

Sermon Summary #4

Learning to Love with Knowledge and Discernment Philippians 1:9-11

Tertullian (@ 200 a.d.) was one of the greatest of the early church fathers and was actually the first man to use the word “Trinity” to describe the nature of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He lived and wrote at a time when opposition to Christianity and the Church was intensifying. Although Tertullian was an *apologist*, which is to say he devoted himself to defining and defending the Christian faith against its critics, he was quick to point out that it wasn’t any particular theological or philosophical argument that would ultimately persuade pagans of the truth about Jesus. Rather it was the seemingly inexplicable love that Christians had one for another that initially baffled and finally captivated non-Christians. In one memorable statement, Tertullian said this:

“It is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. *‘See,’ they say, “[see] how they love one another, . . . How they are ready even to die for one another!*’ No tragedy causes trouble in our brotherhood, [and] the family possessions, which generally destroy brotherhood among you, create fraternal bonds among us. One in mind and soul, we do not hesitate to share our earthly goods with one another. All things are common among us [except] our wives. (*Apology* 39).

This really shouldn’t come as any surprise to us, given that it was Jesus who said, “*By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*” (John 13:35).

Neither should it come as any surprise to us that when Paul finally gets around to defining the content of his prayers for the Philippians he puts *their love one for another* at the center of it. In other words, it is here in v. 9 that Paul unpacks in considerably more detail precisely what he had in mind when he said in vv. 3-6 that he prayed for the Philippians. Here is the content of his intercession!

Last week we took time away from our study in Philippians to immerse ourselves in yet another prayer of the apostle Paul’s, Romans 15:13. I pointed out that one of the more convicting things about reading prayers like that is what we discover about his priorities and hopefully ours as well. Whereas nothing is off limits in prayer, certain things ought to be front and center. Later in Philippians 4:6 Paul will tell us that “in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” In other words, we are to bring all our needs and fears and desires to God in prayer.

But, that being said, when we actually read the prayers Paul himself prayed, they are of a decidedly different order from what we typically pray about. You hear nothing of money or prayers for increased respect or advancement in one’s career or the desire that one’s favorite sports team emerge victorious. Rather you hear things like we just read here in Philippians 1, where Paul prays for an increase in love and knowledge and discernment and purity and righteousness and the glory of God.

So, I think I’ll just leave it at that and proceed to unpack Paul’s prayer for the Philippians. I trust that the Holy Spirit can bring to bear on our hearts whatever conviction we need to feel about how we pray both for ourselves and for others!

Several things should be noted about Paul’s prayer for the Philippians.

Love for One Another (and God)

Paul does not tell us whether this love is to be for God or for one another, probably because he intends both. One thing is certain: any professed love for God that does not find expression in a love for others is hypocrisy! In fact, it is simply impossible. In 1 John 5:1 we are told that “everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of

him.” So, if you don’t love other Christians you don’t love God, no matter how loudly you may insist that you do. You are deceived.

The author of Hebrews makes the same point. He says, “God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do” (Heb. 6:10). How does your love for the name of God display itself? By “serving the saints.”

Having said that, I’m persuaded that the primary expression of love that Paul has in mind and for which he prays is that which exists among Christians in the local church. Paul’s petition here is similar to the one we find in 1 Thessalonians 3:12 – “and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you.”

Love in Philippi, Love in OKC

Love already exists and flourishes at Philippi. Paul does not question the sincerity of their affection for him or for one another. There is no implied rebuke in this prayer, as if he’s subtly suggesting that they had failed to love in the first place. After all, he told us in v. 4 that this prayer was offered in “joy”.

And let’s not forget that love was in evidence immediately upon the arrival of the gospel in Philippi. As soon as God opened Lydia’s heart to receive the gospel she opened her home to Paul and his companions. And no sooner had the Philippian jailer become a Christian than he attends to Paul’s wounds and brings him into his house. And no sooner had Paul and Silas departed from Philippi than the church there begins to support them financially.

But he wants to see it increase and deepen and intensify. We never love perfectly in this life. There are always flaws in our feelings for others and ways in which our generosity and sacrifice and service for them fall short.

As much as we might otherwise prefer, we can never reach a point in our relationship with one another where we feel satisfied and content and think that we’ve done enough. We can never rest on our laurels of love and say, “Well, I’ve just about exhausted what is possible in loving this person. They ought to be thankful for what I’ve done for them.” No. Love is never a static achievement for the Christian but always and ever a dynamic process of growth and expansion and improvement.

