

1:1 As the letter to the Philippians opens, we note that it is actually not a work solely of Paul, but also of Timothy. Timothy, as we will recall, is identified by Paul as his “true son in the faith” in 1 Timothy 1:2. The book’s focus will be heavily Christological – centered around the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is particularly interesting, therefore, that Paul (the “father”) would choose to write this letter with his “son.” Even from its opening words, Philippians seems to be centered around this relational dynamic. Although certainly not a deliberately stated goal of the authors, this seems a particularly interesting theological insight.

Paul and Timothy are “servants” or “slaves” of Christ Jesus. Scholars will often go back and forth as to which term should be preferred, but in either case, the basic principle of the term remains the same; neither a servant nor a slave operates out of their own desires, but is rather commissioned for the purpose of doing the will of the Master. As Christ followers, we are no longer the masters of our lives, but have surrendered ourselves to the work of Christ and His Church. However, our Master is good and kind, offering us the freedom to do what we will insofar as we are within the bounds of His law. We are free to decide within certain limits. R.C. Sproul offers an anecdote in one of his lectures about a young man who didn’t shave one day because “the Spirit didn’t lead me to.” The priest to whom the young man was speaking pressed him a bit, saying (in my paraphrase of Sproul’s words), “Why not do what the Spirit has already led you to do *based on the principles outlined in Scripture*, and then embrace the freedom God has given you to do that which is as simple as shaving?” God gives us parameters in Scripture. From that point, we have freedom to do as we please.

The pair write to “all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi,” which serves as a reminder which should be embraced by all who have come to Christ – sainthood is not a status gained merely upon entry into the kingdom of God at death, but is a reality for all who have died to self and come to faith in Christ Jesus. The word for “saint” here simply means something like “holy ones,” and bearing in mind that holiness is a status of being set apart, Paul and Timothy therefore remind their audience that they have been set apart for the kingdom of God. A saint is not one who has come to perfection in Christ or has already realized all there is to know about Him, but is simply one who is set apart for the Savior. Our sainthood has been secured in Christ, and the question is whether or not we choose to embrace this newness of life and live as those who have been bought for a purpose. The letter is subsequently addressed also to the “overseers and deacons,” those who maintain authority over the congregation. All who are a part of the body of believers at Philippi are under the apostolic authority of Paul, and are by extension subject to the words of Timothy as the one with whom he is collaborating. The specific mention of the overseers and deacons does not indicate their separation from the aforementioned “saints,” but rather highlights the significance of their duties as leaders in the congregation. They have the added responsibility of ensuring Paul and Timothy’s words find fertile ground among the parishioners at Philippi and bring these believers to greater maturity in the faith. In his letter, James will highlight the added

responsibilities of teachers in the faith, and this opening to Philippians seems to subtly reflect a similar notion.

1:2 Witherington has noted the cultural significance of the greeting “Grace and peace,” noting that the common greeting among Greek speakers was “*charis*” (grace) and the common greeting among Hebrew speakers was “*shalom*” (peace, or “*eirene*” in the Greek); thus for Paul and Timothy to use “grace and peace” was to greet both Jews and Gentiles in their own common expressions.

“Grace” here is the same term which those who translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek used to translate phrases like, “if I have found *favor* in your eyes.” The term therefore seems to carry with it a sense not only of God’s undeserved kindness, but even His favorable disposition toward the recipient. The peace of God, of course, is a fairly common gift to be desired throughout Scripture, one which Jesus gives to the apostles following His Resurrection (John 20:19, 21). Specifically, Paul and Timothy wish God’s grace and peace on their readers “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Again, the father/son themes seem to be on full display here – a letter from a father/son duo is sent with grace and peace from the Father and the Son.

1:3 Different translations will either leave v.3 as its own separate thought or will pair it with v.4. Regardless of how the sentence should be structured, the focus is on Paul’s thanksgiving to God for the Philippians and the work they do for the gospel. As the opening to Paul and Timothy’s rhetorical argument of the book, it is important to remember that the goal in these first verses is to draw the audience in and bring them to a greater mutual appreciation. The letter to the Philippians does not contain the same type of rebuke which is so reminiscent of a letter like Romans or the Corinthian correspondence, but it is important nonetheless that the church of Philippi recognize their camaraderie with the apostle, as the message to be delivered is of the utmost importance.

