

***Marks of a Healthy, Maturing Church***  
*Philippians 1:1-11*

Some of you know the name Gordon MacDonald. He is an author and was formerly a pastor and leader in a variety of different ministries. When he travels, he says that he tries to get a seat on the exit row because there's more legroom there. But, he says, "with privilege comes responsibility." Listen to what happened just before take-off on one flight.

The flight attendant comes up, kneels by my aisle seat and says, "Have you read the instruction card that tells you how to open the door in the case of emergency? I need a verbal answer."

I fudge the truth a bit and say yes when the truthful answer is no. I mean, does it take a rocket scientist to know that you simply swivel the handle and push the door out and to the side? So I tell her yes, I've read the card.

But she's smart. She says, "If an emergency happens, I'll be depending on you to open that door. Dozens of other people will also be relying on you, too. So are you sure you know what's on that card?"

Suddenly, she has my attention.

This morning we are going to be studying a passage of Scripture that will have many of you thinking just what Gordon McDonald was thinking: "Yeah, I've read that. I know what it says. I don't think we need to go over this again." Similarly, I hope to have the same effect upon you that the flight attendant had on McDonald. Dozens (if not hundreds) of people depend upon each of us understanding and living out the passage we're studying this morning.

Today we begin a sermon series from Paul's letter to the Philippians. Our passage this morning is Philippians 1:1-11. In this passage Paul describes two of the foundational marks of a healthy, maturing church. Your well-being and that of everyone else in this church depends upon all of us living out these two core commitments. That's because the church is a spiritual family. Just as in any family, how we live and how we treat each other really matters.

Today we consider two foundational commitments of a healthy, maturing church. The church at Philippi was one of the healthiest churches Paul had planted. Other churches (such as Corinth and Galatia) were full of doctrinal, moral, and relational problems. Paul's letters to those churches were painful to write (and painful to read; profitable, but painful). But writing to the Philippians was pure joy for Paul. As we'll see in coming weeks, Paul had some concerns and challenges to address; but the whole tenor of the letter is positive and affirming.

Paul opens this letter as most people did in the Greek culture of his day; he identifies the writer, the recipients, and gives a simple greeting.

1 Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons:

In most of Paul's greetings he identified himself as "an apostle" (Romans 1:1, Titus 1:1), but his relationship with the Philippians was so warm and affectionate that he doesn't feel the need to mention his authority as an apostle; he simply identifies himself and Timothy as "bond-servants of Christ Jesus" - literally "slaves of Christ Jesus." In other words, he and Timothy would do anything their Master wanted, whatever the cost.

Paul addresses this letter to the entire church (saints - those set apart), including the leaders (overseers [elders] and deacons). To the church at Philippi Paul gives this blessing (or aspiration):

2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace denotes the favor that God freely gives as a gift to His people; peace denotes the "wholeness" (in the OT - *shalom*) that God gives us through our relationship with Him. Paul uses these two words to pronounce a blessing upon his readers, reminding them that grace and peace flow "from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

In verses 3 through 8 we see the first mark of a healthy, maturing church:

***A comprehensive commitment to the gospel.*** (Philippians 1:3-8)

Imagine receiving a letter from someone you deeply respect that contained these words:

3 I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, 4 always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all,

Every time Paul remembered the Philippians, he was prompted to give thanks to God for them. And as he thanked God for the Philippians and prayed for them "with joy." What was true about the Philippians that gave him such thankfulness, joy and affection? Verse 5 tells us:

5 in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now.

The term "participation" (NIV "partnership") is *koinonia* and is elsewhere translated "fellowship." The term denotes something that people have in common. For example, if you're traveling and you meet someone from your hometown, home state or country you experience a type of *koinonia*. When I meet someone from Mississippi we always have lots to talk about. Paul sensed *koinonia* - fellowship/participation - with the Philippians because they had ***a common commitment to the gospel*** - both living it out and seeing it spread. Paul never had to "nag" or "badger" the Philippians to care about the gospel; they were just as committed to the spread of the gospel as Paul was.

