

Harris Creek Baptist Church
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Series: Philippians
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Growing a Love for People
Philippians 1:1-11

What you see as we read in that first section of Philippians, verses 1-11 are just the intro, but you see Paul's incredible love for this group of people. You cannot deny how much his heart moves toward these people. Can you think of a time in your life when you have been surrounded by people you really loved? I'm not talking about family. I'm talking about a membership or a club or a brotherhood or sisterhood. Maybe it was a fraternity, a sorority, just a season of your life where you were moving with a band of people and you just felt a part of them.

As I thought about that, I thought about college and my boys, the guys I ran with in college. By the way, I wasn't a Christian in college. Disclaimer up front. We were at a party at 19 Eleven condos. I was playing this game Washers, you know, pitching washers. Anybody do that? Great. What else are you going to do when you're drinking but throw some round thing in a hole?

So that's what I was doing, and this guy got there. I didn't know him, but he was a big guy. He walked in front of me, and I hit him with a washer right in the hip, which is not a big deal because it's like being hit with a quarter pitched underhand. He turns toward me and says, "You'd better watch what you're doing." I want no part of this guy, so I just kind of laugh it off, like, "Hey, man. Sorry."

He comes up and gets in my face. He's looking for trouble. He's like, "You think something is funny?" I'm like, "No, man. I don't think anything is funny. I'm sorry. I was just playing a game. You walked up. Hey, I'm sorry." He goes, "No, I think you think something is funny." Right about then, my buddy Bobby elbows my friend Larry and says, "Hey, JP is in trouble."

I look up, and five of my friends are now surrounding him, closing in on him. I'm standing there, and I'm like, "Now it's kind of funny. It took a humorous turn in this discussion with you as you're all up in my face, breathing your breath on me." One minute I'm like, "Oh man. He's going to hit me and it's going to hurt," and the next minute I'm like, "Oh, look at this. This just got kind of comical."

I think about that. When I ran with those guys, it was like, "Whatever the world is going to throw at me, I know we can handle it. Whatever the situation is, we're in it together. We're locking arms. We're ready to go." Then what happened, as you fast-forward the tape, is I became a Christian. I started going to church regularly. I got involved in a Life Group. The church put this Life Group together, and I started showing up.

I'm looking around the room, and I'm like, "This is a total waste of time. I don't have anything in common with these people." It was like, "Why can't I experience *that*, this brotherhood, this going through life, locking arms, like we can deal with anything? I want to experience that in the

church. What went wrong?" It felt like we had our real friends and our church friends, and we were going through these motions to try to make the church happy.

I loved those guys in college, but I didn't know how to love those guys. I had no idea how to love those guys. It's not like I was going to speak truth to them. "Hey, guys, we shouldn't be in a place where we're in a position to get in a fight. You should never have to do that." I didn't know those words. I didn't know how to love them.

What happened is I had gone through my entire life and never really knew how to grow love for somebody, and now I'm in the church, and I'm looking at these people, and it's like, "I don't love these people. I don't even *like* these people." I never learned how to grow love for them, which is something you can actually do. Somehow the apostle Paul has grown an intense love for this group of people in Philippi, but that's not how it started. I'm going to show you today how it started.

We're kicking off our series where we're reading Paul's letter to the church in Philippi. What we're talking about from this introduction (because it's just the introduction to the letter) is how to grow love for people. I'm just going to give you some Scriptures, and then I'm going to unpack those Scriptures, but before we do, I'm going to give you a history lesson on Philippi, kind of how it started and where it came from and who was there.

As Christians, fundamental to our faith is we're called to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves. I think we know that, because maybe we went to Sunday school once upon a time, but I don't know that we know how to actually do that, what it looks like to apply that kind of love, because it does take some real effort, and it is a skill that can be learned. There are things we can do to foster love, and there are things we can do to take away from love, and we, in some ways, get to choose.

So, Paul is going to show us how to grow love. The three things he's going to give us from this text are that we *partner in the gospel*, that we *see others in a process*, and then just this fundamental basic idea that we *pray for each other*. I'll just tell you a little bit to set this up. This is a letter. That's what we're reading today. Much of the New Testament was just letters somebody wrote.

