

AIM FOR THE BEST

Phil 1.9-11

An Outstanding Prayer

We're looking this morning at what someone has called '*one of the greatest prayers of intercession ever penned by Paul. Almost every word has to be weighed, if the greatness and range of this prayer are to be discovered in their true richness.*' (Martin, p64)

- As with nearly all of Paul's prayers for other Christians, the **focus** of this prayer is the Philippians' **on-going spiritual growth**. For all their strong points, the Philippians hadn't yet arrived at a stage of perfection. Paul has already spoken of the way in which God would be putting the finishing touches to their lives, right up until the day of his Son's return to this earth (v6). Every new day provides us with fresh opportunities to grow more like Jesus. God is continually remoulding our characters, so they become more and more like that of his Son. One person has noted that *Paul doesn't propose a new and sudden experience to fit us for the presence of Christ. On the contrary, there is an ongoing programme of growth. ... If there was an easier path, a short cut to perfection, would the apostle not have mentioned it? But there's no such thing as 'sudden righteousness'. ... We might wish it otherwise. We sometimes hear preachers offering this technique or that kind of experience as a way to instant holiness. But Paul knew nothing of these quick fixes. Instead, he reveals a process of steady growth, as we examine issues in the light of Scripture and steadily follow the will of God* [Motyer, p52,53,54,59]. So on-going spiritual growth is the focus of Paul's prayer for these Christians, as it should be the focus of our prayers for our fellow-believers, too.
 - And for Paul, this was all **motivated** and energised by the **deep affection** he had for them all. He has spoken about this in verses 7 and 8. He *held them in his heart* (v7). He *longed for them all with the affection of Jesus himself* (v8). There was a deep-down gut reaction when he thought of them; he was moved emotionally, he is telling us. He felt homesick for them, such was his love for them. And he loved them like that, because his heart was beating to the rhythm of Christ's heartbeat. Jesus was the pacemaker for his heart, his affections. And it's good when our prayers are energised by that kind of love for our fellow-believers too - so that when we pray for each other using our Church Prayer Diary, we don't simply run through the names listed as a matter of formality. We pray for each other because we have a deep-down affection for one another, a love and deep-seated feeling for each other that has been put there by Jesus – because he is the one who is reigning in our hearts, as the King of Love.
 - And we can notice too, that the **context** of this prayer is **the return of Jesus** (v10). Jesus is coming back to this earth, and Paul longed that his people would be fully ready to welcome him.
- So that covers the focus, the motive and the context of Paul's prayer for the Philippians.
- And the **style** of his prayer unlocks its content for us; for Paul uses a number of very graphic **word pictures** in these verses, that are largely lost in our English translations, which is a pity – because he is a very colourful artist.

First, he paints a picture of

1. TROPICAL PLANT (v9) for us – a plant capable of luxuriant growth, all the year round.

That's the picture behind the rather prosaic words *abounding more and more*, in verse 9. Many plants in Britain have a relatively short growing period, perhaps from March until October. But in the tropics, plants enjoy an environment in which they can grow vigorously all the year round.

- So what is it that Paul wants to see growing in our lives, all the year round, like a vigorous tropical plant? **It's our love!** – our love for God, as our Father; our love for Jesus, as our Saviour and Lord; our love for God's Spirit, as our enabler; our love for our fellow-believers, as our spiritual brothers and sisters; and our love for our neighbours, whoever they are and wherever they are to be found. You will notice that the object of our love isn't defined in Paul's prayer, for that would be to limit the scope of our love. And Paul doesn't want to do that. He wants our love to grow vigorously in all directions, both Godward and manward, both to other Christians and to not-yet believers, locally and

globally! Paul doesn't want to limit the scope of our love in his prayers for us. He wants it to flourish, expand and extend more and more.

- Why does Paul put such an emphasis on our love in this prayer? Because **love is the most basic of all the Christian virtues**. In the opening verses of 1 Cor 13, Paul explains that without love, we accomplish nothing and are nothing in ourselves. *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.* Without love, everything we do and say is worthless. That's why first up, Paul prays for the growth of our love.

Illustration: Tradition has it that Ephesus is where the apostle John spent his last days. And in his extreme old age, we are told that he used to be carried into church every Sunday morning, in the arms of some of the younger members, because he never liked to miss a service. Latterly, he was unable to say anything much at all. But each week as he arrived, he used to mouth the simple words, "Little children, love one another." Rather wearied by the old man always using the same greeting, one person asked him gently, "Tell us, John, why do you always greet us with these same words: Little children, love one another." The apostle paused for a moment, and then replied, "Because it's the Lord's command, and if only this is done, it is enough." He knew about the primacy and sufficiency of love.

