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A Prayer for Excellence Philippians 1:7-11

Intro: In the midst of his greeting, Paul laid out one of the most clear and profound declarations of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Paul was present in Philippi when many of the current congregation had come to know Jesus Christ as their savior. He was not only present; he was instrumental in their conversion experience. Thinking back to that glorious time and recognizing the good work that God had begun in their lives at that time, Paul goes on to declare his confidence that what God had graciously started in them, He will certainly complete. That work was being completed in them daily but would ultimately be completed fully on the day Jesus Christ returns for them.

4-8 - There was nothing exclusive about Paul's Christian greeting to the saints in Philippi. 4 times in the opening verses of **ch1** Paul shows that he includes all the believers in his considerations. He prays for them all (**4**). He is confident of them all (**6-7**). He speaks well of them all, knowing that they're all partakers of God's grace (**7**). And he **l**ongs for them all (**8**). Paul's statements here weren't just directed at the saints in Philippi; they include all Christians, because Paul knew that all believers have been brought by God into a great and unbreakable fellowship.

This is Christian brotherhood, and Paul's greeting is an example of it. It was a new thing in Paul's day. In the first Christian century the world was filled with barriers, just as it is now—barriers of race, wealth, education, and culture. There were ethnic, social, religious, cultural and intellectual barriers. Greeks looked down on Roman culture. Jews looked down on everyone. The free citizen looked down on the slave. The wealthy disregarded the poor and the common person. All these groups were bound together by the chains of Roman rule—Roman, Greek, Jew, soldier, priest, slave, blue-collar. But there was no such thing as a brotherhood that joined them. There was no fellowship.

Fellowship was found first and only among Christians. Christians were one. They confessed one Lord; they knew one salvation. All the barriers of the empire existed within the Christian church, but Christians just overlooked

them. They met, not as enemies, but as those who had been called out of darkness by Jesus and made alive in Him. They loved one another, and the world marveled at it. One of the great pagan writers of the day exclaimed, "Behold how these Christians love one another!" What was true of the early church in its best days should be true of it today.

9-12 – We have now come to one of the great prayers of the Apostle Paul. There are several recorded in the various epistles Paul wrote to different churches and each one is filled with profound truth and deep spiritual insight. The prayer that is our text today is exactly that. Although it is accurate, I almost hesitate to describe this prayer as being deep because of the connotations associated with that word. Among Bible students, if someone reads a theological book that you've read and you ask, "How did you like the book?" If they reply, "It was very deep!" then you know they didn't understand it any better than you did. Sometimes theological concepts can be difficult to grasp and it doesn't help when authors use a lot of 25 cent words. But, sometimes it is necessary. The real problem most people have with spiritual truths is not in the understanding of them but in the application of them to ones own life.

It should be clear to all of us from Paul's statement in vs6 that God has not saved us just to save us. We should also know that God has not saved us merely so that we might be free from judgment and go to heaven when we die. The truth is that God has saved us for several reasons and one of those reasons is so that we might be fruitful Christians. As we saw last week, another reason why God has saved us is so that the character of Jesus might be reproduced in us here on earth. We're to live in the flesh but not of the flesh. We're to do good works so that Christ might be glorified by our lives and that many others might be brought to faith in Him by our example and testimony.

This idea is stated in a wonderful way in **Eph 2:10**. Most Christians are familiar with the previous 2 verses (**8-9**). But how many know **v10**? These verses say 3 things: that God has saved us by grace; that He has a plan for our lives; that there are good works in that plan. God is like a father raising a large family. He happy to have the family, and He's delighted you're a member of it. But He's not satisfied with just that. He also wants you to grow up to be a good citizen, spiritually speaking. He wants productive children. He wants your life to be fruitful with good works.

This is the message of our text. In praying for the Christians at Philippi, Paul asks for 3 specific things. He prays that their love might abound in all knowledge and discernment. He prays that their lives might be lived free of hypocrisy. He then prays that they might be filled with the fruit of righteousness; the *natural result* of the first 2 requests.

There's a helpful illustration of how these 3 things relate to one another from the field of electrical science. Now, I'm not an electrician. In fact, people are usually shocked by how bad an electrician I am. The basic formula of electrical theory is: volts x amperes = watts. Voltage is the pressure that pushes electricity from the power source. Amperage is a measurement of the flow of electricity (current). Wattage is a measurement of power: the product of the pressure multiplied by flow of electricity. Everything Paul says here can be expressed in these terms. All good works depend on being filled with God's love, which is the pressure behind good works. Good works also depend on a channel where the amperage (flow) can be high. Our lives must not be filled with resistors (impede flow) or condensers (store power for private use). They must be open. The love of God Xs a life free of resistance = good works.