Paul is in prison in Rome. The year is about AD 62. He's probably chained to some Roman soldier, and he's writing a letter to the church in Philippi, the believers in Philippi. The purpose of this letter is to thank them for a gift. You know, after graduation your mom said you had to write thank you cards, or maybe after your wedding. This is a thank you card called *Philippians*. We read it, and now the Holy Spirit has made it a part of our Bible.

It's a military city named after Alexander the Great's dad King Philip. It's stamped in history. These are real people, a real place, events that actually happened, and Paul is writing this letter. He starts it by saying (verse 1), "**Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons...**"

In the ancients, you would sign your letter up front. You wouldn't have to turn four pages to figure out who wrote the letter. Right up front you say, "This is who's writing the letter." Paul didn't write this with Timothy. He wrote it on behalf of him and Timothy. The church in Philippi would be familiar with Timothy. And it says who he wrote it to.

There's this city, Philippi, and then there's this more concentrated group of people, the holy people, or the saints (that just means the believers), the overseers, the elders. The word for *deacons* there is really just servants of the church. So, he's writing this to Christians in Philippi, and he writes it with this intense love. But let me show you how this church started. Put your finger there and turn with me to Acts, chapter 16.

In Acts 16 we get to see the birth of the church. This is Paul's second missionary journey. He's there with Silas. Paul has a really basic church planting strategy. Do you know what he does? He would go into a city, and he would find the synagogue, the Jews there, and because he was the Hebrew of all Hebrews, he would begin to teach them, meet them on their turf and impress them with his knowledge, and then he would take a right turn into Jesus.

They would say, "How do you know this?" and he would say, "Well, I met him," and people would be converted inside the Jewish church known as a *synagogue* or the *temple*. This was his strategy, but he couldn't do that in Philippi. Philippi was a church plant on accident. There was no synagogue there, and the reason there was no synagogue there was because there were not enough Jews there.

So, Paul wakes up one Sabbath, and he goes and tries to find the Jewish people of Philippi. He goes to this place of worship by the river, and there are a bunch of women gathered by the river doing a first-century Jewish Beth Moore Bible study. Paul walks up on them and tells them who Jesus is.

I'm going to show you three people. One is Lydia. Lydia is a materialistic fashionista diva. The other is a slave girl who's possessed by a demon who's owned by two men as property, and then the third is a prison guard, a jailer. This first one, Lydia, responds to the gospel of Jesus Christ, invites Paul into her home, and she's baptized, and her family is baptized, it says. This is the church plant in Philippi. It starts in Lydia's living room.

Let me kind of unpack this for you. Lydia graduated from Baylor with an apparel merchandising degree. She had this Etsy business that just kind of exploded and turned into a booth at Spice. Her booth at Spice was the most popular. Everyone from all over came to see it, so this brand was born. She has an office in Dallas, an office in LA, and an office in New York City. She's balling out of control. That's what the Greek says: *balling out of control*.

So, that's Lydia. Paul is now running with Lydia and her friends. He goes back to the river to worship God, the one true God, and he sees there's this girl who's possessed by a demon, that these men would use her for a profit, extort her, because she could tell the future. Satan had given her some sort of ability to tell the future. She starts following Paul, and she's saying in this really obnoxious voice, probably a masculine, deep, gurgling voice or something... I don't know. I wasn't there.

She's like, "This man is from the Most High God telling people how to be saved!" She's just following him everywhere he goes. "These are the men from the Most High God telling people how to be saved!" She's saying it over and over, maybe for days. The Scripture says Paul gets annoyed with her, and he turns and is like, "Be quiet! Stop! I command you in the name of Jesus to come out!" And the girl is delivered.

So, maybe this girl is a stripper at Showtime on La Salle, and she has these two pimps who own her who are doing some nefarious things after hours for profit. We see her. We know her. Now she has been delivered, and she's a Christian. The Holy Spirit comes into her life. These men are not happy, so they take Paul and manhandle him. They take him to the place where people are tried. It says they pull out these rods and begin to beat Paul and Silas. They're all bloody and beaten.

Then they take them to a jailer and say, "Hey, we want you to keep a close watch on them." This jailer is like, "Ha, ha, ha. I have something to do." He puts them in the dungeon, in the torture chamber of the jail. It says the cell within the cell. It says he puts them in stocks. Now we think *stocks*... First-century stocks were actually a torture device. They would contort your legs to where you would begin to cramp and feel pain.

