

Phil 1:3–4: Prayer as Thanksgiving, Part 1

Introduction

I'm very excited about this morning's sermon and the next five or six sermons. I'm excited because we will explore the topic of prayer. We have yet to explore this topic in depth. We explored it briefly in relation to the doctrine of providence when we studied Ruth 3. However, we have not spent time studying it. This study will segue well with last Sunday's member's potluck, where I discussed that one of the values, we as elders want to uphold is prayer. This is one of the values we want to focus upon as a church. This is such an essential aspect of the Christian life. So essential. Prayerlessness is a sin; and prayer is the sign of a heart that has been changed by God.

This exploration in prayer will have two parts. For the first part, we will cover "Prayer as Thanksgiving." We will begin that this morning. That will take us, I think, three weeks. For the second part, we will cover "Prayer as Petition." That will take us two weeks. So, I plan on covering prayer for the next five weeks.

Let's go ahead and open to Phil 1 so that I can show you these things from the Bible itself. Open to Phil 1:3. Philippians 1:3 through 11 is all about prayer. You can see that with the heading above this passage. The ESV reads, "Thanksgiving and Prayer." I imagine that, if you have a different version than an ESV, there is a heading that reads something similar. The first part of this prayer is about thanksgiving. This theme begins in v. 3 and ends in v. 8. The second part of this prayer is about supplication. That theme begins in v. 9 and ends in v. 11. Prayer as thanksgiving and supplication. That's where we're headed.

What we will do in these coming is that we will study how Paul understood and engaged in prayer for us to learn how we should understand and engage in prayer. We will seek to follow Paul in his prayer life. You might respond, "Pastor, we are not to follow any man. We are to follow Christ alone." Look at Phil 3:17 very quickly. The passage reads,

Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.

My assumption for teaching you to follow Paul in his prayer life comes from this (and others like it). In this verse, Paul commands the Philippians to follow him and to follow "those who walk according to the example you have in us." As Christians, we are to look to others on how we should live our Christian faith. Further, we are to live our lives in a way where we encourage others to look to us as a model of Christ. That's what Paul is saying. "Follow me as I follow Christ." We should look to Paul's prayer life to model our own prayer life.

The passage that we will explore this morning is Phil 1:3–4. Turn with me there and let's read it together. The passage reads,

I thank my God for all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy.

As with most of my sermons, I have three points for you this morning. These points will be in the form of questions.

Who Do We Thank?

The first point in our sermon is this, “Who do we thank?” This is a very important question. In our secular age, thankfulness might be encouraged. This country still largely celebrates the holiday Thanksgiving. I doubt that will go away. So, there is an implicit recognition in our national conscience that we ought to give thanks, at least one time a year. Is such a notion good? I believe so. I think that’s it’s a good thing that we have a national holiday called Thanksgiving.

But giving thanks in a secular culture also raises odd question. Specifically, who are we thanking? Some might say that we thank ourselves. Ultimately it is we ourselves who have brought blessings upon ourselves. It was our hard work, our ingenuity, our kindness towards others that got us to a place of success in life. Karma might be at role here. I imagine that atheists, agnostics, and people who believe in some type of spirituality would think this way.

Others might say we need to thank God. God here is undefined. God might be “the man upstairs.” This term for God was made famous by Mark McGuire. McGuire was one of the most prolific home-run hitters in the MLB. In the 90s, he was a very famous baseball player. This God might passively observe mankind. He’s not really involved. He doesn’t really have much relevance in my life. Other than rewarding mankind for his “good” behavior. I imagine many nominal Christians have this understanding of who to thank.

All these falls short. Far short. What Scripture teaches is that we must be thankful and that we must be thankful to the proper being. If we just thank “the heavens,” we fall short of Scripture. We need to be more explicit than that. Well who do we thanks?

Look in v. 3. Paul says this,

I thank my God.

This statement from Paul answers for us the question the question. “Who do we thank?” We thank “my God” or “our God.” The “my” here brings out the personal element of prayer. When we give thanks, we thank the God in whom we have a relationship with, the God who has saved us. God, for the Christian, is not distant and aloof to our prayers. Rather, we can speak of him as a personal God, a God who is close. “God” is so relevant to our lives that he is our personal God. We are constantly consumed with him, thinking about him, and obeying him. He’s not a santa clause or a distributor of karma—he is personal.

The “God” here indicates the being who we thank. “Well who is God, Pastor?” Scripture gives a very specific answer to that. Listen to what the Westminster Confession of Faith says with reference to God. This is the God who we thank.

