

# A MODEL OF LOVE

## SERIES: TENACIOUS TOGETHER



Catalog No. 20180408  
Philippians 1:1-11  
First Message  
Paul Taylor  
April 8, 2018

*Philippians 1:1-11*

In high school, I went on several bicycle ministry tours. They were called Spoke Folk. A group of students along with several adults would bike from church to church and host family night concerts. I lived in Texas, but most of the tours were in the Midwest: Ohio, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa.

It was an odd kind of trip. I'm not sure who first imagined biking around the Midwest singing about Jesus. But something powerful happened on those trips. I would connect deeply with other high school students from around the country and bond with them over the course of a few weeks. There would be tears as we left each other. And as soon as I got home, I'd start writing letters.

This was before email and text messaging. So I'd actually get out pen and paper and write long letters to these friends who lived around the country. Those letters were powerful. Evidence of a deep connection to people far away.

What is it about some relationships that create a deep connection? Why stay in touch over long distances? What unites us to others and gives us a reason to be together?

This morning we're kicking off a series on the book of Philippians. We've called the series *Tenacious Together* as a way of combining what seems to be two of the dominant themes throughout this book. The apostle Paul writes to this young church to encourage them to keep going, to persevere, to stay faithful to the cause of the Gospel. He wants them to be tenacious about the Gospel of Jesus.

And he wants them to do it together. He wants them to be unified and connected, humble and compassionate, other-focused and sacrificial. Somehow the apostle Paul wants this church to have a special kind of relationship with each other so that they carry on the work of the Gospel.

So it makes sense that as the letter opens, the first section is all about relationship. Paul goes on at length about the depth of feeling that he has for the Philippians. Then he talks about the kind of love that he hopes they develop for each other. Paul begins his letter by showing the Philippians a model of love that they can have for each other.

As we look at this passage, it's going to address some really important questions for us. We live in a time when relationships are changing. I haven't written a letter in decades. I hardly talk to anyone on the phone anymore. A lot of my communication is done through short bursts of words: either via text message or online. Relationships are changing.

Our communities are changing too. We are dramatically more diverse as a church community than we were a generation ago. We mix different theological perspectives, ethnic backgrounds, political leanings, and personality types. Is it possible for us to experience the kind of love that Paul will describe in our passage this morning?

And our world is changing. What does it mean to persevere for the Gospel in 21st century Palo Alto? We don't live in a Christian culture. We're surrounded by every culture of the world within a few miles. The reputation of the church is at an all-time low. How do we work together to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed around here?

As we read these verses, there is much that we can learn. We'll see how Paul offers his relationship as a kind of model for how the church might relate to each other and proclaim the Gospel to the world.

I've been praying that this series in Philippians will help us to further our unity as a church and give us a renewed vision for persevering in the work of the Gospel. Our passage this morning will provide a good start in that direction. Let's read Paul's heartfelt letter to his friends.

## Introduction

This letter is not that different from the letters that I wrote to the friends I made during those summers back in high school. Paul had spent a short amount of time in the city of Philippi, but it had been intense. A lot had happened. And he had connected with the people there in deep ways. So he writes this letter to them as an encouragement. He begins in Philippians 1.

### Philippians 1:1-2:

**Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,  
To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at  
Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:  
2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father  
and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

Acts 16 records the story of how Paul along with Timothy and Silas started the church in the city of Philippi. If you want more detail on that story, you can look up online Andy Burnham's excellent sermon on that story from 18 months ago that he called Unlikely People ([pbc.org/libraries/sermon](http://pbc.org/libraries/sermon)). It was a dramatic founding of a diverse church.

The first believer was Lydia, a wealthy artisan who was interested in Judaism but hadn't converted. Then a slave girl was freed from demons. We don't know if she joined the church, but there's a good chance she did. Then Paul and Silas were miraculously freed from prison, and the Roman jailer put his faith in Christ. We also hear of other Jewish men who met Christ through these events.

So this church started with a wealthy polytheist, a Roman government employee, a trafficked teenager, and a bunch of Jews. Sounds like the beginning of a joke, doesn't it. But it's not. It's the beginning of a church. This is the kind of church that Paul is writing to.

Do you think they might have some issues getting along? I think so.

On the bike tours, we'd be a mixed group of students from around the country. There would be one conversation that we'd never get tired of having. We were fascinated by all the different ways we referred to sweet flavored carbonated beverages. Soda. Pop. Soda pop. Coke. I'm sure there were others.