So this guy begins to torture them. Paul and Silas are all bloody. They're all beaten. They're being tortured. What do they do? "Our God is an awesome God, he reigns..." They start singing, and the prison breaks open. There's an earthquake. Literally, this happened. It's not legend. It breaks open.

What happens if you're a prison guard at this time is you have to guard the prisoners with your life. If they escape, you would be tortured to death. This guy wants to die an honorable death, so he pulls his sword and places it to his gut, and he's about to kill himself. Paul says, "Stop!" Let me read it to you, starting in Acts 16:28:

"But Paul shouted, 'Don't harm yourself! We are all here!' The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.'

Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household."

Do you see how powerful the gospel is? Powerful enough to penetrate materialism, powerful enough to deliver from demons, powerful enough to take this authoritative dictator who wants to flex his authority on somebody to torture them, powerful enough to deal with depression, powerful enough to deal with the desire for suicide. The gospel moves in, and the church is born.

This motley crew is now the church in Philippi, gathered around for their Life Group. "Hey, how are you doing, Lydia? How are the purple linen sales going? The booth at Spice is turning a profit? Great." The **GI (14:20)**, the prison guard from Gatesville, is there; the stripper from Showtime is there; and they're gathered in a living room, saying, "Hey, let's dive in and talk about Jesus."

In 2020 we're like, "I really want someone more like me, like, maybe lives in my neighborhood, who likes my interests. And they have to cheer for Baylor, because that's important. I want to make sure they have the same political views as me and think the same as me, because we have to look alike." Are you serious? I've been spending a lot of time doing this community thing. In fact, I've had the privilege of consulting churches on the topic of community, and we've run a lot of experiments.

One time, I can remember, we did this experiment called *affinity groups*, which is you would get in a group based on your interests. We had groups of attorneys and groups of schoolteachers and groups of Etsy business moms, or whatever, and they would do life together. It failed miserably, because it turns out that when you put a bunch of people who think the same in a room, they don't get along. It's crazy.

But when you put a bunch of people who are all different who agree upon the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and they deal with hardship but push through it, something really beautiful is born called the *church*. Community is not found. It's not something you look for. It's forged. It's forged through conflict and through conversations and disagreements. It's forged through life experiences and hardships. It's forged through celebration.

When you push through the "I don't want to do this. Do I have to?" you find something rather remarkable and supernatural and beautiful when you begin to serve each other. So, verse 2: **"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."** Paul views himself as an agent of grace and peace. He extends grace to others, not giving people what they deserve but displaying grace to them.

"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy..." Circle that word *joy* because it shows up in this book in four chapters about 15 times. It is an epistle of great joy. **"...because of your partnership..."** "I have joy in you because of your partnership." **"...in the gospel from the first day..."** I just told you about the first day. **"...until now..."** He intentionally remembers them with joy. As he remembers them, he says joy comes from the partnership.

So, if you want to grow love for people, if you want to love someone more...you're like, "I don't love them, but I want to love them, and I know I should love them, but I don't know how to love them"...partner with them in the gospel. That's my first point: *to grow love for someone, you partner with them in the gospel*. This is where Paul's joy comes from.

You think, "Well, but what if they're not a Christian so I can't partner with them in the gospel?" If they're not a Christian, you get to partner with God so that they would know the gospel. If they *are* a Christian, you get to partner with them in the purpose of advancing the gospel. This is our

purpose, our reason for existence. You can think of everyone in this dichotomy. Every person... There's some sort of partnership going on. You're either partnered with them in making God known or you're partnered with God in helping them know him.

So, as you think about those seasons of life where you've had a people, with those people you've had a purpose. For it to matter at all, whether you were all cheering for the same team or you were playing the same team or you were working in a battle pushing back darkness of sorts, you had a people and you had a purpose. You had a community and you had a cause. You had an assembly and you had an ambition. You had a group and you had a goal. This is true for all of us.

This is why people come from war and want to go back...not because they love war but because they loved who they were at battle with and saw fighting for your freedom as a worthy cause. This is why athletes live in the past. Have you ever met somebody who was a professional athlete and 20 years later they're still like, "Man, I remember. It was fourth down. There were two minutes left on the clock..." It's just all the time. "Man, it was crazy. The bases were loaded. I stepped up to the bat..." They're telling these stories, not just because they loved the game, but they loved who they played it with.

