

Some of you that every Saturday I hand my sermon to my wife, Bonnie, for her comments. Yesterday, when she handed the sermon back to me, it was covered with comments- even up and down the margins! I said, "Bonnie, you just trashed my sermon!" "No I didn't," she replied. I just had some thoughts about the beginning... and the ending... and some of the stuff in the middle!" The most annoying part of all was that her comments were pretty helpful!

This morning we are beginning a five-week series on Paul's letter to the Philippians. I remember reading and being challenged by this little letter as a young person. It's my wife Bonnie's favorite book of the Bible. My daughter's favorite verse of Scripture is found in chapter 4. It's fairly easy to read and understand. And it contains practical insights about Christian living.

I've got a challenge for you. There are several steps. First, sometime this week, find your Bible. (That may be the hardest part for some of you!) Then open it and find the book of Philippians. It's in the New Testament. Then read the whole book. It's only four chapters long, so you can probably read it in about fifteen minutes. Read it each week for the next five weeks and see how God speaks to you.

Today we'll look at the beginning verses of the letter. In those verses we'll find insights as to how to have healthy, satisfying, close relationships

in the church, as well as how to find hope when we fail.

As I read the first eleven verses, try to get a sense of how Paul (the writer) feels about the people to whom he is writing.

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:

2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

3 I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. (Phil. 1:1-11)

As Paul begins this letter, his deep affection for the Philippians is very clear. *I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with*

joy in every one of my prayers for all of you... It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart...For God is my witness how I long for you... (Phil. 1:3,4,7,8)

Where did this strong, caring relationship come from? Did they spend many years consciously working to deepen their relationship? Did they go to therapy together? No! Their close relationship flowed from their experience of being partners in ministry! “...because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now,” (Phil. 1:5) as Paul puts it. Many churches today desire to have strong caring relationships among their members, but few churches actually succeed in doing so. Sometimes church members squabble and bicker with one another. Some may even refuse to speak to other members. They gossip about one another. They may be deeply divided over theology or finances or what color to paint the fellowship hall! Sometimes people even leave a church over seemingly minor issues. And some churches actually split apart. Relationships in many churches are not anything like Paul’s relationship with the Philippian church, even though most churches believe that strong, caring relationships are vital for good churches. So, why can’t people get along better in our churches?

When I was a teenager, I was part of a large youth group in Arlington, Virginia. I really liked the youth director. I loved the music and the retreats and the outings, but something was wrong with our group. There was an

awful lot of nitpicking and harshness in the way we kids related to each other. Somebody was always mad at someone else. And judging one another was a favorite pastime!

Then our youth director challenged us to reach out in a dramatic way to youth in nearby inner-city Washington, D.C. We caught his vision, took over a back room at the Gospel Mission downtown, cleaned it out, painted it, and opened it as a teen center in a very poor neighborhood. Then we gave up every Friday night to be there for the next couple years. And something unexpected happened. We not only had a successful ministry with those inner-city kids, but the quality of our interactions with each other changed significantly. Those strained relationships became less tense. There was far less in-fighting and bickering. People began to see the good in one another, rather than getting stuck on their weaknesses. We discovered what Paul discovered long ago. Churches need to be engaged in outreach, in mission, if they are to have healthy relationships with one another. Otherwise they become self-focused clubs and their energy turns inward and becomes destructive.

Paul was able to have a healthy, loving relationship with the Philippian church in part because they were partners in ministry together. Because of their *sharing in the gospel* as he calls it. The Greek word for sharing here is “koinonia,” the same Greek word usually translated fellowship! You see, fellowship is not just about church suppers and

receptions. Biblically, fellowship is about a partnership in mission. It's about supporting one another in doing the work that God has called us to do. The strongest church relationships I've ever encountered took place among people as they served together- in music ministry, on mission trips, teaching Vacation Bible School, doing youth or children's ministry, or in some kind of outreach to the community.