There is but one only a living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal, most just, and terrible in his judgments, hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty. In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost: the Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.

Theology matters. Any old “god” won’t do. When we pray, we have to be very specific by what we mean. This God is the God who has saved us and marked us out for himself. This is the God from whom all blessings flow. This is the true God. As such, we give him, specifically him, thanks. Ultimately, we thank him.

What Do We Give Thanks For?

The second point this morning is this question: “What do we give thanks for?” So following Paul’s example, we thank God. But what do we thank him for? Well, we thank him for everything. Ephesians 5:20 says to

give thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jas 1:17 says,

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

All the good the experience, every blessing, every breath, every enjoyable moment with your family, every cent you earn, every taste of food that you enjoy, every good is from God. All of it. It’s all from God. We deserve none of it. In fact, we deserve the exact opposite—judgment. We thank God for everything. All good things flow from his hand.

This passage, though, teaches us to thank for something more specific than “everything.” Following Paul’s example, we are to thank God for people. Paul mentions who he is thankful for in vv. 3 and 4. In v. 3, he mentions that every time he remembers “you” he gives thanks for

them. The “you” here is plural in Greek. But it’s not very specific. Is it everyone in Philippi or is it just a certain group of people, a certain “y’all” as they like to say in the South? We don’t know. We need more. We

get more in v. 4. Paul states in v. 4,

always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy

He is saying here that he thanks God always in every prayer of mine “for you all.” I take it that this is an all-inclusive statement. Who does Paul thank God for in the church in Philippi? He thanks God for all the Christians in that church. Paul is thankful for every specific Christian at this church. He doesn’t play favorites. He praises God for each individual believer.

This is significant given a dispute that occurred within the church. Turn to Phil 4:2. I will read through v. 3. The passage reads,

I appeal to Euodia and to Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I say also to you, true companion, help them. They have struggled together in the gospel ministry along with me and Clement and my other coworkers, whose names are in the book of life.

This text indicates that there was some dispute between these two godly ladies. I imagine they cause Paul some heartache. What’s his response? He thanks God for them. Paul’s thanksgiving to God extends to them. Even with those who are leading to the disunity of the church, he is still thankful for them. His love overflows to thanksgiving.

Further, because of Paul’s example, Euodia should express thankfulness to God for Syntyche, and Syntyche should express thanks to God for Euodia. Even in the dispute, Paul desires that they be thankful to one another. This doesn’t mean that Paul wants them to be best buds. It does mean, though, that even in this dispute, they are to love one another. And the way that love should express itself is by each of them giving thanks to God for each other.

When we pray, we often give thanks to God for the people whom we like, the people who are easy to pray for and give thanks for. That’s understandable. We tend to be attracted to the people who we like most. That’s not necessarily bad. We can have friends, people who we like more than others. This tendency towards liking some should not lead to our neglect of thankfulness about others.

In this church, here at CBC, there are some that play favorites. Some that don’t show love to their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Due to the past, due to disputes between believers, some here don’t express love towards one another. And the way you can tell is through your prayers. Do you thank God for his grace in the lives of those you disagree with and have a hard time with? Are you thankful for them? Or, do you just wish they would go away? Paul wants us to be impartial with our love. We don’t just love some Christians here. We are called to love

them all. As a sign of that love, we are to thank God for all those here—even those who we struggle with.

How Do We Thank God?

Now we dive into our last point this morning. It is this: “How Do We Thank God?” Paul informs us that we should thank God constantly with a joyful spirit.

Constantly

First, we are to thank him constantly. I get this from 4. Look what Paul says at the beginning of this verse:

always in every prayer of mine for you

The verb here comes from v. 3. “I thank my God.” That is to carry over into v. 4. So, the idea is

I thank my God . . . always in every prayer of mine for you.

Paul constantly, consistently, repeatedly thanks God for the Philippians. Every time Paul remembers this church, prays for this church, he thanks God for them. Constantly.

So how often should we give thanks to God for those people who attend this church? Constantly, consistently. Following Paul’s example, every time we think of the church, thankfulness should flood our conscience.

This pattern of Paul thanks for the Philippians fits the overall framework with what the Bible teaches about thankfulness. We should thank God constantly for our brothers and sisters in Christ because thankfulness is an essential part of Christianity. This thankfulness flows from the idea that salvation is all by grace. We are thankful because we have been saved by grace. It is not our own efforts that we are right with God. On the contrary, we are saved by grace alone. It is only by God’s unmerited kindness that Christians are saved. And as we are saved, we learn from Scripture that every blessing we receive in life is of grace. We deserve nothing good that we possess or experience. The entire Christian life is one of grace. Because of this, Christians are called to express thankfulness.

