

LOVE THAT OVERFLOWS STILL MORE AND MORE
Sermon for the 2nd Sunday in Advent, 2021
Philippians 1:2-11

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Second Reading from before, Philippians 1:2-11: **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. ⁴ Every time I pray for all of you I always make my prayer with joy, ⁵ because of your partnership in the Good News from the first day until now. ⁶ I am sure of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will carry it on to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus. ⁷ It is right for me to think like this about all of you, because, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the Good News, I have you in my heart, as people who are all partners in God's grace with me. ⁸ For God is my witness how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. ⁹ I also pray that your love will overflow still more and more in knowledge and in all insight, ¹⁰ that you may approve the things that are best, that you may be pure and without blame until the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness, which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Paul's letter to the Philippians followed the standard form of letter writing that was used in polite society of the apostle's day. When we write a letter, our letters conclude with the sender's name. In Paul's day, the sender mentioned his name *first*, then the name of the person or persons addressed. The address was followed by a greeting and then, especially in the apostle's letters, a thanksgiving and prayer. Then came the body of the letter and the conclusion. Included in the conclusion were personal greetings, a farewell, and, in the apostle's letters, a benediction.

Paul had addressed this letter to the Church at Philippi, greeting them with the familiar words “**grace**” and “**peace**.” These are the key spiritual gifts that believers have in Christ. Grace is God's unmerited favour, the love for the unlovable that had moved Him to bring about salvation in Christ for a world of sinners. Peace results from grace. It is the spiritual peace that fills believers' hearts through the certainty that their sins have been forgiven and that God is at peace with them through Christ. These two words, “**grace**” and “**peace**,” pronounced on believers as a greeting and a blessing, flood believers' hearts with the joy of salvation and call to mind all that God has done for them in Christ. No more suitable words could be chosen for a greeting to Christians.

As Paul wrote this letter, he was in prison awaiting trial in Rome. He had been charged with the high crime of preaching Jesus. Of that, there was no question that he is guilty. The only question is *what the sentence will be*. Will he, as in an earlier trial when he was charged with inciting a riot¹, be released? Or will he be condemned to death? Paul doesn't know, and he really doesn't care. He knows that his present incarceration is serving the Gospel. By it, his jailers, the soldiers in the imperial guard and the personal protectors of the Emperor, are coming to understand the Christian faith. Some of them are converting, and even those who don't are learning that it's not the dangerous, subversive cult that the enemies of the Church are saying it is. Beyond that, Paul knows that at his trial before the Emperor, he will have yet another opportunity to preach the Gospel to those in power. For Paul, that's all that matters and he was happy.

Not so happy are the people Paul is writing to, the members of the Christian Church at Philippi. They are very much concerned for the man they consider to be their spiritual

¹ Acts 19:23-41

father, the beloved evangelist who had first brought them the saving message of the Gospel some 15 years earlier. They are hoping and praying for Paul's release. Apparently, they had also sent a care package and some funds to help support Paul in his imprisonment. That was important because back in those days, prisoners had to provide their own food, clothes, and other amenities, which was hard to do when chained to a wall in a dungeon. Without people on the outside providing for you, you'd be in a bad way. So we hear in today's reading Paul expressing his gratitude for their help. He writes "**I thank my God every time I remember you... I have you in my heart, as people who are all partners in God's grace with me.**"

But the whole tone and theme of Paul's letter is really not what we would expect. Instead of being an impassioned plea for more aid and for them to join him in even more fervent prayer on his behalf, he turns it around. He's completely unconcerned for himself, confident that the Lord will do whatever is best. Paul's only concern is for the believers at Philippi. He writes how he is always in prayer *for them*. "**I am sure of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will carry it on to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.**" With a joyful heart, Paul thanks God that He has brought them to saving faith in Jesus and for keeping them in the same.

His main petition, however, is that they would continue to grow in their Christian faith and virtue. He writes, "**I also pray that your love will overflow *still more and more* in knowledge and in all insight,¹⁰ that you may approve the things that are best, that you may be pure and without blame until the day of Christ.**" That's a good prayer for the whole Church, including ours.