The fact that Paul notes that he gives thanks in “all [his] remembrance” of the Philippians helps to demonstrate the frequency of their presence in his thoughts. The implication is certainly that the Philippians come to mind for Paul quite often, and not only this, but on those frequent occasions, Paul does not lament over them or express his concerns for them in his prayers; rather, the Philippians give him much reason for rejoicing and thanksgiving.

1:4 If this verse is its own separate thought, then the focal point is on Paul’s prayer for the Philippians (NIV: “I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you...”).

If it is a continuation of the thought from the previous verse (ESV: “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer...”), then this verse expands on the focal point of Paul’s thanksgiving, focusing on the continual nature of Paul’s

thanksgiving with regard to prayer. In any case, the repetition of terms like “all” and “always” demonstrates the exhaustive nature of these prayers for the congregation – they are constant and all-encompassing.

Paul’s prayers are joyful with regard to the brothers and sisters at Philippi, and we as the audience are given no reason to believe that Paul has reason to do anything other than rejoice. He will go on to note that the church at Philippi has “always obeyed” (2:12), and we note once more that this letter contains no elements of rebuke save for one moment between two individuals (4:2-3). Assumedly the church at Philippi is a source of joy to Paul because of their steadfastness and reliability as a community of believers.

1:5 The reason for Paul’s thanksgiving and prayer is finally revealed in v.5, as the Philippians have apparently partnered with Paul and Timothy from the very beginning. Questions regarding the true starting point for this partnership (is this referring to the beginning of Paul’s ministry? Of Timothy’s? Or the start of the Philippian congregation itself?) will ultimately yield little in the way of fruit; the fact is that Paul and the Philippians have a long and enduring partnership in the work of spreading the gospel, and this partnership is a source of strength upon which Paul is able to draw in times of trouble such as those which he is presently enduring. It is likely that this partnership has numerous aspects, as the Philippians seem to offer prayer and encouragement for Paul (as he makes reference to their prayers for him in 1:19) just as he prays for and encourages them throughout the letter. They also seem to support Paul financially at times (4:15-16). This partnership has therefore been beneficial on multiple levels for all parties involved, as Paul has thus been able to minister more effectively not just to the Philippians, but to multiple communities because of their support. Indeed, the very existence of this letter is a result of the beneficial work which flows from mutual care and love in this partnership. Philippians in this sense serves as a reminder to the reader that the work of the gospel is not simply a work of the pastor, but that there is a strong relationship between the leader and those whom they serve.

1:6 The authors’ statement here is a reminder that there is much of which to be certain when it comes to our confidence in the work of God. Paul and Timothy are not sure of their own work, nor are they placing their hope in the work of those to whom they write; rather, that of which they are “sure” is found in God. Our confidence is not in flesh and blood, not in the work of one particular prophet or pastor, but in the faithfulness of Christ to His people.

There are four foci in Paul and Timothy’s statement of confidence:

- 1) “He who...,” or a recognition of the origin of the good work.
- 2) “began a good work in you...,” or a recognition of what God has done.
- 3) “Will bring it to completion...,” or a promise of hope.
- 4) “At the day of Christ Jesus,” or a promise of timing.

First: We have already examined somewhat that the One who began this work is God. Is this referring specifically to the Father, the Son, or the Spirit? Each could certainly have a viable case made, but ultimately we recognize that all three are He. The Father sent the Son to win the battle for salvation in the human heart. The Son gave Himself and rose to new life so that He might begin the good work of eternal life in us. The Spirit indwells us from the moment of justification to develop the image of the Son within us. In all cases, God began something in humanity which is currently being worked out in greater measure.

Second: God “began a good work in you.” He initiated and we responded as He enabled us. This good work is not of our own origin. We do not do this good work, somehow “picking up where God left off.” God began a good work in us, and the question then becomes, what is this good work? It seems Paul and Timothy are referring, at least in Wesleyan terms, to the work of sanctification. God has sanctified us and is continuing the work of sanctification to make us more like Christ Jesus. Although we err, it is also the case that God is working on making us holy in new ways every day even if we fail to recognize it. Sanctification is a work of the Holy Spirit, not anything of our own merit or effort.

Third: Not only has God *begun* this process, but He also will *bring it to completion*. Elsewhere in this very book, Paul will make the perplexing statement that we are to “work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you...” (2:12-13). Although much more will be said on this statement in the upcoming study, let it suffice for now to say that we do not need to rely on our own efforts to move toward greater conformity to the image of Christ; rather, the effort that we put in to becoming more like Christ is good and pleasing to Him. He ensures that these efforts are not in vain, for ultimately the Spirit is actively working toward increased Christlikeness within us as well. This work of God is such that we will one day see the fulfillment of His promises to us in Christ Jesus, and the completion for which we long is complete conformity to the image of Christ.

