

Philippians: Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ - Study Guide

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

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Abstract:

This source presents a teaching by **Dr. Matthew S. Harmon** regarding the opening verses of the biblical book of **Philippians**. The text highlights how the **Apostle Paul** establishes his **identity** and that of his readers by using titles like **servant** and **saint**, which emphasize both humility and a specialized purpose under God. **Harmon** explains that the greeting of **grace and peace** serves as a summary of the **gospel's transformative power** in a believer's life. A significant portion of the commentary focuses on **Paul's deep gratitude** and his prayers for the church to grow in **spiritual discernment** and **moral purity**. Ultimately, the teaching asserts that the **gospel creates unity** among believers, which serves to reflect the **glory of God** through their mutual affection and shared mission.

Briefing Document:

Philippians 1:1-11: Greetings and Gratitude in the Gospel

Executive Summary

This briefing analyzes Philippians 1:1–11, focusing on how the gospel establishes a unique identity for believers and fosters a community defined by gratitude and unity. Key insights include the multifaceted nature of "servant" leadership, the positional and ethical dimensions of "sainthood," and the "already-not-yet" dynamic of divine grace and peace. The text underscores that the gospel unites believers to display God's glory, a process initiated by God and guaranteed to reach completion.

I. Greetings in the Gospel (Verses 1–2)

The opening of the letter establishes the identity of the senders and the recipients, embedding themes that Paul develops later in the epistle.

The Identity of the Senders: "Servants"

Paul introduces himself and Timothy as "servants of Christ Jesus." The use of the Greek term *doulos* carries three primary layers of significance:

- **Old Testament Honorific:** The term echoes the status of key figures like Moses, Joshua, David, and the "Isaianic servant." In this context, it is an honorary title for those with significant roles in God's redemptive plan.
- **Greco-Roman Subservience:** From a cultural perspective, *doulos* refers to a slave—someone owned by a master. This emphasizes Paul's total devotion to Jesus Christ, where his agenda, priorities, and itinerary are determined solely by his Master.
- **A Model for Leadership:** Paul uses the term to redefine leadership. Contrary to Greco-Roman models that used authority for self-benefit, Christian leadership is characterized by humility and service to others, as exemplified by Christ in Philippians 2.

The Identity of the Recipients: "Saints"

Paul refers to the Philippian believers as "saints" (or "holy ones").

- **Definition:** Being a "saint" means being "set apart" for God's special purposes. This is rooted in Exodus 19, where Israel is called a "holy nation."
- **Positional vs. Ethical:** While every Christian is positionally a saint (set apart by God), there is a moral dimension. Believers are called to reflect the purity and "blazing holiness" of God, as seen in Leviticus 11:44 and Isaiah 6.

Specific Church Roles

Uniquely in this letter, Paul addresses "overseers and deacons":

- **Overseers:** Synonymous with "elders," these individuals hold authority through shepherding and preaching.
- **Deacons:** These are individuals set apart to meet the tangible needs of the church (modeled after Acts 6:1–7).
- **Purpose of Mention:** Paul likely singles them out to anticipate themes of unity and to acknowledge their role in organizing the financial gift sent to him via Epaphroditus.

The Apostolic Greeting: Grace and Peace

Paul adapts standard greetings to convey deep theological truths:

- **Grace (*Charis*):** A play on the Greek *chirein*, this summarizes God's generous work in Christ for undeserving rebels.
- **Peace (*Shalom*):** An adaptation of the Jewish greeting, signifying the establishment of God's order and the cessation of hostility.

- **The "Already-Not-Yet" Dynamic:** These terms represent realities believers have already experienced in Christ but will only realize in full at his return.

II. Gratitude in the Gospel (Verses 3–8)

Paul's prayer of gratitude highlights the depth of his relationship with the Philippian church and his confidence in their spiritual trajectory.

Key Elements of Gratitude

Element	Description
Unity	Paul repeatedly uses "all" and "every" to stress the unity of the congregation.
Partnership	The term <i>koinonia</i> (fellowship) refers to their shared participation in the gospel, including but not limited to their financial support.
Divine Completion	Verse 6 provides the assurance that God, who began the "good work" of sanctification at conversion, will bring it to completion on the "day of Jesus Christ."
Affections	Paul describes his yearning for the church with the "affection of Christ Jesus," suggesting that Christ's own compassion is channeled through Paul.

III. Intercession in the Gospel (Verses 9–11)

The shift from gratitude to intercession outlines a logical progression of spiritual growth.

1. **The Central Request:** Paul prays for love to abound in "knowledge and all discernment." This is not an empty emotion but a grounded love that distinguishes between right and wrong, and between what is "good" and "best."
2. **The Purpose:** This discernment allows believers to "approve what is excellent," translating intellectual understanding into tangible actions.
3. **The Result:** Progressive growth in Christ-likeness, described as being "pure and blameless" and filled with the "fruit of righteousness."
4. **The Final Goal:** The ultimate end of this spiritual development is the "glory and praise of God."

IV. The Big Idea: Synthesis and Application

The overarching theme of the passage is that **the gospel unites us to display the glory of God**. This is achieved by determining the believer's identity, deepening gratitude through mutual participation, and expressing that gratitude through intercessory prayer.

Framework for Application

To apply these truths, one must address four dimensions of the Christian life:

- **Understanding (Thinking):** Recognize that all we are and have is a gift from God.
- **Belief (Identity):** Accept that God, not the self, determines one's identity.
- **Desire (Feeling):** Long for a life marked by gratitude rather than the "bent towards a lack of gratitude" characteristic of fallen humanity.
- **Action (Doing):** Be intentional about expressing gratitude to God (through prayer focused on His attributes) and to others (through notes, emails, or verbal encouragement).