It was one of the first times many of us had really understood that different cultures could be really

different. And of course, what you called a kind of drink was only the tip of the iceberg of differences.

Paul greets this young, diverse church with a very standard greeting, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." This exact phrase is found in Romans, both Corinthian letters, Galatians, and Ephesians. Modified versions are in Colossians and the two Thessalonian letters.

In one sense, this is just what Paul always says. But why does he always say it? I think Paul wants to unite these people around what makes them a community. God is our father. Jesus Christ is Lord.

Last week we celebrated several baptisms during our Easter service. One of the things that I love about doing baptisms here during Easter is what happens immediately after the person comes out of the water. This room is full of people who explode in celebration and welcome for their new sibling.

When we baptize people, we symbolize their new birth in Christ. They have a new Father. But they also have new siblings. That's what it means for us to have the same Father. It means that we are siblings. We are connected together. And in many cultures, the sibling relationship is even stronger than the parent-child relationship. We are a team.

For those of us who believe in Jesus, we have the same father. Nothing will change that. We have one Father. And we have a very special brother.

He's the sibling that is always pulling us together. He's the one that organizes the family reunions and keeps up with everyone. He's really the glue that holds the whole family together. God is our Father. Jesus, the Lord, is our brother.

The book of Philippians is particularly fond of Jesus. It boasts the highest percentage of verses that reference Christ out of any book of the Bible. 33.654% of its verses talk about Jesus. It's the only book where over a third of the verses reference Christ. Philemon is next at 32%.

This first chapter is even more fond of Jesus. It has the largest number of references to Christ for any chapter of the Bible. 2.799% of the words of this chapter are the word, Christ. 1 Corinthians 1 is a close second at 2.686%. Do you get the point?

Christ is really important to the book of Philippians. Christ is our connection. Christ is our brother who connects us to same father. There is no family without the work of Christ.

Think for a moment about where you really feel like you belong. Where do you belong?

Some of you may not feel like you belong anywhere. You may not feel like you belong in your families of origin. You may have a hard time connecting with a group of people. But that is part of the power of the Gospel. If you believe in Jesus, you are part of this family. You belong here.

It doesn't matter if you still get angry. It doesn't matter if you volunteer at church. It doesn't matter if you don't feel like you're good enough to belong to this group. You might feel like there is an inner circle and you're not in it. But none of that really matters. There aren't degrees of belonging. If you believe in Jesus, you belong here.

That's the radical grace that God our father offers us. You don't earn your belonging. You don't deserve it. You just receive it. You don't have to do anything to belong here. You just belong to God. He is your Father. Christ is your brother. This is your family.

These days we have a lot of control over who we spend time with. I can unfriend you. I can block your phone number. I can move far away. I can mute your email threads. I have a lot of options at my disposal if I don't really want to interact with you.

But no matter what you or I do, we are brothers and sisters. You don't choose your siblings. We didn't choose each other. But we have the same Father. You may have chosen to be in this room this morning. But God has chosen this community for you. That's a big part of what the book of Philippians is about.

## Paul's Love

Paul continues by describing the deep affection that he has for this community of people. Listen to the strong language that he uses in Philippians 1:3-8.

### Philippians 1:3-8:

**I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, 4 always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, 5 because of**

**your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. 7 It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. 8 For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.**

This is powerful language. "I thank," "I pray with joy," "I am sure," "I feel," "I hold you in my heart," "I yearn for you." Six times in six verses Paul expresses his feelings. And six times in six verses he uses the word "all."

Paul is not saying that he clicks with a few of the people in the group that share his interest. He wants to make it abundantly clear that he feels an intense emotion toward everyone in the community. Everyone belongs. He loves everyone deeply.

Honestly, Sunday mornings can be a challenge for me. In this room full of people, I see so many people that I'd love to sit down with for an hour over coffee. Couples that I've married. Individuals that I've counseled through conflict or grief or confusion. Men and women that I have taught and learned from. People whom I've mentored or disciplined. I've had meals with many of you, coffee, activities from skiing to hiking to praying and of course, eating ice cream.

There is a deep relational connection here in this church. Not just me but all of us. We have gone through life together. That means something.

This is why Paul talks with such deep emotion about the Philippians. But he calls out three specific things that draw him together with these people. These are true for us as well.

First, he says that they share a "partnership in the Gospel." Paul is united with them in a common goal. And that goal is living and proclaiming of the Gospel in the world. What Paul probably has in mind specifically with these words is a financial contribution toward that work. That's the way the language of partnership is most often used in the New Testament.

