

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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“There Will Always Be... a Long Way to Go”

The fifth in a Lenten series on spiritual principles

Philippians 3

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The following sermon is another installment in a series of sermons that have been written in response to Paul's letters. The premise of the series is that the churches wrote back to Paul.

As some of you will remember who've been at DaySpring for a time... I have some friends who are archaeologists and scholars of ancient Middle Eastern texts. And these friends, just a few years back, discovered a series of letters that had been written by various authors back to Paul in response to his epistles. This was, of course, an archaeological find of great significance... I'm mean, to find letters from the first century written to the Great Apostle and to find them all in one place... well... it was just unprecedented.

They were found in a Tibetan monastery...

In just near-perfect condition.

Hermetically sealed in a mayonnaise jar...

So they've come to be called, The Mayonnaise Letters, Epistulus Mayonatus in the Latin... or Miracle Scripts. It's a really important find and those who found them are keeping it a big secret... That's why you haven't heard about them yet. These scholars who are my friends are going to make a big splash someday when they get them all translated. But, they send one to me every now and then, and said that I could read them to you as long as we all promise not to tell anyone they exist.

So... don't tell anyone... They're planning someday to have a big PR event... They've already talked to Oprah and they've already sold the movie rights to the folks that produced the Da Vinci Code.

This is really big...

so don't tell anyone...

Okay???

This letter is written it seems in response to the epistle from Paul to the Church at Philippi.

“I Clement, servant of Jesus Christ, student of Paul the Apostle, fellow pilgrim of saints everywhere, Elder to the Church at Philippi and... part-time donkey trainer,
To Paul, witness to the love of God and good news in Jesus Christ.
Grace and Peace to you my good friend and beloved teacher.

You cannot begin to imagine our joy when Timothy arrived with your letter. The news of its arrival spread throughout the community, and within hours we had organized a reading party.

As you might imagine, Euodia and Syntyche had a little squabble as we organized the event. I'm still not certain your guidance to place them both on the fellowship committee was best. How did you say it? ... *The friction they experience when they're together is God's gift to them.*

I think I've come to understand your teaching, that the spiritual work we need to do will often be prompted by the people with whom we seem to have the most trouble. I get that... but

Euodia and Syntyche haven't gotten it yet. Though your direct words to them in the letter pleading with them to **"be of one mind in Christ"** seemed to help.

But their usual pettiness came back as the fellowship committee started planning the reading party. Euodia thought the whole thing should be very formal, by invitation only... Syntyche wanted it to be a "come one, come all" kind of thing... **"even nonbelievers should be welcome,"** she said....

My background as a donkey trainer came in handy during the meeting and we survived it and the party was on.

Paul, you should have been there... well... it was as if you were there. As I read your warm words, a hush fell and so did lots of tears... That you **"remember us in prayer with gratitude,"** that you, **"hold us in your heart,"** that you are **"confident Christ is working a good work to competition within us,"** **"that you long for us"** ... were God's very Words of encouragement to us.

Thank you, my dear brother... To know that you are in chains and your thoughts are so unselfishly for us, is life to us and challenges us not to live enslaved to our circumstances... which as you know, grow more difficult always.

Your perspective is through the gospel. You always see everything in light of that. Thank you for reminding us that the **"Gospel is being proclaimed because of your imprisonment."**

Brother Aritachi... who as you'll remember, was a former operative for the zealots... came to the meeting with a covert plan to bust you out of prison. He called it, Operation Paulos Apostlos. It basically involved him infiltrating as a Russian guard... and then sneaking you out in the evening trash. We told him he'd been watching too many Greek Plays. There's a new one running called '24' and he goes every week.

Anyway, your assurance that God was still using you helped us put that thinking to bed.

I do want to tell you about the conversation that one part of your letter stirred in us. As always, it seemed like your words, our lives, and the Spirit were in some sort of alchemy to create something we needed to hear.

You were right on, addressing again your old theme about the legalists. It just seems like that will always be among us. And it's not just those bent on enforcing Jewish practices... It can come from anyone who has confused the path with the destination.

It seems like that's a great temptation and tendency for so many. Once they've discovered some teaching or some practice, they anxiously begin holding to that as if they were holding on to God himself.

Quite frankly, when you said that all your Jewish accomplishments and practices were rubbish compared to Christ... there was a gasp in the room. One of our new members who moved from a church in Galatia, stood up and said in anger, **"Clearly this man's imprisonment has clouded his judgment... How dare he call our tradition "garbage."**

Again, my donkey training helped. I was tempted to react defensively for you in anger... and put this newcomer in his place but I just remained at peace... Timothy was about to rise and give him "what for" but I shook my head gently in his direction. There was silence for a while and then one of our most timid women spoke up, **"With all due respect to my new brother, Paul didn't call our tradition garbage... What he said was that all his spiritual past was a "gain" to him... but that in comparison to knowing Christ, it's as if it were garbage. He considers it insignificant next to knowing and experiencing God."**

It was an amazing moment, Paul. Sister Bekah rarely says a word... but she does listen, thanks be to God. And she spoke so lovingly that the anxiety in the room seemed to fade so that

others began to see things. It was fascinating... as if the love in her heart for her brother created room for us to see and move forward.

