

In many ways, today is a big day for the life of our Church. It is a big day because a massive transition has taken place as we have launched Mark and Lynn into the next chapter of their ministry. Although, for us, we are not at a beginning. God planted this church long before any of us were here, and we are merely turning to a new chapter of the ministry that has been laid out before us.

Last week, as I listened to Mark's last sermon, I sat in humble gratitude for the chance I've had to learn from Mark and will continue to have to be able to learn from Mark. But I think even more so; I was sitting in gratitude about what God has done in this church.

One of the great gifts of the past year for me, as I have been talking with people and preparing for this transition, has been the opportunity to talk to so many of you and hear the stories of how God has used CPC in your life. I have listened to stories of people who have been at CPC for decades and decades. I have talked with Jeff Ferrar and heard so much of what God had planted in the DNA of this church. I've listened to stories from the elders of God's faithfulness throughout difficult times and great times. God has been incredibly faithful to this church and has given us great confidence to stand firm in that faithfulness.

This morning I want to reflect, pastorally, on what this transition means to me, offering some of the many thoughts and prayers that have been rolling around in my heart the past few years. I also wanted to give you a glimpse into where we are going through the Fall. Today we are doing a one-off sermon in Philippians, but we will start a five-week series named Ekklesia: Becoming a Community of God next week.

In that series, we will refresh and look back at the Elders' vision set out in 2018. In all that we have been through in the past few years, we want to focus back on the vision of being a "transformed people - transforming the SF Peninsula." So for five weeks, we will look at the distinctive markers of being a community of God. And then after that, on October 10, we will start a ten-week series through the book of Galatians, which is all about what it means to be a community founded on the gospel alone. Today, I want to share something that has been on my heart as I have been praying and looking at this particular Sunday.

[Read Philippians 3:1-11](#)

A beautiful thing hovering beneath the surface of the New Testament scriptures is the burgeoning creation of the church. You see it most clearly in the book of Acts, of course. But all over the New Testament, at nearly every turn, we read letters written from a pastor to a church or church leaders. Nearly everything we read was written to a community of believers.

And so, throughout the New Testament, specifically in the writings of the Apostle Paul you see various pastoral prayers that come directly from the heart of "Pastor Paul" to whatever particular church he is writing to. As a pastor myself, I find these prayers give shape to a kind of pastoral imagination of how we are to live as pastors in relation to our church.

In this same spirit, this morning, I want to unpack a pastoral prayer from Paul to the church in Philippians because it is one that I have found myself coming back to in the past few months as I have prepared and thought of you all this morning

In this prayer, we will look at three things.

Pastoral gratitude

Pastoral partnership

Pastoral prayer

Pastoral Gratitude

"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (Phil. 1:3-5). At the foundation of the life of a Christian is a posture of gratitude. For Paul, his relationship with the Philippian church was a gift, something to be considered a joy.

In a world that is defined more often than not by hostilities toward others, the gift of the church is a gift of a community built around gratitude and grace. It is a special gift to consider others brothers and sisters in Christ. As a pastor and leadership team at CPC, we resonate with Paul's sentiment of gratitude for the unique relationship within the church. Church, I want you to know that I, too, pray for you. I pray for you often, and each time I pray, it is with humble gratitude for you and the honor it is for me to call you my church community. But notice the gratitude for Paul is always directed toward God. The source of the joy is located in God, who has established the church, not the church itself.

One of the central themes of Paul's message to the Philippian Church was joy. And even here, at the beginning of his letter, Paul is filled with joy. It is all the more stunning when we realize that Paul is writing about this joy from prison. I think that is because joy is the first and proper response to the gospel. It lies at the heart of the Christian experience, a fruit of the Spirit, and a reflection of one's encounter and walking with the Spirit. What can often be misunderstood is the way that joy transcends particular circumstances. It can transcend circumstances because it is based on the presence of God and his example of love.