Jesus, you will remember, said that '**love is the hallmark of the true disciple.**' A new command I give you, he taught, *Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples* [and not following any other guiding principle for your life], *if you love one another*" [John 13.34-35].

Illustration. If we see a person wearing a black-and-white scarf around Gateshead, we know instantly that they are a Newcastle supporter. But if we see someone wearing a red-and white scarf, we know they support Sunderland. So as far as which team a person supports, a football fan is instantly recognisable by the colours he wears. And likewise Jesus tells us in John 13.35 that 'love' is the colour we are to wear to show others that we are truly his followers.

But **how do we know what love is**, and how it should express itself? The word is bandied around very freely and is used in all sorts of different ways by all sorts of different people to mean all sorts of different things.

- One person may say, 'I love strawberries.' Another person may say, 'I love my children.' The kind of love we have for strawberries is somewhat different from the love we should have for our children, I would suggest. One is about consumption; the other about service. One is based on attraction, the other on responsibility.

And so that's why Paul speaks next about love's

2. TWO SUPPORTING STAKES (v9)

The more vigorous the growth of a plant, the more important it is to have sturdy stakes to support its growth. And so the first supporting stake Paul speaks about here is

2.1 Knowledge

Knowledge is vital to define the content of our love. The word is used about 20 times in the New Testament to describe **our mental grasp of spiritual truths**, something that is made possible by us coming to know God personally through his Holy Spirit's work of conversion.

So what Paul is saying here is that **our love must be an informed love**, otherwise it might branch out in all sorts of inappropriate directions. Our love must be informed and shaped by God's Word.

- Some people mistake **romance** for true love. They talk about having 'fallen in love'. But the problem with 'falling in love' is that it's just as easy to 'fall out of love'! Romance is based on mutual attraction – and if that attraction starts to fade, so will the relationship. True love has to be about more than mutual attraction if it's to flourish. It has to be about **commitment**, and that's what

the Bible teaches us right from the beginning: *A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife* (Gen 3.24). Love in marriage is about a lifelong commitment, not simply warm romantic feelings.

- Other people mistake *indulgence* for true love, people when it comes to raising children. “I gave him everything he ever asked for,” we may hear a parent say in despair. “I don’t know what’s gone wrong with him.” Well, *that’s* what’s gone wrong with the child. Instead of being loved, he’s been indulged. Others may say, “I let him choose for himself what he wants to do,” – and then wonder why they end up with a child who has wasted his life, or drifted into petty crime. The Bible teaches us that true love is about bringing *discipline* to a child’s life (Heb 12.5-11). It’s about training a child to live the right way – God’s way. That will involve both teaching a child what’s good, and correcting a child when it does wrong. That’s the nature of love – not simply giving in to a child’s every demand.
- And some people wonder how they can *love God*. They may think that God wants them to perform all sorts of religious rituals as a way of showing love to him.

Illustration. I saw a snippet of a programme on television recently about some people in Spain who went in for a ceremony of body beating. They flogged themselves with an instrument made up of lots of strands of ropes, and thought God would be pleased by this show of self-inflicted suffering. But the Bible tells us that God offered up his own Son at the cross for our sins, removing any need for us to beat *ourselves* up, or punish *ourselves* for our misdeeds. Indeed, to do so, suggests that Christ’s sacrifice on the cross for our sins was somehow deficient, inadequate. And that’s not simply to misunderstand what our response to God should be. It’s to be deeply insulting to him.

So unless our love for God is well informed from the Scriptures, we can end up offending God instead of pleasing him – a terrible mistake to make. Jesus taught us that we show our love for him, not by beating ourselves up, but by keeping his commandments – especially his command for us to love each other as he has loved us. So that’s where our energies should be spent, not in empty rituals of self-harm.

Love needs to be well informed if it is to grow in the right directions – if it’s to be true love, and not a false imitation, like a sucker on a rose brush.

But knowledge on its own is never enough. True love must express itself in actions. In other words, our knowledge needs to be applied to the everyday situations in which we will find ourselves. And so that’s why the second supporting stake for our love is

2.2 Discernment

Knowledge is about the ‘what’ and discernment is about the ‘how’. How do we take the principles of Scripture and work them out in practise in our everyday lives? That takes discernment, or *depth of insight* as the NIV puts it. This is the only time this particular word occurs in the New Testament, but a similar one occurs in Heb 5.14, where the writer speaks about those *who by constant use* [of God’s Word] *have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil*. Someone has said that ‘knowledge is nothing until it has passed into our experience’. And so that’s what Paul is praying for here.

