

PEOPLE: A BLESSING OR A BURDEN?
PHILIPPIANS 4:1-3

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

People can be a burden--- even Christians. Norm was a Christian businessman in his fifties when I knew him. He worked for a hydraulics manufacturing company. Before his position in that company he had been self-employed for many years. On two occasions in his life he formed a partnership with another Christian businessman. According to Norm, in both instances he was taken advantage of by his partner, and both times he lost money in the deal. He told me that he would never go into business again with another Christian, or with anyone else for that matter. He had hoped for better things from Christians.

Norm's reaction is understandable, but unfortunate. He had a lot of experience in ministry in churches and in service to other Christian organizations. He had a lot to offer. But he had bad experiences with other Christians. Too often he found people to be a burden.

Sigmund Freud once wrote to a friend, **"I have found little that is good about human beings on the whole. In my experience most of them are trash."** (Letter to Pfister, 10 September 1918) Fortunately God does not look at human beings in that way. If He did, He would not have sent His Son to die for us. Human beings are not trash. At times we may have felt that way about other people, or even about ourselves. Most of us have had the experience of being hurt deeply by what someone else said or did to us. Sometimes the other person was a fellow Christian.

The Apostle Paul had reasons to be cynical about people. In the New Testament book of 2 Corinthians in #11 he reported that he had been whipped five different times, beaten with rods three times, stoned once, shipwrecked three times, and imprisoned a number of times. He also had his share of bad experiences with Christians. On his first missionary journey a guy named Mark deserted Paul and his other companions. Another time a Christian named Demas left him in the lurch. In 2 Timothy #4 Paul makes reference to the trial before the Romans that he was awaiting when he wrote the Epistle to the Philippians. (PROJECTOR ON--- 2 TIMOTHY 4:16) In v. 16 he says, **"At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me."** That would be enough to prompt some people to throw in the towel, right?

The Epistle to the Philippians in Greece (PHILIPPI MAP 3) was written just prior to that defense. Paul was a prisoner of the Romans in their capital city of Rome. Probably he was chained to a guard most of the time, though he was allowed to live in his own rented quarters. For two years he had to wait for the judicial process to get to his case. We were told in #1 that even Christian preachers were trying to cause distress for Paul in his imprisonment. They were doing this to the apostle who was fighting to establish

the legal right of Christians to preach the gospel. There was not much appreciation for his efforts from that group of preachers.

I.

Paul had reasons to regard people as a burden. But that was not his overall perspective. In v. 1 of our passage in #4 he indicates that JOY COMES FROM LOVING PEOPLE. (I. JOY COMES FROM LOVING PEOPLE.) That was not his only source of joy. We have seen from our study of Philippians that Paul's primary source of joy was knowing and serving Christ. Yet there is also a joy that he experienced, and that we can experience, that comes from loving people.

Paul writes in v. 1 of #4, **“Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.”** This is a hinge verse. It looks backward and forward. Last week we saw that at the end of #3 Paul warned about people who claimed to be Christians but who did not want to be bound by rules. They wanted to focus on satisfying their physical appetites. He warned that Christians should not give in to these appetites because they were now citizens of heaven. The prospect of Christ's return at any time and the transformation of their bodies that would happen then ought to keep them from sin. Verse 1 is a fitting conclusion to that thought. But it is also an introduction to what is to follow.

Notice the words which Paul uses to describe the Christians at Philippi. He uses five different terms of endearment: “Brothers,” “whom I love,” “long for,” “my joy,” and “my crown.” At the end of the verse he again calls them “beloved.” Paul loved these Christians greatly.

Why did Paul have such love for these people? They became a source of joy to him because of the investment which he had made in them. When he first showed up in this Roman colony, the first convert to Christianity was Lydia, a Gentile businesswoman who had been attracted to the Jewish religion. She invited Paul and his companions to stay at her house. A bit later Paul cast a demon out of a slave girl. For that he was beaten and thrown into a prison by the city officials. Out of that prison experience the jailer and his family were converted to Christ. By the time when Paul left Philippi a church had been established. That church continued to grow in numbers and maturity.