This is this idea of community. Paul is looking back, and he has these fond memories of these people. Have you ever experienced this, like, partnered with somebody in the gospel? It's a supernatural bond that can't really be explained. I remember I went on this mission trip with these guys. I didn't know the guys, had never met them before. It was five other guys, and we trained for this mission trip. We met every Wednesday afternoon. We began to learn the culture, the people, who were there, what we were going to do. We began to prepare.

We get on a plane for 13 hours. We land in this country in Africa, and we begin to do work, just advancing the gospel. For 10 days we're locked arms, just pushing back darkness, making Jesus known in this place. We had nothing in common. Some of us had grandkids. Some of us didn't have kids. We were all across the board in our age and socioeconomic status and diverse in really every way...different ethnicities...all of it, just representing incredible diversity.

The only thing we had in common was we were men who loved Jesus, and today, if I see those guys, it's a tearful experience. I can't explain it. Twelve years removed from that, and if I see them, it's high five and long embrace, and it's like, "Hey, how are the kids? Tell me about the wedding, because I know I missed that." There's just something. Our hearts are knitted together in some unique way.

I think about that Life Group with those people I didn't like. I remember a turning point for us was the person I least liked... We went to Haiti together, and it changed the dynamic of our relationship because we were partnered in the gospel. So, Paul, when he remembers them (verse 3), he thanks God. Who remembers you and is moved toward giving God thanks, and who do you remember and *you're* moved to thank God?

I want you to know, if you're trying to grow a love for someone, be careful what you think about them, because we're all much more programmable than we want to believe. If you think negative thoughts toward somebody, you will grow and foster hate in your soul toward them. It's very,

very doable. We are all being brainwashed. Every day of our lives, we are growing hate or affection for somebody.

When Paul thinks of that jailer, he's not like, "Man, you tortured me, bro! I remember how much that hurt. Y'all were hitting me with those rods. And that girl is so annoying, always talk, talk, talk. 'He's a son of the Most High God.' Gosh, it was so annoying." Those are not the thoughts he feeds. The thoughts you feed grow. It's very simple. If you apply this idea, it will change your life. I'll say it succinctly like this: *the memories you feed determine the emotions you feel.*

He says (verse 6): "**...being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.**" Paul is confident that God is at work in the Philippians, and he speaks words of hope over them. "**It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart...**" Such tender words. "**...and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel...**"

He defends *and* confirms the gospel. That's what I'm doing this morning. If you're here and you're not a Christian, I am ready to defend the gospel to you, to use apologetics to show you that, logically, taking a step to placing your faith and your life in the hands of Jesus Christ is not crazy. If you're here and you're a follower of Jesus Christ, a Christian, I want you to walk through those doors in a minute deeper in love with him, with a greater confidence that you chose correctly.

You could have chosen Allah or Brahma. You could have chosen the Jewish monotheistic God, but you chose Father, Son, and Spirit, the one true God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth. Well done. You have chosen correctly. You will be with him forever. "**...all of you share in God's grace with me.**" The second time in just a few verses we've seen the word *grace*. Grace is you not getting what you deserve but getting something greater than you could have ever deserved.

I love the acronym: *God's Riches At Christ's Expense*. Not that *grace* is an acronym. It's just an easy way to remember what it is. It's God's riches at Christ's expense. "**God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.**" Paul's love for the Philippians was born out of Jesus' love for them. He strived to love them like Jesus loved them. A secret to loving the unloving is beginning to see them as God sees them.

Here's a way to say it: *to grow your love for someone, see them in a process*. Understand that they're in a process. That's my second point. Everyone in your Life Group (yourself included), everyone you do ministry with, and everyone you know is in a process. They're not finished yet. God can see them as finished because he sits outside of time, but you're not God. As you see them, you know that they're not where they're going yet. They're getting there.

Some of us have such a small view of God that we think, "Oh, he'll never save them" or "They'll never grow out of that." We speak labels over people. "She just talks all the time. Oh my goodness! She's always on her phone. He constantly thinks about his business. The way they parent is so frustrating." Those are all words of finality. "This is who they are. They're not going to change."

