

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, Philippians: Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ,

Session 2: Greetings and Gratitude in the Gospel, Philippians 1:1-11

BiblicaleLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

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Welcome to session two of our course in Philippians, Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And so, in session two, we're going to begin our working through the passages in Philippians itself. So I've entitled this particular session, Greetings and Gratitude in the Gospel. So we will be looking at chapter one, verses one through 11, and we will work our way steadily through that.

So this opening section of Philippians, we can break it down into three different subsections. And the first one I've entitled, Greetings in the Gospel. So this will cover Philippians chapter one, verses one and two.

So let's go ahead and read that. I'll be reading out of the English Standard Version. Philippians one, beginning in 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. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. So as we look at this opening section here in Philippians one and two, I think it's always striking when you read a letter from Paul to look at how Paul describes himself.

He regularly introduces himself, and although there are similarities in the ways that he introduces himself in different letters, here I think he's very intentional when he opens by describing himself and Timothy with him as servants of Christ Jesus. And so I want to think a little bit about this term servant and its significance. One aspect of this title of servant is that it emphasizes Paul's common ground with fellow believers.

In other letters, Paul will introduce himself as an apostle, which immediately sets him apart in one sense from the rest of the believers. And yet here in Philippians, he begins by referring to himself and Timothy as servants. Now this term can be understood in a variety of different ways, and it's striking that Paul includes Timothy in this description.

He introduces himself and Timothy as servants of Christ Jesus. And I'm going to look at this from a couple different angles. The first angle that I want to look at is the Old Testament background of God raising up key individuals and giving them the title of his servant or servant of the Lord.

And so you think of individuals like Moses and Joshua and David. And of course, preeminently in the Old Testament, I would say the Isaianic servant of the Lord. And then

when you come to the New Testament, of course, you see that Jesus is described in terms borrowed from those different servant passages.

And so in Scripture, the term servant can be used as an honorary title for someone who holds a significant or important position and role within God's redemptive plan. And I think that is part of what he's saying here. And we should note, this is actually anticipating Philippians chapter 2, where he's going to talk about Christ taking on the form of a servant.

And so that is one aspect of the significance of this title of servant in Philippians 1 verse 1. The second aspect of this background, though, we can look at it more from the Greco-Roman background, and it emphasizes a person's lack of rights and their subservience to an individual. And so this is one of the challenges of translating this particular Greek term, *doulos*, because it can refer to a variety of different types of relationships between people. It can refer to, well, we would refer to in English as a slave, a person who is legally owned by another person.

And that would have been probably the most common association that Greeks and Romans hearing this language would have thought of first: that when you called yourself a *doulos*, you were referring to yourself as a slave, as someone who is owned by another person. And so, although I think Paul is using it in the sense previously of more of the honorific title, I don't want to gloss over or miss the reality that Paul uses this term also to communicate that the Lord Jesus Christ is his master, and that Paul and Timothy serve at his pleasure, that their priorities, their agenda, their itinerary, all of it is determined by their master, the Lord Jesus Christ. And so that brings out an element of Paul's total devotion to Jesus Christ as his Lord and master.

And then lastly, I think one of the reasons that this term ends up being used is it also paints a picture of leadership, of the type of leadership that Paul has in mind that should characterize the Church, that contrary to Greek and Roman concepts of leadership, which were using your position of authority and power for your own benefit and only benefiting others to the extent that it actually ends up benefiting you as well, Paul uses this term servant to reflect the kind of leadership that he and Timothy and others within the body of Christ are to exercise. And that will come out even more clearly in Philippians chapter 2, when we see the picture of Christ taking on the form of a servant and humbling himself and becoming obedient even to the point of death on a cross. And so even here in this opening line, lines that we might be tempted to just read past quickly because we want to get to the good stuff that's later in the letter, what we discover is, is that Paul often drops these little hints of themes and concepts and ideas that he's going to develop later in the letter, and he embeds them in these introductions to kind of give you a preview and a foretaste of what he's going to talk about later in the letter.

So it's wise for us to slow down and make sure we capture what's going on there. And the more that we read Philippians over and over again, we'll start to see how those points connect throughout the letter. So Paul and Timothy described themselves as servants of Christ Jesus.