I’ve had people tell me they came to Bridgeway because of the worship or the children’s ministry or the missional focus and even a few because of the preaching. But I assure you, when non-Christians look upon us from the outside the one thing that will impress them is how we love one another. They couldn’t care less about the excellence of our Sunday services or the precision of our theological understanding. What will captivate their hearts and bring them back for more is the way we put aside petty personal preferences and selfish ambition and envy and competitiveness and love one another as God in Christ has loved us.

God has to make it happen

Listen again to how Paul said it in 1 Thessalonians 3:12 - “and **may the Lord make you increase and abound** in love for one another and for all, as we do for you.” If their love is to increase, indeed if our love for one another is to increase, **God has to make it happen**. Yes, we are responsible to love others, to do whatever is needed to clear away obstacles and to extend forgiveness and to overcome bitterness and jealousy and envy and rivalry and all the sinful impulses that hinder us from loving others. Yet it is clear that Paul believed God must be present and prior, working in our hearts to make this possible. After all, *if love were entirely within our power to produce, why would Paul have bothered in praying for it?* He goes to the throne of grace and asks God to work in the hearts of these people to alert them to ways in which their love is weak and self-serving, asks him to enlighten their minds to see the depths of how God has loved them in Christ, and pleads with God that his Spirit might convict them and stir them and empower them and enable them to overcome the defensiveness and selfishness that so often hinders our love for others.

Increase and Abound!

Love can increase far beyond what we think is possible. We may believe that we have loved to the full extent possible for us, that our hearts are stretched to the breaking, that we have at some point reached the limit of what is

reasonable to ask of a human being, but Paul evidently believed that love could grow and expand and become increasingly more passionate and authentic and could express itself in far more concrete and tangible ways than we have even begun to imagine.

Here he prays not simply for the maintenance of love in their midst, not simply that they hold fast to the status quo, but that they experience excess, fullness, an overflowing, a love that ignores boundaries, a love that knows no limits!

Knowledge and Discernment

The kind of love Paul has in mind isn't the sort of gullible, gushy, gooey sort that lacks wisdom and encourages people to continue in their sin. Love must be governed by "knowledge" and "discernment." Let's take each of these in turn.

(1) True and lasting and Christ-like love must be characterized by **knowledge**. Isn't it interesting that whereas we tend to pit love and knowledge against each other, Paul insists they are absolutely essential to the other. In other places he argues that if all we have is knowledge and lack love, it is useless. In 1 Corinthians 8 he says that "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (8:1). There is a kind of knowledge or better still a way in which we approach it and pride ourselves in it that shuts out love, that quenches love. But here in Philippians 1 Paul says that you can't love well if your love isn't guided by knowledge. What can he possibly mean by this?

Well, for one thing it isn't just any sort of knowledge that he has in view. He's not talking about knowledge of the stock market or the rules of golf. *It's knowledge of God and his ways and in particular the manner in which he loves sinners like you and me.*

So what is it that Paul has in mind that we need to "know" to love well?

Our love must be grounded in and flow out of a knowledge of **why we should love**. In other words, to love well we must understand how we ourselves are loved by God in Christ. Here's but one example of what I think Paul has in mind. In **Ephesians 4:32** he exhorts us to "be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." Clearly, if we are to forgive one another properly and sincerely we must first be fully aware of and in touch with the depths of the forgiveness that God has given us in Christ. And then in the immediately following verses I think Paul says the same thing that he says here in Philippians 1. In Ephesians 5:2 he again exhorts us: "And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

It isn't enough simply to exhort a Christian to love. We need to go deeply into the knowledge of what it means when he says that "Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Here we are given not only the ground or reason why we love others but also **the pattern or paradigm we are to imitate as we love others**.

People love others for all sorts of *illegitimate reasons*: they feel it is their moral obligation, but their heart isn't engaged; some are trying to repay a debt they think they owe; others are trying to put someone else in their debt, hoping that by "loving" them the other person will do something in return; and then of course sometimes what passes for "love" is mere flattery. This is loving *without knowledge*.

To love with knowledge is to realize that we were utterly undeserving of Christ's love; worse still, we were **undeserving**. Thus even though others deserve no good from us and possibly even deserve bad, we are to love. Christ loved us without regard to the cost that was entailed, subjecting himself to humiliation and shame and suffering and the unimaginable anguish of being separated from his Father. Do we love others only when it is *convenient* for us to do so, only when there's time in the day, only when others are looking, only when we feel like it, only when we are persuaded they deserve it, only when we anticipate being loved in return, only when it makes us look good in the eyes of others ("Oh, my, isn't he a loving person," "Wow, she is really something that she would do that for such a jerk!")?