It's not the money that's important. But where you give your money shows what you value. That's why we were so humbled by the generous giving toward our facility remodel. Not because it makes our campus look

nicer, but because it demonstrates that as a community we value this place and have hopes that God can use it for his purposes.

We are in this together with a goal. We are about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You don't just give money to PBC as a kind of dues so that you come here and eat the food. We aren't just paying to keep the lights on so that we have a place to meet and sing. We believe that God is doing something. We believe that we are partners on a mission to see the Gospel of Jesus lived out in this world. That's what our money and time and energy and prayers go towards.

I'm headed to Nashville this week for a conference on the Gospel and culture called Q Conference. Their conviction is that the Gospel encounters culture through seven "channels of influence." Media. Business. Arts and Entertainment. Education. Government. The Social Sector. And the Church.

This a holistic vision for partnership in the Gospel. Proclaiming the Gospel is not just something that pastors do. We are all involved in the work of the Gospel no matter what part of society we operate within. The Gospel is our common goal.

The best part about this goal is we know it will succeed. Paul continues by declaring his confidence that "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion."

We sometimes read this verse in terms of what God is doing in our lives. God saved me, and he will continue to grow me and mature me as a Christian. That is absolutely true, but I don't think it's what Paul is referring to here. The "good work" that was begun was the work of the Gospel. And it's this partnership in the work of the Gospel that God will bring to completion.

Imagine an opportunity to contribute your efforts toward something that you know for sure will succeed. What would it feel like to know that every bit of work you put in was going to mean something positive? Ultimately, there would be success. And it wouldn't just be here. It would be eternal.

This is the confidence that Paul has. And it gives him an incredible sense of connectedness to the people with whom he shares that confidence. What God starts, God finishes. We contribute, but God ensures success. But that success is an eternal one: "at the day of Jesus Christ."

I think this is the element that is challenging for us. Can you see the end-game?

Honestly, that's what makes the partnership hard for me sometimes. I forget the end-game. I forget that this is all headed together somewhere that God has guaranteed. I get so focused on the here and now. And what's happening now is often very difficult or painful.

That's why the last thing that Paul says is that they are "partakers of grace" together. What that means is that they have suffered together. They have gone through hard stuff side by side, and together they have received God's grace to carry on.

Nothing quite connects people together like suffering together. When you go through pain together, something supernatural happens.

But we live such isolated lives that we don't often even share our pain. We might be going through hard things, but we have a hard time feeling like we're together in it.

I have gained so much from the hard things that I have gone through with some of you by my side. And I've been blessed in rich ways by walking alongside some of you through difficult times. When we "partake grace together", as Paul puts it, we come out as a community.

If you're going through something difficult, don't do it alone. You belong here. We share a purpose together for the sake of the Gospel that God guarantees with be completed. But the path is a hard one. It's full of pain and struggle. So let's do it together. When we do, we will find the kind of deep relationship that Paul is describing here.

## Their Love

This is the love that Paul has for Philippians. So after describing the depth of this love, he continues by praying that the Philippians might experience this kind of love for each other.

### Philippians 1:9-11:

**And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, 10 so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.**



Paul wants for these Philippians to experience a deep and meaningful love for each other. Isn't that what you want?

He explains that love in three ways. You can tell that Paul was a preacher. Everything comes in threes.

First, he says the kind of love he wants for them results in knowledge and discernment, so that they may "approve what is excellent."

We sometimes think that love makes us stupid. The strong emotion of love makes us irrational and leads us to make bad decisions. In fact, a 2013 study in the Netherlands claimed to prove that a budding romance diminishes cognitive ability.<sup>1</sup> Does love make us stupid?

Not this kind of love. This kind of love helps us to make good decisions.

I see this all the time in our decision-making process as a church. We have a strong value for listening to lots of different people when we're making decisions. That means that things often take forever. Sometimes that can be really frustrating. But at the end of the process, I always look back and realize that we have made a better decision. Our love for each other has given us discernment.

Without love, how will I make decisions? Myself. How I see things. What I need. My preference. Love for each other changes the equation. If we listen and value and respect and lay ourselves down for each other, that makes for the ability to approve what is excellent.

Good decisions don't come from good ideas. They come from good relationships. Good decisions come from good relationships.

Those good relationships and good decisions lead to a kind of wholeness that Paul describes as becoming "pure and blameless for the day of Christ."

