



Radio Ministry of Cornerstone Community Church

"A Letter of Encouragement"

Philippians 1:1-2

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It is difficult to overstress the value of an encouraging letter – a letter that affirms the value of a person who is made in the image of God, and a letter that affirms the work of God in the lives of other people. In his excellent book, *Practicing Affirmation*, Sam Crabtree writes this: "Even with the Bible's emphasis on humble self-denial and its warnings against pride, the Bible praises people to the glory of God. Ultimately, the chief end of God is not to glorify man as humanistic thought would have it, the chief end of man is to glorify God by enjoying him forever. Meanwhile the praising of people does not necessarily preclude the praising of God, if the people are commended ultimately for his glory. God is glorified in us when we affirm the work He has done and is doing in others."

A very important statement for us to think about this morning, because as Christians, we are too often light on commendation and heavy on criticism. We sometimes have the strange idea that if we praise a person for their work, or their character, and their love, then they will become proud. And we somehow think that it's not God's job to keep a person humble, but it's ours. So we tend to be light on praise and heavy on complaining, and criticism, and negativity.

The Apostle Paul didn't think that way. Instead, his mind's eye looked for that which was praiseworthy in people. Now mind you, there were times in which he needed to rebuke others and he was not afraid to do that, but his habit was to look for evidence of grace in the lives of others and to praise them for it.

For example, just in this little letter that we call "Philippians," we find the Apostle commending the recipients no less than seven times.

- He praises them for their partnership in the gospel.
- He praises them for God's work which was being accomplished in them.
- He praised them for being partakers of grace while he was in prison, in contrast to those who had abandoned him, and those who were enemies of Christ.
- He praises them for their love, and for their prayers, and for their progress and joy in the faith.
- He praises them for their kindness in meeting his financial needs and in supporting the work of the gospel. Their gift, he says, is a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice to God.
- And he praises them for the spiritual fruit that was increasing to their account because of their love and because of their generosity.

And so, this is a cheerful letter of encouragement and affirmation. There's a little rebuke when it's needed, but for the most part, it is a letter of great encouragement and affirmation of what the Lord is doing in their lives.

Paul wrote this letter from prison. He was imprisoned in Rome. It was about 60 to 62 AD. The recipients of the letter are believers in the Greek city where the church was located – the city of Philippi. The earliest name of this city was Fountain City, but in 356 BC, Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, changed the name. He seized the city and he named it, Belonging to Phillip, or Philippi.

During the Roman period, this was the place where Marc Antony and Octavius defeated Brutus and Cassius in 42 BC. The city was a fertile area near gold mines, and it eventually became a Roman colony. And so the citizens of Philippi were Roman citizens.

The theme of the book is “rejoicing in the Lord.” The key verse is Chapter 4 and verse 4: “rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice!” The key words in the book are joy, and rejoice, and rejoicing. Fifteen times the Apostle uses these words to indicate that he is convinced that we must discipline ourselves to focus on Christ, who is the source of our joy. We are to be joyful! Rejoice always! It's a command from the Lord; it's not determined by our circumstances.

F.B. Meyer writes in his commentary, “It is remarkable to notice also the number of times in which he mentions the Savior's name. It occurs 41 times in this epistle. That is on average every two or three verses. But this is characteristic of the Apostle. He was a slave of Jesus Christ. He viewed all saints as living with himself in Christ. His life was full of Christ. Christ was his life. To die was to depart to be with him. His rejoicing was in Christ, and steadfastness was only possible as he and his converts stood fast in the Lord.”

Therefore, in this letter, what we see is the power of Christ-centered joy. Biblical joy is rooted in Christ and in our relationship to him.

Now, the circumstances that led to the writing of this letter were that Epaphroditus, who was a member of the church in Philippi, had traveled to Rome to bring a financial gift to the imprisoned Apostle. And now he is sending him back to Philippi with a thank-you note, and this is the thank you note. A beautiful letter.

The first two verses neatly break into three parts. Let's look at it together. First, we see the servants.

