultures mixed and the movement of people, we see innovation skyrocket and liberty flourishes.

But on the other hand, when we act as tribalists, it usually leads to isolation. Oftentimes to authoritarianism. And when this happens, innovation is stifled and societies often suffer.

And so naturally, the author advocates for this continued openness, for a free flow of people and ideas and goods. And he sees this as the basis for continued human progress. Well, in this text today, we see Paul, he shares a similar desire for progress, but in a very different way.

[2 : 28] He's not talking about economic progress. He's not talking about political progress. He's talking about progress in our lives as believers. Progress as we move closer and closer as individuals and as a body toward Christ.

And so we see, we've looked over the last couple weeks of how Paul has been encouraged by the church at Philippi. Both in their partnership in the gospel for the love that they have shown him and one another.

He highlights the work that God has done in their life that he's continuing to do, that he will bring to completion. And so we see today, this prayer of thanksgiving turns into a prayer of petition.

He asks that God continue to work in the lives of the saints in Philippi. Because he recognizes that it's God alone who empowers the church. It is God alone who provides us with the desire and the ability to follow after him.

And so we're going to focus on this prayer today. Philippians 1, verses 9 through 11. It should be on the screen behind me. Follow along as I read. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment.

[3 : 35] 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.

This is the word of God. Pray with me again. Oh God, we come to you hungry and needy. And so Lord, we ask that you fill us up.

That you reveal the truth of the gospel today. In such a way that our understanding may be broadened and our faith may be deepened. God, I ask that you use me as an empty vessel to effectively communicate your truth.

Lord, I ask that through our passage today. That we may be convicted. That we may be challenged and encouraged. As we seek to live for you. We pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. So as I mentioned, this is our third week in the book of Philippians. And we're finally getting to the end of Paul's introduction.

[4 : 40] The last couple weeks we focused on Paul as he introduces himself to the church and addresses the church specifically. We've talked about his thankfulness that he has for the church. And how they provided for him and loved one another.

And he also highlights the work of God in their lives. The work of God that happens at the point of conversion. The work of God that's continuing to happen in their lives.

And looking forward to the completed work of Christ when he returns. And so with an emphasis on the work of God, we may be tempted to think, well, if God's in control, then, you know, there's really not much more for us to do.

God is sovereign overall, so we can kind of just sit back and follow along. But that's not the posture that Paul takes in these verses here. He's prayed a prayer of thanksgiving.

Now it's a prayer of petition. Asking that God continue to work. Encouraging the church to continue to follow after him. And so we're going to be focusing on this prayer today.

[5 : 36] Specifically, three aspects of his prayer. We're going to look at the request, the reason, and the result. The request, the reason, and the result for this prayer.

So let's first look at verse 9 again at the request that is made. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment.

So the very first thing that Paul prays for here when he's thinking about the church in Philippi is that they may increase in love. And it may seem to you as a rather simple request that's made.

But the more and more I thought about this, the more and more I was convicted this week. Because it's not how I pray for the church normally. And maybe you struggle with this too. When we think about praying for the church here at Becclew.

Or we think about praying for other churches in Edinburgh or Scotland or the global church around the world. Usually, at least for myself, love isn't the first request that comes to my mind. I may pray for the effectiveness of certain ministries.

[6 : 35] I may pray for people to have endurance in the midst of persecution. We may pray for financial stability for churches. But oftentimes, praying for love, even though it's such a basic request, is not something that we often think of.

But this is what Paul is praying for here. This is where his focus lies when he's thinking about the progress within the church. And it's interesting that he doesn't include an object for this love.

He doesn't say increase a love for God or love for one another. He just says love that it may abound more and more. And so he's speaking really of the virtue of love. A characteristic that we as believers should have.

That should pervade our whole being. And so he's not also speaking of a generic love. A worldly love. If you go out on the streets and ask someone what love is, you're probably going to get a different answer from every person you ask.

But he's speaking very specifically here of the love of the Father. And so if we look at Jesus, before he was arrested and crucified, we have a recording of his high priestly prayer.

[7 : 45] Where he prays for the saints. He prays for you and me. And he asks in that prayer, speaking to the Father, he says that the love with which you have loved me may be in them.

And so Jesus desires that the love of the Father, the same amount of love, the same quality of love, that the Father loves the Son, is the same love that is extended to us.

And so, of course, throughout the Bible, we see this theme of love repeated. Especially by Paul here, if we think of many of his other letters to the New Testament church. In 1 Corinthians 13,

what's known as the love chapter, faith, hope, and love remain, but the greatest of these is love.

