
“Gospel Affections”

Philippians 1:3-8

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I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

⁷It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God’s grace with me. ⁸God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

If you’ve been a Christian for any amount of time, you know that one of the most foundational commands is that we are to love one another. That was the ministry theme of our church in 2020. We know there are many practical ways in which that command is lived out. They can be summarized in the ‘one another’ commands that are found throughout the New Testament. Here are just a few examples. Carry one another’s burdens, forgive one another, accept one another, encourage one another, serve one another, and there are many more like it. All of those fall within the great command to love one another. At the same time, when we look at those examples, they are all practical things we are to do. They’re all actions, and of course we must do them. Those are the outward expressions of our love for one another. Now, all those things are vital and necessary for us to live out our love for other Christians, but in doing so, we may ignore the emotional side of love. Maybe we think emotions are fleeting, or to be too emotional is a sign of immaturity. Yes, when I was a youth, I was emotional, but I’m an adult now and I should leave those emotions behind. Or we were raised and taught to think that emotions aren’t trustworthy, especially in the area of our Christian faith. What’s trustworthy are facts, not feelings. The fact that Jesus is God, the fact that he came to this earth, the fact that he died on a cross, the fact that he rose again. Thus, some of us over the years may have suppressed our emotions, especially as it relates to our Christian lives, especially in the area of loving one another.

We all know that the pandemic has made it that much more difficult to love one another. We’re not allowed to gather as a church, we’re not even allowed to visit in each other’s homes. All we are permitted to do is to speak to each other through a device, a screen of some kind. This pandemic has put some serious restrictions upon the church being able to love each other.

That’s why I think today’s passage is so relevant for us today. The Apostle Paul is writing from a Roman prison. Being in prison is a pretty serious restriction. He’s away from the church that he founded, he can’t visit them, he can’t be with them and continue to teach them the truths of the faith. But despite these restrictions, what we see is Paul’s heart, overflowing with emotions for them.

Let's look at the emotional language Paul uses.

First, consider his use of superlatives. Look at verses 3-4. "I thank my God **every** time I remember you. In **all** my prayer for **all** of you, I **always** pray with joy." There's no reason for us to think that Paul is exaggerating. He was being completely honest. We do the same thing. We also use superlatives to express our emotions for someone, don't we? We say, "I can't stop thinking about you." "Every waking moment, you're on my mind."

Next, when he prays for them, he has joy. As we said last week, joy is one of the themes of this letter, and this is his first mention of this word, this emotion. Just picture the situation. Paul is in prison. There's not a lot he can do. One thing he can do is to pray. He's going through the list of churches that he's planted and as he prays, he pictures certain faces, he remembers the work of the Gospel in those people, he thinks about how eager they were to learn and grow in the faith, and even join in Paul's ministry in whatever way they could. He thinks about the sacrificial and generous gift that they sent to him, and he begins to thank God. Every time he thinks of the Philippians, he can't help but to thank God for what he's done in them, and he's filled with joy. One commentator made an insightful observation. Thanksgiving to God and joy often go hand in hand. I think he's bang on. Just consider the opposite. In the absence of thanksgiving to God, there is the absence of joy. So, when we think of people and all that God is doing in them, we give thanks and are filled with joy.

Next, look down to verse 7. He says, "It is **right** for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart." The word for 'right' is the same word for 'just' or 'righteous'. Paul is saying, "How could I have any other feeling about you." Or perhaps another way is like this, "Or course I would feel this way about you!" Or "What other way would I feel about it." It is right, it's just, it's correct, that I would feel this way. What I love about this phrase is that he mixes together logic and feeling. A lot of the time we put those two against each other. We look at logical people and say, look at that guy, he's a robot, a calculator, he has no emotion. Or we look at the emotional person and say, look at how flakey he is, so emotional, so illogical, but Paul combines the two. His feelings about them were based on reasons. It is right, it is just that I FEEL this way about you.

Then Paul says, He holds them in his heart. The heart is the very center of your being. It's the center of a person's physical and spiritual life. It's the seat of a person's emotions. Paul is expressing to them that he keeps the Philippian believers at the deepest part, the very core of his person.

Then in verse 8, Paul says, "God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus." When Paul says "God can testify" he's calling God as his witness. He's saying that God knows how much I love you. And then he says that he longs for them with the affection of Christ Jesus. He greatly desires to be with them. He yearns and aches for them.

Then the word 'affection.' It's the Greek word for our bowels, intestines, our guts. It's the equivalent of the word, 'heart'. It's the same word used of Jesus when he looked upon the crowd and saw that they were helpless, like sheep without a shepherd, and he had compassion on them. He had a deep, deep affection for those people. And on top of it, he says, more than just it being just a human emotion, it's an affection that comes from Christ Jesus. Isn't there a fundamental difference between saying, "How I long for all of you with affection" and "God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus"?