It was Thomas Aquinas who said that "joy arises from and out of love." This is the basis of the pastoral relationship for Paul. One of joy that is

built out of the love that he has for the church. I love this text because you can almost feel Paul's heart for the church

The basis for this joy and gratitude

For Paul, this joy was also rooted in the partnership that had grown between the Philippians and Paul in the gospel. The community of the church is not simply a gathering of people who believe similar things. But instead, it is a community that is built on the gospel. The gospel is both its identity as well as its calling.

Over the next year, we will look a lot at what it means to be a community of God. And specifically, we will look at what it means to participate together for the gospel. This is the basis of his joy, the "partnership in the gospel."

Let's keep reading because we will see in the next verse that Paul's gratitude is rooted in a deeper confidence in the work of God. *"being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (v. 6)*. Notice, however, where the confidence is found. It is not in the church or in Paul's ability to pastor; the confidence falls squarely on God.

But what is the "good work" that Paul references? It is in reference to the work of salvation and the establishment of the church as a community of God. Again, this is the basis of the church. Its organizing and defining principle is that it is a community of God, established by the work of the gospel. For Paul, the church exists on a spectrum from the "good work" that "began" (past tense) and the "completion" of that "good work" on the day of Christ (future tense). And it is within this spectrum that we find ourselves at CPC.

Here's the kicker. One of the fundamental postures of the church is that it is a "future community." It is a community built on a future coming reality that has already begun in the present. And we live in the time between when Jesus has announced and brought the Kingdom of God (Jesus in each of the Gospels announces the arrival of the Kingdom of God at the beginning of his public ministry).

This is what God has begun in the world. The availability of the Kingdom of God is here, and it is available for us to organize our lives around. But Jesus also talks about a future reality of the Kingdom of God. Something that will one day be fully consummated on, what Paul calls "the day of Christ Jesus."

Theologians call this concept "Inaugurated Eschatology," or called the "now and not yet" Kingdom of God. This is the tension we live in as believers, actively living in the Kingdom of God while also awaiting its fullest expression and establishment in the future.

The invitation for the church in Philippi and the invitation for us is that we would continue to live into the realities of the gospel that is present in the past work of Jesus on the cross, the present availability of the Kingdom of God, and the future restorative work of all things by Jesus. This swells up in me and should you a posture of patient expectation. God has established this church and will continue to do so.

But this also means that we exist as exiles amongst rival kingdoms because we are in the time between the times. There is always a temptation toward assimilation and accommodation to the world around us. In succumbing to these temptations, we actually shift our allegiance from a community of the Kingdom of God to a community of a different kingdom. But Paul says, no! Hold to the work that God has started in you long ago.

These can be tricky lines to decipher when the community of faith has departed its identity as the community of God. And what is needed is the voice of Paul, the voice of other pastors and leaders, to draw our attention back to the core identity of who we are, navigating the world within our identity in the gospel.

Years ago, when I left the first church I ever did paid ministry at, one of my old students came up to me on my last night as the youth pastor, and she handed me a post-it note that said, "Kevin, you are my God-ologist." That is a pretty apt description of what it means to be a pastor. In many respects our role as leaders at CPC, is to walk alongside the community simply pointing out where God is present. To direct you to where the Kingdom of God is available and where we can live more in line with it.

As pastors, we do this not so much as experts, but we do as designated guides. Those struggling alongside one another. One of the things I have heard often at elder meetings is that Christian leadership is merely "one beggar, telling another beggar where to find bread." I like that picture of leadership because it resonates so well with what it means to pastor. Pastors are members of a community that has found bread, and as beggars, we return to our community of beggars and point out where to find the bread.

So Paul's letter opens with a deep sense of pastoral gratitude for his church. Second, he moves on to discuss pastoral partnership. Look down at verses 7-8.

Pastoral Partnership

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. vv. 7-8

As we can see from the text, in this particular moment, Paul also mentions that the church in Philippi has supported him during his imprisonment. They helped sustain Paul through various gifts they sent him. And Paul is affirming that they too will experience similar struggles in the days ahead of them as a community.

To place one's allegiance in Jesus as Lord is to assert a level of separation from the other "lords" in our world that demand allegiance. In Paul's day, this primarily meant denouncing the Roman way of life with all of its religions. For us, this means the rejection of political and ideological allegiances. The rejection of our self-sufficiency. The rejection of individualism. Our ultimate allegiance is found in Jesus alone, as the organizing principle of our lives.