In Galatians 5, where Paul talks about the fruit of the Spirit, the first fruit that he lists is love. And so here, too, he's speaking of love, not only that it exists, but that it abounds.

That we may experience the love of Christ, the love that drew Christ to the cross, to die for your sins and mine. This is what he wants to abound in the church. And so he uses this language, abound, it's the same words that he uses in chapter 4, when he's talking and recounting about the provision that the church has provided for him.

[9 : 04] This financial support, how he's been well supplied by the church, when no other church would. He said it's this abundant supply of money and resources that he's received. This is the same imagery that we see here.

And so before my family and I moved to Edinburgh, we lived in the city of Greenville, South Carolina. And Greenville is kind of known as, to have this really beautiful city center. It's not a huge city, but it's a growing city. And in the city center, in the middle of downtown, there's this waterfall. And it used to be used to power textile mills back in the day.

But now it has been cleaned up. It's now surrounded by this beautiful park. And the water from this waterfall flows into a river. And a little bit beyond downtown, it went right by our neighborhood where we lived.

And so around that river, the park continued. There were volleyball courts. There were picnic pavilions. There was a play park. It was a great place to spend time and take the kids. However, the problem with that park, it was very low-lying in elevation.

[10 : 07] And so when we got significant rainfall, oftentimes the park would flood. And a few times when we lived in that neighborhood, the flood rose so much that not only did it pour over the banks, but it rose to the level that it was above the nets of the volleyball court, that the entire play park was covered in water.

And so let this be an imagery then of what Paul is talking about here, that we're so filled up with God's love that we have no room to store it, that we can't contain it, that it naturally flows from us abundantly and consistently to those around us.

Another thing happened when that river would flood is it would attract attention from people. Usually the local news stations would come and set up a camera to see how extensive the flooding was in the park.

People from our neighborhood would walk down and snap pictures. You could even walk across the bridge in the park. And so the same here. The love that we have for one another should be something that is attractive to the outside world, something that is a curiosity to the outside world, something that can't be replicated outside of Christ.

Because Jesus says this himself in John 13, 35. He says, By this all people will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.

[11 : 21] So the love that Paul is talking about here, the love that we receive from Christ, should not only link us to one another as saints, but it should also identify us with Christ.

But we see here that this love is not just an emotion or a sentimental feeling here. It's grounded in truth. And so that's why Paul continues that our love should abound more and more with knowledge and discernment.

Maybe you've heard people in the church before say something like, you know, I don't really care much for theology. I just try to love Jesus.

Or, you know, I don't spend a whole lot of time studying the Bible. I just think it's important to love one another. But it's important to remember this truth, that if we remove our knowledge of God from our love for God, then we are just worshiping a God of our imagination.

Martin Luther said this, that I am not permitted to let my love be so merciful as to tolerate and endure false doctrine. The love that we experience through Christ, that we share to one another, is not a license for naivete.

[12 : 35] It's not this aimless emotion that just leads to general indifference or tolerance in our lives. Love is to be directed. We cannot love what we do not know.

And so if we think about a marriage relationship, maybe if you're married, you can think about maybe when you first started to get to know your spouse. You were first introduced to them. There might have been that initial attraction.

Maybe you had this growing infatuation for them. But it wasn't until you actually started spending time with them, until you actually started talking with them and getting to know them, did that genuine and authentic love begin to develop.

And so knowledge is not the enemy of love. Knowledge is a necessary requirement for its existence. Authentic love for God is founded on a knowledge for God.

And so when Paul speaks of knowledge here, love that must abound more and more with knowledge, he's talking about a spiritual knowledge. A knowledge that comes through knowing God, the character of God, being able to understand the depth of his love for us and the truth of the gospel.

[13:47] And so how do we develop this knowledge? Is it just by showing up on a Sunday morning? That's part of it through the preaching of God's word. But is this something that we hunger after?

Is this a knowledge that we desire so much in our Christian lives, as Paul does here? In chapter 3, later on in Philippians, in verse 8, he says this, I count everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.

There is nothing more important in Paul's life than knowing Christ. It is this knowledge that gives him purpose in his life. It is this knowledge that propels him forward to be a servant and a saint of God.