One side note we should mention: yes, Timothy is mentioned in this opening line- Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus. And yet, Timothy had some role in the writing of this

letter, but Paul regularly uses first-person singular pronouns and says things like I and me, and really doesn't use we and us when he's writing to the Philippians. And so he is still the primary author, and Timothy played some role in also helping him to write to the Philippians.

Okay. So that's a little bit about how Paul introduces himself. What about the Philippians? What do we learn from the Philippians, even in this opening couple of verses? The key term that Paul uses to refer to them is saints, or it could also be translated as holy ones.

Now, when we hear that term saints, what we need to understand is that the primary sense of that term is that it refers to people who are set apart for God's special purposes. And part of the backdrop to this is, of course, the Old Testament. And even perhaps even more specifically, when you get to Exodus chapter 19, and God has brought Israel out of Egypt, and he's brought them to Sinai, where he's going to cut a covenant with them.

And before he actually makes the covenant, he refers to Israel as a holy nation, there to be set apart for his special purposes in the world. And that's the idea behind this term of saint. Now, we have to acknowledge that in our contemporary usage, sometimes people use that term saint to refer to someone who is perceived as especially holy or especially spiritual.

And that is not how Paul is using it here. Every person who is in Christ, every Christian, is a saint in this sense, that we are set apart for God's special purposes in the world. Now, we need to be careful that we don't so emphasize that we lose sight of the fact that the term saint also has moral and ethical dimensions.

In other words, yes, we are set apart, but part of that being set apart is having the moral character and life that reflects the purity of God himself. And ultimately, we see this perhaps most clearly in Leviticus chapter 11, verse 44, where God says to Israel that they are to be holy because he is holy. And that's not just an Old Testament thing.

Peter picks up on that language in 1 Peter 1 and reminds believers that that should be true of us as well, that we as God's people should reflect the purity of the God that we serve and worship. And so, yes, there is a sort of positional sense in which every Christian is set apart and is a saint. And yet, there is also a moral and ethical element that says we should be people who are holy in the sense of being morally pure and pursuing a life that reflects the blazing holiness of God himself.

And perhaps there's no clearer picture of this than what we see in Isaiah chapter 6, where Isaiah has this throne room vision of the Lord seated on his throne, and the angelic beings crying out, holy, holy, holy is the Lord. And when he is confronted with the pure, fiery, brilliant holiness of Yahweh sitting on his throne, Isaiah realizes instantly, I'm not worthy to be here. I'm a man of unclean lips.

I need cleansing. I cannot be in the presence of a holy God in my unholy state. And that's where God addresses that by cleansing Isaiah's lips with a coal from the fire and enabling Isaiah to hear what Yahweh has to say in terms of his commission.

But that's just a great passage that helps to reflect on the utter holiness of God and our unworthiness. And yet, part of the beauty of the gospel is that because we are in Christ, we are set apart as holy. And our sins have been cleansed by what Christ has done.

So Paul refers to the Philippians as saints, and yet he singles out a specific pair of individuals within the church. He refers specifically to overseers and deacons. And so we talked a little bit about who these people are and what their function was. And although scholars can disagree on this, I'm convinced that the term overseer is essentially synonymous with elder in the New Testament.

It has the idea of those who have authority in the church through shepherding and preaching. And so Paul specifically refers to them in this introduction. He also refers to a group of people called deacons.

And these are individuals in the church who have been set apart to serve the specific needs of people in the church. The origin story of that is probably best found in Acts chapter 6, verses 1 through 7, where you can look at that background. But the idea is these are people who are set apart to help meet the tangible needs of people within the church.

But then why mention them? Paul doesn't do this anywhere else in his letters. Why specifically in this letter to the church of Philippi does he mention overseers and deacons? I would suggest to you that the primary reason is probably twofold. One is in anticipation of addressing some of the unity issues later in the letter, and also in recognition of the fact that the gift that came from the Philippian church to Paul through Epaphroditus would have been something that the overseers and the deacons worked together in order to make it happen.

And so as part of him expressing gratitude, he specifically addresses them in his introduction and greets them as a group as a way of reflecting his gratitude for them and their role in giving this gift. Now after Paul identifies himself and identifies the recipients, he gives a version of his standard greeting of grace to you and peace. And so I want to think a little bit about these terms grace and peace.

When we think of grace, this is a term that ultimately I think we don't fully appreciate sometimes because we just use it all the time. It's so familiar to us; it's almost church speak, it's Christianese that we don't sometimes stop and think about what that term actually signifies. And the way Paul uses it here is as a summary term for all of God's work in Christ, what he's done for us as his people.

