



Combatting Cynicism in our Life Together

Life Together: Cultivating Covenant Community Series #3

Philippians 1:3-11

David Sunday

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Father, as You spoke and created the universe by Your powerful Word, will You speak into our hearts today and create new possibilities, new understandings, of Your life, Your vision and purposes for us, Your church? Lord, we do not know it all. A whole lot of what we know we have not really put into practice. So we need Your Holy Spirit to continually breathe new life into us, so that Your living Word would live in us and cause our lives to be more and more conformed to Your purposes for us in Jesus. So please come. Come breathe your Holy Spirit upon me as I preach and upon all of us as we hear. Give us vigor. Give us attentiveness. Give us love. Give us joy. Give us faith to receive Your Word and be changed by it. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 that love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things. As we talk about cultivating covenant community in these weeks leading up to advent, we're asking God to build this kind of love in our church: a love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things. But there is a contaminant that threatens to destroy that kind of love in our church and the more we allow that contaminant into our hearts, the more we become people who will not bear difficulties, who don't really have any hope for anything, who distrust, who despair and who disengage and distance ourselves from one another. This contaminant is very prevalent in our culture. I'm talking about cynicism which is an attitude of the heart that causes us to disengage, distrust, despair and reject. It's very, very prevalent. I'm not going to spend a lot of time trying to prove that cynicism is a problem in our culture. I think that would be to waste time proving the obvious. If we don't see it, I think it is because we are in somewhat of a state of denial.

Let's talk about what cynicism is. The Desiring God blog describes it very vividly:

Cynicism is that sneering bitterness toward all things true and deep. It's the subtle contempt trying to contaminate the cheeriest of moments—that slow, thick smoke of pessimism toxifying the oxygen in the lungs of our hope, suffocating any glad-hearted

embrace that God did something meaningful in our lives and
strangling our childlike faith

Wow! I don't want that. Sneering bitterness, subtle contempt, contamination of cheer, toxifying the oxygen of hope, suffocating gladness, strangling childlike faith. That's cynicism and it's something that we have to battle against every day of our lives. It's very present on talk radio. It's very present in the media. It's very present in relationships and I want us to think about how we can combat it in our life together because cynicism does affect our life together.

Paul Miller, who wrote The Praying Life, says that to be cynical is to be distant. And he says, "Cynicism begins with a wry assurance that everyone has an angle. Behind every silver lining is a cloud. The cynic is always observing, critiquing, but never engaged. Loving, never. Hoping, never. The cynic stands back, aloof, always knowing what's wrong, but never willing to get in there and bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things. To be cynical is to corrode love in our hearts.

So what can we do to combat cynicism? We're going to turn to a passage of Scripture today in Philippians 1. Last week's message on self-pity was very topical and I'm thankful for what we were able to hear and what I was able to teach last week, but I really prefer to be able to go to a passage of Scripture and let the sermon emerge from the truth of that passage. I believe what Walter Kaiser said was true. "A preacher is allowed to preach one topical sermon a year and then repent the next week." So this is my repentance.

I want you to return to Philippians 1. I remember preaching through Philippians at Grace Community Bible Church right before we came together as New Covenant. How refreshing and how beautiful Paul's attitude is in this letter. It's a letter that's bristling with hopeful realism. A man wrote a book against cynicism and called it Hopeful Realism. That's like the opposite of cynicism. Paul's not unrealistic. He knows there are problems in the church. He addresses the problems. But he's hopeful. He's full of joy. He's radiant with love. There's a warm-hearted affection that comes through in these first eleven verses—the kind of affection that we want to cultivate together in this community. So we're going to talk about how to combat cynicism, using these first eleven verses of Philippians 1 and seeing the example of the Apostle Paul, which really comes from the work of Jesus in his life. Let's worship God and just thank Him as we hear His Word, beginning at verse one:

*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,
To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with
the overseers and deacons:*

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

³ I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷ It is right for me to feel this way about you all (it is right for me not to be cynical about God's work in you), 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. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. ⁹ And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

So how do we combat cynicism in our life together? Three main points:

- You need to take your own temperature. We're going to see how we do that, using Paul as an example.
- You need to become someone who sets the temperature—the atmosphere—in the room of the life of God's people.
- You need to know where the furnace is and how to get close to it.