If you are a part of this church, but don't really *feel* part of things, take a look at the area of service. How are you engaged in the mission of this church? Are you involved in any tasks of ministry here? Have you found a way to use your gifts to serve the work of Jesus Christ in this place? If you haven't, that's where you need to start. Because, that's how lasting connections usually occur. If you're not sure where you can plug in, come talk with me and we'll see where your best fit is. Paul had a deep, caring relationship with the people of Philippi because of their partnership in ministry with him.

But Paul isn't finished. The second thing that Paul mentions in his prayer is found in verse 6. *I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.* (Phil. 1:6) Paul is confident that the Philippians will keep on growing in their Christian lives, that the God who began a good work in them will bring it to completion! And that should give every one of us hope. Some of us have long-time habits that we have almost given up hope of ever changing-

drinking too much, eating too much, or spending too much, for example. Or, how about those less-obvious character flaws- speaking negative things about others, being constantly plagued with a negative attitude toward life, being self-indulgent and giving little of our time or money to help others, failing to stand up for what is right, becoming easily angered, or discouraging our children by being overly-critical of them. Sometimes we give up hope that we can ever change these things, but Paul assures us that we can. God will continue his work in us through his Holy Spirit.

Raymond Saba grew up in Syria as a Muslim in a Christian neighborhood. Sadly, those Christian neighbors regularly harassed him. After his father was shot by political opponents, his family was stripped of all their rights, and he moved near a Palestinian refugee camp where Saba identified with the suffering of the Palestinian refugees. He became hardened as he saw the inhumane conditions there. He already hated Christians and now he hated Jews, and refused to believe in a God who could allow such suffering.

He came to America and was stunned one day when a friend said that he believed in Jesus. From that time on Raymond regularly mocked him and his Jesus. However, he later read the biography of Chuck Colson, a former aide to President Richard Nixon, who spent several years in prison for his part in the Watergate conspiracy. The story of Colson's conversion to Christ haunted him. He looked for a hidden agenda for

Colson's coming to faith, but he couldn't find one. And he found he was actually jealous of Colson's close relationship with God.

In desperation, he prayed, "God, if you really exist, I want to know you." He found himself lying face-down, crying on his carpet. He made a deal with God. "I'll follow you, but no Jews. No Jesus. No returning to the Middle East."

God began to work in his heart, showing him times in his life when God had intervened to protect him. And God began to deal with his "conditions" one by one. As he watched a video of an Israeli official deriding Arabs, he finally understood that the Jewish people were just as enslaved by their hatred of Arabs as Arabs were enslaved by their hatred of Jews. His former political beliefs were demolished.

While reading the gospel of John, he was astounded by what he learned about Jesus and drawn to him, so much so that he became a follower of Jesus, in spite of his childhood experience with so-called Christians in Syria. And in time, he even responded to Jesus' call to return to the Middle East to tell others the Good News of God's love for them.

God can change lives, any life, just like he changed the life of Raymond Saba. God can even change your life! As Paul notes here, real change is possible because it is God's work, not ours! And, as Paul understands, it is often a process. It was with Raymond Saba. And it usually is with us. Like Paul, we are confident that the One who began a

good work in us- as a child, as a teenager, as an adult- the one who began a good work in us will bring it to completion by the day of Christ's return. The work of God in us begins with grace- not with anything we have done. It is God's gift. The completion of that work is also dependent on God's grace. And that should give us hope! God can and will change you. Trust him and ask him to do it.

Finally, Paul gives us a quick set of criteria for measuring Christian maturity. In verses 9-11 he says, *And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless having produced a harvest of righteousness...*

He prays that love might overflow more and more in their lives. This love is not the mushy, touchy-feely kind of love. This is agape-love. A commitment to act in the best interest of the other person- that hard kind of love which puts the needs and hopes and dreams of another person ahead of our own. Love like that is a sign of Christian maturity.

In his opening prayer, Paul tells us the secret of deep, caring relationships in the church- partnership in service. He reminds us that God can really change us. And he shows us the sign of Christian maturity- real self-sacrificing love. There is lots more to come in this exciting little letter. Read it this week and see for yourself!