

THE COMMUNION OF THE SAINTS

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Resources for Christ-Centered Discipleship

I recently read about an African American who started going to a new church one Sunday and wasn't too excited when he saw the congregation. He had always enjoyed the comfort of going to a predominately African American church, and this congregation was mostly white. In spite of his misgivings, he stayed for the meeting and even came back the next Sunday. He was drawn to the teaching that he heard and the depth of Christian life he sensed in the people.

He ended up deciding to stay and become part of that fellowship. It wasn't an easy choice, though. He said, "When you're black in this country, with all of the history of racism, apart from the saving knowledge of Jesus, your blackness is sometimes all you have left. It totally defines you. But God showed me that I was a Christian first and a black man second." (Quoted by Joshua Harris in *Stop Dating the Church*)

When I read that man's testimony, one sentence stood out to me. It's where he said, "God showed me that I was a Christian first and a black man second." He just happened to be a black man struggling with going to a mostly white church. The situation could have just as easily been reversed. I think we're all hoping and praying to see Christians and churches continue to move toward a Christ-centeredness that makes those kinds of issues completely unimportant. What I appreciated about his story was his recognition that to be a Christian means being brought, through Christ, into a community of believers in which the oneness that we share in Christ is more important than any other human distinction. That's something we all need to consider.

One thing we've all noticed in our day is that our world and our country seem to be growing increasingly fragmented. A recent book on the loss of community calls the current condition *atomization*-- the picture is that of people, like individual atoms, drifting away from each other (John L. Locke, *The Devoicing of Society: Why We Don't Talk to Each Other Anymore* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 122).

There is plenty of room for individuality in our lives, and the loss of community is not what we need. It's not what God wants. When Christ calls us to Himself, He calls us not only to Himself individually, but He calls us into a community of Christians.

The opening verses of the book of Philippians give us God-given insight into what it means to be a community of believers. Paul is a Jewish Christian writing to what would have been a predominately non-Jewish Greek and Roman church. But the cultural and national differences that meant so much in most of the ancient world didn't mean much at all to Paul as he wrote to the Philippians. Why?

In Philippians 1:7 he tells why. Paul expresses his deep affection for the Philippians, and then he says, "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." Now, this is important because what it tells us is that . . .

Christians Have Communion with Each Other Because We All Share in God's Grace

The word *communion* simply means sharing, participating in, or possessing something in common. So if we want to understand the communion of the saints, we have to ask, "Who are the saints and what do they share?"

Who Are the Saints?

The word *saint* literally means one who is set apart for God. Now, everyone who comes to Christ, receiving Him as Lord and Savior through repentance and faith, is set apart by God to be saved by God and to belong to God. That's why Philippians 1:1 says, "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons . . ." The overseers are the elders who watch over the church. The deacons are those who have made a commitment to serve the needs of the

church and have been recognized by the congregation for that. And the saints include everyone and anyone who has received Christ as Lord and Savior.

The striking truth the Bible teaches is that the saints are not a small, special group of Christians who are uniquely good or religious. The saints are simply all of us who have been set apart for God through faith in Jesus Christ. When Paul writes to the Romans (Romans 1:7), he says, "To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ."

What Do the Saints Share?

Throughout history, when different churches have used the Apostles' Creed as an expression of faith, they have stressed different aspects of what is meant by the communion of the saints. Some have stressed the communion, or spiritual oneness, that Christians living on earth have with those who have passed away and gone before us. We share God's grace with them and will one day be reunited with them and with Christ. Some have stressed the communion that we have in sharing the gifts that God has given through the church. We share the Word of God, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and many other gifts that have been given to the church for our good.

But the most important source of our union and communion in Christ is what Paul mentions here in Philippians 1:7: we who are believers in Christ all share in the grace of God. That grace is the undeserved mercy and love of God that saved us. And it unites us to God and to each other. That's what makes the church not just a collection of individuals but a communion of the saints.

In the ancient world one of the most impressive and distinctive elements that marked the Christians was the way they lived out this oneness with a unique sense of community. One of the most ancient Christian documents is called the Letter to Diognetus. Diognetus was a non-Christian, and apparently a Christian named Mathetes (which means a disciple) wrote him a letter trying to explain why

Christianity was spreading so rapidly. He talked about the Christians' sacrifice and willingness to share with others and their commitment to the sanctity of life. He said for instance that they did not discard unwanted babies. He also said that the racism and nationalism so common in the world was not found among the Christians.