Now ten years later the Christians in that city sent one of their leaders to Paul at Rome to encourage him and to bring him a gift of money. To see this growth and commitment in the church at Philippi was a cause of rejoicing for Paul. There was little about his physical circumstances that could give him joy. But because he had invested in the Lord and in people, he saw good results. He experienced joy as he saw the changed lives which his investment had a part in producing.

People today, even Christians, so often search for joy in the wrong places. We look for it in physical pleasure, in power over people, in possessions, in drugs, in food, and in alcohol. Too often people are regarded as a means to obtaining these other things rather than as an end in themselves. Or people, even family members, can be treated

as obstacles to obtaining what we consciously or unconsciously regard as what is the more important objective in life. Physical possessions and pleasurable experiences will pass away, but an investment made in people will pay eternal dividends.

In Luke #16 Jesus told a parable about an unrighteous steward. A rich man fired his investment manager for squandering his possessions. But this investment manager cleverly reduced the debts of some of the rich man's clients. The rich man recognized the shrewdness of his former employee. Jesus summarized the point of the parable in v. 9 of Luke 16. (LUKE 9:16) He said, **"And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings."** In effect, Jesus was commending an investment in people with the good news about Jesus.

The Apostle Paul loved people because he saw them as a source of joy and because he saw them as a "crown." There are two words for "crown" in Greek. One has reference to the crown that a queen or a king would wear. The other word, *stephanos*, (PROJECTOR ON--- STEPHANOS) which is used here in v. 1, refers to a crown that the winner of an athletic competition would receive. This crown, or wreath, was made of leaves or flowers.

Paul has used the terminology of a race several times in this letter. (PHILIPPIANS 3:14) Back in #3 v. 14 he said, **"I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."** In #2 v. 16 he told the Philippians (PHILIPPIANS 2:16) to hold on to the word of life **"...so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain."**

The crowns were awarded in the Greek games at the end of each race. The end of the race which Paul is talking about is apparently the return of Jesus. (1 THESSALONIANS 2:19) In 1 Thessalonians #2 v. 19 Paul writes, **"For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?"**

Our stock portfolio and financial savings will never rejoin us on the other side of the grave. But investments in people will. (PROJECTOR OFF) Paul realized that as a result of his efforts, many people at Philippi had become Christians and had grown in the faith. He was confident that at the time of the Second Coming, if not before, he would see them again and that they would be a kind of crown for him.

If our investment is in people, we can savor that prospect now. That's what Paul did, and it was a source of joy to him. Harry became a Christian through watching a Billy Graham telecast. Soon after that he got involved with a church in Massachusetts. I came to that church as a youth pastor. I spent a considerable amount of time with Harry. We were both single at the time. I led Bible studies in which he was involved. I helped him learn how to lead a Bible study. He got involved as a Sunday school teacher and youth group leader. While he was involved in a discipleship group that I led, he began to sense that God was leading him in the direction of being a missionary overseas. He got married and ended up in Thailand. There he and his wife worked with

a tribal group and established the first church among those people. Harry and his co-workers translated the Bible into the language of the Pwo Karen people and were involved in producing the first Pwo Karen Bible. A church was started in that village. Later church plants were made in surrounding villages. It has been a joy to me to see the effects that his ministry has had in this remote part of the world.

You don't have to be a pastor to invest in people like that. If you have kids or grandkids, you have a readymade opportunity to invest in the future through them. You can do it through teaching Sunday school or by befriending an unbeliever or by having a one-on-one Bible study with another person or by volunteering to help in our children's ministry or our prison ministry. I have been talking to representatives of two of the nursing homes in town. Both of them want churches to come in and do weekly services or Bible studies. I have committed us to do a Saturday service one Saturday a month at Long Term Care at the BC Hospital followed immediately by another service at Mountain View Nursing Home. So far we haven't been able to get any of the other churches to commit to taking another Saturday. But if any of you would like to try your hand at helping out or leading a monthly service, I would be happy to help you learn how to do it. Just let me know. There is a required orientation session at the hospital this Wednesday at 9 AM, which will also involve getting a TB test.