1. Take Your Temperature

Discern how much cynicism may be rising up or creeping into your heart and ask yourself, “Is my life characterized by the kind of love that Paul describes for his church?” One of the chief indicators that you need to take your temperature with is a thermometer. Your prayer life is a thermometer, telling you how much you love God's people; it's not sentimental feelings that tell you if you love. It's your actions. Does your life express thankfulness to God frequently and consistently for all God's people, with a joy that is contagious because you hold the people of God in your heart? Paul says with all sincerity and honesty, “This is what characterizes my life. I am thankful to God for you. I am frequent in my giving of thanks for you. I am consistent in every prayer of mine for all of you praying with joy.” We see this in verses three and four. Thankfulness, frequency, consistency, all-inclusiveness, joyousness before God, in prayer for God's people. That's Paul's attitude and that's how you take your temperature. Does that

characterize you? Ask yourself, “Am I frequently, consistently and joyously thankful to God for His people? Is that the truth of my life? Do God’s people know that I am thankful for all of them, that I am joyous in giving of thanks because I hold them in my heart?” Can you say that truthfully today? That’s how you take your temperature.

If your temperature is low, it’s probably because there’s an element of cynicism that’s rising up, telling you not be thankful, not to be joyful, not to be consistent in praying for all of God’s people. The beautiful thing is that prayer can change the temperature of your heart toward the church and toward Christians. C.S. Lewis gave some very wise counsel on this: “Do not waste time bothering whether you love your neighbor. Act as if you did.” Just start doing it. As soon as you do this, you find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you love someone, you will presently come to love him. So Paul gives us a very clear and straightforward example here. If we are struggling with a cynical attitude toward the body of Christ, we need to get on our knees and give thanks for God’s people consistently and joyfully because God is at work in their lives.

James Montgomery Boyce said, “I think that 90 percent of all divisions between true believers in this world would disappear entirely if Christians would learn to pray specifically and consistently for one another.” Paul models this in all his letters.

So what’s your temperature right now? What is being indicated through your attitude toward other believers about whether or not you are warmly affectionate, whether or not you are bearing all things, believing all things, hoping all things, enduring all things in your life with other believers? Take your temperature.

2. Set the Temperature

How do you change the temperature in a room? With a thermostat. I did not turn on the heat in our home until this morning—October 19! (Someone else did a couple weeks ago but I turned it off.) We survived until today, but I saw some frost on the ground and decided to turn on the heat. It’s the thermostat that sets the temperature in the home. I want to be a thermostat in Christ’s church, setting a temperature of warm-hearted love for God’s people. I want you all to be thermostats in this church, setting the temperature. Don’t just wait for someone else to set the temperature; actively turn up the heat, so to speak. And in this case, it can never be too hot. There can never be too much warm affection and love in the church. I want you to be thermostat setters.

So how do you do that? What do you see as some of the ways we can combat cynicism and cultivate warm affection for God’s people? *

I see three activities that Paul is actively engaged in with the Philippian church that I think help cultivate a warmth of love and affection in the body of Christ:

- Serving together
- Seeing God's grace in one another
- Sticking with one another

In verse five, Paul says he's thankful for them "*because of [their] partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*" Partnership is the word *koinonia* that was used in a joint business venture. These people are working together to see the gospel advance in their community and around the world as they're partnering together in the gospel. They are not viewing church simply with a consumer mindset. "What's in it for me? How is this service going to meet my needs?" Rather, they are joining together as a church to say, "How can we serve to get the good news of God's love and truth in Jesus Christ out to the world?" This partnership has created a comradery of warm affection.

It's as we partner together in the gospel that our love for one another is able to flourish and grow. When we start viewing the church from a consumer mindset— "What's in it for me? How am I being ministered to?"—we often become cynical. We can always find ways that we are not getting our needs met, but if we're engaged—if we're seeing the church not simply as a place of ministry where I get my needs met, but as a base of ministry where gospel advancement is taking place through our partnership together—that allows us to grow in love. So it's because of their partnership that Paul loves them. It's serving together that cultivates that kind of love.

Secondly, seeing God's grace in one another cultivates warm affection. Who doesn't love verse six of Philippians 1? It's a beautiful statement of confidence and the grace of God at work in His church.

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

I am sure that God is going to carry forth this work. He says in verse seven:

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.

We are all recipients of God's undeserved kindness, grace and bounty. As I see Him at work in you, I am confident that He will continue His work. Paul's looking. He's alert. His

vision is tuned into the activity of God and the church of God; that's what motivates his thankfulness because God is at work and God is gracious.

