

KEEPING YOUR JOY - The Heartfelt Theology of an Isolated Prisoner #3

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LOVING OTHERS WITH THE AFFECTION OF CHRIST JESUS

Philippians 1:7-8 - "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. [8] For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus."

"It is right for me to feel this way about you all..." (7). The *way* Paul feels about them all is spelled out in verses we've already studied. He *thanks God for them* (3). He *prays for them with joy in his heart* (4). And he *holds high confidence for their future in Christ Jesus* (6).

Now, in today's text, Paul tells them it is *"right" for him to feel this way about them* (7). That's the phrase that sets up the interpretation of our text. If Paul's feelings for these people just flowed from the *friendship* he had for them we would say his affection for them was *"natural."* We probably wouldn't use the word *"right"* or *"proper."* We wouldn't use *ethical, duty* type words - to define the naturally warm feelings of affection.

Perhaps we can get at Paul's point by considering its opposite. We all know what it's like to *not* feel about people the way we know is *right*. We know what it's like to feel *anger* when we're supposed to be *patient*, or to wrestle with *hatred* when we're supposed to *love*. We know, even if we try to kid ourselves and bluff our own conscience, when what we're feeling toward someone isn't *right*.

So *how do we keep these things "right?"* How can we keep our hearts *right* in our affection and care for fellow Christians. I see the subject of *Christian unity* in our text. I see Paul telling us how to hold others *rightly* in our hearts - in a way that *fits* with our devotion to Jesus Christ as Lord and *propels and authenticates* the spread of the gospel in this world. Jesus said the world would know we were His disciples by our *love* for each other. When this isn't *right* in our hearts we make the gospel of the cross a massive lie in terms of its reach into lost hearts.

I see three roots to a *right* heart of Christian love and unity in this text:

First, true unity comes from a shared sacrifice in a consuming task - "....for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel" (7b).

Second, true unity comes from understanding what it means to be recipients of grace - "....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...."(7a).

And ***third, true Christian unity comes from a realistic view of what it means to expose our heart's motives***

and affections to an all-knowing, all-powerful Judge - “For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus” (8).

Let’s prayerfully work through these three points together:

1) **TRUE CHRISTIAN UNITY COMES FROM A SHARED SACRIFICE IN A CONSUMING TASK**

Philippians 1:7b - “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.**”

“It is right for me to feel this way about you all....” (7a). How does Paul **feel** about them? He **thanks God** whenever he thinks of them (3). He **prays for them with joy** (4). He **holds them in his heart** (7). He **yearns for them with the affection of Christ** (8).

That’s **how** Paul feels in his heart for these people. There’s nothing cold or detached or formal in these words. This is a loving relationship. The real question is **why** does Paul feel this way? What has **caused** this kind of unity? He tells us in **verse 7** - “....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.”

This is profound. The love Paul has for these people didn’t come from doughnuts, car rallies, movie nights, or home fellowship groups. He says they were partakers with him of God’s grace, not just in salvation, but particularly by sharing in **imprisonment** and **defending and confirming the gospel**.

In other words, because they were following Jesus in the same Roman environment Paul was in, they were experiencing the same persecution, paying the same price, and facing the same challenges Paul was facing. They were **persevering** through the **same difficulties** for the **very same reason**. They loved the gospel just like Paul did. And they were paying the price of that love together.

These verses speak to a particular problem in the church. **Loneliness**. This is a felt need in our busy, impersonal world. People leave church because they didn’t have any friends. And churches try everything imaginable to link people together against loneliness.

But maybe we need to probe deeper than we are. What if the cure for loneliness isn’t what we think it is. I mean, all of our **social activities** don’t seem to solve the problem. This is what Paul is getting at in our text.

You can't create Christian unity just by putting Christians together in the same room. If you put people together with totally different interests and goals they will **bore** each other. If you put people together with the **same** goals, but don't make the extending the gospel the central motive, they will have **selfish** goals and **compete** with each other. We will only build **shallow relationships** if we build them around **small activities and goals**.

Look at the kind of unity Paul describes in verse 7 - **"....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."**

That's it. People will **pray** for each other, **care** for each other, and **long** for each other when they **sacrifice their lives for the same Gospel** - when they are **plunged together deeply into this shared divine assignment**. And they become **especially** united when they **sacrifice** and **suffer** together for that same Gospel.

We **know** this is what Paul had in mind by the way he describes **his** situation and **theirs** in more detail in 1:29-30 - **"For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, [30] engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have."**

Underscore that word **"engaged"**(30). He's not talking about the things they **attend**. He's talking about the things in which they're **engaged**. They were **"engaged in the same conflict"** that engaged Paul. They could have **avoided** the conflict by being less outwardly attached to Christ as Lord, but they chose to **engage** themselves in it.

And because they were all **engaged** in the conflict of defending and spreading the gospel they didn't have time to give their hearts to their own petty goals. In other words, the things that normally **divide** people were lost sight of because none of them was living for himself or herself anyway. Remember it, you can't create unity without emphasizing the Lordship of Jesus and the Great Commission. You can create **surface friendship** without these things, true enough. But you can never create true **Christian unity**.

The more any church devotes itself merely to people's likes and tastes the more people will divide and squabble over whose petty tastes will rule the pack. The more people forget about their likes and dislikes and concentrate on sacrificing themselves for the gospel, the more they will come to love Jesus **and each other** at the same time.