The first thing Paul says a Christian needs is abounding love (9); meaning, we must not only be filled with Christ's love but we must be constantly increasing in that love. Now, lest we balk at this exhortation and say, "We do have love! We're a loving church! Everybody says so!" Notice that the love that Paul prays for is not an end in itself; it's actually just a means to an end. Paul tells the Philippian saints that he prays that their love will increase so that they may be able to approve the things that are excellent (best). In fact, Paul's prayer for their increasing love is so closely linked to their ability to approve (choose) what is excellent that you could say Paul is simply praying for what is best!

Now, before we unpack exactly what these excellent things are, before we dig down and discover how an increase in love moves a church towards the goal of approving these excellent things; we should elaborate on the spiritual ramifications of what Paul is saying to the Philippian church, and every church. Paul's prayer here is the death-knell of spiritual mediocrity that can become entrenched in any congregation. This prayer spells the death of the smug air of self-satisfaction some believers adopt when they

feel they have “arrived.” This prayer spells the end of any and all contentment we may have with our own excuses. Paul prays for what is excellent, for what is best!

Wherever you and I may stand in the spectrum of spiritual maturity, the one thing that is true of every Christian is that we could all do better than we do and many of us could do much better. 1 of the most important steps we can take though is simply to recognize where we are. It shouldn't be too difficult to realize we are not quite where God wants us to be. Maybe you're experiencing spiritual dryness. Maybe your knowledge of God is limited. Maybe you desire to pray with a greater sense of reality in spiritual things or experience a greater degree of fruitfulness from your prayers. That's exactly what Paul's praying for and his prayer has the potential to help us overcome the spiritual hurdles of dryness and lack of fruitfulness in our lives.

Still, Paul doesn't expect excellence to be dropped on the church in a nice little package. He prays that believers can discern and approve what is best. Meaning; as their love abounds they, through knowledge, can test by experience and then choose what is best. The force behind choosing what is best is love, but not just any kind of love – it's a love that abounds in knowledge and all discernment. The word used here for knowledge (epignosis) is a special word that refers to advanced spiritual knowledge. In the NT, it's only applied to spiritual things: knowledge of God, religious or spiritual knowledge and doctrinal knowledge. In Paul's use, it speaks of a mature grasp of the meaning of the gospel that is the result of sound, biblical instruction and the full experience of walking by faith in God's Word.

Our love must also abound in all discernment. Discernment is a reference to the understanding given by the Holy Spirit. Just as the Word of God is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart, so the Holy Spirit enables us to discern how love should operate. Yet, Paul doesn't just pray for discernment but for all discernment; lit: all insight. This is not an exhortation for total insight or a depth of insight but rather the breadth of insight – employing a moral perception across all of life's experiences.

True Christian love is guided and constrained by knowledge and discernment. Love without these 2 will quickly turn into a parody of itself and we see that everywhere in our society today. Parents refuse to discipline their children and then when those kids grow up to become miscreant and

delinquents, their parents bend over backwards to shield them from the consequences of their actions. On the other hand, knowledge and discernment without love quickly becomes overbearing and caustic (Pharisees). Christian love is regulated by knowledge of the gospel and moral insight. These constraints don't stifle love; far from it – they ensure love's purity and value.

Paul prays for just this kind of love because the excellence he wants believers to pursue is not easily discerned. What are these things? The term refers to superior things, things that really matter. There are countless decisions in life that are not just a straightforward question of right and wrong. Some decisions are merely a choice between what is good, better or best. For these, you need a discernment that helps you see how they are different and then make the best possible choice. Some decisions are clear: where to continue your education; what career to pursue; where to live; etc. We all want to make the best possible choice and for a believer, you want to be obedient to the Lord's leading. But, not all of the decisions we face in life are life changing but they can still be life altering.

How do you spend your time? Do you invest a healthy amount of time into spiritual endeavors or is it mostly spent in personal relaxation or consuming entertainment? In the use of your time, are you committed to what is best? What about your personal reading or prayer time? Are you committed to what is best? What about your finances? Do you see yourself as a consumer or as a faithful steward of what the Lord has given to you? Are you committed to what is best in this area of your life? Has your passion for the lost increased since your own salvation? Has your knowledge and experience of God and faith increased? Have you stepped out of your comfort zone and served the Lord in painful self-denial? Are you committed to choosing what is best in all areas of your Christian walk?