In the second example, the longing is sandwiched between God at the beginning and Jesus at the end. This is how much I long for you, God is my witness, and the affections that come from Jesus, that the love that I express to you.

So, what we see is Paul using some of the strongest, emotive language to describe his love and his feelings for the Philippians.

Now, when was the last time you spoke like that to another Christian? Uhhh, you know...like never...! Why is that? Why don't we express ourselves to each other in this way? Yes, it is a bit awkward to speak like that to each other, even if you're really close. Perhaps we fear that we'll sound corny or perhaps look a bit too fanatical. We say that we are praying for you, but we don't bathe those words in emotional language. It seems almost ridiculous for us today to talk like that. It might be because we don't have much emotions in our prayers. Or that we don't pray much for others. Or we just feel strange sharing the emotions that surround our prayers. We don't say to someone, "I was praying for you yesterday, and I was overcome with tears." That might make the person feel really uncomfortable if we were to share something like that. Or perhaps we use the excuse, well, I'm just not a very emotional person.

I'm not exactly sure why we're that way, but it is hard to speak like that in person.

Since it is so awkward to speak like that and since we don't really write to each other anymore, we've become completely unaccustomed to using that kind of language. For example before my wife and I got married, during our time of dating, we had our fair share of ups and downs. Sometimes we'd be riding a relational high, but often times, underlying those highs, was an unstable foundation. We weren't communicating very well. We were fighting. The relationship felt shallow and so on. So, every once in a while, maybe once a year, we'd meet on campus and she'd give me a letter, a hand written letter. The first time I got it, I was blown over at the Niagara Falls of emotions and feelings, the hurts, the concerns, and then the reaffirming commitment and love towards me. These were things that she wasn't able to express to me face to face, because I was an insensitive jerk, but alone with her thoughts, with pen and paper, she wrote down clearly the things she wanted to say. After the first couple of letters, I knew what was coming every time she handed me one of those letters. I think the last time she gave me one of those letters was like 10 or so years ago when we were really going through a rough patch. I was giving her the silent treatment, we were mad at each other...and I was like, wait for it...wait for it...there it is...another letter.

As Christians, who are not only part of the universal church, but in particular, are part of this local expression of the church, should communicate our love and affections with each other. We should first of all, have those affections. These are your eternal brothers and sisters, your eternal spiritual parents and spiritual children. And then we should actually express those affections.

Here's how you can do that. CoaH challenge #78 says, "Write a hand-written letter of encouragement and mail it." Coah Challenge #79 says, "Write an encouraging email to one of our missionaries." And before you write that letter, go to God in prayer, especially thanksgiving prayer. Won't that completely change what you write? You would think about your history with that person. The impact that person has had in your life. The shared experiences and memories. What God is doing in them.

What God did through them for you. Would all of you do that this year? Let's become a church that learns to express our deepest, heart-felt, gut-felt emotions to each other.

If the first point of this sermon was that we should show affections toward each other. The next point is to look at the reason for our affection. **The reason for Christian affection is the Gospel.** What do I mean by that? For the Christian the Gospel is the most foundational and important basis for our mutual love for one another. More specifically, *because of the Gospel, Christians are united in Christ, and that's the reason for our affection.*

Paul says in verse 7 that they all share in God's grace with him. Isn't that a great way of expressing our commonality? We are all sharers in God's grace. We've drunk from the same fountain. Here's how Paul elaborates on this theme in the next chapter. "Therefore, if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion...". Somebody once said something like this: Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.

It is commonality that binds us together isn't it? Being part of the same team forges some really strong bonds. If you're traveling abroad and meet a fellow Canadian, a quick friendship forms. Having the same interests also forms relationships. Several times I've met complete strangers through mountain biking and we've at least become acquaintances and then even riding partners. Then the obvious example is that of a family. And as strong as those commonalities are, Gospel commonalities are the strongest of all. These are commonalities that are rooted in grace. They're not commonalities that we have decided to have on our own, like joining a club or a forum. They're not a commonality based on our achievements. In fact for us, it's the exact opposite. Our commonality is based on grace—totally underserved favor from a holy, loving God, on hell-bound sinners. Is there a greater basis for our commonality than that?

In other words, it's like what John wrote in 1 John 4:19, "**We** love because he first loved **us**." We've all been loved by God, shown in the grace of Jesus Christ dying on the cross, rescuing us from darkness and catapulting us into the kingdom of light. That's the first basis of our affections for each other.

