

SHARING LIFE AT FIRST BY PASTOR BOB BENDER ON OCTOBER 8, 2017
“BEING AN ANSWER TO A PRAYER” FROM PHILIPPIANS 1:9-11

How many of you have seen an answer to prayer? Now, let’s change one letter in this question and let me ask it again. How many of you have **been** an answer to prayer? There is obviously a difference between seeing an answer to prayer and being an answer to prayer. So, today I want to talk to you about being an answer to prayer from Philippians 1:9-11. Paul had already told them **that** he was praying for them in verse 4; now he tells them **what** he is praying for them in vv. 9-11 <read>. As we engage our theme for Philippians—press in and press on—we are pressing in and pressing on with what? What Paul prayed for them.

Paul could have prayed for Philippians’ faith, witness, obedience, their continued giving, or a number of issues vital to their church. However, he prays for none of these. His prayer addresses the greatest need of the church; the most important quality of the Christian and the same thing Jesus prays for us in John 17:26—love. What does that kind of love look like? In typical Pauline fashion, he fleshes out a principle in a practical way that Jesus introduced in a somewhat theoretical form.

These three verses record the three-fold aspect of Paul’s prayer for the Philippians. He simply prays that their already existing love for one another would grow stronger. Since I have both Jesus and Paul as examples of what to pray for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ; it is also my prayer for you as well—not that I am even close to being in the same ballpark as Jesus and Paul.

What would you think of a pastor, staff member, or church employee who had a working knowledge of the Bible and possessed all kinds of expertise and yet did not relate to people in love? You would not think too much of such a leader and rightfully so. And yet we come to church week after week, study God’s Word, and even worship God leaving with no greater love for others in this church—our very own family. I am reminded of Paul’s encouragement to his protégé in 1 Timothy 1:5—“But the goal of our instruction is **love**...” (not more instruction!) The longer I serve the Lord, the more I see the importance of love. In fact, if I had my ministry to do all over again, I would love more. And so, my prayer for you is the same thing Paul prayed for the Philippians—more love. This month as we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, I am reminded of what Rick Warren states, “We have had our reformation of creeds; now we need a reformation of deeds.” John Wesley once said, “It is entirely possible to have a right knowledge of God and yet not have a right attitude toward him or others. Satan is proof of this.” I encourage you to simply be an answer to prayer by loving more—something every one of us in this room could use a little more of.

/ANSWER THIS PRAYER WITH A LOVE THAT FLOWS (V. 9A)

The Philippians’ love was already abounding, or overflowing. Paul prays not that it will abound; not that it will abound more and more; but that it will abound *still* more and more. This word, abounding, means to be more than enough; to be extremely rich; to be in excess; to increase abundantly. For Paul, no other word so characterized the new age ushered in by Jesus than this word. Jesus introduced the concept in John 10:10 and Paul uses this word 26 of the 39 times it appears in the New Testament. The new age of Jesus is marked by grace that abounds or overflows (Rom. 5:15-17); we abound or overflow in hope (Rom. 15:13); we are to abound in edifying others (1 Cor. 14:12); we abound in the work of the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58); our ministry is to abound in comfort (2 Cor. 1:4-5) and in the glory of God (2 Cor. 3:9); we are to abound in thanksgiving (2 Cor. 4:15); we are to abound in joy and generosity (2 Cor. 8:2); and we are to abound in everything—faith, word, knowledge, and work (2 Cor. 8:7). It is no surprise, then, that Paul refers to the Philippians as abounding, or overflowing in love.

Would this word characterize our relationships toward one another—so abounding in love that it just flows and overflows to those around us? This love abounds in us; let it abound through us. We have let Jesus in; let’s let Him out!

Our church is a church with abounding, or overflowing love—financially, relationally, missionally, maritally, parentally, personally, and encouragingly. But church, we can do better! We can abound still more and more in friendliness and hospitality. We can abound still more and more in caring and compassion. We can abound still more and more in sharing and serving. We can abound still more and more in giving and going. We can abound still more and more in loving and learning. We can abound still more and more in encouraging and having one another’s back.

Does your love flow—even overflow to others? Are you abounding in love? Love is our church’s calling card. Something is flowing for out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. This love that flows was Paul’s prayer for the Philippians. This love that flows is Jesus’ prayer for our church. This love that flows is my prayer for you. Are you an answer to it?

When love overflows, church problems dissipate, financial needs are met, people are encouraged and feel genuinely loved, burdens are shared, and prayers are answered. When love overflows, unity reigns. When love overflows, people get saved, for God can entrust new souls to that fellowship. When love overflows, there is energy, excitement and joy. Nobody likes to come to church thinking they have come to a funeral by mistake. When love overflows, there is an atmosphere of acceptance. People come to church wanting to be accepted. Be an answer to prayer with love that flows.