- Given that loving children is about training them in the way they should go, how do I go about doing that in practise? How do I apply the *principles* of God’s Word to the *practical* situations I find myself in from day to day?
- This is why Paul prays that God’s Holy Spirit will give us discernment. It’s the word that is often translated as ‘wisdom’ in the Old Testament – the ability both to know the right thing to do in any given situation, and the sense to get on and do it.
- When I take a child dedication service for parents of a new baby, I will pray that they will be given the wisdom to know *when to speak, and when to stay quiet; when to encourage and when to correct; when to teach and when to listen*.

Illustration. Mike Brearly was arguably the best cricket captain England has ever had. He was a fairly average player, but a brilliant tactician and man-manager. He went on to become a professional

psychoanalyst. And in his best-selling book, *The Art of Captaincy*, he explains that the art of good management in a cricket team is knowing who needs an arm around the shoulder and who needs a good kick up the backside - and when. Brearly's two strike bowlers during his captaincy of England were two very different characters. Bob Willis often needed an arm around his shoulder, whereas Ian Botham often needed a good kick up the backside to get the best out of him for the team. Both actions were appropriate, but at different times and with different players. And Brearly turned out to be such a good captain because he got the timing of those actions right more often than not.

- Now, it's like that with parent. We don't need a degree in psychoanalysis, but we certainly need discernment, to know how to love each child for the individuals they are. Do they need an arm around the shoulder, or a kick up the backside (metaphorically speaking, not literally, I hasten to add). When it comes to loving other people, it's not a case of 'one size fits all'. We need to use different approaches with different people. That's why Paul prays for discernment – the ability to turn the principles of Scripture into the right practical actions.

So this is the luxuriant tropical plant that Paul wanted the Philippians to cultivate: a love like Jesus', well informed from God's Word and applied with great sensitivity to each recipient.

- The love of Jesus is *a selfless love*. It's a love that never stops to ask, "What's best for me?" It dedicates itself to securing the best for others.
- To that end, it's *a sacrificial love*. It expends itself for the good of others without counting any personal cost.
- It's also *an unconditional love*, because it expresses itself without taking into consideration the merits (or otherwise) of its beneficiaries. It doesn't ask, "What does this person deserve?" It asks, "What does this person need?" It doesn't ask, "What will you do in return for me?" It simply gives.
- And so it's *an uncalculating love*. It doesn't look for any reward, not even a 'Thank you' from the beneficiary. Jesus loved people regardless of whether or not they appreciated his love. And that is perhaps the biggest challenge of all – to go on loving people, even when there's nothing coming back from them for us.

This is the kind of plant Paul wanted to grow more and more in the lives of the Philippians. You see, when we measure our love against the love shown by Jesus (which we will do if we allow our love to be shaped by a knowledge of God's Word), we will soon discover how much scope there is for our love to grow. The more we read about the kind of love Jesus displayed, in the Gospels, the more we will realise how much richer and deeper and broader ours could be. There's always more scope for our love to grow.

But why was Paul so passionate in praying for the Philippians love to grow like a luxuriant plant.

Well, that takes us from a tropical greenhouse, where plants are being grown, to

3. THE ROYAL MINT (v10) where coins are being manufactured.

Paul prays that our love will grow *so that we will be able to discern what is best* – what really matters in life. As our love grows deeper and richer, so we will be better and better placed to discern what's best – not merely what's good, but what is excellent. It's sometimes said that 'the good is the enemy of the best'. If we settle for what's merely good, when we should be striving for the very best, then we'll be a disappointment to God – and to other people as well.

- The picture here is of a coin tester, examining little discs of metal to ensure they pass the exacting standard required for legal currency, coins of the realm. Nothing but the best will do. Blemishes will be discarded.
- And only when our love is abounding will we be able to discern what the very best course of action is, in any given situation, day by day.
- If we are motivated by traces of self-interest, our actions will be tarnished, less than ideal.
- But when our love for God is growing, we will ask, "What's best for him?"
- And when our love for others is *abounding more and more*, will we start asking more consistently, "What's best for them in this situation?" - before we act.

Because Paul loved the Philippians so much, he didn't want them to settle for anything less than the very best.

And so he moves on next from the royal mint, where coins are tested, to

4. THE DEPARTMENT STORE (v10) where we buy our clothes – Marks and Spencer, or British Home Stores, or the Littlewoods Discount store, where we can pick up clothes for a snip!