But we see that this knowledge is not alone. It's actually coupled with discernment. And so this Greek word that's used for discernment here is actually a term that would be used for testing materials, or testing metals, rather, to see their quality, to figure out the ingredients within this metal. And so when we think about discernment, it's really this deep perceptiveness, this insight and understanding that we have. So not only does Paul want the church to have a love that comes through knowledge of God, but also a love that is discerning, a love that can be applied to others within the church.

[15:12] And so if we think back again about a relationship with your spouse, or maybe even a close friend of yours, spending time with them, you get to know them. But the quality of your friendship is not based on the amount of information you know about that person.

A mark of a quality marriage is not how many questions you can get right on a trivia question, a game show about your spouse. We must have wisdom and understanding not only in the love and knowledge we have, but how to apply that love to one another.

So if you think of your spouse, you should be the one who knows best how to comfort your spouse when they're struggling, how to encourage them when they're discouraged, how to love them in such a way that they can appreciate and receive well.

And so the same goes for the church. Our love for Christ is not just some mushy sentiment. We can love each other well because we know the gospel.

And we can love each other well because we know how to apply the gospel in our daily lives, in individual relationships, in the church at large, in the global church.

[16:24] And so that leads us then to our second point. We looked at Paul's request, now the reason for his request. What is this reason that he says we need for deserving love?

Why does Paul pray that it may abound within the church? Look at verse 10. So that you may approve what is excellent and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.

And so we can split this up into two parts. What first does it mean to approve what is excellent? One of my best friends who I've known my entire life, he works actually in the fashion industry.

He's someone who pays very close attention to detail. And this has benefited him well. He works for a clothing company in New York City in their corporate office.

And his job is a chief merchandiser. And I'm not going to pretend to know all what that includes. But basically, part of his responsibility is figuring out what the line is going to be for the next season.

[17:22] What clothes and articles are going to be included included in the sale for the fall, winter, spring, seasons ahead. And so part of that responsibility is working with designers, working with the financial side to see what's going to sell, what do we want to include, looking not only into articles of clothing, but how we're going to make these clothing, this clothing.

What materials are we going to use? What dyes are we going to use? What buttons are we going to put on a shirt? Someone has to make those decisions. And so he does this well because of his attention to detail.

And this really is something that I see throughout his life that has really benefited me because this applies to technology and computers and audio equipment and tools and household goods. So he's really, I use him as my personal shopper that whenever I have a big purchase to make, I'm going to

call him up and say, hey, what do you think about such and such?

Last year, I wanted to get some new Bluetooth headphones. So I call him up and say, hey, what do you think? What are my options? Without even doing research, I mean, he could spit off, well, these are the best ones for exercise.

These ones are really good waterproof ones. These, you should avoid these. The quality is not best. These are the ones that have the best sound quality. And so when we look at what Paul's saying here, this is really what he's talking about.

[18 : 36] Being able to approve what is excellent means being able to see and decide what is superior in our lives. Not just to distinguish between good and evil. That is oftentimes easy to do.

But be able to distinguish between what is good and what is best. What is permissible and what is preferable. Paul wants the saints at Philippi to determine what really matters within the church. What is of primary importance and what is of secondary nature. What has eternal value and what is just temporal in nature. And so I think we can oftentimes get wrapped up in things that are secondary in nature if we think of society in general.

Maybe it's politics for you. Maybe it's social issues. Maybe it's your job. Maybe it's your family. Not to say any of these things are bad. But are these things what are supposed to be of primary importance in our lives.

The trouble is when we spend so much time and attention on these secondary issues that we can elevate them in status that they become gods in our life. And we can lose track of what is most excellent.

[19 : 45] We can see this within the church as well. It's very easy to cling to secondary issues within the church, right? We may have a preference on how ministries are run.

How the church service should be conducted. What changes we should make to the sanctuary. It's okay to have opinions. There's nothing wrong with them. But when we elevate the importance of those opinions to primary in our lives that's when we forsake the gospel.

If we look through the history of the church it's a history filled with divisions. And not to say some of those divisions weren't necessary and essential for the preservation of the gospel.

Some were. But if we think especially in modern times when there are arguments within the church when there are splits and divisions within the church what's the reason for that happening?

Is it because of a lack of discerning love for one another? Is it because we've made secondary issues primary issues? That's a problem that we need to avoid.

[20 : 48] My pastor back in the States he'd always used to say whenever he was asked to give an opinion or would offer his opinion on a secondary issue related to the church he'd always end his comment by saying well that's not that is not a hill I'm willing to die on.

And so that's something I think is important to remember when we're talking about secondary issues or opinions that we have it's perfectly fine to have those opinions but if they're on secondary issues it shouldn't be a hill that we're willing to die on.