He said: "Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers." What that meant in those days was that the Christians were Jews Romans, Africans, and Greeks, but they were Christians first and were Jews, Romans, Africans, and Greeks second. Christianity gave them a new identity. It did not mean that all distinctions were wiped out and that all the beauty of diversity disappeared. It meant that in the midst of all their differences they recognized a deeper unity. What was the source of their unity? The grace of God in which they all shared.

God wants you to take this very seriously. Being a Christian is not a trivial thing. It's something to treasure. God wants you to treasure not only your connection to Him but to every other person who is connected to Him through Christ. How willing are you to look past the differences that you see in other people, and even the difficulties you may face in relationships with them, in order to treasure the communion of the saints who share God's grace? Like all of the doctrines, or teachings, of the Bible, this isn't just a theoretical thing.

The Communion We Share As Christians Should Affect the Way We Treat Each Other

If you listen to what Paul writes in Philippians 1, it's obvious that the communion of the saints is not just a theory or doctrine to him. It touches his heart and transforms his vision. It should do the same for us.

The Communion We Share As Christians Should Make Us Thankful for the Grace We See at Work in One Another

In Philippians 1:3-6, Paul says, "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, 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."

Paul was grateful for the ways in which he discerned God's grace in the lives of these people. Often we read something like this, and we think that this was just Paul's nature. It was just Paul's natural response to these particular people because they were especially good people. But that was not the case.

The people at Philippi were not perfect. They had their share of problems just like the rest of us. All through the book of Philippians Paul talks with them about their problems. At the end of chapter 2, he warns them against complaining and arguing. At the end of chapter 3, he talks about former followers of Christ who have turned away from the faith in order to follow their own desires. At the beginning of chapter 4, he writes, "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord." These two women were fighting with one another. Paul sees in their disunity a sin threatening the heart of the church, a weakness destroying the church's effectiveness. Paul addresses this problem throughout the book of Philippians with a passionate call for unity.

This church had problems, and Paul saw the problems, but notice that he didn't let the problems he saw in these people keep him from being thankful for the good work of God's grace that was also at work in them. God wants to use the example of the apostle Paul to teach us that this is a crucial quality for a truly Christian community.

How thankful are you for the work of God's grace in the communion of the saints? Do you have a tendency to be continually critical of and disappointed with other Christians? Maybe you think that's OK because, after all, you're just seeing the truth and telling it like it is. Do you think the apostle Paul didn't see

the truth clearly? He saw with painfully clarity all the ways that all the Christians and all the churches fell short and messed up. Yet God gives us Paul as an example to teach us to be thankful. One way to express faith in the communion of the saints is by letting go of criticism and learning to be thankful for the grace of God at work in imperfect people. Be thankful for others and patient with others

The Communion We Share As Christians Should Make Us Patient with the Progress of Others

Notice Paul's perspective in verse 6. He says, "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."

In the life of everyone who has received Christ, God has begun a work of grace that He is committed to completing. When you receive Christ, God not only gives you forgiveness but He also begins a work of renewal that He promises to continue and complete. In spite of your setbacks and your sins, God is going to finish what He started in your life.

It is equally true that God is not finished yet. The whole Christian life is a process of growth and change. If we are going to be a community of Christians that glorifies God and helps people along the way, there has to be a certain positive, even joyful, patience with people in the process of spiritual growth.

At one point in my life, I was very disillusioned with the church and with other Christians. Then I read a little book that changed my perspective by helping me see more clearly what the Scriptures teach. The book was called *Life Together*, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

If you don't know his story, Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian who was persecuted, imprisoned, and eventually killed by the Nazis during World War Two. In *Life Together* he writes about Christian community. One of the most interesting things he says is that the greatest hindrance to true Christian community is actually the serious Christian who has very strong ideas

of what the Christian community ought to be and very little patience with the community that doesn't live up to those ideals. He writes:

He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter (the community), even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial. The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community, demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself, then enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren accordingly. When things do not go his way, he calls the effort a failure.

Think about that for a moment. Have you seen this happen not only in Christian community or church fellowships but also in friendships or even marriages? The ideal that we dream of can become the enemy of the real good that God has given us. So the friendship or relationship or, in the case of the church, the fellowship that we have been given by the grace of God is constantly being compared to the ideal that we cherish in our minds. Instead of becoming patient participants growing together in the grace of God, we become impatient critics and accusers of others.

Bonhoeffer, like Paul, calls us to a different perspective.