I've told you many times that one of the things I've learned the most from Kate in our marriage is the constant refrain, "There is grace for this." I think even in this past week, she has used that with me. In difficult situations it helps me look for how is God working. Paul is always attentive to that. Cynicism feeds off disappointment and breeds hopelessness. It's sort of a nothingness, just an apathy; not expecting anything good to happen in this situation. But God's grace brings the hopeful confidence that even when things aren't perfect and there are problems, we can trust God to do His work in our fellow believers. We're not the change agents, the Holy Spirit is and He's at work in them just as He is in us. So we rejoice in the grace that He is showing and we see how God continues to move our brothers and sisters in Christ forward and we rejoice in that. It causes us to love one another, giving thanks to God for one another. So seeing God's grace in one another is a way that you can set the temperature—turn up the heat—in the life of the church.

Thirdly, stick with one another to cultivate warm affection. When we are fickle and hop from community to community and don't stick with a group of believers over the long haul, we miss out on the opportunity to see love grow. These people were not fickle. They went through hardship, false teachers, persecutions, even imprisonment; but Paul says, "I am thankful to God for *your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*" This is a relationship that's lasted a long time. This is a relationship that has continued amidst hardship. We see at the end of verse seven, "*...both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.*" We miss out on the richness of fellowship and the warmth of affection if we don't stick together through thick and thin. Nothing warms your heart toward another believer like going through suffering and adversity together. Paul had a special affection for this church because of how they stuck with him in his hardships and imprisonment.

These are some of the ways that you can set the thermostat. Serve together for the advancement of the gospel. Get engaged in making Jesus known to people and showing the love of Christ to people. Serve together. See God's grace at work in His church and stick with one another. Persevere through hardship and you will be a temperature setter. You will turn up the heat.

1. Know where the furnace is and how to get close to it

Finally, we've got to know how to draw near to the furnace. Where does this kind of love originate? A thermostat just sets the temperature; there's got to be a working furnace to heat the house. Paul points us to the working furnace in verse eight: "*For God is my witness...*" Paul takes an oath here. That's how serious he is. "God will testify that this is true of me. God knows that what I'm saying is not a lie. I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus."

I love this verse and pray it would be true of me that God would see that I love you with the love and affection of Christ Jesus. Paul's saying, "It is not my natural love that enables me to continue loving you the way I do. It is the love of Jesus that is filling me as the waters fill the sea. I am united in Christ. My heart is pulsating with the love of Jesus that caused Him to come from heaven to earth and be born in a dismal manger and become the servant of all and die on the cross for your sins. That very love, the affection of Christ Jesus, His love causes my heart to throb. His love is pulsating through my very being and it is through the love of Christ that I yearn for you, Philippian church. And God is my witness of that." That is a strong claim. Could you say that in terms of your relationship to God's people? "God is my witness. How I yearn for the people of God at New Covenant with the affection of Christ Jesus."

The word Paul uses here is *splagchnon*. It sounds kind of gutsy. *Splagchnon*. It's speaking of the bowels, the innermost being. In a very real sense Paul is saying, "I writhe inwardly with yearnings of love and affection for you as God's people. It is the love of Jesus that is causing this inward driving of my soul, this burning love for You to arise in my heart. It's the love of Christ that is filling me."

That's the furnace. That's what heats up the church. That's what burns away the dross of cynicism. Jesus, Who knows all—warts and all; every failure—is never cynical about His church. Never. We are His bride and He is confident that we are going to be radiant, without spot or wrinkle before Him. He is full of hope. Jesus bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things for His people. What a great Savior! He never looks at us and says, "I'm just going to stand at a distance from you. I'm going to be aloof from you. I don't believe any good is going to come out of you." He always draws near. He always hangs in there. He always perseveres. He always believes because He knows that God is at work in us and because He died to secure that work. Paul's saying that is what enflames my heart.

Ministry that's empowered by self is so very limiting. We can churn up natural love as long as things are going well, but natural love fades quickly. This kind of love in the body of Christ—this kind of covenant community—is not natural. It is supernatural. Don't you want

this? Don't you want the world to see a community that is throbbing with the love of Christ? The good news is that we can get this kind of love from God. God can work this in us.