Fourth: The completion of this work comes “at the day of Christ Jesus.” That is to say, we will always be works in progress in this lifetime, but the day will come when the sinful nature is removed, when the imperfect becomes perfect, and the incomplete is made whole. This is not in conflict with the Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification, as Wesley understood that we could not be completely perfected in this lifetime; rather, that for which we hope in this lifetime is a perfection *in love* and a freedom from *willful sin*. The completion of the work of Christ removes from us even that sin which is done by omission, and we are brought into perfect alignment with the will of God in every way.

1:7 The authors seem to be stepping back for a moment to reference their thankfulness mentioned in 1:3 when they mention their feelings about the Philippians. Their

feelings toward the Philippians are not unfounded but are firmly rooted in this longstanding partnership.

NIV seems to stick more closely to the grammatical structure of Paul's sentence in the Greek, where ESV moves some word order around a bit for the sake of clarity in the English-speaking mind. I have bracketed the sentence to make these shifts more easily identifiable:

ESV – “[It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart], [for you are all partakers with me of *grace*], [both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel].”

NIV – “[It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart]; [for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel], [all of you share in *God's grace* with me].”

Why is this significant? Word order is fairly flexible in the Greek, so the New Testament authors' word placement in a given sentence can often highlight what they consider to be important. In the original word order, Paul seems to be building the case throughout the sentence that the Philippians are his partners in the work of the gospel, and they have attained this status because of their partnership in his imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. All of these facts – his fond remembrance of them, his imprisonment, their co-laboring – they lead him to declare them his partners in the grace of God. Contrast this with the word order of the ESV, which explains after the declaration of partnership just what the specifics of that partnership are. A fairly minor detail, in some ways, but these details can carry with them some shifts in how we perceive the weight of the sentence.

Also significant, however, is the NIV's addition of “God's grace” to what, in the original text, is merely “grace” (differences bold and italicized above). There is little question as to the nature of the grace which the Philippians share with Paul and Timothy, but it seems a needless clarification in this case to add to the text that which simply is not present in the original but can clearly be discerned with simple logic.

We recall that Paul does not speak of his imprisonment as a past event, but as a present reality. He is writing this letter from within the confines of prison walls. The NIV translation is more accurate here in terms of literal meaning, while the ESV seems to highlight what is being referenced – although Paul says “in chains,” he is referring to his imprisonment, so both simply show a different side of the same concept.

1:8 The term “martyr” is what appears here, which the ESV translates as “witness.” This is the original definition of the term, without it necessarily carrying the full implications of what we typically consider it to mean in this particular context. A martyr was just

this – one who witnessed. Paul identifies God as his witness who can attest to the validity of what is being said.

There is an interesting word choice which Paul uses for what is often translated as “affection” here, as the term literally means “intestines.” However, the term carried with it a much deeper meaning – it expressed the true depth of one’s feeling toward another. The emotion expressed was one experienced in the deepest parts of the self, hence the use of the bowels for imagery here. It is exceedingly common for us to use parts of the body to express other concepts – e.g., “from the heart” – but given the lack of use for this particular part in our culture, it sounds odd to our ears. Thus, we speak of affection to gain an understanding of the term’s implied meaning.

It should be noted that this is not merely Paul and Timothy’s own longing but is rather “the affection of Christ Jesus” which is expressed in them. There seems a duality here to what is being expressed; just as later in this letter Paul will encourage them to “work out [their] own salvation... for it is God who works in you,” so now he seems to speak of his own affection working in tandem with the love of Christ Jesus. Many a Christian theologian has expressed the sentiment, “All truth is God’s truth” – in other words, regardless of where it’s found, if something is true, ultimately it owes its validity to the One who is the Way and the Truth and the Life. In the same way, I see Paul essentially arguing in a subtle manner in this statement that “all love is God’s love” – that is, genuine love (affection) has God as the Source.