Paul showed his love for people in several ways. **First**, he cared enough about them to share the gospel with them. His desire was to see people become part of the family of God through faith in Christ.

Second, he showed his love to people by telling them that he loved them. We see that here in v. 1. (PHILIPPIANS 1:8) Back in #1 v. 8 he said, "**For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.**" There was a fellow once who went to church on Sunday while his wife stayed home with a couple of sick kids. The minister delivered a powerful message on the subject of loving one another. (PROJECTOR OFF) This guy became convicted of his own failure to express his love toward his wife. So on his way home he composed a beautiful, eloquent statement of his love for her. When he got home, the first thing that he did was to deliver this moving, passionate statement to his wife. No sooner had he finished than his wife responded, "That does it. Both of the kids threw up this morning. I broke one of my favorite serving bowls. And now you come home drunk." Nevertheless Paul sets a good example of expressing love toward other people.

We can demonstrate our love for others, **thirdly**, by spending time with one another. Paul says here that he longs to be with these Philippian Christians. A part of his ministry life was spent visiting churches which he had earlier established. His physical situation now made another visit to Philippi impossible at the moment. A sign of our love for people--- for our mate, our children, and our church family is a commitment to spend time with them. Expressions of love often mean little if they are not backed up with a commitment to spend time with people.

One of the challenges of the Covid pandemic has been our loss of Christian fellowship. Access to live streaming and social media has been helpful. We are thankful to have Zoom meetings. Yet there is something lost when we don't have that personal interaction with each other. Some church researchers are saying that the Christian church as a whole has lost about a third of people who used to show up in church on Sundays. We humans and we Christians need personal interaction with each other.

Then, **fourthly**, Paul indicates that a love for people is demonstrated when we have a concern for the spiritual condition of one another. Often in the New Testament we see the apostle sending a representative to see how a church is doing spiritually. Always he is praying for the spiritual well-being of others. If we are going to love people, if we are going to experience joy from our relationships with them, then we have to develop an interest in the spiritual aspect of their lives.

II.

If joy comes from loving people, we need to realize also that LOVING PEOPLE MEANS PROMOTING UNITY. (PROJECTOR ON--- LOVING PEOPLE MEANS PROMOTING UNITY) This is a principle supported by Paul's words in vv. 2 & 3. Paul writes, **"I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers..."**

Two women in the congregation at Philippi were not getting along with each other. The name of one was Euodia, whose name literally means "prosperous journey," and the name of the other was Syntyche, which comes from a Greek word whose root meaning is "lucky," or "fortunate." Verse 3 indicates that these two women had fought at Paul's side in the cause of the gospel. So they were both leaders and workers for Christ. Perhaps they were among the first to become Christians at Philippi. Clearly they had a significant role in the growth of the church there.

But now there was some kind of conflict between them. It was a conflict of such significance that it warranted his reference to it in a letter addressed to the whole congregation. The nature of their disagreement is not described. It apparently did not involve an issue of doctrine. If that was the case, Paul would have provided the correct doctrinal understanding at this point. Notice also that Paul does not take sides. He was too far away to get directly involved in the dispute. Instead he pleads with each of them to agree with the other. Literally the verb which he uses means "to have the same mind." This is the same term that he used in #2 when he talked directly about the need for unity in the church. This desired meeting of the minds would necessarily require humility from both parties and an attitude and display of forgiveness.

(PHILIPPIANS 2:2) In v. 2 of #2 Paul said, **"... complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind."** Then he went on to talk about the need to avoid selfish ambition and to develop humility. Probably the dispute between Euodia and Syntyche was a major part of the reason for that admonition. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Problems in a church often develop from this kind of conflict. Two people have a disagreement not about doctrine, but about practical matters. They have different ideas about how to do something, or they have a personality clash, or one has been offended by the other and doesn't get the issue resolved. The bigger problem is that such disputes seldom involve only two people. The congregation as a whole is too often affected.