The point is that we only love well and to the glory of God when our love for one another is driven and energized and governed by the knowledge of the kind of love that God had for us in Christ. That's the simple reason why you will never be able to love someone in "knowledge" so long as you live in ignorance of the gospel.

(2) Also, true love, the sort of love that will accomplish good in the life of the beloved, must be characterized by *discernment*. What Paul has in mind with this word is *the spiritual ability to make difficult moral decisions in the midst of a vast array of competing and confusing choices*. Gullible and naïve love is worse than bad. It is destructive. So what kind of discernment does Paul have in mind?

Love must be the sort that is able to discern when it is appropriate and when it is not appropriate to be generous and supportive. Consider the challenge we all face when confronted with the panhandlers that proliferate in OKC. When is compassion justified? When does giving money to those who beg for it actually hurt them and reinforce their lack of responsibility? When does an act of what feels like kindness actually compound a person's problem rather than alleviate it?

A love that accomplishes much should be keenly aware of the circumstances and people and timing and consists largely in discretion in speech. We need to be wise and discerning regarding the objects of our love. Although we are to love our enemies, we don't love them in the same way we love our friends and brothers/sisters in Christ.

We must remember that no matter how passionate we feel, no matter how extensive our sacrifice may be, *we have not loved someone well if we fail to awaken them to the perilous condition in which their sin has placed them*. If you think loving someone well means you keep silent about both the temporal and the eternal consequences of their beliefs and their behavior, you are sadly mistaken. You are loving in the absence of discernment. If you love someone without speaking the truth to them for fear that it might hurt their feelings or damage your relationship with them or get them in trouble with someone else, you have failed to love them well.

Loving with discernment means that you never communicate your affection or support for them in such a way that they feel free to continue in a lifestyle of unrepentant sin. If you in any way endorse their behavior or minimize its immorality or simply write it off as if everyone is entitled to live as they please, or if you love in such a way that you are fearful of passing judgment on them, you have failed them, you have not loved them well. You have thrown discernment out the window.

To shower someone with love and affirmation and affection without fulfilling the painful and costly task of pointing out to them the eternal consequences of their sin is not only not loving them, *it is loving yourself more than you love them*. Your refusal to identify their sin and call them to repentance is probably done to *protect yourself*, to guard your own heart from the distress that will likely come from creating discord in the relationship. You're afraid of their anger, their rejection of you, you're afraid they will label you as prejudiced and arrogant and judgmental. Your so-called love of the other is in actual fact selfish love of self. *You are more concerned with how the truth will boomerang and affect you than you are with the impact their sin will have on them*.

Consider one example that is most often in the news these days. How often do we see a famous pastor or spiritual leader interviewed on TV who cowardly refuses to articulate the biblical stance on homosexual behavior? The person is so afraid of being labeled a bigot or a fundamentalist that they weasel out of saying what God said: "Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality . . . will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6:9-10).

To say anything remotely similar to that will invariably bring down the angry denunciation of the TV host or countless others who will label you as unloving and arrogant and may end up costing you friendships and money and advancement in your career. *But if it is in fact true that certain unrepentant lifestyle choices threaten your eternal destiny (and I assure you that homosexuality is by no means the only one, so don't think I'm singling it out as unique or as more sinful than other acts of moral rebellion), if it is in fact true that heaven and hell hang suspended on the choices people make in this regard, it is the worst imaginable expression of calloused indifference, indeed hatred, of the other for you not to say so!*

If your oncologist lives in fear that telling you the truth about a malignant tumor will ruin your day, or make you unhappy, or cause you to fall into depression, or appear to rob you of hope for the future, and refuses to disclose

your condition and schedule immediate surgery, he is not loving you! If he says: “Hey, all is well! Take a few aspirin and watch how you eat and you should be fine,” thinking that to say otherwise will disrupt your vacation schedule and will bring distress on your family, he is not loving you! How much more so when the consequences are not merely temporal physical death but eternal spiritual death!

Let’s look at a perfect illustration of what it means to exercise “discernment” in our loving of others. It is found in something Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. He tells us in Matthew 7:6 - “Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.”

I can hear someone object: “But wait a minute, Jesus. If we really love these people we won’t call them ‘dogs’ or ‘pigs’ and we certainly won’t refuse to share the gospel with them no matter what they do to us in return.” Well, Jesus disagrees with you!

