

Philippians 1:1–11: Thanksgiving Characterizes a Gospel-Shaped Life

CPS: Give thanks to God for those who partner in the gospel and
Pray that their love may continue growing

INTRODUCTION

This world in which we live can be a dreary one. This life that we live can be a hard one.

- Our **politicians** tell us that we are disadvantaged and that the ‘other guy’ isn’t giving us a fair go (“it won’t be easy under Albanese”)—all so that we will vote him in or keep him in power.
- Our **media** tells us that the world is going to end in some form or another; either climate will destroy us, big business will destroy us, or the ‘other’ political views will destroy us—all so that we will keep watching.
- Our local and national **businesses** tell us that without their products our life will be a boring or unhappy one—all so that we will purchase their products.
- Our **culture** tells us that we are either victims and need to be on constant look out for our oppressors or that we are victimizers and we need to live in constant shame while trying to atone for our immutable God-given characteristics—all so that they can control us and bend us to their will.
- And on top of all that we have **our own issues and struggles**:
 - We struggle in school or with our studies.
 - We struggle making friends.
 - We can’t find a spouse.
 - We struggle to get along with our spouse.
 - We can’t have children.
 - We struggle to get along with our children.
 - We don’t like our car.
 - We don’t like our house.
 - We don’t like our job.
 - We don’t make enough money.
 - There are health issues, injuries, deaths, and miscarriages.
 - There are sins and addictions we cannot seem to overcome.

All this leads too many of us to be **perpetually pessimistic**. It clouds our vision so that we don’t see God’s good work in the world; we don’t see the good things that others are doing in the world; and we don’t rejoice because too often we don’t know what there is to rejoice about! We don’t give thanks because too often we don’t know what to give thanks for!

If there was anyone in the world who had reason to be perpetually pessimistic, it was the apostle Paul while writing the letter to the Philippian believers. The letter of Philippians starts out like many of Paul's other letters:

- He introduces himself and those with him: "*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus*" (Phil 1:1a).
- He states to whom the letter is written: "*To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, including the overseers and deacons*" (1:1b).
- Then he invokes the grace and peace of God over them: "*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*" (1:2).

But shortly after we get into the letter, we find out that Paul is writing in the midst of difficult circumstances:

- He is in jail on account of the gospel (Phil 1:7, 13, 14, 17; cf. 1:19, 30; 2:12, 24; 4:14).
- He is most likely jailed in Rome, ~800 miles (~1,300 km) away from his close friends in Philippi, which was located in Macedonia, which is the northern part of modern-day Greece.
- He had fellow Christians intentionally trying to do him and his reputation harm while in jail (Phil 1:15–17).
- He suffered the loss of everything on multiple occasions (Phil 3:8; 4:11–12).
- He had a close friend near to death (Phil 2:25–27).

And it is in the midst of this difficult and trying situation that the Philippian Christians sent Epaphras on the ~1,300 km journey to assist Paul in his needs and to see how they, the Philippian church, could help Paul and meet his needs: "*You were, in fact, concerned about me but lacked the opportunity to show it*" (Phil 4:10b; cf. 2:25, 30).

So, in light of the Philippians' desire to tangibly demonstrate their concern for Paul, he (Paul) sends Epaphras back to the Philippians with this letter. And what do you think Paul's message to the Philippians is? Do you think it is one of perpetual pessimism?

- I'm hungry, cold, and I've been beat up!
- Take care of my family!
- Make sure no one sells my house!
- Pray that I'll be set free soon!

No, he doesn't say anything like. Rather, Paul says, 'I'm good.' In fact, he goes further and says **'I am able to rejoice regardless of my situation and circumstances.'** In fact, he goes even further and says **'Not only do I rejoice regardless of my situation and circumstances, but so should you because you and I have been shaped by the gospel!'**

Rather than wallow in perpetual pessimism, Paul practices and calls for the practice of repetitious rejoicing! Throughout the letter to the Philippians, Paul acknowledges his trials and tribulations, as well as the Philippians' trials and tribulations, and claims that a gospel-shaped life can repetitiously rejoice in every part of life. I say again, A gospel-shaped life can rejoice in every part of life.

So, throughout the letter, Paul will not only press home that a gospel-shaped life can repetitiously rejoice in every part of life, but he **will reveal *how*** he (Paul) and we (Christians) can repetitiously rejoice in the midst of good and bad circumstances, so that we can live in a manner worthy of the gospel, so that we can live a gospel-shaped life.