A number of years ago, I read a book by Gary Thomas and was struck by this section of it. I copied it down and want you to see what he said:

When we lose our heart for a person, a ministry, a calling or a church, God can renew our passion if we go to Him for that purpose.

I do that again and again and again. Asking God to fill me with His love for our church—not that I don't feel love for you because I actually do. But I know that I'm mercurial in my tendencies and could easily, left to myself, become very grumpy, irritable, angry, self-pitying and unloving. I need Jesus to fill me with His love. When we lose heart, He can renew our passion if we go to Him with that purpose. You may have lost your heart for your spouse, but God hasn't lost His heart for His child. Isn't that a beautiful thing? God is the Father of your spouse, just like He is your Father. What does that make God to you then? God is both your Father and your Father-in-law. And your Father-in-law loves your spouse and if you need God to renew your love for your spouse, go to your heavenly Father-in-law and ask Him to give you the love that He has for His child.

God hasn't lost His heart for His child. You may have, but God hasn't. You may have lost your heart for our congregation—that can happen sometimes—but God hasn't lost His heart for His congregation and for His church. He remains passionate about our welfare. God will give us His heart if we will just go to Him and receive it.

So what do we have to do today? We have to pray. That's how Paul ends this beautiful little paragraph of love. He doesn't end it by just saying, "Here is my example. Go and do it." He ends it by praying for spiritual power. He asks for the kind of love that God has for His people, the kind of thankfulness that characterizes His heart, the total anti-cynicism that's in Him. Paul wants these same attitudes to pervade in his life.

If we don't eat, we starve. If we don't drink, we dehydrate. If we don't exercise, we atrophy or bloat. If we don't breathe, what happens? We suffocate. If we don't pray, we lull ourselves into a spiritual coma of indifference, apathy and all-out cynicism because it's only as we get close to the furnace that we can love one another in any way that brings glory to God.

Let's spend some time in prayer together with your Bible open. Look at how Paul prays in verses 9-11. Pray this prayer for ourselves and our church. Cultivating life together means not just listening to or reading sermons about it. It's very easy to listen and think that's good, then go off and forget. Cultivating involves plowing—preparing the soil of our hearts. This is not hard

stuff to understand; it's hard to practice. We need God's grace to live like this. It's not what we don't know that is affecting us. We don't have power in ourselves to live this way.

So first, let's pray for love to abound more and more. We are a church that loves one another, but that needs to abound more. So bow where you are and ask God to fill you with the love of Jesus Christ so that your love will abound more and more. If there's someone in your life right now whom you aren't feeling much love toward or you are feeling bitter toward or you aren't forgiving, go to God and ask Him to give you His heart for that person. Would you do that right now for a minute or so?

Then Paul prays for knowledge and depth of insight because love without knowledge is anemic and knowledge without love becomes abusive. So let's pray that we would know God better and better because He is the furnace. We need God and His love to inflame us so that we would abound in love more and more. Pray for more knowledge of God. Pray that the Holy Spirit would deepen your love for His Word and for yearning for Him; that He would create in you hunger to know Him better. Pray for that.

Lord, if we say that we know You but have not love, we are lying. We pray for these two things together. We pray for more love and more knowledge. We don't just want to be sentimental. We want to pray in a way that honors You and affects the knowledge of Who You are. We don't want to be puffed up with intellect either and just know You; we want to truly love. We pray for both of these in our lives, Lord.

Pray, as you know God and as you love, that you would approve what is excellent. There are excellent things that God is doing in His church. There are excellent things that God is doing in the world. Cynicism causes us not to see and approve what is excellent. That's corruption of the heart. When we stand before Jesus, we want to be pure and blameless. That means standing before Him full of love and knowledge and praise for all the good things that He's been doing in His church and in the world. So pray that you would have eyes to see what's excellent and see how God is at work; that you would be a person who sets the temperature of love in the community of God's people.

O, Lord. Kill the cynicism that rises up and says that nothing is good or worth giving praise for. Kill that attitude of the heart that says, "I see everything that's wrong, but nothing that is good." Help us to approve what is excellent that we may be pure and blameless for Jesus Christ. We want to be a church that's filled with the fruit of righteousness. A church that is actively engaging in partnership to see Your gospel advance. A church that is filled with good works and the fruit that can only come from You, Jesus. So fill us with your love, Lord. We are

coming to You, empty vessels that need to be filled. Fill us Lord. And whatever good comes from us, we will know that it comes from You and through You and to You are all things. To You be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

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