Study Guide:

Study Guide: Greetings and Gratitude in the Gospel (Philippians 1:1-11)

This study guide explores the opening of Paul's letter to the Philippians, focusing on the themes of identity, partnership, and the transformative power of the gospel. Based on the analysis by Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, the following sections review the linguistic, historical, and theological foundations of Philippians 1:1-11.

Review Quiz

1. How does the title "servant" reflect Paul's leadership philosophy in contrast to the Greco-Roman culture of his time? In the Greco-Roman world, leadership was defined by using authority and power for one's own benefit. Paul's use of "servant" (*doulos*) rejects this, modeling a leadership style based on humility and the benefit of others, eventually exemplified by Christ's own sacrifice.

2. What are the two primary backgrounds for the term *doulos* as used in Paul's introduction? The term carries an honorific Old Testament background associated with key figures like Moses and David who held significant roles in God's plan. Simultaneously, it reflects a Greco-Roman background emphasizing a lack of rights and total subservience to a master, signaling Paul's total devotion to Jesus Christ.

3. In what sense does Paul use the term "saints" to describe the believers in Philippi? Paul uses "saints" to describe those who are set apart for God's special purposes, drawing from the Old Testament concept of Israel as a "holy nation" at Sinai. This is a positional title for all Christians, rather than a designation for a select group of exceptionally spiritual individuals.

4. What is the moral and ethical dimension of being a "saint" according to the text? While the title is positional, it also demands that a believer's character reflect the purity of God. This ethical

pursuit is rooted in the command for God's people to be holy because He is holy, as seen in the cleansing of Isaiah and the instructions in Leviticus.

5. Why is it significant that Paul specifically mentions "overseers and deacons" in this greeting? This is a unique inclusion in Paul's letters, likely intended to acknowledge the leaders' role in organizing the financial gift sent to Paul via Epaphroditus. Additionally, mentioning them early prepares the congregation for Paul's later exhortations regarding unity within the church.

6. How does the text define the Greek concept of "grace" (*charis*) within Paul's greeting? Paul uses "grace" as a summary term for the entirety of God's work in Christ, emphasizing that it is a gift neither deserved nor earned. It may also be a theological "play on words" regarding the standard Greek greeting of the time, *chirein*.

7. What does the Jewish greeting of "peace" (*shalom*) signify in this context? Peace refers to the full establishment of God's purposes in the world and the restoration of right order. It signifies more than just an end to hostility; it represents the world functioning exactly as God intended it to.

8. What is meant by the "already-not-yet" dynamic of the gospel? This dynamic describes the tension of the Christian experience where believers have already received God's grace and peace through Christ, yet still await the final, future completion of these gifts. Paul's greetings serve as a reminder of both past reality and future hope.

9. Define the term *koinonia* as it relates to the relationship between Paul and the Philippians. Often translated as "partnership" or "fellowship," *koinonia* refers to a shared experience and participation in the gospel. In this passage, it encompasses both their mutual spiritual bond and the tangible financial support the Philippians provided for Paul's ministry.

10. What is the "central request" of Paul's intercessory prayer in verses 9–11? Paul prays that the believers' love would abound specifically in "knowledge and all discernment." This suggests that Christian love is not a groundless emotion, but one that requires the wisdom to distinguish what is excellent and essential in everyday life.

Essay Questions

- 1. The Theology of Identity:** Analyze how Paul establishes the identity of both the authors and the recipients in the first two verses. How do these titles (servant and saint) shape the way the congregation is expected to view themselves and their relationship to Christ?
- 2. Divine and Human Affection:** Discuss the concept that human affection can be a conduit for divine compassion. How does Paul's yearning for the Philippians "with the affection of Christ Jesus" illustrate this principle?
- 3. The Process of Sanctification:** Examine Philippians 1:6 and its relationship to verses 9–11. How does the assurance of God's "good work" being completed influence the practical "fruit of righteousness" Paul desires to see in the lives of the believers?

4. **Biblical Discernment:** Contrast the world's definition of love with Paul's request for love to abound in "knowledge and discernment." Why is discernment necessary for a life that is "pure and blameless"?
5. **The Ultimate Goal of the Gospel:** Using the "Big Idea" provided in the text, explain how the unity of the church and the personal growth of believers ultimately serve the purpose of displaying God's glory.

Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Charis (Grace)	A summary term for God's generous work through Christ; a gift given to those who do not deserve it.
Deacon	An individual set apart within the church to help meet the tangible and physical needs of the congregation.
Discernment	The ability to distinguish not just right from wrong, but to identify what is better or best among various choices.
Doulos	A Greek term for "servant" or "slave," signifying total devotion to a master and a lack of self-determined rights.
Fruit of Righteousness	The tangible actions and character traits produced in a believer's life as a result of their right standing with God.
Koinonia	Translated as "partnership" or "fellowship"; it refers to a shared participation and mutual investment in the gospel.
Overseer	A term synonymous with "elder" in the New Testament, referring to those with authority to shepherd and preach.
Saints	Literally "holy ones"; those set apart by God for His specific purposes in the world.
Shalom (Peace)	A state where everything is in its right order and functioning as God intended; the full establishment of God's purposes.
The Day of Christ	The future point of completion when God's work in believers is finalized and Christ returns.