It is, thus, with no surprise that Paul begins his letter with a thanksgiving to God in Philippians 1:3–11 and **demonstrates that Repetitious Thanksgiving Characterizes a Gospel-Shaped Life.**

I. PAUL'S THANKSGIVING TO GOD (1:3–8)

A. (When/How Often) Paul Gives Thanks Continuously/Habitually (1:3)

After Paul and Timothy introduce themselves (1:1–2), Paul declares that he continuously gives thanks to God: "I [continuously] give thanks to my God" (1:3) This isn't a one-off thanksgiving. This is a habitual thanksgiving; a life that is characterized by thanksgiving to God that is brought on **every time** Paul remembers the Philippians: "for every remembrance of you" (1:3). The NIV puts it quite well: "I thank my God every time I remember you" (1:3).

So, every time Paul remembers and thinks about the Philippian Christians, his close and dear friends, he gives thanks to God **for them** (1:4, 7). And because he is always remembering them, his thanksgiving to God for them has become habitual; it has characterized his life.

That is a lot of thanksgiving! I don't know about you, but I think about those who are close to my heart **a lot!** The obvious ones are my wife, children, and parents. But I'm also always remembering my friend Matt in the USA. We text a few times a day almost every day. For example, whenever I come across a cringe-worthy church sign, I take a pic and text it to him. He does the same for me.

So, whenever I remember Matt because I see a silly church sign or something of the like, I text a funny picture. But whenever Paul remembers the Philippians for whatever reason, he gives thanks to God for them! I wonder who is allowing the gospel to shape their life? Paul or the person standing before you.

B. (How) Paul Gives Thanks in Prayer (1:4)

Paul then tells the Philippians and us reading his letter *how* he goes about giving thanks to God for the Philippians. He gives thanks to God through prayer for them: “always praying with joy for all of you in my every prayer” (1:4). So, as Paul goes about his life and ministry (he's building tents; he's telling people about Jesus; he's being stoned and kicked out of town; or he's being beaten, flogged, and thrown into prison [Acts 16:20–24]), he remembers the Philippians, so he prays for them and in that prayer he gives thanks to God for them.

C. (Why #1) Paul Gives Thanks Because the Philippians Partner in the Gospel (1:5)

But what is so special about the Philippians that results in Paul's habitual thanksgiving to God for them? Why does Paul's remembrance of them, their coming into his mind, drive Paul to his knees in prayer for the purpose of giving thanks to God for them? Paul gives us three important reasons.

First, Paul gives thanks to God for the Philippians **because they partner in the gospel with him**: “because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now” (1:5). We find out from this letter that the Philippians are not on the front lines with Paul in spreading the gospel and planting churches; but they have partnered with him in the proclamation and spread of the gospel **(a)** by materially supporting Paul and providing for his needs (2:25; 4:15–16), **(b)** by sending members to minister to Paul while he is in jail (2:25), and **(c)** by sharing in his troubles and afflictions (4:14). No wonder these Christians constantly come to mind; they are Paul's biggest supporters (4:15–16)!

D. (Why #2) Paul Gives Thanks Because God Will Complete His Good Work in the Philippians (1:6)

The second reason that Paul gives thanks to God for the Philippians is **because God is doing a good work in them and Paul is fully persuaded that He will complete that good work by the time Jesus returns**: “I am sure of this, that he who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (1:6).

Although Paul doesn't explicitly tell us what is that “good work,” he gives us a number of clues throughout the letter that suggest the “good work” of God in the lives of the Philippian believers is **God's transformative process in the lives of the Philippian Christians**:

- Paul prays that the Philippians will be “pure and blameless in the day of Christ” (1:10).
- Paul commands the Philippians to cease grumbling and disputing so that they would be “blameless and pure” in relation to the day of Christ (2:14–16).
- Paul commands the Philippians to think like him in knowing the power of Jesus' resurrection and in pursuing perfection (3:10–15).
- Paul reminds the Philippians that Jesus will transform their lowly body to be like His glorious body in the day of Christ (3:20–21).

Thus, Paul's conviction of the future perfection and completion of God's transformative process in the lives of the Philippian Christians gives rise to Paul's thanksgiving to God on behalf of the Philippians! Paul thanks God for the Philippians because God **is** perfecting and **will** perfect the Philippians, making them pure and blameless when Jesus returns. They are not perfect, pure, and blameless now (no Christians and no church is), but they are becoming more perfect, more pure, and more blameless each day; and in this Paul gives thanks.

If God is doing a good work in the Philippians, who are average every-day disciples of Jesus, who are part of the church, under the New Covenant, and citizens of the Kingdom of God, then we can take it to the bank that God is doing this same good work in all his children, who are disciples of Jesus, part of the church, under the New Covenant, and citizens of the Kingdom of God.