You thinking they're not going to change is not you having a small view of *them*; it's you having a small view of God. You thinking that someone won't get saved is not you thinking little of *them*; it's you thinking little of God. "God, you're so tiny. You can't even save them. You're not very powerful, because they're beyond your reach, clearly. They're so annoying to me that I don't think you can save them." That's the cry of your heart. Be careful. Be careful how you view God.

"...being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." I think we're afraid of being naïve. If you're going to be naïve in anything, have a naïveté that is born out of faith. "I believe God can." That's a beautiful naïveté, because it's *not* naïve, because he can. "I believe God can." Everybody is in a process.

When you were saved, did all of your sins, all of your struggles, go away? This is where you should violently shake your head. Some of them did, if I'm honest with you. I used to have this terrible language. Like, curse, F-word, noun, verb, adjective. It was just normal. I became a Christian, and I just didn't talk like that. I went to bed, and I woke up, and those words were gone. I wasn't tempted to curse anymore.

Pornography, on the other hand, gripped my soul. I had feasted on this drug and was an addict, and that was slower to die. Like a dog to his vomit, I wanted to return to that which brought death in my life. Alcoholism. I was a drunk. I became a Christian, and I no longer craved alcohol. I know that's not true for everybody. For me it was. It wasn't my vice anymore. I wasn't slave to it. Materialism, on the other hand, is still there some days. That one dies slowly, for whatever reason.

I don't know what those were for you, but you're in a process, and those you're doing life with are in a process. Paul just reminds them, "Hey, Jesus is doing a work in your life." He begins to see them like God sees them. God sits outside of time, so it's hard to understand this mindset. He says in Romans 8:30, "Those he called he also justified, and those he justified he also glorified." That word *glorified* is past tense. *Glorified* means to be presented pure and holy before Jesus.

Somehow, right now, God who does not work in our chronological, man-made, human construct sees you as perfected. He's no longer counting your sins against you (2 Corinthians 5:19). There's now no condemnation for you because you're in Christ (Romans 8:1). That's crazy. God knows your sins past, present, and future, and he has removed them as far as the east is from the west. He can see you, that future version of you, as pure and blameless.

We don't really have a way to explain that, but he loves you like his child. Paul strives to see the church in Philippi like God sees them. You've been around parents who just love their kids so much they're grossly naïve, almost negligent. Have you ever seen this? You see a toddler on the floor at Walmart beating the ground, and you're like, "Hey, your daughter is over there throwing a temper-tantrum."

"Oh, gosh. She's just hungry."

"Oh, she didn't eat? You should feed her, because that's annoying." You're like, "Hey, little Timmy is acting up over there."

"Oh, really? He didn't have his nap."

"Yeah, he's stabbing someone with scissors."

"Oh, he's just tired. It's what he does when he's tired. He gets violent."

"Evidently. Get the kid some sleep."

God is not naïve to your sin. He has acknowledged it and paid for it. So, what does Jesus see when he looks at you? He sees someone who's worth it. He sees someone who he bled out for, someone who he died for. He purchased you to God. This is a beautiful reality.

What Paul does, as he speaks these words of truth over them, is he moves into prayer for them. It's one thing to tell somebody you're praying for them. It's another thing, a better thing, a greater thing, to tell them what you're praying for them, and that's what Paul does. He says, "I am praying this over you."

Do you ever do this? Somebody says, "Hey, I'm praying for you." Sometimes I'm like, "But are you really? Did you just text that? You're praying for me? Is that like continuous throughout the day? What does that look like?" Have you ever told somebody, "Hey, I'm praying for you" and you didn't? That's the unforgivable sin. No, I'm just kidding. It's not. That's a joke. It's not. Some of you were like, "Shoot." It's not the unforgivable sin.

This is his prayer. He tells them. "**And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight...**" He says right out of the gate, "My prayer for you is that your love would grow in knowledge." Love is hate when it lacks knowledge so often. I can't tell you how many times I've mediated a conflict between two people or two businesses or two organizations and the conflict was rooted in a misunderstanding.

It's like, if we just grew in knowledge, we would also grow in love, which is an incredible application for us. I have to tell you something. I believe this to be true. You test it, because I'm going to say something crazy. This is a big statement. I believe more than any time in the history of the world are we, you and I, being brainwashed. You leave here and you test that.