How so? Remember, Advent is chiefly a penitential season, a time of self-examination and repentance to prepare for the Saviour's coming. We hear this coming through loud and clear in today's First Reading from Malachi² and our Gospel³ reading. Malachi uses the imagery of purification by fire and of highly caustic launderers' soap to describe the kind of cleansing our souls need to prepare to receive the King. The indication is that it's a painful and labour-intensive process. So also John the Baptist, in his fiery preaching, scorches the ears of those who hear him. He doesn't just point out the sins of the smug and self-secure; *he rubs their noses in it.* He wants them to be terrified of God's wrath on account of their sins. He wants them to feel unclean, diseased, and horrible inside so that they will long for cleansing that only Christ can give. This is what we, too, are to experience. We are called to do a careful investigation of the sin that fills our hearts, and that overflows into all the evil we do and say. We are called to fear God's righteous anger, to hate the way we are, to repent sincerely, and to receive the forgiveness Christ has earned for us by His death on the cross.

But that is not an end in itself, and this is where we sometimes get hung up. Often, we focus all our attention on the negative, the "*what's wrong with me.*" We get caught up in the endless cycle of I sin; I repent; I get forgiven; I sin; I repent; I get forgiven. It's as if the sin in our lives *is a chronic disease we are trying to learn how to manage or cope with.* It can't be cured, so the best we can do is to minimise the symptoms and prevent major outbreaks. The goal of the Christian life then becomes to learn how to sin less or at least not as severely.

There's something to be said for that, but again, it's not the goal. It's only a step toward it. The real goal, as Paul prayed for the Philippians, is that "**love will overflow still more and more.**" When we speak of love in this sense, it is not like the feelings of affection we have for family and friends. No, it is love in a *biblical sense*: the kind of self-sacrificing commitment that Jesus displayed when He gave His life for us on the cross; the kind of love Paul displayed when he subjected himself to beatings, imprisonments, and other hazards in order to get the Gospel to those who hadn't heard it; the kind of patient, kind, gentle, and forgiving love that we are called to display in our dealings with each other and with all people; the kind of love that says, "*I don't care about me. I'm not important. What can I do for you?*"

The Christian life is not just a battle against sin. It's the struggle to grow toward producing *ever more of the good fruit of love.* And we need to see it that way for a couple of reasons.

² Malachi 3:1-7b

³ Luke 3:1-20

The first reason is so that we shall become ever more dissatisfied with our present condition. With love as the goal, the bar is set a whole lot higher than simply not sinning; and we can see how miserably far we fall short of it. That will help reveal the full extent of our sin and help lead us to more honest and thorough repentance. Second, with true biblical love as the goal, we shall see that we are incapable of generating it in ourselves. Like faith that trusts in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and receives His forgiveness, love is a gift and work of the Holy Spirit - the Spirit who comes to us as the Word of Christ is proclaimed, which is why Paul ties our growth in love to our increasing spiritual **knowledge** and **insight**. The more we learn of Christ, the more we spend time in His Holy Word and meditate upon it, the more the Spirit works in us the gifts of faith and love.

This growth in love we are to experience is also a promise of God, a promise that He calls us to believe. And we can and should believe it, for with Him, all things are possible.⁴

Therefore, as we prepare to receive our King this Advent, let us join our prayers with Paul's, that the Lord would cause our love to overflow still more and more. Let us focus not just on what should not be in our lives but also on what should be. Let's press on toward the goal knowing that **"He who has begun a good work in you will carry it on to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus."** Let us prepare ourselves for His coming by subjecting ourselves to His ongoing work in us in order that we shall be filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory of God. In His holy name. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Lord God, we praise You that You reckon us as blameless in Your sight because of Jesus' obedience for us. We praise You for Your commandments, so that we may love with right knowledge, and for the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We ask You to bless all who preach, teach, read, and study Your Word, that more and more people may know the Gospel message of joy and hope.

Refine our hearts, so that we may prepare a smooth way for the Lord in them. Give us stronger faith, joy and confidence, and grant that we may abound in hope through the power of the Holy Spirit. Enable us to trust You firmly, to worship You with pure hearts, to serve You with clean hands, to obey You with willing minds, and to love You with our whole beings.

Guard us, that Satan, the world, and our flesh may not deceive us, or lead us into error, unbelief, and sin. Do not let us lose the inheritance that You have graciously promised to those who know You in faith. Teach us to watch and pray at all times. We praise You that You have enabled us to stand with joy and confidence before the Son of Man when He comes in glory to judge the living and the dead. Therefore send us Your Spirit so that we strive to be blameless in our love for each other, to grow in it, and to practise it with sensitivity and insight.