Our God does not keep his people trapped in cycles of sin all their life; rather, he progressively makes us more pure, more blameless, and more perfect day-in and day-out. Not always in great strides that are noticeable from day-to-day, but incrementally. I may see no great change in my blamelessness today from yesterday, but I sure do see a change today from ten years ago or twenty years ago when I got saved. So should

you! We should give praise to our God not only because he is perfecting us, but because God is the one who will bring that good work to completion on the day of Christ, making us pure, blameless, perfect.

E. (Why #3) Paul Gives Thanks Because It Is the Right Thing to Do (1:7–8)

The final reason that Paul gives thanks to God for the Philippians is **because it is simply the right thing to do**: “Indeed, it is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I have you in my heart, and you are all partners with me in grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how deeply I miss all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus” (1:7–8).

In light of the Philippians’ partnership with Paul in the gospel ministry **and** in light of Paul’s deep affection for the Philippians, it is morally right for Paul to give thanks to God for them in prayer. It is simply the right thing to do. For Paul, it would be a sin not to give thanks to God for those who partner with him in the gospel, who are being perfected by God, and for whom he holds a deep affection.

The level of depth with which Paul has thought about his relationships is astounding. Many of us go through life with nary a thought about the morally right response to those with whom we have relationships. We take our relationships for granted. We consider **their** obligations to **us**, rather than **our** obligations to **them**.

Not Paul. He has considered **(a)** what the Philippians have done for him [partner in the gospel], **(b)** what God is doing for the Philippians [perfecting], and **(c)** what his personal feelings toward the Philippians are [they hold a special place in his heart and misses them], and has concluded that **(d)** his moral obligation is to habitually give thanks to God for them and to pray for them. Oh, that we would consider the moral implications of our relationships in such a way as Paul has. The results for both us and them would be astounding.

II. OUR THANKSGIVING TO GOD

What are we to make of Paul’s thanksgiving to God for the Philippian Christians? In other words, what am I to do with this thanksgiving? How should it shape my life? How does it make me a more faithful disciple of Jesus? How does it make me a less pessimistic person? Especially in light of the fact that there are no commands in this passage!

A. Imitate Paul's Prayer Life in Phil 1:3–8

Throughout his letters, indeed, even in this letter to the Philippians, Paul urges his readers to imitate him: “Join in imitating me, brothers and sisters, and pay careful attention to those who live according to the example you have in us” (3:17; cf. 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; 2 Thess 3:7, 9; Heb 13:7). Although we can't imitate everything Paul does because we are not apostles of Jesus, we can imitate his prayer life, which is given as an example for us to follow. Paul continually and habitually gives thanks to God for the Philippians because they partner with him in the gospel ministry, because God is doing a good work in them, and because it is the right thing to do.

B. Give Thanks for Those Who Partner with You in the Gospel and in Whom God is Doing a Good Work

Let me ask you, who do you know that partners with you in the gospel ministry? Who in your life tries to lead others to Christ? Who in your life tries to disciple Christians to maturity? Who in your life defends Christ and the Christian faith? Who in your life meets the material needs of others for the praise and glory of Christ? Who in your life financially and materially supports the efforts of those in gospel ministry?

I also ask you, in which Christians do you know that God is doing a good work? Who is growing in grace and maturity? Who is becoming more pure and more blameless as the years go on? Who is living according to the example given to us by Jesus, Paul, and the other apostles? Which Christians do you see becoming more perfect, more pure, and more blameless because of God's good work in them?

Allow me to list a few names you may have heard that come to my mind: Craig Lloyd, Rhoi Harris, Xi Liu, Ian Wright, Hong Han, and Andrew Novic. It seems to me that they are partnering with us and we are partnering with them in the gospel. It seems to me that God is doing a good work in them and I am 100% convinced that God will bring that good work to completion on the day of Jesus' return.

If the people of whom I'm thinking and you're thinking are partners in the gospel in whom God is doing a good work, then **the right thing to do is give thanks to God for these people every time you remember them!** And you do this through prayer. Whenever Craig, Rhoi, Xi, Ian, Han, Andrew, and whoever else comes to your mind, pray for that person and thank God for that person. Don't just do it once, or twice, or three times, but every time, again and again and again! **Let thanksgiving for your partners in the gospel be something that characterizes your life!**

III. PAUL'S PRAYER FOR THE PHILIPPIANS: THAT LOVE MAY GROW (1:9–11)

And when you give thanks for these partners in the gospel in your prayers, pray Paul's prayer: "And I pray this: that your love will keep on growing in knowledge and every kind of discernment, so that you may approve the things that are superior and may be pure and blameless in the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God" (1:9–11).