And the fact that we not only don't deserve it, but we've done everything to not deserve it. And yet shows the generous character of God that, despite the fact that we were rebels, God sent his son for us. Probably a little bit of a play on words with the standard Greek greeting here.

In Greek, the term for grace is charis, and the standard Greek greeting in Paul's day would have been chirein. And so somewhat related, so perhaps Paul is making a little twist on that. And then the second term is peace.

And again I think this is another summary term for the full establishment of God's purposes in the world. And this too I think was also an adaptation of a Jewish greeting because the standard Jewish greeting in Paul's day would have been shalom, peace. And it has more than just a sense of a ceasing of hostility; it has a sense of everything being put in its right order and functioning as God intended.

And what we have to appreciate about these two words is that there's an already-not-yet dynamic to this. That we have already experienced God's grace and his peace through Jesus Christ. And yet there is still more fullness of that to come.

And so we live within that already not yet. And so when Paul extends that greeting of grace and peace, it's a reminder of what God has already done, and it's a reminder of what God will bring to completion in the future. So that's the opening two verses of greetings in the gospel.

Now we're going to look at the next section, gratitude in the gospel. We will read from Philippians 1, verses 3 through 11. I thank my God in all my remembrance of you.

Always in every prayer of mine for you all, making my prayer with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. 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. 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.

For God is my witness how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment so that you may approve what is excellent and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God. Okay, so let's start by looking at Paul's prayer of gratitude here in verses 3 through 8. We're going to pull out several elements of this.

First, I want you to notice how repeatedly you heard the term all or every in that section. It's a way of stressing the unity of the Philippians that he's grateful for all of them and that in all his prayers he expresses that gratitude. So there's a heavy emphasis on the all and every in this particular prayer.

The second thing is the specific mention of the term partnership in verse 5. The ESV translates this term as partnership. Other translations could translate it as fellowship. If you've heard of the Greek term koinonia, that's the word in view here.

And part of the challenge of that term is the fact that it's difficult to consistently translate it with the English word in context. And so we'll see other occurrences of this term, and we'll point it out. But it's another way of stressing the unity that Paul experiences within the body with other believers.

Here it has a sense of a shared experience of God's grace in the gospel. Now I think he might have in particular in mind the financial gift that the Philippians gave, but I think it's broader

than that. I think he's grateful for their shared fellowship, their shared participation in the gospel, not just the fact that they gave a financial gift to assist him in his ministry.

I also want you to notice in verse 6, Paul's confidence that God will complete his work in believers. This should be a very encouraging verse. There's similar language that Paul uses in Galatians chapter 3 verse 3 about God completing his work.

But the idea is that once God began his work of making us more like Jesus Christ, he began that at our conversion, and he is going to complete that work on the day of Christ. That should be just a great encouragement and comfort to us because oftentimes with the ups and downs of our following the Lord, we can experience highs but also lows, and we can wonder, are we really ever going to be fully like Christ? And the New Testament makes it clear, yes, we will be glorified, and we will be made perfectly in the image of Christ himself. And then lastly, from this prayer of gratitude in verses 3 through 8, we see Paul's affection for the Philippians.

He talks about that in verses 7 and 8. He mentions how he has them in his heart and that he yearns for them with the affection of Christ Jesus. And I think that expression is capturing this idea that Paul's affection for them, for the Philippians, is actually Christ's affection for them being expressed through Paul. And so as a result of that, what we discover is that when we experience compassion from other people, when we experience the affections of other people, what that is is God's way of expressing his affection and compassion for us through those other individuals.

That's a remarkable gift that God gives us, that we can be the conduit, the channel of Christ's affection for other people. So in verses 3 through 8, we see this prayer of gratitude. Then in verses 9 through 11, there's a shift to talk about Paul's prayer of intercession.

What is it that Paul is praying for when it comes to the Philippians? And I've broken it down into a progression here. The first thing that we see is this: what's the central request? What is the main thing that Paul is praying for the Philippians? I think we can summarize that as love abounding in knowledge and discernment. So the love that Paul has in mind here is not a sort of empty emotion, this sort of groundless feeling.