That word "pure" comes from the world of metals. It is used to describe a material that is unmixed, without alloy. It is one consistent material. That's purity. That's wholeness.

Love makes me whole as a person. Pure. My motives are solid. My conscience is clear. Love can make us whole.

This isn't because you supply something that is missing in me. A few years ago, a popular romantic

comedy had everyone saying, "You complete me." You fill up something in my life that is missing. You make me whole like a final puzzle piece completes the puzzle.

That's not what Paul means here. Love makes us whole because these relationships restore us to a wholeness before God. You don't supply what's missing in my life. God does. But he does it through the way we relate to each other.

But love doesn't just make us whole. Love orients us outward toward other people. Paul says the final result is that we are "filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ."

This doesn't mean that we've eaten a ton of oranges. It's not a picture of having a bunch of fruit inside of us. Paul is describing a fruit tree, heavy laden with all the fruit hanging from its limbs. The fruit we are filled with is not for us. It's for others. Fruit doesn't serve the fruit tree. It brings life outside of itself.

Love gives you something to make the lives of the people around you better. When you love someone, you help to bring life to them. Fruitfulness is for others.

This is the love that Paul wants for the Philippians. It helps them make good decisions. It makes them whole as people. It orients them toward others. That's a powerful kind of love.

So now we can look around and ask a difficult question of ourselves. Do you have this love?

There are so many things that make this kind of love difficult in a community like ours. We are all busy. We live far away. We run in different circles. We are all so different. How do we even begin to get connected to each other in a world like ours?

As we move further along in the letter, we'll see some practical ways that Paul suggests this might happen. Mostly it has to do with humility, following the example of Christ, and laying down our lives for each other. But for now, Paul just says that he prays for this.

That's a decent place to start. Let's pray for this. Let's all pray that we might grow in love. We believe in prayer, don't we? Let's pray that God will grow our love as a community?

I did just that a few weeks ago as I was starting to prepare this passage. This was during Lent, and I had spent an hour that day fasting and praying. This prayer

kept coming back to me. God, give us unity as a church. May our love abound more and more.

God answered that by leading me to have a difficult conversation. I approached someone who had hurt me and admitted that their actions were hurtful to me. The whole time I'd been praying God was convicting me that love for each other means that we deal with stuff. We take our relationships seriously. We have the hard conversations and take the time to work through stuff together.

I don't know what will happen if you pray this prayer. But I think God will lead you in some way. Pray that we'd have discernment. That we'd be made whole. That we'd have something to share with each other. Pray for love and see where that leads.

## Conclusion

Thinking back to those bike tours in high school, I realize that those were miniature experiences of what the church is all about. We were bonded together. We had a purpose to proclaim Jesus wherever we went. I felt loved by this group of strangers. And I was able to experience love for others in a powerful way.

But eventually, I stopped writing letters to those new friends. Those connections faded. I'm only connected very tenuously to a few of them. But that doesn't mean those relationships are gone. Because we were connected by the eternal work of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus brought us together. He showed us love. He gave us the opportunity to love each other.

As we study the book of Philippians, we will be given a vision. A vision of Jesus Christ opening up a new kind of community for us. It's not another person to keep in touch with, one more demand in a life that's already too full. It's an opportunity to be part of something.

We belong to each other if God is our Father and Jesus is our brother. We are loved and drawn together by our common purpose which God will make happen. And we have an opportunity to experience a deep and humble love within this community. We belong. We are loved. We can love.

Isn't that what we want?

Isn't this what you want? What better movement is there to be a part of? Do you really think that your startup will change the world? Do you really think that all the time you spend on other stuff is worth your attention? Do you really believe that the time and energy that you devote to all the demands of your life are worth those sacrifices?

There is nothing better to commit your life to than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. God is at work through his people to restore his creation to health, peace, and relationship with him. God is fixing the brokenness of the world. Do you want to be a part of that?

It starts here. With a ragtag group of very different people learning to love each other and work together. It doesn't make sense that something so big and so eternal and so important should look like this: potlucks and picnics and small groups and prayer meetings. But that's how God works.

Join in. Find your place in the people of God. Be part of his work in the world. Let's be tenacious for the Gospel together.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Tara Seuss. "The Science Behind Why Falling In Love Really Does Make Us Stupid," *Elite Daily*, February 18, 2016. (<https://www.elitedaily.com/dating/science-falling-love-stupid/1326172>)