- Paul encourages us to make sure our actions pass God's sunshine test. That's the thought behind the word *pure* in verse 10. Paul wants us to be *pure* in our innermost motives.
- Very often, when we're buying clothes, we will ask a shop assistant if we can take them to a window so we can see what they look like in daylight, instead of by artificial light. There may be a slight colour shift, and daylight is usually brighter than any artificial lighting.
- The word for pure that Paul uses here is derived from a word meaning 'the sun'. It's the only time it occurs in the New Testament.
- But it conveys the idea of allowing our innermost motives to be scrutinised by the purity of God's gaze. How do our actions look in the light of God's truth, as revealed to us in his Word? How transparent are our motives? God's sight is like X-ray vision. He sees beyond and behind our mere actions to our underlying motives. He examines not only what we are doing, but why we are doing it.
- And only when our actions are motivated by a genuine love for him - and for others - will they pass his transparency test.
- That's another way of translating the word Paul uses in this verse. When God shines the light of his truth on our actions and motives, does that light pass straight through them, like light passing straight through a clean window. Or does it pick up little bits of dirt – some self-interest or hypocrisy, deceit or pride?

Our next port of call are the

5. THE LAW COURTS (v10) because Paul continues by speaking of his desire for us to be *blameless* right up *until the day Jesus returns* to this earth. If the word *pure* points to our inner attitudes (our motives) the word *blameless* points to our outward actions. The word carries the idea of 'not causing offence'. Love doesn't take offence; nor would it ever knowingly want to give offence.

- Paul wants our love to be so well informed and so discerningly applied that when God, our Judge, looks down on our actions, he will see nothing to merit charges against our name.

And so in verse 11, Paul rounds off his prayer by leading us into

6. AN ORCHARD (v11)

When our lives are being driven by the kind of well informed and sensitively applied love that Paul is speaking of here – pure in its motives and not causing offence by its actions – we will be *filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ* – the kind of fruit that is produced by being in a right relationship with Jesus.

- We come into a right relationship with Jesus through accepting his death on the cross for our sins.
- And we stay in a right relationship with Jesus through drawing on the presence of his Spirit in our lives, day by day.

Paul has taken us into an orchard where the trees are laden with fruit, ready for harvest time. And I'm glad that Paul finishes with this picture, because it reminds of the life force that is behind the luxuriant plant he has been speaking about, the plant of love.

- You see, if Paul was urging us to produce such luxuriant growth through our own efforts, he would be setting us an impossible standard. We would find this prayer terribly discouraging. He would be praying for something that is simply beyond us.
- And that's why it was so important for him to include the words *through Christ Jesus* at this point in his prayer. It's only through the power of Jesus, living within us by his Spirit, that we are able to produce the kind of love he is praying for here.

- You see, we grow to be like the people we live with. And Paul has already spoken of the way in which his own heart was beating in time with Christ's, because he was living so close to him. It was as if Christ was his 'spiritual pacemaker', enabling Paul's heart to beat with the same rhythm as his Lord's.

Someone has said, *What's unique about the Christian's ethical calling is this. In every other kind of system or religion, we're being challenged to become what we are not by nature. But as Christians, we are being called to give full expression to what we have become by our regeneration. We've been made God's children, indwelt by his Holy Spirit. So the Christian life is an outworking of what God has already inworked. We are called to become what we are. This is the unique aspect of Christian ethics. Every other system is a striving to be what we are not by nature. But in Christ, the new nature is already in place, poised for growth, and waiting to express itself the more fully* [Motyer, p55]

And so Paul ends by reminding ourselves that all this is ultimately so that God can be glorified in us, and praised for all of eternity.

- Paul wants us to *abound in love, more and more*, not simply so that others will benefit from our well informed and sensitively applied actions towards them; but so that God himself is praised and glorified.
- We have been saved so that we might redound to his glory and praise.
- It's not about us – about what we're able to achieve during our days on earth.
- It's not even about other people, and how they might benefit from us being loving towards them.
- It's about God, in the final analysis. It's about how God can take weak and fallible, very imperfect sinners, and transform them into something that displays the glory of his own character, as a God of love.
- It's about the glory of a God who specialises in character makeovers. Anyone can transform a living room, with a coat of paint here and some wall hangings there. Anyone can transform a garden, but cutting back the shrubs and planting a few flowers.
- But only God can effect a character makeover, taking self-centred sinners and turning them into loving, self-giving personalities like his Son, the one who came to earth *full of grace and truth*. That was his great glory, and can be ours for God too.