It is rooted in knowledge and in discernment. And that discernment that he has in mind here is necessary for us to be able to know, not just right from wrong and good from bad and wise from foolish, but oftentimes it's necessary for us to have discernment to know what is good and what is better and what is best. And to know the difference between, well, this is permissible, but this is preferable.

That's often where discernment comes into play. And so that's the key request that Paul prays for the Philippians, that their love would abound in knowledge and discernment. And then based on that central request, there's a purpose statement.

What is the purpose of that love abounding? It's so that we can approve what is excellent or essential, that we can not just understand it intellectually, but that we can live it out in everyday tangible actions. That's followed by a result. This idea of progressive growth in Christ's likeness until the day of Christ, this idea of abounding in the fruit of righteousness,

this idea that our lives produce the fruit that comes from our right standing with God based on what Christ has done for us.

This idea of being pure and blameless also ties back into the concept of holiness mentioned earlier in the introduction. And then the final goal, the ultimate goal that Paul has in mind for this prayer is the glory and praise of God. That ultimately, his prayer for the Philippians- what he wants to see ultimately happen - is, in fact, God being praised and glorified.

And before we move on, I think it's helpful for us to pause here and just think about, is this the way that we pray in general? I think oftentimes the way that we pray can be so driven by specific circumstances in our lives, and that's certainly necessary. God wants us to bring our requests before him about health situations or job issues or whatever else it might be that is on our heart. He wants to hear that.

And yet, this is a model for us for how to pray for ourselves as well as how to pray for others. And so I think these introductory prayers that Paul has at the beginning of his letters can be a wonderful way to kind of jump-start our prayer life when we feel like it can get a little stagnant and we're just praying for the same requests over and over and over again. But immersing ourselves even in these three verses here, verses 9, 10, and 11, can jump-start the way that we pray for one another.

Okay, so that's walking through the passage. Now I want to land the plane here by giving us the big idea. Here is the big idea in the passage.

I would summarize it like this. The gospel unites us to display the glory of God. The gospel unites us to display the glory of God.

And we can break the passage down into two sections. In other words, how does the gospel unite us to display the glory of God? First, it unites us to display God's glory by determining our identity. We saw how Paul labored to explain who he is and who the Philippians are and how it's rooted in God and his character.

And then second, the gospel unites us to display God's glory by deepening our gratitude. And so we see in verses 3-8, gratitude is rooted in our mutual participation in the gospel. And then lastly, verses 9-11, gratitude expresses itself in intercessory prayer.

And so that would be a way of summarizing the main thrust of what Paul is trying to communicate here in these opening verses. Lastly, I want to conclude with some thoughts on application. And before I walk through this, I do want to highlight that my approach to application can be found in this book called *Asking the Right Questions: A Practical Guide to Understanding and Applying the Bible*.

And so if you want to get a little bit more depth on where I'm getting these ideas, how I develop them, you can find it in that particular book. So in every passage in terms of application, I'm going to ask four broad questions in terms of application. So what does God want me to think or understand? And there's a lot we could pull out here, but we'll start with all that we are, and all that we have is a gift from God.

That's a great way of fueling that gratitude to understand intellectually that that is true. Now, the second aspect of application is what I'll refer to as belief. So we need to take the truths in the passage and believe them to such an extent that they actually shape the way that we live.

So from this passage, we can say we need to believe that God determines my identity. That's who determines it. We're not on the hook to figure out who we are or create our own identity.

God is the one who determines our identity. Third, we want to ask, what does God want me to desire or feel? And one thing that I think we can pull from this passage is we want to long for a life marked by gratitude. I think oftentimes we underestimate how important gratitude really is.

One example of this is when you look at Romans chapter 1 and Paul is, in essence, retelling the fall of humanity. It's striking that one of the things that he mentions in there is that humanity has a bent towards a lack of gratitude for who God is and what he has done. And so I think we should long to be people marked by gratitude to God and gratitude towards others.

And then lastly, what is it we should do? And one thing, one tangible action point we could take from this passage is to be intentional about expressing gratitude to God and others. Maybe it's taking the time to write a note or an email or send a text to someone expressing gratitude for something that they have done for you. Maybe it's being intentional about beginning your prayer with gratitude to God for his attributes and for what he's done for us in the gospel.

But we should be people who are marked by gratitude. And that's where Paul ends this opening section. And so that brings us to the conclusion of our first passage in Philippians.

We'll pick up our study in the next session with a look at Philippians 1 verses 12 through 18.

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