“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.” (Phil. 1:1-2)

He begins by introducing himself and Timothy as servants. “Paul and Timothy, servants.” It's a Greek word for “slave.” It emphasizes the Apostle's recognition that now he belongs to God. Remember from last Sunday that we talked about redemption, what redemption means. That we are redeemed by God. We are bought out of the slave-market of sin by the blood of Christ, and we become God's possession. That's what's in Paul's mind as he uses this word. But the

word also means “servant,” and refers to willing, humble service. And it's interesting that Paul uses this word here, because in some of his other letters, he introduces himself as an apostle. And the reason he doesn't need to do that here is because his authority is not being attacked or questioned as it was in other areas, perhaps when he wrote 2 Corinthians. Most of all, that letter is about the attacks that he was under as an apostle. But he doesn't have to talk about that. He introduces himself and Timothy as servants. He's addressing them as friends, as partners in the gospel. And also because servanthood, we will see, will become somewhat of a secondary theme in this book. As Jesus Christ in Chapter 2 will be exalted as being THE servant of all time, who humbled himself, took upon himself human flesh to be our Savior.

Well, who is this Paul? Well, before Paul was an apostle, he was Saul, a persecutor of the church. And Acts chapter 9 describes his conversion. As the gospel was spreading, so also the opponents to the gospel were increasing. And Saul was one of them. He dragged Christians before the courts. He was seeking to have them put to death, but God intervened. And Jesus appeared to him in a vision, and in a bright light that blinded him. And he said, “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*”

And Jesus asked the question that way because anytime the church is persecuted, anytime a true believer who has the true gospel is persecuted, ultimately *Christ* is being persecuted. “Why are you persecuting *me*?” It was on that road, on that day, in which Saul was converted to Christ. He was gloriously saved and later, then, became the Apostle Paul. It's about 15 years after his conversion now, that he is writing this letter from prison.

But then there's Timothy. Not only Paul, but Timothy. We're introduced to Timothy in Acts chapter 16, where we learn that he was converted on Paul's first missionary journey. If you remember 1 Timothy, it talks about how his mother and his grandmother had been used by God to instill within him an understanding of the Scriptures, and so he knew the Old Testament. He knew the promise of the Messiah, and so when he heard the message that Jesus Christ *is* that Promised One, he turned to Christ, and he was saved.

And so now Paul is in the region of Galatia; it's after the Jerusalem Council. He picks up Timothy to take him along on the next missionary journey, according to 2 Timothy 1:5. It was the faith of his mother and grandmother who specifically, it says in 2 Timothy 3:15, taught him the sacred writings. “Sacred writings” refers to the Old Testament. So here's a young man who grows up in a spiritually-mixed home. His mother is a believer. The Scripture simply says his father was a Greek. So his mother is a Jewish believer in Christ, and he is taught the Scriptures. And God uses that to prepare his heart for the gospel.

Timothy had an important ministry to Paul. He went with Paul on his second missionary journey. He often visited him while he was in prison in Rome. In fact, turn to Chapter 2 to look at these wonderful words that Paul says of Timothy, who was faithful and loyal. Chapter 2, verse 19, “I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. For I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father, he has served with me in the gospel. I hope therefore to send him, just as

soon as I see how it will go with me. And I trust in the Lord that shortly I, myself, will come also.” What words of commendation for this young man, Timothy! Paul says, I have *no one like him!* I have no one like him who is genuinely concerned for *you*, believers in Philippi. All these others seek their *own* interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But Timothy wasn't that way. Timothy was faithful, Timothy was loyal, and he had proven worth, because he was faithful in serving with Paul in the gospel.

Later on, Timothy served as pastor of the church in Ephesus. So at the time of the writing of this letter, Timothy was visiting Paul in prison.

And so the letter begins, “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus.” This is one of six letters in which Timothy is mentioned along with Paul in the greeting, probably because Timothy, when he was visiting with him, and Paul was writing, Timothy probably was the secretary. He was probably the one actually writing the letter as Paul directed him to. They are servants, slaves of Christ, and servants of the church.