Next week, we will start a vision series on the “Church” and what it means to be an alternative community within the world around us. And here Paul is saying to continue to put your allegiance in Jesus. For it is this allegiance that will carry on, but it will also bring about challenging times.

The verb used here for “to feel” is a prominent theme throughout the letter from Paul. It has to do with having or developing a certain mindset or disposition. It is more about having you in my mind than a flippant emotional feeling. Particularly in light of verse 8, it is a verb used to conjure up images of friendship and a deeper sense of relationship. Almost a sense of “I am with you.”

The “witness” that Paul feels toward this church is his connection to the same grace of God that is established in them as was in him. This is one of the foundations of Paul’s thanksgiving for the church that “all of you share in God’s grace with me.” Paul recognizes that the foundation of the church, which includes him and every congregant in Philippi, is rooted in the grace of God. This is the mutual relationship that is established between the church and the pastor.

Pastors are not perfect; they are not some sort of elite who have obtained a moral perfection level. This can be hard at times for members of a church to recognize and accept. But it is important to understand. As leaders at CPC, we do not promise perfection because we cannot offer that, but we promise a desire to seek the grace of God in all moments. In another letter to his protégé Timothy, Paul wrote, “*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst*” (1 Tim. 1:15).

Pastors are not those who have things figured out; pastors are simply those designated within the community to lead in service and to seek grace. As you will learn, my life is constructed solely on the grace of God. It is grace upon grace. And I strive to honestly confess before you all that I am the biggest sinner in the room.

On the Sunday we announced our transition, I mentioned a quote by Eugene Peterson from his book on Pastoral Leadership, *Working the Angles*, that has resonated deeply with me. He writes,

The biblical fact is that there are no successful churches. There are, instead, communities of sinners gathered before God week after week in towns and villages all over the world. The Holy Spirit gathers them and does his work in them. In these communities of sinners, one of the sinners is called a pastor and given a designated responsibility in the community.

This is who we are as leaders, and this is who I am as your pastor. I am simply one of the sinners that comprise the church of sinners we call CPC. And we are given a specific responsibility, nothing more and nothing less.

For Paul, the establishment of the relationship between pastor and congregation is built entirely on the gospel, both the experience of and the living into the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. Paul closes this section in verse 8 with a beautiful phrase, “*God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.*” It is an uninhibited display of affection.

His love of Christ has spilled over into his love for Christ’s people. All of his theology and all of his spirituality have culminated into a love for the people of God.

This is the gift of pastoral ministry that we hope to bring, the affection of Christ Jesus to you all. We love you as a parent loves a child. Not meaning a pedantic or demeaning way, but in a way, that means we want to see you thrive. Or, as we say around here often, “We want to make and mature more disciples of Jesus.” This love and affection for the collection of people we call church is the space we seek to love you well. Even in the midst of our failures and our need for grace, we seek to grow in our love for you, Jesus’ church

So Paul has now demonstrated his pastoral gratitude, his pastoral partnership, and finally, he closes this opening with a pastoral prayer or petition for the church.

Pastoral Prayer

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may 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. vv. 9-11

A shift now takes place from reflecting on the relationship between Paul and the church toward Paul leading the church. The prayer is a single sentence that spans all three verses here, in which the prayer is straightforward in its meaning for four things: that their love may abound more and more, that knowledge and moral insight would also abound, discernment for that of utmost importance so that they may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ’s return.

The first is that their love may abound more and more. Whenever we come across the word love, it can be hard for us to determine the depth of the command because it has been so diluted of its meaning in our culture. It is such a common word that we have to work hard to move beyond its surface meaning. How we define the word love is really important because it shapes how we live out the command to love. Corinthians 13 is a good place for this, “Love is patient, love is kind.” 1 John 4 is another great place, “God is love.”