What does that look like? Paul gives us some specific ways to express this overflowing love later in his letter to them and to us (2:2, 3, 4, 5, 14, 4:8). Answer this prayer with a love that flows out into others’ lives.

//ANSWER THIS PRAYER WITH A LOVE THAT KNOWS (VV. 9B-10)

What kind of love are we speaking of? Is it some kind of namby-pamby, syrupy-sweet, maudlin sentimentality kind of love? Does this love tolerate everything? Paul qualifies this love as not only a love that flows but a love that knows. Our love is to be constantly expanding but ever regulated. This abounding love is disciplined by real knowledge and all discernment. Knowledge of what? The parallel prayer in Colossians 1:9 gives us some insight. Here, Paul is thinking of the knowledge of God. He uses a word that refers to experiential knowledge; not intellectual knowledge. Paul must have been thinking of 2017 when he wrote these words. Here’s why...

Speaking to the 55,000 students and young adults gathered at the Passion Conference in Atlanta last January, Beth Moore said, “You will watch a generation of Christians –OF CHRISTIANS–set the Bible aside in an attempt to become more like Jesus. And stunningly it will sound completely plausible. This will be perhaps the cleverest of the devil’s schemes in your generation. Sacrificing TRUTH for LOVE’s sake. And you will rise or fall based upon whether you will sacrifice one for the other. Will you have the courage to live in the tension of both TRUTH and LOVE?” Church, do not abandon convictions for love or abandon truth for grace. We stand on God’s measure of love. “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God and everyone who loves is born of God and *knows God*” (1 Jn. 4:7). We love with God’s pure love even in this politically correct world when we are accused of being intolerant, bigoted, full of hatred, homophobic, or even Islamophobic. God’s love that is inconsistent with God’s Word is not love at all.

Without knowledge, love is misguided. Someone said, “Nothing beats love at first sight except love with insight.” With indiscriminant love comes a condoning of wrongs committed against God and others. There is zeal without knowledge; there is love without knowledge. Both are equally dangerous. Misguided love tolerates almost anything. Misguided love accepts anything without assessment. Misguided love lets people get away with almost anything. Real love is love that is knowledgeable—like God’s love. He is the One Who knows me the best and yet loves me the most.

With God’s knowledge then, my love becomes discerning—practical in its application. Without discernment, love is incomplete. Love that knows possesses spiritual perception in decision-making. Love that knows discerns what makes a weaker brother stumble and avoids those activities. Love that knows realizes

that knowledge alone results in pride, but love builds up. Love that knows confronts. Love that knows understands the reason for every tone of voice. Love that knows overlooks a multitude of sins. Love that knows gives people the benefit of the doubt. Love that knows does not withhold it until it is earned. Love that knows is sensitive to the needs of every person we come into contact with by asking ourselves the question, “How can I minister to this person right here; right now?”

One result in the life of a genuinely loving person who has God’s knowledge of the facts and spiritual discernment is seen in the first part of verse ten. They approve the things that are excellent, distinguish between the major and the minor, or test the things that differ (as in the testing of coins in the old West by biting them). It overlooks when you are hurt by an unintended oversight. When someone loves you, your name is safe in their mouth.

This love approves the things that are excellent. It is so easy for us to express our disapproval over things not to our liking, isn’t it? What about approving or applauding the things that are excellent? What is high on Gods’ list of priorities? Wrong question; not what, but who.

One day as I was driving to work in Austin years ago, I noticed a home-made sign written on a piece of cardboard tacked to the telephone pole at an intersection near our home. It said, “LOST, old, deaf, shaggy brown dog. Please call _____.” To some little boy or girl, that dog was the most important thing in the world. They were going to move heaven and earth to find that old, deaf, shaggy brown dog that others could probably care less about. Would we have that kind of love that approves of the things that are excellent—the least, the lost, the lonely, the left out and left behind—people no one else loves? Anne Meskey wrote, “I saw love. Then I saw God. Then I believed and cried out, ‘The Lord; He is God!’”

As this love then discerns between good and evil and as this love distinguishes between the good and the best, you become a person of sincerity and blamelessness until the day of Christ. This word, sincere, means spotless, or pure. It is used to refer to exposing garments to the rays of the sun to reveal any blemishes; to separating of troops into ranks; to straining liquids to remove worthless substances; or to the testing of pottery. I believe the Lord is at work in your life exposing spiritual blemishes of lack of love to the rays of the Son of God. He is looking for a few good men to separate unto Himself as His crack troops in His army of love. He is looking for a few good women who love at all costs. He is looking to strain us of moral impurities through the Word and by His Spirit.