If we do not give thanks daily for the Christian fellowship in which we have been placed, even where there is no great experience, no discoverable riches, but much weakness, small faith, and difficulty; if on the contrary, we only keep complaining to God that everything is so paltry and petty, so far from what we expected, then we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow according to the measure and riches which are there for us all in Jesus Christ.

This is the perspective to which God calls us here in Philippians 1. He says, "See the reality of your communion in Christ." If we see the reality of our communion in Christ, we will be able to be thankful for the grace at work in people and patient with their progress.

The Communion We Share As Christians Should Move Us to Love One Another from the Heart

Look at Philippians 1: 7-8 again. You'll notice that Paul expresses his love for the Philippians and prays for their love for each other. "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. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. "

It's a biblical principle that the best way to conquer negative attitudes and emotions is not just to resist them but also to replace them with positive Christlike attitudes and emotions. It's been said that if you do not keep people on your heart, they will end up getting on your nerves.

How can we keep people on our hearts? There is only one way: Deeper love for people comes from the love of Jesus Christ. Look at the end of verse 8. "God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus."

First, we need to truly receive, by faith, the love of Christ. In the core of your being you have to not only receive Christ as your Savior but truly become aware of, enjoy, and experience the deep affection and love that the Lord Jesus Christ has for you.

Second, having received the love of Christ, you share it. You see, it wasn't just Paul's affection, and it isn't just your affection. Verse 8 says it's "the affection of Jesus Christ."

Look at the prayer that begins in verse 9: “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ--to the glory and praise of God.”

The word "abound" means to overflow. God says that He wants our love to overflow and to do so "more and more." The idea is that of something that keeps on overflowing and overflowing. This is the kind of love God wants in us for each other

Paul says this love needs not only to be a love that is abounding but also a love that is discerning. Love needs knowledge and insight to guide it and to guard it. If you love people, that is great, but do you have spiritual knowledge and insight? If you don't, then in spite of your love, you can hurt the people of God, the cause of Christ, and the community of faith. We need both the warmth of God's love and the wisdom of God's Word.

I read a story this week about the early days of the Christian church, when a pagan actor was converted to faith in Christ. Since most of the drama of that day encouraged immorality, and young boys were often introduced to homosexuality through playing the parts of women, this new Christian decided he would have to leave the theater. But the theater was all he knew, so he decided to support himself by teaching drama to non-Christians. Before he began, he went to his church elders and explained his predicament and his plan.

The elders objected to his idea. They said if it was wrong to be in the theater, then it was wrong to teach others to be in the theater. But since they had never been in a situation like this before and they didn't know how the young man would support himself otherwise, they asked one of the more famous leaders in the Christian church from the city of Carthage to give his opinion. The church leader's name was Cyprian.

Cyprian told them, "You are correct in your view that what is morally wrong to do is morally wrong to teach." It was the church's responsibility to hold the young believer accountable to that. But, Cyprian added, if the young man could not find employment, then it was also the church's responsibility to help care for him. And, he added, if the church was financially unable to do this, he could move to Carthage and they would provide whatever he needed for food and clothing. (Cited by Charles Colson in *Being the Body*, 108)

That's the kind of Christian community that made such an impact on the ancient world and still makes an impact wherever it is seen and experienced. It's the community of authentic love based on the recognition of unity in the shared experience of the grace of God. It's a sense of community that is thankful for the work of grace in imperfect people, patient with the progress of people, and loving with a love that, full of the wisdom and insight, both holds people accountable for their actions and cares graciously for their needs.

How do you get that kind of love and wisdom? Well, the Scripture tells us right here in verse 11. It's not just something that comes from trying harder on our own. It happens as we are "filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ--to the glory and praise of God."

The same Christ who died for your sins and rose again is the one who causes the fruit of righteousness to grow and ripen to maturity in your life. That is why verse 11 says it "comes through Jesus Christ." And that's why all the glory and praise for this fruit belongs not to you or to me but to God, who causes its growth.

All of the greatest gifts God offers us come through Jesus Christ. That's why you have to start with your relationship to Him. It's your relationship with Him that makes you a saint in God's eyes, because salvation is all about His grace, not your goodness. Christ died and rose again to pay for your sins. By His grace He invites you to trust in Him, to receive Him as your Lord and Savior. When you

do, He gives you Himself, His forgiveness, the gift of eternal life. It is all His grace. You just have to want it, to know that you need it, and to come to Him, to respond to Him by trusting in Him as your Savior and Lord.

If you have never done that, then come to Him now. If you have or are coming to him, then know that in coming to Him you also come into the communion of the saints who belong to Him, and He wants you to love them in His name for His glory.