We see in the biblical imagination about love that it is representative of and points to the character and nature of God as its definitive element of love. Love is not affection; it is not emotion. It may indeed have emotions that come along with it, but it is not fundamentally emotion. According to Thomas Aquinas, love is to “will the good of the other.” I think that is a pretty good definition of what the character of God is like. It is to will the good of the others. And the reason God is love is because God is the source of all that is good. He knows, far better than me or you, what the “good” for us and the others truly is. The words “abounding more and more” indicates Paul’s prayer is not because they lack love, but that they would continue in their love.

Paul goes on further, praying that their love would abound more and more “in knowledge and depth of insight.” The word used for

knowledge here is epignosis, which carries a connotation of “intimate relational knowledge.” It is speaking beyond mere head knowledge and into the more experiential knowledge. “Depth of insight” is indicative of moral knowledge. It is the moral insight that allows one to discern ethical decisions.

The second aspect of Paul’s prayer is the why of the prayer, “*so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ*” (v. 10). Some things are important for the Christian, and others things are not. This is really challenging for us to understand because we live in a world that assumes we should have an opinion on everything. Bombarded by story after story, issue after issue, we are to exercise discernment on what is best. Discernment is one of the virtues that must be strengthened for the church. This would be a good thing to pray for as a church, for discernment on what is best—that our love would abound with knowledge, moral insight, and discernment.

Ultimately, the purpose of this prayer is that we may be found pure and blameless on the day of Christ. The word for pure implies purity of motive. Thus, it is not perfection but intention that Paul is praying for. He is seeking that the church becomes the kind of people for which goodness is the natural disposition. Then in all situations, Christlikeness will permeate their thinking.

In the final verse, we see the ultimate purpose of the pastoral prayer, that they would be “filled with the fruit of righteousness.” Later, in chapter 3 of Philippians (3:9-11), Paul will talk about:

The righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ - yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

For Paul, the “fruit of righteousness” is to embody the cruciform life of Jesus. The self-emptying, gracious love of God. This is the fruit that comes from the source of Jesus’ righteousness into us.

And all of this is for the output of the glory and praise of God. This is not just the ultimate goal of this prayer but is ultimately the goal of all things—the glory and praise of God. Everything is to this single end that God will receive glory through the work he has done and is doing.

Church, this is our ultimate end, that CPC would be a place that embodies and lives in such a way as to the glory of God. It is the focus of our discipleship, ministry, worship, study, everything.

So there is Paul’s prayer and my prayer for you. I hope that as we stand at a fork in the road, we continue in the work that God has started in us long ago. I speak on behalf of the leadership of CPC when I say that we are so grateful for God calling you our church.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

I want to close slightly differently than we typically do. I want to share an adaptation of this letter I wrote in the same fashion to you all. I am not assuming myself to be Paul, nor am I presuming to re-write scripture. I desire to merely echo Paul’s words to you. So here is my prayer for you all as we embark on the next chapter of life together at CPC.

Dear Church,

Dear Church, to CPC, God’s holy community founded, rooted, and established in Christ Jesus in the Bay Area. Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord, our Shepherd, our Senior Pastor Jesus Christ

Each time I remember you in prayer, I thank God for you because you have become so dear to us, an extension of family. Daily, I am reminded of the gift that ministry is, and although the years ahead pose challenges we cannot yet foresee, it is pure joy to labor alongside you all. Because together, we partner in living according to and proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom of God to a world that is looking for answers.

Be confident, church, because God started a work in us long ago and has faithfully been with us all along. And never fret; God will carry this work to its fullest goal until Jesus returns. Our affection is proved true in every circumstance because we all share in the immense grace that God has lavished on us. Thank you, Lord, for the undeserved grace of renewal

And my prayer for you is that we may love well, more and more in the image and likeness of Christ. I pray for our wisdom and discernment to grow in times of moral confusion. I pray we learn discernment and attentiveness to the leading of the Spirit. In this, I pray our motives will be of a pure heart and that we can be found blameless in Christ. All of this as an outpouring of the fruit of a life lived in the gift of Jesus’ righteousness. And may ultimately, all we do be for the glory of our good God.

Amen.

© 2021 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1460FC