2) **UNITY GROWS WHERE PEOPLE COME TO UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF LIVING CORPORATELY AS CO-PARTAKERS OF GOD'S GRACE IN CHRIST JESUS**

Philippians 1:7 - "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....**"

Then he says the same thing in different words in **verse 8** - "For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all **with the affection of Christ Jesus.**"

I listed this point second even though it comes first in the order of our text. Here's the point I wanted to make. When you partner with people in the gospel you realize they aren't perfect. They let you down. You can usually see all the places where they don't resemble Jesus at all. They're trying, all right - just like you're trying. But they can be such miserable, mean, self-centered flops at times.

What keeps Christian love alive at times like that? Where does true Christian unity come from with unchrist-like people? When Paul says he **yearns** for these people "***with the affection of Christ Jesus,***" what does he mean? We're pretty certain Paul doesn't even **know** all the Christians in the church at Philippi. How can he say he yearns for them all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

I send letters to people all the time and have learned to find religious ways of signing off. "In Christ" is the tag I've used for years, hopefully not without forgetting its meaning. Paul said he "***longed for these people with the affection of Christ Jesus***"(8). There are two ideas bound up in those words:

- a) ***First, loving people with the affection of Christ Jesus isn't just a nice way of saying he really loves them a lot.*** It's not the **amount** of love Paul's describing, but the **kind**. He loves them the **same way** he's been loved by Jesus Christ.

In other words, he didn't **choose** these people because they were lovable. **Paul** chose to love these people just as **Jesus** chose to love Paul. It wasn't up to Paul to choose whom he would love and whom he would reject. We usually **select** our friends based on common interests, skills, education, age, humor, sense of charm, and so on.

But when you love people with the "***affection of Christ Jesus***" those distinctions are obliterated. You love them because **Jesus** loves them and it breaks Jesus' heart if you don't love them too. If you love people with the ***affection of Christ Jesus*** they don't have to **deserve** your love before you give it to them anymore than you **deserved** Jesus' love when He gave it to you on the cross.

All of which leads to the second reminder of what Paul meant in **verse 8** when he said he *“longed for these people with the affection of Christ Jesus.”*:

- b) **Second, Paul loves these people as fellow partakers of grace - Philippians 1:7 - “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....”**

Paul knew **he** was a receiver of free grace and he knew **they** were receivers of free grace. He knew **he** had been loved with the affection of Jesus Christ and he loved **them**, he said, with the affection of Jesus Christ. And the affection of Jesus Christ, whether to **him** or to **them** comes as **gracious** affection. It is always affection for the unlovable and the guilty and the annoying. And gracious affection builds and feeds Christian unity with unlovable people.

We have a tough time seeing people as **partakers with us of grace (7)**. We know **we’re** saved and kept by grace. And we know **they’re** saved and kept by grace. But **linking us all together** in grace - **that’s** the tricky part. In fact, Jesus recognized our selective spiritual sight and told a classic story to enlighten our blind spots:

Matthew 18:23-35 - “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. [24] When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents (That’s very roughly about *five billion* Canadian dollars today. This is *more* wealth than Solomon had at the peak of his kingdom). [25] And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. [26] So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' [27] And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. [28] But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii (That’s about *fifty* Canadian dollars today), and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' [29] So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' [30] He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. [31] When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place.”

[32] “Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you

all that debt because you pleaded with me. [33] And **should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?** (FULL STOP - That's it - right there. That's what it means to see people as "**partakers with us of grace!**") [34] And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. [35] So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

God can **forgive** sin. The fact that the first debtor was forgiven a debt that would have taken, at average annual income, about two hundred thousand years to pay back (one talent was the equivalent of roughly 20 years wages - 10,000 X 20 = 200,000 years) shows God can even forgive **huge** debts instantly and freely.

What He can't forgive, apparently, is the blindness that forgets or refuses to see others in the body of Christ as "**partakers with us of grace.**"

3) **UNITY GROWS IN THE BODY OF CHRIST AS I REMEMBER MY ACCOUNTABILITY BEFORE GOD**

Philippians 1:8 - "**For God is my witness**, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus."

It is strange that Paul puts his words in the language of a formal oath when he's not in a court or under any judicial trial. Or perhaps he **is**. And perhaps he's **reminding** himself that he is. Every motive of his heart falls under the examination of his Judge.

True, Paul has a Redeemer, and what blessed comfort that is. But he never seems to forget that he also has a Judge. Everything counts. Everything is reviewed. Everything **matters**. Paul trains himself never to allow the freeness of grace to lull him into not **mind**ing God as his judge.

This can't be a **bad** way to think because other great New Testament apostles and pastors remind their flocks of the same truth. James, who spent considerable time with brother Jesus, told his congregation, I'm sure on many occasions, that they needed to live life carefully, with an ongoing consciousness of the Judge of all hearts - **James 5:9** - "**Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door.**"

What is the Judge doing at the door? God looks for how much "**affection**" you have for your fellow partakers of grace. The Judge looks to see how well you **remember** your five billion dollar debt when confronted by someone who owes you fifty. Remember, God isn't finished with your debtor yet. There may be those who hurt and annoy and wrong you. But they owe you far less than the debt you've been

forgiven by Jesus Christ. And God will complete His work, even in the heart of your worst enemy. You're going to love sharing eternity with them. So learn to love your fellow debtor right now.

So where does deep, joy-producing unity come from? We really need to know. ***First, unity comes from a deep, shared, sacrificial commitment to building the kingdom. Second, unity comes from appreciating we are all part of a body created and sustained by undeserved, divine grace. And third, unity comes from anticipating divine accountability and reward for our motives and actions in the body of Christ.***

Discover how freeing and how joyful it is to worship every Sunday with ***partakers, along with you***, of forgiving, restoring grace!