This word, blameless, means to avoid stumbling by not placing things in our own way. A Godly deacon gave me some good advice once, “Preacher, don’t be stumbling over those molehills.” It is so easy to focus on the little nitpicking things that people are concerned about and forget the great issues of life—genuine love for others. Little people talk about little things and big people talk about big things. Only little people stumble over molehills. Giants step over them because it takes a mountain to trip up a giant. Does your love know? Is it discerning, seeing the big picture and the most important issues? As your love knows, you will be an answer to this prayer.

///ANSWER THIS PRAYER WITH A LOVE THAT GROWS (V. 11)

Paul says that you have been filled with the fruit of righteousness in the past and this past experience still influences your present situation. The phrase, fruit of righteousness, refers to conduct pleasing to God. This fruit of righteousness is rooted in Jesus and now is growing to full fruition.

Once there were only weeds in the garden of your soul, then Jesus came in and the righteous seed was planted. Now, beautiful, fruit-bearing-trees adorn your garden. The righteous fruit of love that grows requires this righteous root—a personal relationship to Jesus beginning with conversion. The righteous fruit of love that grows is maintained by a constant relationship to Jesus (John 15:5). The righteous fruit of love that grows requires good soil—a heart willing to receive the Word. The righteous fruit of love that grows requires constant

nourishment of God's Spirit (Rom. 5:5). The righteous fruit of love that grows requires the right atmosphere—a good church environment like the Philippian church and FBC. This righteous fruit of love does not make a lot of noise; it just quietly bears its fruit. Love grows. It lives, gives, forgives, and outlives anything (1 Cor. 13:13).

Love grows and grows and grows. Mary Hughes told this story in her work, *We Cannot Measure Love*. “My daughter, Francesca was about four years old when she first became aware that numbers were not just new words in her vocabulary or names for digits. She learned also that they can be used to express quantity. One memorable day Francesca turn to me to express her love with the help of her newfound knowledge. She said, ‘Mommy I love you 10 times!’ And after deep thought she said, ‘I love you 20 times!’ After another short pause she reached a breathless pinnacle with, ‘I love you 600 times!’ A grateful hug and kiss from her produced a tiny frown and then a final outburst, ‘Mommy, I love you more than *all* the numbers!’” If your love was quantified, how much would it be?

Last Sunday night in our small group, we were reminded by Charles Hummel in his classic work, *Tyranny of the Urgent*, “The root of all sin is self-sufficiency.” That quote hit me between the eyes because that is my Achilles heel. The context of the quote was in the area of prayer, but it fits in this context of love because guess what? If your love tank is not full of the love of Jesus, you will not love one another with a love that grows. This righteous fruit not only comes from Jesus; it will be examined by Jesus in the Day of Judgment (v. 10). Jesus will then examine the fruit of love in the day of our testing. Will your love be a love that overflows and knows and grows? If so, it will be to the glory and praise of God not only in eternity, but in time—in the great “until.” Think about your love. Is your love growing, waning, or stagnant? What would your spouse say? Your children? Your work associate? Your fellow church member?

The apostle John lived in Ephesus as an aged man. He was no longer able to preach. But the pastor of the church would often ask John to bring a closing word of benediction. John would always rise to his feet, lift his aged hand and say, “Little children, love one another.” He would always say that. A friend asked John once, “Why it was that you always say the same thing?” He responded, “Because there is nothing more to be said. It is a final word. If we love one another; that is everything.”

I pray for you to love one another. I appeal to you to love one another. If we love one another, that is everything. Eugene Peterson's rendition of 1 Corinthians 14:1 is, “Go after a life of love as if your life depended on it—because it does.” And so this week, my challenge to you is this as someone has said, “To love every minute of the day, you must love every minute of the day.”

As Donald Trump said in Puerto Rico this week, “There's a lot of love in this room,” so I affirm as well as I have many times before—“There's a lot of love in **this** room.” In the words of the song by the Heritage Singers, “In this very room, there's quite enough love for everyone.” So today, we are going to share it with one another as we spend some time in this auditorium going to folks around us who have meant something to us to tell them how much they mean to us <time to move around to do so>. Yes indeed, “In this very room, there's quite enough love for everyone...For Jesus, Lord Jesus, is in this very room.”

I was thinking as I reviewed this life message that it lacked on thing—a powerful, emotional, pointed love story to tell. But that story isn't mine to tell; it's yours to live!

Central Idea of Text (CIT): Paul prays that the Philippians' love for one another will grow.

Big Idea of Message (BIM): Be an answer to prayer.

Major Objective (MO): Ethical

Specific Objective (SO): I desire FBC members to love one another more.

Primarily Addressed Need (PAN): How can I grow in my love for FBC members?