1:9 Here we get to the meat of the actual prayer itself: Paul’s desire is that the Philippians would love in greater measure. There are a few aspects to this verse which deserve greater attention:

- 1) The content of Paul’s prayer – its primary focus – is the love that the Philippians have. The greatest reward for their work alongside Paul in the gospel is the multiplication of their love. As Christ followers, that which should characterize us most is our love; indeed, the goal of Christian theologians in the Holiness movement (during the 1700-1800s) was to gain perfection in love. This is therefore the greatest wish Paul can have for them, that they would gain love in greater measure.
- 2) There are two ways to potentially read “with knowledge and all discernment,” and both seem applicable:
 - a. Just as their love abounds, so may their knowledge and discernment. These too are beneficial to the Philippians, as their knowledge and discernment will allow them to be more effective in ministry. They will be better able to apply their abounding love to their neighbors.
 - b. May their love be characterized by knowledge and discernment. Love is made even more effective when it is paired with wisdom and understanding. This is what causes theologians and pastors today to

pursue further education, for instance; there is great benefit to the Church when our love is paired with a trained and caring mind.

In any case, the Philippians are to grow in their love, and this is not of their own work – it is a gift from God as a result of Paul’s prayer over them.

1:10 The growth and refining of their love has an end goal: to “approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.”

The term for “excellent” here is often rendered in the New Testament as something like “of greater value” (as it appears, for instance, in Matthew 6:26, 10:31, and 12:2). Hence Paul’s hope for the Philippians is that they would be able to know what matters most, that which is of the greatest value. To “approve” what is excellent is essentially to put that which we receive to the test (arguably, the test of Scripture) and to find that it holds up to scrutiny. Paul’s hope is therefore that the Philippians will be able to use their “knowledge and discernment” (1:9) to put everything in life to the test, determine its consistency with the will of God, and in so doing be able to live in a “pure and blameless” manner.

Paul’s mention of purity and blamelessness here warrants a brief examination of the value of holy living according to the New Testament. Many will ask why those who are in Christ should bother to live holy lives if God’s grace is so abundant, but this line of thinking clearly stands in stark contrast to so much of the message of Scripture as to be refuted with even a brief examination of key texts like Matthew 5:48 (“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”), Romans 6:1-2 (“Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!”), and so on. The call to holiness pervades every corner of Scripture, both Old Testament and New. God tells His people Israel that they “shall be holy” *because* He is holy (Leviticus 19:2), which is repeated by 1 Peter 1:16. Leviticus 20 contains two separate calls to holiness (20:7, 26). Perhaps most problematic for those who insist on a cheapened view of grace, however, is 1 Thessalonians 4:7 – “For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.” Our call is to walk in blamelessness and purity as Christ followers.

This holy living has an end goal in the verse, which is “the day of Christ.” This is not to say that the need for holy living ends on that day, but rather that its culmination is the day of Christ, on which humanity will stand before the Lord and face judgment. Following that time, the people of God will have no possibility for sin; the tempter will be banished to eternal punishment, and it would be impossible for us to dwell in the direct, face-to-face presence of God when tainted with sin, so Scripture makes it clear that sin will be no more. The exhortation of 1:10 is to walk in a blameless manner for that day so that we will not be subject to judgment for wickedness.

1:11 One of the ways in which purity of life manifests is in the “fruit of righteousness” – that is, a life spent in dedication to Christ will result in certain identifiable distinctives. Is the

fruit to which Paul refers here to be identified with the fruit of the Spirit which he mentions in Galatians 5? The argument could certainly be made, given the fact that the Spirit is the source of righteousness in the life of the believer; furthermore, righteous living is characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, goodness, and self-control. Believers should be “filled” with this fruit, but the translation may miss a subtlety which seems present in the use of this term: this is often translated as “fulfilled” or “completed,” which implies for us that the completion of God’s sanctifying work within us is found in a righteousness which is found in every aspect of the believer’s life. The term used here is a cognate of the Greek “pletho,” from which we get our modern word “plethora” – in other words, the wish is that the believer would have an absolute abundance of righteousness within them which brings about wholeness and completion in Christ Jesus.

The fruit of righteousness “comes through Christ Jesus, to the glory and praise of God.” That is, the fruit of righteousness is a gift of God given to His people. Christ is the source of the gift, and the fruit is made manifest as a result of our surrender to Him. Regardless of the degree to which the believer is involved in the process of moving toward holiness and righteousness, the ultimate reality is that this is a gift from God in Christ. Thus it is little wonder that this is all “to the glory and praise of God!” He is the Source of all righteousness, whether that which is clearly identifiable as His own or that which is found in us – all righteousness can be traced back to Him. When found in humanity, it is in actuality a work of Christ in His people by the power of the Holy Spirit. In all things, God is the One who is worthy of the glory and honor and praise, as no righteousness can be found in us apart from Him.