Now, the second point of passage is this: the saints. “*To all the saints in Christ Jesus are at Philippi.*” All the saints. The letter is written to all the believers in the church at Philippi.

So let's think about who he's talking about. First, he's talking about saints, which are “set apart ones” – that's what the word literally means. Set apart in Christ, which is *all* believers. The word, “saints,” comes from the word, *hagios*, which means “holy.” It means, “set apart,” or “called ones.” And you will find this to be one of the most interesting studies in the New Testament – to trace that little word, “saints,” throughout all the New Testament, and study what it means. It means that God, in His grace, has called out those who are to be saved through the gospel, and they are saints by position. We are holy ones *by position*, though we are not always holy in our *practice*. But the goal is that we would become holy in our practice also. But that's what God calls us. We are called-out ones. Romans 1:7, “*to all those in Rome were called by God and called to be saints.*” 1 Corinthians 1:2, “*to the Church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who and every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

I grew up in in a religion that considers certain people to be saints after they're dead. The Bible says we are saints when we are alive, and it's not just certain believers, but it is *all* believers. Every believer, biblically speaking, is a saint. That is, we are called out of the world. That's the point. We're called out of the world to be distinct, because we serve a distinct Savior. And so, the word for church in the New Testament is “*ekklesia*,” which means an assembly of called-out ones. They're called out of the world, they assemble together as the called-out ones of God, gloriously saved by his grace. And so the church is a community of saints, and that's what the Philippians were.

So, when Paul is writing this letter, he's writing to a community of believers, those who've been called out of the world to serve and love Jesus Christ. Turn with me to Acts 16. I want you to see the history of this church in Philippi, and how it was born. Acts chapter 16. Every local

church has a time of birth, a time when it is planted. And so we need to think about the planting of the church at Philippi.

We, here at Cornerstone, we know there was a time 26 years ago in which this church was planted. God placed a burden on the hearts of certain people and the church was planted. It was born. The same happened in Philippi. Acts 16:5 summarizes what I already told you about Timothy, so let's just pick it up in verse 6.

“And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.”

In other words, the Spirit of God was directing their mission trip: where they would go, where they would not go, where the door was open, where he closed the door. He was guiding them.

“So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.” (Acts 16:6-10)

You see the map on the wall behind me. You can see to your far left, that area of Macedonia, and the red arrow pointing to Philippi. Up until this point, all of the missionary work of the Apostle has been to the right, in the area of what is now known as Turkey. But now, in the second journey, God is calling them to take the gospel to Greece. And that's where Philippi is located, what we now call Greece.

And so we see here that they arrive there in Philippi, they set sail from Troas, it says in verse 11, and they arrived in Philippi,

“which is a leading city of the District of Macedonia, and a Roman colony. We remained in the city some days. And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together.” (Acts 16:12-13)

That's an interesting point, because if you see Paul's pattern in the book of Acts, when he goes to a new city, he goes to the synagogue. There was no synagogue in Philippi because there had to be ten Jewish men over 30 years old to form a synagogue. Apparently, Philippi is a small place with a small community, and did not have enough men for a synagogue, so he goes down to the river. And there he meets up with some women who are having a prayer meeting.

“One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshipper of God.” (v. 14)

She was a businesswoman, part of this gathering. And this is a beautiful phrase you should underline in your Bible: *“The Lord opened her heart.”* The Lord, the Holy Spirit, *“opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.”* So the Spirit awakened her mind and her

spiritual ears, to hear the gospel, and obviously, then, she believes, because it goes on to say *“And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.’ and she prevailed upon us.”*

So, it appears that the church in Philippi started in Lydia's house, as many churches do in church planting efforts. To wait for a public building to become available is not always an option. Many churches start in homes, as was the case here in Philippi. So Lydia, then, is the first convert.