Jesus has in mind *the danger of being overindulgent and undiscerning*. In loving our enemies, going the extra mile, and not judging unjustly, there is the peril of becoming wishy-washy and of failing to make essential distinctions between right and wrong and truth and falsehood. *Whereas the saints are not to be judges, neither are they to be simpletons!*

The terms “dogs” and “pigs” (perhaps a wild boar) in this text are not what we normally think of when we hear the words. The “dogs” to which Jesus refers are not the cuddly household pets of the 21st century, but rather wild and savage street hounds that carried disease and filth. In 2 Peter 2:22 Peter refers to false teachers and portrays them as dogs which return to their vomit. He also describes them as pigs that are washed only to return to wallowing in the mud. Carson explains:

“Jesus sketches a picture of a man holding a bag of precious pearls, confronting a pack of hulking hounds and some wild pigs. As the animals glare hungrily, he takes out his pearls and sprinkles them on the street. Thinking they are about to gulp some bits of food, the animals pounce on the pearls. Swift disillusionment sets in – the pearls are too hard to chew, quite tasteless, and utterly unappetizing. Enraged, the wild animals spit out the pearls, turn on the man and tear him to pieces” (105).

Jesus is not saying that we should withhold the gospel from certain people we regard as unworthy of it, “but he does recognize that after sustained rejection and reproach, it is appropriate to move on to others” (Craig Blomberg, 129). There are those who are *persistently vicious and calloused*, who delight not in the truth of Scripture but only in mocking it.

Therefore, the “dogs” and “pigs” are not simply unbelievers, but *defiant, persistently hateful, and vindictive unbelievers*. “It ought to be understood,” wrote Calvin, “that dogs and swine are names given not to every kind of debauched men, or to those who are destitute of the fear of God and of true godliness, but to those who, by clear evidences, have manifested a hardened contempt of God, so that their disease appears to be incurable” (349). We read in Proverbs 9:7-8, “He who corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury. Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you.”

Remember that this instruction from Jesus is set in the context of *loving our enemies*. So, whereas we are not to cast our pearls before swine, neither are we to be nasty and vicious and uncaring.

In our recent study of eternal security I pointed out that all too often in the name of love people will give a false assurance of salvation to someone who is living in unrepentant unbelief and immorality. Thinking that it would be “unloving” of them to challenge the legitimacy of someone’s profession of faith, they pat them on the back and assure them that although we may not agree with each other right now at least we can all be assured we’ll spend eternity in heaven together. That is not loving! That is the utter absence of discernment and can actually contribute to that person’s damnation!

Approving what is Excellent

Learning how to love with knowledge and discernment is absolutely essential if we are to “approve what is excellent and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ” (v. 10).

Paul refuses to let Christians settle for mediocrity. He prays that our love would grow in knowledge and discernment so we can identify what is above average, what is superior, what is of moral and spiritual excellence, what really counts, and pursue it (see Phil. 4:8).

I find it fascinating that when Paul finally gets around to how we should prepare ourselves for the end of the world, for the coming of Christ, he says nothing about stockpiling of food or guns or digging an underground shelter or quitting our jobs or rushing off to the mountain tops. He says we need to be diligent to cultivate a more discerning and knowledgeable love! He tells us that we need to develop greater moral purity and blamelessness.

Filled with the Fruit of Righteousness

Learning how to love with knowledge and discernment is absolutely essential if we are to be “filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ” (v. 11a).

It’s unclear from Paul’s language whether this is the fruit that *consists of righteousness* or the fruit that *comes out of righteousness*. It may be both. What’s important to note is that this fruit comes not as a result of our efforts unaided, but **through Jesus Christ**, which is to say through the empowering that he supplies by his Spirit.

Of this we may be sure: it has nothing to do with “religion” or self-made efforts to impress others with our spirituality.

How important is it to Love with Knowledge and Discernment?

There are many in the professing Christian church who give mere lip service to the importance of cultivating a spiritual culture and family affection in which love that is characterized by knowledge and discernment can flourish. They say to themselves, “You know, that’s just not who I am. I’m not in to that right now. Our church has a different calling. We first need to get our theological ducks in a row. We have to be diligent to dot all our doctrinal ‘i’s and cross our theological ‘t’s. Then, if we can find time and energy we’ll be more conscientious about loving others.”

If you want to know the value and importance Paul placed on the ever-increasing and abundant growth of our love for one another, look at v. 11. **This** is what brings glory and praise to God!

“By this,” said Jesus, “all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”
(John 13:35).

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