The second basis for Gospel affections is Gospel partnerships. One of the reasons why Paul has such strong feelings for the Philippians is because they are working together and laboring for the Gospel. In verse 3, Paul says that he's always praying with joy, "because of your partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now." The word for partnership in the Greek is *koinonia*. It's a word that many of you have heard before and it means fellowship. The word has almost nothing to do with sipping coffee and eating donuts. "After the service is over, please join us in the gym for fellowship." Fellowship is actually a commercial term. It's used of two partners, business people coming together, for a joint effort. Both put in their personal investments to get the business off the ground. They come to an agreement to work together like Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak. That's fellowship. Two Christians gaming online together; a group of Christians watching a movie together. Some Christians going for a bike ride together. Christian friendship, yes, for sure, but is it truly fellowship? I love Christian friendships, don't get me wrong, but technically, I don't think it's fellowship. There has to be a Gospel foundation to the relationship, especially, as it relates to Gospel ministry.

The Philippians were Paul's Gospel ministry partners from the very beginning. Just think, at the time of the writing of this letter, the Philippian church had been around about 10 years. So, from day one, until now, they were Paul's reliable ministry partners, or ministry fellowshippers. At the very end of the letter, Paul acknowledges receiving their gift. It probably included money, probably some personal care items that you might need if you were in person—dried foods, a blanket, a coat, some shoes.

And then when we look down to verse 7, Paul says, "It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, (now listen carefully) whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the Gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me." Again, it's in the context of Gospel ministry—being imprisoned for the Gospel, defending the Gospel and confirming the Gospel—it's in these endeavors that the Philippians share in God's grace with Paul. Therefore, true fellowship are relationships that are formed around Gospel ministry. When a team of 30 church members assemble at Cornerstone to cook and serve meals, fellowship is occurring. When a short-term mission team goes overseas to run a children's program or build a home, fellowship is occurring. When a team comes together to run Christianity Explored where some lead, some pray, and some cook, true fellowship is happening. When a missionary goes abroad, and the sending church and the missionary share their mutual affection, financial support and prayer, and edifying correspondence, that's when fellowship and partnership occurs.

So, to summarize, Gospel affections are based on the shared unity we have because of the Gospel and shared Gospel ministry endeavors.

Here's an application. Yes, it's great to go and have coffee together with another Christian brother or sister. Yes, it's fun to spend hours gaming with Christian brothers and sisters. Yes, it's fun to sip coffee and eat donuts together in the fellowship hall. Let's continue doing all those things. But let's get back to the heart of the matter. We love who we love, because of the Gospel. Don Carson writes it like this. "The heart of true fellowship is self-sacrificing conformity to a shared vision." And a few lines later he says, "Christian fellowship, then, is self-sacrificing conformity to the Gospel." Let me bring your attention to CoaH Challenge #90: Serve at Cornerstone; and CoaH Challenge #92. Volunteer or tutor through TCM.

We looked first that we should have strong affections of love toward other Christians. Second, we looked at the Gospel being the reason for our affections. And finally, what should be the result of our affections. What should our affections for each other lead us to do?

The result of our Christian affection is prayer.

Next week's sermon is all about prayer, as we'll be looking at the specific contents of Paul's prayer. It's not until we get to verses 9-11 that we actually see what Paul asks God to do for and in the Philippians. However, we get to see part of that prayer in today's passage.

Notice first how Paul addresses God. He says, "my God". That means he has a personal and intimate relationship with God. I have to confess, when I pray, it's usually, just God or Father or Father God, but I don't address him as 'my God' very often. But that is in fact who God is to you and to me. He's my God. Just whisper that to yourself. "My God". That's what God's people have called him through the centuries. God said to his covenant people.

“I will be your God and you will be my people.” That means that the God of the covenant is ‘my God.’ He has entered into an unbreakable relationship with me. David wrote in the 23rd Psalm, “The Lord is **MY** shepherd.” And Jesus cried out on the cross, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me.” If God is ‘my God’ to Jesus and he taught us to pray, OUR Father, then, because of Jesus, because we are saved by him, and we are in him, and the Holy Spirit resides in us, God is ‘my God’ too. This again points to the intimacy we are to have in our prayers, especially when we pray for our fellow believers. In saying “My God” we are in a sense also saying, “Our God,” referring to the shared grace we have together.

Secondly, we pray with confidence in the God who finishes his work in us. In verse 6 Paul writes, “Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” Notice that even though Paul has the utmost confidence that God will do what only God can do, that is, to finish, to complete the good work he began in us, that fact doesn’t keep him from praying. That means that we can’t allow our strong belief in the sovereignty of God to negate our own activity. This should never be. In fact, the very opposite is true. The very reason for why Paul prays, and gives thanks, is because he is so confident that our sovereign God finishes what he started. Let that be the case for all of us as well. When we pray for one another, we should pray with the unshakable confidence that God is working in that person, that God is not only working but in the process of completing what he began in them. There are a lot of prayer related tasks in the CoaH Challenge. Let me share just one. CoaH Challenge #48. Give thanks to God for different things every day for a month...especially for God’s people.

Revisit your emotions. Have they been stifled? Do you consider yourself too ‘mature’ for emotions? Let’s show Gospel affections to one another, based on the Gospel, what Christ has done for us and Gospel mission, what Christ calls us to do.

Let’s pray.