Mabel calls up her friend Louise and asks, "What did you think of the business meeting yesterday?" "I guess that it was OK." "But what did you think about Frieda's suggestion that we get a pink carpet to replace the one that we have in the church sanctuary." "I guess that I didn't think about it that much. Pink isn't my favorite color, but whatever people want is OK with me."

"Well," Mabel says, "Pink would be just horrible. That Frieda has some ridiculous ideas. And she thinks that just because her husband is head of the church baptismal tank committee, she can get her way. She always has to have things her own way, doesn't she?" "Well, she can be pushy sometimes."

So the next time that Louise see Frieda, Louise is strangely distant. Frieda doesn't understand why. And disunity in the local church has been cultivated. The basic cause of such disputes is pride. The remedy is self-restraint and forgiveness and trusting God to develop humility within us.

Notice how Paul responds to the situation at Philippi. He calls upon a third party. He says, "**Yes, I ask you also, true comrade, help these women...**" My suspicion is that the term "true comrade" was actually a proper name that would be transliterated into English as Syzygus. In the first century church when Gentiles became Christians, it seems that many of them changed their names. Many Gentiles were given names at birth based upon pagan gods. New names which were taken, or suggested by church leaders, were given to draw out some aspect of their character. So Paul, in effect, could be saying, "**Indeed, I ask you to help these two women, Syzygus, for you are a true comrade...**"

Syzygus was a true comrade, or partner in the gospel. He was a team player. He knew how to work with other people. It seems that he had a leadership position in the Philippian church, and Paul called upon him to try to reconcile these two women. His request is an illustration (PROJECTOR ON--- GALATIANS 6:1) of the principle which Paul described in Galatians #6 v. 1: "**Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.**"

One of the beatitudes which Jesus included in His Sermon on the Mount (MATTHEW 5:9) was recorded in the Gospel of Matthew #5 v. 9: "**Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.**" Loving people means getting involved in their

lives. Sometimes it means doing difficult things, like trying to reconcile Christians who don't get along with each other.

III.

Verse 3 also makes reference to one of the many reasons why unity needs to be promoted among Christians. For the last part of v. 3 speaks of people **“whose names are in the book of life.”** In v. 1 we see that joy comes from loving people. In vv. 2 & 3 we learn that loving people means promoting unity among fellow Christians. (III. PROMOTING UNITY IS IMPORTANT...) Now we find that PROMOTING UNITY IS IMPORTANT BECAUSE OF OUR ETERNAL DESTINY.

The term “book of life” is first used in the Bible in Psalm 69 v. 28. Psalm 69 is one of the Psalms written by David. He is talking there about his enemies and God's enemies (PSALM 69:28), and he says in v. 28, **“Let them be blotted out of the book of the living;/ let them not be enrolled among the righteous.”** The implication is that God has a record of those who are righteous, of those who are on His good side.

The term “book of life” also appears several times in the Book of Revelation. At the end of #20 reference is made to the final judgment by God of the earth and its inhabitants. (REVELATION 20:15) The book of life is opened and v. 15 says, **“And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”**

Chapter 21 goes on to speak of the new heaven and the new earth where Christians will live in eternity. (REVELATION 21:27) Verse 27 says, **“But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's [referring to Jesus] book of life.”** This book of life is something like a family genealogy. It records the members of the family of God.

This terminology also had significance to the Roman citizens of Philippi. (PROJECTOR OFF) For there was a civic register that was kept in the city of all of the Roman citizens of the community. Paul in Revelation is talking about a heavenly register.

It is sad when family members do not get along with each other. I knew a family in Connecticut in which the parents were married for thirty or forty years and then they separated. They were at each other's throats and decided to live apart. The kids were grown up and living away from home. But each of the parents worked to get the sympathy of each of their kids. Then it seemed like they were trying to manipulate the sympathies of the grandchildren. It was a mess. Many of us have known situations similar to this. Some of us perhaps have been caught up in them. It is a difficult, sad thing to see families which are divided.