Paul mentions that this had been true "from the first day until now." Read Acts 16 when you get the chance to learn about "the first day" that the Philippians heard the gospel. A woman named Lydia (a seller of purple cloth) and her household were the first to believe. After a series of wild events, Paul and Silas were thrown into prison. After some miraculous events, Paul led the jailer and his household to the Lord. These dear people were the nucleus for the church at Philippi. From that "first day" the believers in Philippi shared Paul's burden for spreading the good news of Jesus Christ across the known world. They had heard the "good news" that your sins can be forgiven and that you can enter God's family through faith in Jesus Christ. Since they had experienced the gospel as good news, it was only natural that they were committed to seeing others experience the same.

When Paul looked backwards, he saw the Philippians' commitment to the gospel. It only made sense that when he looked forward, he saw further commitment to the gospel.

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

Because of their commitment to the gospel, Paul was convinced that God would continue to bring the Philippian church to maturity until the day that Christ returned. Paul could not have written this about every church he had planted. Paul probably didn't have this confidence about the church in Corinth; they didn't show the fruit of a church whom God was bringing to maturity - whole-hearted participation in the gospel. They were consumed with internal strife and unchecked sin.

It is a sobering thing to realize that verse 6 is not an unconditional statement about every local church. For example, Revelation 2 records a letter from Jesus Christ to the church at Ephesus. There Jesus says that if that church didn't repent and love the way it did when it was young that He would "remove [their] lampstand" (2:5); He would remove His presence and His blessing from that church (as the glory of God departed from the temple in the OT). A church can stray so far from God that He cannot and will not "complete the good work" that He had begun.

But when it came to the church at Philippi, Paul was confident that God would continue His good work. In verse 7 Paul explains:

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

This is probably a reference to Paul's current imprisonment in Rome. Throughout Paul's imprisonment and legal proceedings, the Philippians had stood with him. It wasn't just a few "committed people" within the church; Paul said "you all" are partakers with me. Such broad-based participation in the gospel gave Paul confidence that God would continue His good work in the church at Philippi; and this participation in the gospel was the reason Paul held them so close to his heart.

8 For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

If need be, Paul says, he could call God to testify on his behalf; in the deepest part of his being (lit. "inward parts") Paul felt the same affection for them that Jesus Christ did. Paul really could not express his love for them any more fervently. Surely Paul's affection for them mirrored God's affection for them.

When we read the rest of Philippians, we see at least four ways that the Philippians participated in the gospel. We will look at these in more depth as we come to these passages, but I'll list them here:

The Philippians' commitment to the gospel:

- They prayed for Paul. (1:19)
- They supported Paul financially. (4:15-16)
- They sent people to encourage Paul. (2:25)
- They shared the gospel in Philippi. (1:27)

They were called to do the same thing in their city that Paul was doing as a missionary. There should be great continuity between a church's local outreach and the outreach they send people to do in other parts of the world.

Implications. Like all organizations, churches have a life cycle. It's very common for churches to begin with a strong commitment to sharing the gospel. That's why people begin churches! But as the years go by, it's very common for a church to move from "helping people come to faith in Christ and experience God in all of life," and settle for "being a good church or a friendly church or \_\_\_\_\_ church." It is very common for churches to drift from a comprehensive commitment to the gospel.

We have wrestled with this over the years at Faith. Faith has been in existence for 32 years. We started with a clear vision to reach people for Christ. Ever since the mid-90s we've sent people to serve as missionaries to serve in different parts of the world. We've prayed for missionaries, supported missionaries financially, encouraged those we've sent. We've recognized that God calls us to have the same commitment to the gospel here in Manhattan that our missionaries have in other parts of the world.

We've had to revisit and reestablish this commitment to the gospel over the years. The past several years we've have become more convinced than ever that ***this church doesn't exist only for those who are already here***; we also exist for this community and for those who don't yet believe. This is our mission here in Manhattan. This is a core reason we're offering Rooted three times a year - so that more of us will actually live as followers of Christ who are "on mission" to help others come to Christ. One aspect of Rooted involves understanding the gospel and learning to share our stories with others.