Behind all of your answer are choices. The last thing I want to do is generate a load of guilt over the choices that are constantly presented to us; choices we often fail to make for the glory of God. I hesitate even to suggest these things because guilt never helps us make the right choices, it only increases our stress and resentments. That's why Paul doesn't mention anything specific here. He refuses to provide an arbitrary checklist for us to measure ourselves by or set up hoops for us to jump through. He simply prays that the believers would pursue what is best, knowing that they can't

pursue excellence without transformed hearts and minds. Only love can accomplish this. Thus, the Christian life must be motivated and informed by love; love governed by biblical principles and exercised with judgment.

The next thing Paul prays for is that our lives would be pure or free of obstructions. The word he uses means “oven tested.” This doesn’t mean we must be perfect, none of us are. It does mean that our lives must be open before God and before others. There must be no hypocrisy. In Paul’s day, pottery was a major industry and it varied in quality just as products do today. Cheap pottery was thick and solid and didn’t require much skill to make. Fine pottery was thin and brought a high price. Fine pottery was very fragile and it would often crack in the oven and it should’ve been thrown away. But dishonest dealers were in the habit of filling in the cracks with a hard pearly wax that would blend in with the color. This made the cracks practically undetectable; but it was immediately detectable when the pottery was held up to light, especially the sun. The artificial element was often detected by “sun-testing.” Honest dealers marked their finer product by the caption *sine cera*—“without wax.”

Paul’s saying that the flaws in the lives of believers must not be covered up with wax. Our lives are not perfect. In this life we will always have flaws, but we must not disguise them artificially. We must be sincere. God’s love will not flow through a Christian whose life is a sham. Hypocrisy will stop the flow. Fortunately, God’s love will flow through an honest Christian, no matter how marred the vessel. Paul says as much in (2 Cor 4:7). Thus, we look forward to the day when what is begun on earth, with all its imperfections, will be made perfect in heaven. There we will be sterling examples of God’s fine workmanship.

All this leads to the fact that we are to be fruitful Christians-filled with the fruits of righteousness that come through Jesus Christ. This doesn’t refer to internal righteousness: love, joy, peace, etc... the fruit of the Spirit. It refers to what is seen externally. The fruit of righteousness is the fruit that righteousness produces. This is to be seen in the innumerable acts of kindness and service to which every believer in Jesus is called to perform.

We need to note also that the Christians are not only called to bear fruit, they are called to be fruitful. That is, to bring forth much good fruit. How is this to be done? In the first place, it must be done by depending on Christ.

This is what Jesus was talking about in the last moments he spent with his disciples before his crucifixion (Jn 15:1, 4-5). There will be no fruit of righteousness in anyone's life apart from a dependence on Christ.

Again, Paul doesn't refer to the day of Christ in order to insert a veiled threat. "The boss is coming! Look busy!" Actually, he's saying something even more compelling. He's telling us that we must live out our Christian lives with a view to the day of Christ. This means believers should live in such a way that they remember they are moving toward that day and are completely constrained by it. On that day, the fruit of our lives will be entirely righteous. So now, if we live with that day in view then we'll produce much righteous fruit in anticipation of that day. That's a legitimate part of the call toward excellence.

The church is to see itself as an outpost of heaven, a microcosm of the new heaven and new earth. Sure, we're still contaminated by sin, failures, relapses, rebellion, self-centeredness – we are not what we ought to be. But, on the other hand, by the grace of God; we are not what we were! As long as we are left here, we should and will struggle against sin. But, in the midst of that struggle, we should also anticipate, as much 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 – we don't want that perfect righteousness to be a culture shock. It won't be if we are already striving to walk in that direction.

It's clear from his prayer that Paul was not satisfied with the status quo! Knowing that we're already destined for the perfection that is to be achieved when Jesus returns, Paul doesn't expect any of us to just sit around and wait for it to happen, he wants us to press on toward it. Paul was never lackadaisical about his spiritual walk; the more fruitful and holy he became, the more he recognized how much further he had to go. He wants us to share the same vision. He was passionate about pursuing spiritual excellence in his own life and he prays that we would do the same in ours.

The fruits of righteousness are the result of walking in sincerity before God and choosing what is excellent. These 2 prerequisite abilities come into our lives as our love abounds in knowledge and all discernment. Jesus Christ is the source of that love; He's the power plant. Our lives are the cables (vessels) God uses to transmit (communicate) His love to a lost and dying

world. Is His love impeded from its intended goal by your life or is it freely and powerfully transmitted by it? We have the biblical knowledge; we have spiritual and practical discernment. The only question left to ask is: are you committed to choosing what is best for your life? 😊