The Bible says that a church of Christians is like a family. We have the same Father. As any good father would want, He desires to see unity in His family. So He is unhappy when His children in the same local church cannot get along with each other. Because we are sinners, such divisions do happen.

We are fortunate to have here what I sense is a very good spirit of unity. I don't sense that we have any big cliques or divisions. But the Bible says that we Christians are always part of spiritual warfare. Since Jesus said that unity among Christians is very important to Him, we can be confident that the spiritual forces of evil will always try to disrupt that unity.

Here are two of the practical things which the Bible puts forward about how followers of the true God can preserve unity. **First**, we can be on guard about gossip. By gossip, I mean conversations with other Christians which put a fellow believer in a bad light. This is so easy to do. We all feel slighted or neglected or mistreated at one time or another by other Christians. We can recognize the shortcomings in other people. The Book of Proverbs has several warnings about gossip. (PROJECTOR ON--- PROVERBS 26:20) Chapter 26 v. 20 says, **“For lack of wood the fire goes out,/ and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.”** Some translations use “gossip” instead of “whisperer.” The original Hebrew word did have a connotation of whispering, which paints an effective picture of what often happens with gossip.

(PROVERBS 20:19) Proverbs #20 v. 19 warns us, **“Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with a simple babler.”** The NASV translation puts it this way: **“A gossip betrays a confidence;/ so avoid a man who talks too much.”** So there is a good reminder here to all of us to exercise restraint in our conversation with other people.

A **second** practical thing that we can do to preserve the unity of the church is to go directly to someone with whom we have a problem. (PROJECTOR OFF) There are some injustices or slights or conflicts that we encounter in life where the best response is to forgive and overlook. But when there is a matter which needs to be addressed, the right thing to do is to speak to the person who has offended us. The easier thing to do is to complain to others about something that has happened. The right thing to do is to speak to the offender in a loving way.

(PROJECTOR ON--- MATTHEW 18:15) Jesus said in Matthew 18:15, **“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.”** If we have a problem with another person, we should go to that person. Preserving unity is important, because our names are recorded in the book of life. That makes us family. (PROJECTOR OFF)

People can be, and sometimes are, a burden. But they are creatures created in the image of God, and they are creatures for whom Christ died. So they can also be a blessing. The determining factor is our attitude. We need to seek God's perspective on people. We need to invest in them. Along the way some will disappoint us, but an investment in people will pay dividends in the end. We also need to do what we can to promote unity among fellow members of the family of God.

Foundational to all of this is the assumption that we are part of God's family. Is your name recorded in the book of life? Do you know for sure that if you died today that you would go to heaven? You can know that now. The apostle John told us that in #5 vv. 11-13 of his first epistle. (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 JOHN 5:11-12) He wrote, **“And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1 JOHN 5:13) I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.”**

The Bible promises us that we can know now that we have eternal life. The determining factor is whether or not we have the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, in our lives. The Apostle John says that this happens by simply believing in His name. That means we believe that the claims which He made are true. He claims to be the Son of God who has existed with God the Father from eternity past. He claims to have become a human being without giving up His essential characteristics of divinity. He claims to be the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament. He claims to have lived a sinless life. He claims to have died on the cross to pay the penalty for the sins of humanity. He claims to have risen from the dead on the third day. He claims to have ascended bodily into heaven. He claims that He will return some day to collect His family. To receive eternal life, we must believe that the claims of Jesus are true. We must place our trust in this Jesus.

One way to express this faith in Jesus is through prayer. As we close this part of our service today, I am going to pray a model prayer that you can use to express your faith in Jesus. If you have never done that, you can pray it along with me, silently, if you so desire. If you truly believe what you are saying, you will receive eternal life. So here is the prayer:

“Jesus, I know that I am a sinner who has violated your laws. I believe that you are God, that you became a human being, that you died on the cross to pay the penalty for my sins. I believe that you rose from the dead. I put my trust in you. I welcome you into my life. Thank you for the forgiveness of my sins and the gift of eternal life. Amen.”