A. Pray That Love May Grow (1:9)

Paul prays to God that he (God) will continue to grow the Philippians' love more and more. Now we need to be careful when we speak about love in the 21st-century. Modern culture has twisted and perverted love into being a carnal, self-gratifying feeling, so that anything that satiates my selfish and carnal impulses and desires is what I love. Therefore, **to love myself**, modern culture says that I should do whatever I want to do in order to be happy, regardless of who it hurts, regardless of how sinful it is because love is satiating my selfish and carnal impulses and desires. **To love others**, according to modern culture, I must approve and cheer on those who engage in this carnal, selfish, and sinful behaviour. In short, **modern culture abounds and is ever growing in a love that has broken free from knowledge and discernment; it is love based on ignorance.**

Paul does not pray for this kind of ignorant, selfish, carnal, sinful love, but for the abounding of love that is grounded in and shaped by "knowledge and every kind of discernment" or "knowledge and **thorough** discernment" (1:9). **Paul prays for his gospel partners and we should pray for our gospel partners that their love grow, increase, and abound in the sphere of knowledge and discernment; in the sphere of truth.** In short, Paul prays that the Philippians will 'love rightly' more and more.

But in order to love rightly, one must be guided by knowledge and thorough discernment—truth. There is an inseparable connection between love and truth. The sad reality is that many pastors, teachers, denominations, churches, and Christians have freed themselves from the shackles of knowledge and thorough discernment—truth—when it comes to love. They deemphasize knowledge because it is a hindrance.

But Paul says, no, we don't love how we want to love; we love rightly, according to knowledge and thorough discernment; otherwise we may end up like Jephthah and

sacrifice our daughter (Judg 11:29-40). And it is for this love that Paul prays the Philippians abound.

B. The Purpose of Love (1:10–11)

But why pray for a truth-based love to abound? Paul wants the Philippians to abound in a knowledge/truth-based love so that they will in turn be able to approve the things that are superior and, thus, “be pure and blameless” when Jesus returns because they will then be filled with the fruit of righteousness (1:10–11).

Did you know that love impacts both your present and your future? Allow me to again run through Paul’s reason for praying that the Philippians’ love grow in knowledge and in thorough discernment.

As you grow and abound in a truth-based love, you will be able to test and approve the things that are superior (that which is godly and right), rather than approve those things that are base and sinful. As you approve that which is godly and right, you become filled with the fruit of righteousness to the point that when Jesus returns you will be pure and blameless.

Truth-based love → approving that which is superior (godly and right) → filled with the fruit of righteousness → pure and blameless when Jesus returns.

Now, don’t think that Paul is advocating a works-based righteousness. Note that Paul says the fruit that comes from righteousness comes through (by means of) Jesus Christ (1:11). Not only that, but Paul has already said that God is the one who makes us 100% pure and blameless on the day of Jesus’ return: “I am sure of this, that he who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (1:6).

Paul doesn’t just want his beloved friends, the Philippian Christians, to be more loving for love’s sake; he wants them to be pure and blameless when Jesus returns so that (purpose) God will be glorified and praised! Jesus doesn’t just want his disciples to be more loving for love’s sake; he wants them to be pure and blameless when he returns so that (purpose) God will be glorified and praised! “*to the glory and praise of God*” (Phil 1:11).

IV. OUR PRAYER FOR THOSE WHO PARTNER IN THE GOSPEL: THAT LOVE MAY GROW

So, as we remember those who partner in the gospel with us: Craig, Rhoi, Xi, Ian, Han, Andrew, my parents, Sarah's parents, Bob, and whoever else partners with you, we must **not stop** at giving thanks to God for them, but continue our prayer that God continues to grow their love for their betterment and God's glory. Our gospel partners are not perfect; they have not been perfected yet. As such, we must pray for them in this area of love.

Do you want your gospel partners to be able to approve the things that are superior, godly, and right? Do you want your gospel partners to be pure and blameless on the day of Christ? Do you want your gospel partners to be filled with the fruit of righteousness? Do you want your gospel partners to live lives to the glory and praise of God? Then for the glory of God, to the praise of God, and for the love of your gospel partners, pray that their love will continue growing in knowledge and thorough discernment and never stop!

CONCLUSION: GIVE THANKS AND PRAY FOR ABOUNDING LOVE

Paul gives thanks to God for those who partner with him in the gospel and he prays that their love may continue growing. As those who should imitate Paul, we should give thanks to God for those who partner with us in the gospel and we should pray that their love may continue growing!

If we today, as we sit here in church, are remembering those who partner with us in the gospel, then let us imitate Paul **now** by going to our great God in prayer for the purpose of giving thanks for these men and women and to pray that their love will continue growing in knowledge and thorough discernment.

Don't stop praying prayers like this. Do it tomorrow and the next day and the next day in perpetuity. Show the world that thanksgiving for your gospel partners characterizes your gospel-shaped life.