In fact, not thanking the God as Scripture defines him is a hallmark of ungodliness. Turn to Rom 1:21. The passage reads,

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

The context here is the Paul discusses God’s revelation through the created order and the human rejection of that revelation. God has revealed himself clearly through that which has been made. Rather than accept this revelation, mankind has rejected it. As a result of mankind’s rejection,

God has judged mankind. Verse 21 specifies this for us. Mankind “did not honor God or give thanks to God.” As a result, God made them “futile in their thinking and darkened their hearts.” He judged them. Why? Because they didn’t thank God. Thankless to God is a grave sin.

Thanklessness is marked by attitudes of bitterness, selfishness, pride, and backbiting. People who are not thankful complain, they focus upon their own grievances, they have a strong victim mentality. Every offense is against them. This attitude should not mark our church.

On the contrary, we should constantly thank God because all that we have is of grace. You should consistently, daily, hourly, by the minute, thank God for what he has done for you, for your brothers and sisters in Christ. All that we have is of grace. We are content to be thankful. To accept God’s blessings and providence.

With Joy

Along with consistent thankfulness, we should also thank God with a joyful spirit. Look at what Paul says right at the end of v. 4.

making my prayer with joy

How does Paul make his prayer? How does he express his thankfulness to God for them? With joy.

Joy is opposed to complaining, to bitterness, to victimhood. To be joyful is to be content, happy, and satisfied. It is one of the fruits of the Spirit. It is to be satisfied in Christ and in his plan for your life. One commentator defines it as

It is more than an emotion: it is an overarching mindset that allows him look beyond his personal situation to the sovereign Lord who stands above all events and ultimately has control over them.

Christians are joyful people. They are marked by joy.

What’s important for us to notice about Paul’s reference to joy here is the context in which Paul expresses that joy. As we will learn as we go through the book, Paul wrote Philippians while he was imprisoned. Look at 1:13. It reads,

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Paul is not thanking God for the Philippians while drinking pinacولاتos and sunbathing on the beach. He is not in a good place. He has every excuse to be bitter, to complain, to not be

thankful, to pity himself. Is that his response? No. Instead, he offers thanks to God in a joyful spirit.

In our prayer life, we need to fight to consistently give God thanks with a joyful spirit. It's hard to give thanks many times. It's also hard to give it with joy. Many of you are going through personal struggles when it's hard to give thanks, and especially hard to give thanks with a joyful spirit. As your pastor, let me encourage you to pray for this gift of God. Pray that God would produce in you a thankful heart that is accompanied by a joyful spirit. It is in suffering in which God the Father transforms us into the image of Christ through the power of the Spirit. If you're not thankful, if you don't have joy, if the trials of life are too great right now, ask God for a thankful heart. Thank him that you can ask him for a thankful heart. Ask him to impart to you joy in the trial. As we learn from Paul, he can and does do this. Ask him.

Conclusion

The only fitting way to close a sermon like this is to conclude it with a prayer of thanks to our God. Please pray with me.

Our Father in heaven, we gratefully acknowledge that every perfect gift and every good thing we have received is from You, the Father of heavenly lights. We confess that we do not deserve any good thing at all from You, so we can only stand in humble gratitude that you have given us so precious a gift as eternal life in Christ. In the exercise of your sovereign will and in accord with your eternal good pleasure, you brought us forth out of spiritual death through Your Word. Human language does not contain words sufficiently express what you have done for us. Father, we sorrowfully acknowledge our stubborn sinfulness and the desperate wickedness that remains in our hearts and continually causes us to sin against that inexhaustible grace to which we owe everything. We confess that far too often we are not joyfully thankful. We confess that too often we complain and pity ourselves. We also confess that too often we don't love one another. Infinite, sovereign King, we ask that based upon what Christ has done for us on the cross, that you work in us the Spirit's ministry. Produce in us a joyful thankfulness that we express towards you for others. Lead us to love you and love one another. We offer you this thanksgiving and these requests. Accomplish in us, Father, the gracious work of redemption that Christ has won for us, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Communion

“The Lord's Supper is a memorial of Christ's death, the elements being symbolic of his body and blood. Every believer should partake of the Lord's Supper but only when he is in fellowship with the Lord. It shall be open to all believers, regardless of church affiliation.”