My cousin, James, you remember him... he was the one always trying to get you to go to the camel races... James said all of a sudden, he had an image of all of us standing on step stools... and looking over a fence...

And over the fence was the vastness of God, the mystery of Christ. And the step stools were all the traditions and teachings and practices..., that were helping us to see. But once we saw over the fence, we sort of forgot the step stools... They just were nothing compared to the infinite beauty, the eternal mystery over the fence.

You can imagine where everyone went with this idea. The conversation was lively and enlivening. Some folks were able to confess their anxiety and fears about the freedom the gospel seems to offer us. Others were able to confess that they had arrogantly thrown away their step stools thinking they could see just fine without them.

I hadn't mentioned it yet, Paul... but we do have those among us who seem to think the grace of God is some sort of license. **"Their gods are their stomachs,"** as you say. They got so tired of all the rules they just ran away from them... and sometimes it seems they think that running away from rules is the same as the journey of faith.

So, you see, we find ourselves trying to walk the narrow path that you've taught... Knowing that legalism is death but so is license... Neither is the path that leads to life. We want to find the way that leads to life.

Like you, we want to know **the power of the resurrection and the fellowship of Christ's sufferings.** That is the reality we're gazing at over the fence.... **The mystery of Christ... to be like him in death so as to join him in resurrection.**

And Paul, thank you for your humble words that followed... that you hadn't obtained it... not yet. You could feel the reality of grace flowing in and between us. So many of us struggle, Paul. I do... and sometimes as an elder, I feel so hypocritical.

There are days when it seems like I've made some progress... like I've grown. And my on-going struggle, you know the one with jealousy that you and I talked about so often... that struggle will seem to vanish.

But then something will happen... and it'll feel like I'm back to square one. A few weeks ago, on the way out of church, I overheard two of our young men talking about how blessed they were by Virgil's sermon (he and I have been alternating). And before I could catch it, jealousy had overcome me.

It was almost like I was angry that they had been blessed by someone else... Like I would rather his sermon have been boring and shallow, so on the way out of church they would be saying, **"... sure can't wait for Clement to preach next week."**

When I saw this...

When I felt it...

Realized it...

I was almost sick at my stomach at the sight of my own brokenness. I thought I was past it... I thought I'd outgrown it but, no, there it was... There it is. For several days I made matters worse by condemning myself and assuming I was some hopeless case... **"the worst of sinners."**

But then your letter arrives and I hear my teacher confessing that **"He hasn't arrived either... That though Christ has taken hold of you... you don't quite have a grip on the Power of the Resurrection."**

Grace flooded me... and I remembered that time you were preaching about your own struggles and how the things you don't want to do you keep doing. You said that we will always have a long way to go.

Well... of course we do... as you say, **"we've been called heavenward..."** into the eternal and the infinite. And the closer we get, the further we know ourselves to be. The more

perspective we gain over the fence, the more vast we understand vastness to be. We're all of us, always just beginning... thank you, for reminding us of that.

As we heard your words about **“forgetting what lies behind... and pressing on...”** there wasn't a person in the room not experiencing the power and blessing of God's presence among us and we floated our way to the end of your epistle.

Towards the end of the party, as Euodia and Syntyche broke out the figs-in-a-blanket desserts they'd made, we made a list of questions that, if you have time, we'd love for you to address.

Question One – We know what you said in the past about women being quiet in church, but what about the ones who have matured? Just between you, me, and the prophetic fence post, they seem to mature more quickly than the men and my theory is that it has something to do with the suffering they've known and their capacity for self-sacrifice. We've also found that God's Spirit seems to have gone and gifted some of them to preach... Your thoughts?

Question Two – Could you write to us about your thoughts on music in worship? We have some who only want to sing the ole' standbys... You know, like *Everyday with Yahweh is Sweeter than the Day Before*, and *All Hail the Power of Yahweh's Name!* And we have others who've taken Greek folk tunes and written Christian lyrics. There's one I think you'd like about evangelism... The lyric is something about *a spark getting a fire going*. Catchy tune... the kids love it... but some are resisting. Your thoughts?

Question Three – We're a little crowded in worship these days and are wondering about going into a building program. Can you advise us about the wisdom of that and do you have any ideas for a capital campaign theme. So far, all the building committee has come up with is... *Please Give a Lot of Money*. I just don't think that's very catchy, creative, or subtle enough. What would you think of something more theological like *Building an Abode for the Body* or *Bricks for the Baptized?* Your thoughts?

Well, I'm running low on papyrus... and I need to get back to the donkeys. I know you're content with your provisions, but we're sending one of Euodia's fruitcakes. If you don't like it, I can assure you that Epaphroditus can eat the whole thing in one sitting.

God's Peace be with you, Paul, servant of the Lord God. And there in your chains and in your contentment may you indeed know the power and joy of the resurrection... and the love of your family in Philippi.

We hold you in our hearts always.

Your disciple and friend,

Clement”