We should not be willing to risk what is most excellent in our lives the unity of the church the love among the saints the centrality of the gospel simply so we can get our own way.

So let's look further then at verse 10 we looked at seeing what is most excellent choosing what is most excellent but it also says so that we may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ. And so what does it mean to be pure and blameless?

A few weeks ago we talked about why Paul calls the church saints because that's our identity in Christ Christ has given us his righteousness that we are holy and set apart.

[21 : 59] But I don't think that's quite what Paul is getting at here this is a prayer for action so yes although we identify in Christ we are also called to holiness as well and so that's I think what he's referring to here is our own sanctification our calling to pursue holiness as Christ as is at work in our lives so we should desire to be more and more like him.

And so this doesn't mean that we reach a point of perfection in our life that's not what Paul is saying here. In fact he makes that point himself later on in the letter in chapter 3 verse 12 he says not that I've already attained this referring to being like Christ or I am already perfect but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

And so since we are in Christ we are motivated to be pure. Some places the same Greek word is translated as sincere. Are we inwardly pure?

do we live lives of sincerity as saints? We're also called to be blameless. And this word really has a dual meaning.

It means to personally avoid tripping over obstacles but also prevent others from tripping over obstacles that we've created. And so Paul is saying that our conduct should not cause offense to those around us.

[23 : 27] And so when we combine these ideas together purity and blamelessness. We see that Paul is talking about this inward character that we should have but also this outward conduct that should be evident.

Inwardly our minds and our hearts should be pure. Paul says in Colossians to set our mind on things above. Outwardly we need to live lives that are above reproach.

Our actions should be evidence of the work that God is doing in our lives. This is a comprehensive holiness inside out. That Christ alone can see inside our hearts and that others can see around us. And so Paul says we live this way for the day of Christ. Now this is the second time in just a couple verses that Paul has talked about the day of Christ just in his introduction.

And so what is the importance of the day of Christ? What does it mean? We talked about this last week where the day of Christ is a time where Christ will come again where the nations will be judged where the people of God will receive salvation and vindication.

[24 : 36] And so this is a good thing if we are saints if we are brothers and sisters in Christ to await the day of the Lord. But not only wait for that day but also to prepare for that day.

The day of the Lord provides us with direction. It provides us for motivation in our lives. What if we knew that Christ was coming again tomorrow? How would that change our lives?

How would that change our priorities? In our relationships certainly we'd be more merciful toward others. More willing to forgive and extend forgiveness to those around us.

Certainly we'd have a desire to share the love of Christ with those that don't know him. To see the gospel expand. That we may personally be prepared for his return. Jesus gives us a couple parables related to his return and one of those is the parable of the ten virgins who are awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom.

Five of them are wise and five of them are unwise. The unwise ones forget to bring extra oil for their lamps as they wait in the night for the arrival of the bridegroom. And so they hurry out to go buy more oil.

[25 : 47] Of course a bridegroom comes in their absence and they're left out of the wedding. Jesus says at the end of that parable he says that we do not know the day nor the hour of his return.

And so even though we don't have that information we should nonetheless be ready and eager and prepared for his return. And so that brings us then to that final R the result.

What is the result of Paul's request? Look in verse 11. He says we are to abound in discerning love in order to be pure and blameless as a result filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.

So in my back garden we have an apple tree that we've enjoyed for the past couple years. It's been really nice when we first arrived it was just heavy laid with apples. So many apples that we can't possibly eat them all.

We actually bought a juicer to try to juice some of the apples. We've made pies that we've given away to people. And last year I noticed that some of these branches were kind of struggling. Some of the apples weren't really that good so I decided I need to figure out how to prune this tree.

[27 : 02] I never pruned an apple tree before and didn't know how to do it. A little internet research says that the apple tree it should be trimmed like a goblet. So the growth should happen on the outside.

There shouldn't be any inward growth any apples or branches inside the interior of the tree. And so I did my best to do that and now seeing the fruits of that labor we see more fruit being growing even apples the size of probably golf balls right now in the tree looking forward to when they will be ripe before the harvest in a few months.

We all know basically how this fruit is grown. This is something we learn in primary school how the roots suck up the water and the nutrients from the ground. The trunk spreads out these nutrients to the branches.

It's the leaves that collect the sunlight that's necessary for growth. And so we see here this is true of the life of the saints as well. Paul is explaining this process that we receive the love of God we show

this love to others we grow in holiness and as a result we see fruit.