We're seeing God calling a new generation from our midst to serve Him in other cultures. If you haven't done so already, look at the missions wall just outside the

worship center. There you can read some of our vision for outreach across the world. On the monitor you can see those we've sent to different cultures.

As I think of this church, I can honestly say that there are people here at Faith that have this comprehensive commitment to the gospel. I have conversations each week with people who are burdened for others to know Christ, who are taking risks in sharing the gospel with others. But it's not enough for a few to have this commitment; if we are going to be a healthy, maturing church, we need a widespread commitment to the gospel - experiencing it and sharing it with others.

In verses 9 through 11 we see the second mark of a healthy, maturing church:

***A growing capacity to love.*** (*Philippians 1:9-11*)

In verses 3 and 4 Paul told them **that** he prayed; in verses 9 through 11 Paul tells them **what** he prayed. He prayed for their capacity to love each other.

9 And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment,

Paul's basic petition was that their "love may abound still more and more." Paul could have used several different Greek words for "love." Paul uses the term **agape** - which "seems to have been virtually a Christian invention - a new thing" (J.I. Packer, *Your Father Loves You*, Harold Shaw Publishers, 1986). People naturally think, "I will love you if you deserve it, if you have treated me in loving ways. . ." **Agape** love isn't based on the character of the person **being** loved; it is based on the character of **the one loving**. In other words, **agape** love imitates God's love for us.

Romans 5 says that God demonstrated His love (**agape**) for us in that "while we were still sinners [later in v. 10 "enemies"], Christ died for us." **Agape** is a supernatural, sacrificial love. **That's** the type of love Paul wanted to see full to overflowing in the lives of the Philippians. He had already seen this type of love in their lives; he prayed that such love would abound still more and more.

Paul was very wise when he prayed that their love may abound still more and more **in real knowledge and all discernment**. Paul understood that love has content and love requires discernment.

First, love has **content**. Paul wanted their love to abound in "real knowledge" - which is basically the knowledge of God and His ways that comes from Scripture. This means that *biblical truth* should inform our love for each other. We don't love each other in ways that make sense to us; our love is informed by Scripture (which is often different from what makes sense to us). The better you know God the better you can love others.

But content alone is not enough. Second, love also requires **discernment**. Paul also prayed that their love would abound "with all discernment" ("depth of insight" NIV). Scripture needs to be applied skillfully because real life situations are complex. You may

have noticed that the Bible doesn't list every conceivable situation in which we might find ourselves and then tell us exactly what to do. Rather, we generally find principles and perspectives taught and illustrated in the Scriptures. Those principles and perspectives must be applied wisely and skillfully.

Last week we talked about delighting in God's word, having the intention to meditate and obey, and crying out to God to teach us and empower us. This approach toward the Word will result in real knowledge and discernment. If we aren't experiencing God deeply through the Word, we will not be able to love each other well. We will treat others in ways that are contrary to Scripture, and then we'll be baffled why we experience such strife and turmoil. Whether or not the word of Christ dwells richly within you will affect the health and maturity of this church.

In verses 10 and 11 Paul explains the **results** of a growing capacity to love.

10 so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; 11 having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which *comes* through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

If their love would abound in real knowledge and all discernment, they would value the right things and they would grow in holiness. And Paul's confidence would be proven true: God would continue to perfect them until the day of Christ Jesus.

When we talk about the importance of love, it would be easy for us to be like Gordon McDonald on that plane: "I've got it. This is not that complicated. Do we need to go over this again?" The short answer is "Yes!" If we don't abound in love, it doesn't matter if we're "on mission" or if we do Rooted or if we're serving in our community or if we're sending missionaries around the world.

Paul actually believed that a church without love has little or no value in the Kingdom. In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul said:

- \* Your gifting doesn't matter if you don't have love; your life is just noise.
- \* Your knowledge and faith don't matter if you don't have love.
- \* Your ministry to the poor and your sacrifice don't matter if you don't have love; it has no profit in the Kingdom.

But if we do excel in love that abounds in real knowledge and discernment, our gifts, our knowledge and faith, our good works and sacrifice will have great value.