“As we're going to the place of prayer,” it says in verse 16, *“we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and us, crying out, ‘These men are servants of the most high God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.’ And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, ‘I command you the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.’ And it came out that very hour.”* (Acts 16:16-18)

There was a demon possessed woman who knew the truth about why they were there, which is interesting, by the way. Satan and the demons know exactly who Jesus is. They just refuse to submit to him. The woman's owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, verse 19, *“they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. And when they brought them to the magistrates, they said, ‘These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city.”* In other words, they just sucked away our income, is really what the problem was. They were making money off this fortune-telling girl who was inhabited by a demon, and now she's useless to them.

“The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped.” Because he knew that was the sentence for a security guard losing his prisoners. *“But Paul cried with a loud voice, ‘Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.’ And the Jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ And they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, and your household.’ And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who are in his house.”* (Acts 16:19-32)

I don't know all of you who are here this morning, but perhaps one of you is like the Philippian jailer and you've come here this morning with that question in your mind, “What must I do to be

saved?" God's Word says, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Come to the Lord Jesus Christ. He alone is Lord and Savior.

"He took them," it says in verse 33, "the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.

"But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, 'Let those men go.' And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, 'The magistrates have sent to let you go. Therefore come out now and go in peace.' But Paul said to them, 'They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out.' The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens."

Remember, everyone who lives in this Roman colony is a Roman citizen.

"So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed." (Acts 16:33-40)

That's the birth of that church! That's how God planted that church in Philippi. Through directing the Apostle missionaries to a prayer meeting of women at the river, to them being thrown into prison, and a guard being saved. Isn't God amazing? His hand of providence over these matters is remarkable!

Go back to Philippians chapter 1. So, it's all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi that Paul is writing this letter to, along "with the overseers and deacons."

Overseers are elders. Church elders are referred to here, along with deacons. They are part of the body. Notice it says, "with the overseers and deacons." They are *with* all the saints. Church leaders are not above the flock, they are *among* the flock. Church elders are not merely board members, they're shepherds, they're overseers.

In fact, there are three different words in the New Testament that are used to refer to the same person, or the same office. There is the word, elder, which is the Greek word, *presbuteros*, which refers to him being a mature man and not a new believer. The emphasis is not merely upon his numerical age, but upon his spiritual maturity and his experience. There's the word, overseer, which is *episcopos* in the Greek. This refers to a guardian, a superintendent. The emphasis is on oversight and administration. And there is the word, pastor, *poimēn*, in the Greek, which means, shepherd. The emphasis here is upon his spiritual care and protection. You wrap all those words and their meanings together and you get the function of elders in the local church.

"To all the saints in Christ Jesus we're at Philippi, with the overseers and the Deacons."

So, there are elders mentioned, but then there's also deacons. It's *diakonos* in the Greek. It literally means, "servant," or "a minister," one who administrates to the care of the needy. Generally speaking, the word deacon simply means, "servant," so there is a sense in which every believer who serves the Lord is a deacon. There is that sense in a general sense. For example, Romans 16:1, it's used of a woman named Phoebe, who ministered to the church. Or Colossians 4:7, a man named Tychicus who was a beloved brother and faithful servant. Timothy, in 1 Timothy 4:6, he's told to be a good servant. This is the word that's used in Acts chapter 6 to refer to the seven servants who were chosen by the people to take care of the needs of the widows. And that example and Acts chapter 6 becomes a pattern that developed later in New Testament letters. We don't see it happening anywhere else in Acts, so it's hard to say whether or not that which took place in Acts 6 was the introduction of a new office. It seems better to understand that it was a pattern, or a prototype, that later, as churches grew and needed these kinds of leaders, that they were appointed.

The New Testament deacons are servants. They are people who gladly give of themselves to serve the church in order to free up the elders to concentrate on the shepherding ministry through the Word and prayer. Apparently, the need for deacons was decided by the elders as local churches were growing. And so it seems that that probably was the case.