So as we undergo sanctification as we grow more and more like Christ fruit should be a necessary result. Conduct in our lives where we see and desire the advancement of the gospel where others are benefited and ultimately God is pleased.

[28 : 21] But it's important to note that this righteous fruit also needs a righteous root. As Paul says the righteousness comes through Jesus Christ. Our fruitfulness is not self-generated.

It's not based on our own efforts. The harvest of our good deeds is a product of Jesus Christ himself. And so if we think back to the passage that we read earlier from John 15 where Jesus refers to himself as the vine.

In verse 5 he says I am the vine you are the branches whoever abides in me and I in him will bear much fruit apart from me you can do nothing. And so our fruitfulness is wholly dependent on Christ's work in our lives.

And so that should be reassuring to us because it's not based on our own efforts it's not about how hard we try or how good we are that we may see fruit. It is the work of Christ in our lives.

It is God's work in us that allows good works to flow from us. This is what Christ desires to see in his church. To see great fruit happen as a result of his work in our lives.

[29 : 32] In Titus 2.14 talking about Jesus Paul says this says he who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people of his own possession who are zealous for good works.

So Jesus died to redeem a people who are passionate about good works. Who are passionate about seeing fruit. Notice this logical progression then in Paul's prayer.

he prays for loving hearts. He prays for discerning minds. He prays for this inward purity this outward blamelessness that results in the fruit of righteousness.

And so we should live in such a way our hearts and minds should be so transformed by the gospel that this is just a natural outcome of God's work in our lives. But ultimately this isn't the end of the verse.

It doesn't end here. Paul's prayer doesn't end with just our fruitfulness. Our fruitfulness is not the ultimate goal. We are filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.

[30 : 45] And so we bear fruit not so we can look good or that we can receive the credit. We bear fruit so that God receives the glory. This is our ultimate aim. This is our greatest ambition.

And so if we go back to John 15 again where Jesus calls himself the vine in verse 8 he says by this my father is glorified that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

So our fruitfulness it points to the greatness of God. It points to the beauty and the excellence of God. It is he who we praise with our actions.

It is he that we exalt with our lives. If we think back to the book that I mentioned at the very beginning this book on the history of human progress the author states he says openness has been the greatest blessing of mankind and will continue to provide us with new sources of wealth and technology.

And so in the mind of this author human progress is the ultimate end. And so that's why it's an imperative that he gives that we need to create political and economic systems that are open that we act as traitors in such a way that we can attain more wealth and more technology and ultimately more comfort.

[32 : 08] That's the exact opposite of what Paul advocates for when he talks about progress in these verses. Our sanctification our fruitfulness our holiness is not the end goal of our Christian life.

Instead it is the means by which we glorify God. God is the ultimate ends in our life. The Westminster Catechism very first question sums it up so well.

What is the chief end of man to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever? This should be the reason for doing everything. The reason we come here to worship. The reason the Word is preached. The reason we gather as community groups that we're involved in ministry.

The reason we work and have families and go to school. All for the glory of God. Paul sums it up well in Romans 11. He says, For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.

To Him be glory forever. And so when we take a step back we've looked at this prayer in three parts. But if we consider the prayer as a whole yes, Paul is praying for the church that they may show progress in their faith that they may be holy and blameless and pure that they may bear fruit.

[33 : 19] But if we boil it down to what Paul is really asking He is asking God to glorify Himself. His prayer for our progress is ultimately a prayer for God to be praised.

And so that needs to be our prayer as well. When we think about progress in the Christian life it's not about how good we are or how hard we try. It's not about proving ourselves to God or to others. may it be our prayer that God deepen our love so that He may receive the glory. That He give us discernment that He be praised that we can have fruit in our lives that ultimately God can be exalted.

That's our prayer as believers. That our fruit is not for our own benefit. We have already received the benefit of salvation through the love of Christ. So let that love embody us.

may be something that we desire to share with one another that ultimately God receives the glory and the praise. Let's pray. God we thank You for the example of Paul's prayer.

[34 : 35] How he desires that love abound within the church. Love that is grounded in the love of the Father. The love that the Son has demonstrated to us through His sacrificial death that we may have life.

God may we be a church that is characterized by love that is coupled with knowledge and discernment. God we desire fruitfulness in our own lives not that we receive the praise but that God receives all the glory.

May that be our heart's desire. we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Now if you'll stand for our final hymn the deep deep love of Jesus.

heaven. If you'll come up and then larger through the peace is where you