

Chapter 8 - Overcoming the Hurdles (Philippians 1:1-11)

Paul prays for what is excellent

"At one level, Paul is asking God for a constantly increasing love." However, the love he prays for is not an end in itself but a means to an end - so that they may discern what is best.

He prays that they may discern what is best. What are these best things? Three clues from the text:

1. In order to discern them, the Philippians love must abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight. This excellence is not easily discerned but only to those who abound in love. Not just any love, but a specific kind of love, namely that which "abounds more and more in knowledge and depth of insight."

Carson writes: "The ever increasing love for which Paul prays is to be discriminating. It is to be constrained by "knowledge" and "depth of insight." Without the constraints of knowledge and insight, love very easily degenerates into sentimentality or into the kind of mushy pluralism the world often confuses with love. Christian love will be accompanied by "knowledge" - that is, in Paul's use, that mature grasp of the meaning of the gospel that is the fruit of sound instruction and full experience."

2. He says "what is best" or "things that differ." Paul's point is that there are countless decisions in life where the choice is not an easy choice between right and wrong - there is a need for extraordinary discernment to distinguish things that differ and choose the best.

3. From v.6 we see that Paul prays for them knowing that "he who began a good work in you will carry it on until completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Not only will their faith be maintained but it will improve until perfection on the last day.

Putting these 3 clues together, what do we have? All of the elements of maturing Christian discipleship, all requiring a growing and abounding love to be able to discern them. Carson gives some practical examples of what these discerning choices look like:

"What do you do with your time? How many hours a week do you spend with your children? Have you spent any time in the past two months witnessing to someone about the Gospel should mark how much time have you spent watching television or in other forms of personal relaxation? Are you committed, in your use of time, too what is best?

What have you read in the past six months? If you have found time for newspapers or news magazines, a couple of whodunits, I Naholo or two or perhaps a trade journal, have you also found time for reading a commentary or some other Christian literature that will help you better understand the Bible or and prove your spiritual discipline or brought in your horizons?

How are your relationships within your family? Do you pause now and then and reflectively

think through what you can do to strengthen ties with your spouse and with your children? Do you make time for personal prayer? For prayer meetings? Have you taken steps to improve in this regard? How do you decide what to do with your money? Do you get a set percentage, say, 10%, of your income to the Lord's work, however begrudgingly, and then regard the rest of your income as your own? Or do you regard yourself as the Lord's Steward, so that all the money you earn is ultimately his? Are you delighted when you find yourself able to put much more of your money into strategic ministry, simply because you love to invest in eternity?

Has your compassion deepened over the years, so that, far from becoming more cynical, you try to take concrete steps to serve those who have less than you do? Is your reading and study of the Bible so improving your knowledge of God that you're wholehearted worship of the Almighty grows in spontaneity, devotion, and joy?"

This is not to trigger waves of guilt, but a recognition that these are the kind of choices that the grace of God abounding love brings forth. Paul doesn't give a checklist of actions for Christians to take, but instead prays for their love to abound and to be full of discernment to choose what is best.

Carson then issues a challenge to those engaged in full-time ministry - how often are you praying this prayer for those under your care? He notes several pressures that have crept in to influence our values and schedules:

- *The pastor's job has been diversified* - giving oneself to the Word and Prayer is more difficult when occupied as counselors, fund-raisers, administrators, committee members, referees, politicians, and media personalities.

- *Many pastors are confused about their own identity and may suffer from low estimates of the value of their work.* Clergy are no longer the respected members of the community they once were and the position is much less often considered a profession than even 30 years ago.

- *Not a few clergy feel discouraged and unfruitful.* Some will work decades and never see the fruit of a conversion.

- *Some clergy bury themselves in endless activism*

Obviously, this prayer does not just apply to clergy. We all must ask how much we pray for these "best things."

Paul's Prayer is Tied to the Long View

The purpose of Paul's prayer is that they would abound in love and discernment so that they would "be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that

comes through Jesus Christ."

As we see in this passage, the pursuit of excellent things is not merely an intellectual pursuit, but has as its aim the fruit of righteousness.

Fruit of Righteousness

What does the fruit of righteousness mean?

- Some might suggest that this refers to righteousness, in the sense of justification. This would speak of the fruit of righteousness in the sense of the life that results from God crediting my sins to Christ and his righteousness to me.

- However, based on the way the phrase had been used in the OT (Prov. 11:30; Amos 6:12) and the fact that the phrase here is parallel with pure and blameless, it seems best to take this as an ethical quality. "To be filled with the fruit of righteousness is to be characterized by the conduct - the actions, words, and thoughts - that God himself judges to be right.

- Even with this definition, we are still to understand the fruit of righteousness as a work of the Holy Spirit and a product of the grace of God.

Until the day of Christ Jesus

- Better understood as with a view towards the day of Christ. This is another instance of the forward-looking prayer that we've talked about in past chapters.

Outposts of heaven

- Carson explains that this call to live righteously with a view to the day of Christ is a call for the Church to be an outpost of heaven. He calls it a "microcosm of the new heaven and the new earth, brought back, as it were, into our temporal sphere. We are still contaminated by failures, sin, relapses, rebellion, self-centeredness; we are not yet what we ought to be. But by the grace of God, we are not what we were. For as long as we are left here, we are to struggle against sin, and anticipate, so far as we are able, what it will be like to live in the untarnished bliss of perfect righteousness. We are to live with a view to the day of Christ."

Praying for revival.

- Paul's prayer is, essentially, a prayer for revival. What could be more relevant for us than this?

Paul's Prayer is not Idolatrous, but Praises God.

How could the pursuit of excellence become idolatrous?

Perfectionism - Does anyone struggle with being a perfectionist?

- This is a danger, not only in our personal lives but in the church as well.

- Striving for 100% may be nothing more than idolatry in the form of self-worship.

- This is not an excuse for laziness, but does require that we examine our motives.

- Paul is not calling the Philippians to this 100-percentism, but asking God to make them

fruitful. How can we tell the difference between a good pursuit of the best and an idolatrous pursuit of the best? Carson writes: "Here then is a practical test as to whether the excellence I pursue is really for the glory and praise of God or for my own self-image. If the things I value are taken away, is my joy in the Lord undiminished? Or am I so tied to my dreams that the destruction of my dreams means I am destroyed as well?" (142)