Rid Your church of that all that is divisive, evil, and wrong, that all who profess Your name may serve You in truth, purity, and loyal devotion.

Give peace and stability to the nations on earth. Put down all evil rulers, and raise up leaders who will rule and serve us according to Your good pleasure.

May Jesus rule in the hearts of all parents and children. Supply the spiritual needs of all families, so that truth, love, and high morals may bless our homes.

Be with all people everywhere, in all situations and circumstances of life. Give healing to the sick, comfort to the sorrowing, guidance to the young, hope to the aged, comfort to the bereaved, and wisdom to the perplexed.

⁴ Matthew 19:26

Lead us to continue to look to Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end. Help us to wait in joyful hope for His second Coming, when He will receive us, and all others who believe in Him, into Your eternal presence. This we pray in His holy name. Amen.

SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Malachi 3:1-7b

¹ **“Look! I am sending My messenger, and he will make the way clear ahead of Me.** Then the Lord, for whom you are looking, will suddenly come to His Temple, yes, the Messenger of the covenant, whom you desire. Look! He is coming,” the LORD of hosts has said.

² However, **who will endure** the day of His coming? **Who can stand** on the day when He appears? For He will be like a refiner’s fire and like launderers’ soap.

³ He will sit down like a refiner and a purifier of silver, purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver. Then they will present an offering to the LORD in righteousness. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of long ago, as in former years.

⁵ “Then I shall come near to you to judge you. I shall be quick to testify against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear to a lie, against those who defraud hired men of their wages, against those who exploit widows and orphans, against those who take away the rights of resident-foreigners and do not fear Me,” the LORD of hosts has said. ⁶ “For I, the LORD, have not changed. That is why you, O children of Jacob, have not come to an end. ⁷ Since the times of your fathers you have been turning away from My Prescriptions and have not been keeping them. Return to Me, and I shall return to you!” the LORD of hosts has said.

Philippians 1:2-11

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. ⁴ Every time I pray for all of you I always make my prayer with joy, ⁵ because of your partnership in the Good News from the first day until now. ⁶ I am sure of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will carry it on to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus. ⁷ It is right for me to think like this about all of you, because, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the Good News, I have you in my heart, as people who are all partners in God’s grace with me. ⁸ For God is my witness how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. ⁹ I also pray that your love will overflow still more and more in knowledge and in all insight, ¹⁰ that you may approve the things that are best, that you may be pure and without blame until the day of

Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness, which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Luke 3:1-20

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, while Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judea, while Herod was the tetrarch of Galilee, while his brother Philip was the tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis and while Lysanias was the tetrarch of Abilene, ² and at the time when Annas and Caiaphas were the Chief Priests, the Word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the country around the Jordan and preached that people should repent and be baptised for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ It was as Scripture has said in the book of the Words of the prophet Isaiah: **“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord! Make His paths straight! ⁵ Every ravine will be filled in. Every mountain and hill will be levelled. The crooked roads will be made straight, and the rough roads smooth, ⁶ and all people will see the salvation of God.”**

⁷ Therefore, John kept saying to the crowds who were coming out to be baptised by him, “You brood of poisonous snakes, who has warned you to run away from the coming wrath? ⁸ Therefore, produce fruits worthy of repentance! Do not begin to tell yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father’! For I tell you that God can raise children for Abraham from these stones. ⁹ The axe has already been laid at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

¹⁰ The crowds used to ask him, “Therefore, what are we to do?”

¹¹ He used to answer them, “The person who has two tunics should share with the person who has none, and the person who has food should do the same!”

¹² Tax-collectors also came to be baptised and asked him, “Teacher, what are we to do?”

¹³ He told them, “Stop collecting any more money than what has been laid down for you!”

¹⁴ Soldiers also used to ask him, “What are we also to do?”

He told them, “Do not extort money by violence, do not accuse people falsely and be satisfied with your wages!”

¹⁵ The people were expecting something and were all wondering in their hearts whether John might perhaps be the Christ. ¹⁶ John answered them all: “I am baptising you with water. However, the One who is more powerful than I am is coming. I am not worthy to untie His sandal-strap. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷ He has His winnowing fork in His hand to clean up His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His barn but will burn the chaff with fire that cannot be put out.”

¹⁸ So, with many other words John kept exhorting the people and telling them the Good News.

¹⁹ However, when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and all the other evil things he had done, ²⁰ Herod added this to them all: he locked John up in prison.