So there are the servants, and then there are the saints, and then, finally, look at verse 2: the salutation. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Here you will notice in this verse, as you will in the other New Testament letters, that grace always comes before peace. It's never peace and grace, it's always grace and peace. And that's not accidental. If we really believe in the inspiration of the Scriptures by the Holy Spirit, in that every word is inspired, not just the idea, but *every word* is inspired by the Spirit of God, there's something to learn from this order. Grace to you and peace from God.

The reason grace always comes before peace is because that's the way it is in salvation, and that's the way it is in the Christian life, and that's the way it is in our relationships as believers. You will never know the peace of God without experiencing the grace of God. There is no peace found outside of Jesus Christ. Until you experience the grace of God, and come to God through faith in Jesus Christ, and become his child, there's no peace. Because peace flows out of grace. And there's no peace with each other without living in the realm of grace.

That's one of the things that we should continually be praying for here at our church, and one of the things I'm so thankful for here, is the atmosphere of love and grace that is in this place. Because that atmosphere of loving grace leads to peace in our relationships with one another. You lose the grace in the horizontal relationship among believers, you will lose the peace.

So, one of the ways that we fulfill the command to guard the unity of the church, which is what Ephesians 4 tells us to do, is to always be striving to live at peace with one another. Conflicts are part of life, right? So, what does the believer do when he senses conflict with another person? He takes the initiative to go to that person, and say, hey, I sense that there's something not right between us. Can we talk about that? Can we make that right?

Perhaps you are here today, and you are not in fellowship with another believer in this church. We say to you with the authority of the Word of God, God expects you to take some action. He expects you to go to that person, in love and grace, and say, brother or sister, I love you and I want to be in fellowship with you. Can we take care of the wall that's between us?

That's a byproduct of the gospel. The gospel is all about God reconciling sinners to himself. So, gospel-oriented living in the church means that we are always seeking to live at peace with one another. You won't have that peace without grace. So, there's grace that leads to peace.

Near the end of John's gospel, Jesus said this about peace: in John 20:21, "Peace be with you. As the father has sent me, even so I am sending you." Peace be with you. Jesus said, in the world you won't have peace. But in me you'll have peace, right?

So what do we gain from this little salutation? We gain the reality that the supply of grace and peace has not run out! Paul says grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. It's an ongoing supply of grace and peace from God the Father and from our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. What does that mean for you and me? It means there is still plenty of grace for you, and plenty of grace for me, and plenty of peace for you, and plenty of peace for me. It's an ongoing supply.

I connect that to Lamentations 3 which says that the mercies of God are new every morning. Great is thy faithfulness! Isn't that wonderful? Every morning we wake up with a fresh supply of mercy and grace and peace from God. We don't have to live off of yesterday's leftovers. We have a new supply every morning. It is God's bountiful grace and his peace.

Now these two verses introduce the Book of Philippians for us. They're not really filled with explicit application, but there is some application that is implicit there, and that's what I want to challenge you with this morning. I want you, this week, to write at least one letter of encouragement to a brother or sister who's been a blessing in your life. Note the evidence of grace that you see in their life. Note the way that God has used them to help you grow in your own spiritual life. And then ask God to make you the kind of believer who is heavy on praise and light on criticism. Heavy on commendation and light on complaining. That is so needed among us as believers – as individuals, and as a church. That's my challenge to you today. Apply the Scripture by following the Apostle's example.

Let's pray. Father we thank you so much for your grace and mercy toward us in Christ Jesus. We are sinners who are not worthy of salvation. We are worthy of condemnation. We are worthy to be sent away from your presence for all of eternity. And yet you, in your grace and love, have sent to us the Savior, your Son. Father I pray that we would always be seeking to glorify his name. And I pray, too, Father, that the grace and peace that we continue to receive from you is grace and peace that we pass on to one another. Father, I pray that you will teach us to be brothers and sisters who are always filled with a word of encouragement for others and that through that, Lord, you will use all of us for the building up of this body, this church, for the glory of your name. So, thank you, Father, for the book of Philippians, and thank you for even the

truth that's in two simple little introductory verses there for us to mine, to dig out, and apply to our lives. So bless us as we do so, in Christ's name, Amen.

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