Let me tell you why. Because never before have we had Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, have we had news sources, subscriptions to information, so that we get in these feedback loops where we are only fed people who are feeding our agenda. I've seen the headlines, and they're shocking. They exist for one reason: to foster hate. If you're in *this* feedback loop and somebody else is in *this* feedback loop, we leave our houses ready to make war with each other.

Here's a challenge. I'm not just saying this in vanity. I'm locking eyes with you. I hope you do this. Literally, this would be fun. Follow up with me. Say, "Hey, I did that thing you asked me to do, and here's how it went." Find somebody who believes completely opposite to you and take

them to lunch or coffee, sit on your hands, and say, "Hey, how did you get there? I just want to know." Genuinely be curious and listen. When you express your agenda, you lose. That's not the game. Just listen.

What you might do in doing that is you may earn the right... At the end of that, they may say, "Well, what about you? Tell me how *you* got there." Be careful. Don't be like, "Oh, I've been waiting. He told me you'd say this." No, don't do that. Just seek to build a bridge rather than destroy it. Another word for that is *love*. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. This is the greatest, number one, above all other commands that I give you."

"...so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God." He says, "That you would be able to discern what is best, that you would walk in the way God desires for you, filled with the fruit of righteousness, and that fruit of righteousness comes through Jesus Christ."

That word for *pure* is an interesting word. In the English, it would translate (and it may be in your Bible) as the word *sincere*. In the Latin the word is *without wax*. In the Greek it's the word for *sun tested*. Why? Those are strange words. Because in this culture, this was a culture of pottery. They would create and make pottery, and they would sell these pots, and they were very useful for the day.

If you overheat pottery or heat it up too fast in the kiln it will get cracks, and pottery with cracks is worthless. So, if you dealt in pottery, rather than throw that away and start over, what they would do is they would put wax in the pottery. They would get this paraffin wax and cover those cracks with the wax and then paint over it.

Whenever you used that pot and got it hot or put it over a fire, that wax was going to melt, and it was going to be worthless again, and they took your money. So, what you would do when you'd buy a pot was you'd hold it up to the sun and turn it to try to see if there were cracks in it. Paul is saying to them, "I want you to be authentic. I want you to be real."

This is so important, particularly in a day and a culture and a place where we play Christianity, where we think, "Oh, I'm going to go on Sunday. I'm going to give 10 percent. I may serve in this way." Then you walk through those doors and it has zero implications on how you do business, how you talk, what you do for fun, who you hang out with, the condition of your heart, your criticism, your critique. It doesn't affect anything else you do, and you think, "Well, I paid a penance. I'm going to die one day. Hopefully I squeak into heaven."

You're not a Christ follower. The reason I can say so emphatically and prophetically and certainly that you're not a Christ follower is because, plain and simple, you're not following Christ. That's simple. That's not wordplay. It would be normative for you to leave here and disciple your children, to have your faith impact your business, your worldview, your relationships, your dating, everything you do. Paul says, "This is my prayer: that you would be sincere, that you'd be true." If you want to grow love for someone, pray for them.

There are two kinds of Christians in the room. There are those of you who pray and those of you who don't know God. When you know him, you talk to him. If you want to grow love for somebody, I know no greater way than praying for them, that that would be normative. What's really fun about this text for me is Paul is writing this letter 10 years after he was there, 10 years after the demon-possessed girl shouted at him, 10 years after the jailer almost took his life, and he's reflecting back on the past 10 years of the work God has done.

What's fun for me as I think about Harris Creek is we're at the starting line. Now, I know it's a 145-year-old church. I know some of you have gone here for decades, but for a lot of us, we're here, and I'm excited to journey with you through the struggles of your marriage, your prodigal children, your challenges in dating, your dealing with sin. I'm excited to go through with you your marriages, your weddings, the celebrations of life, the birth of your children, the healing. I'm excited to make those memories with you.

We're here, and we're looking forward, and we're journeying. The Spirit of God is pressing us deeper and deeper into each other, but let's be honest. This is a big place. Relatively speaking, a very large place. Everybody look around. I'm serious. Look back there. Look around. Do you see people? Everybody sees who's here? It's a fairly full room, socially distanced. You don't know each other. You may have locked eyes with someone you know, but you don't know most of the people in the room.

I'm the pastor. I don't know most of the people in the room. Your church is that Life Group. That's your church. What we do here is we remember who God is, we're reminded of what he has done for us, but when we gather as a Life Group, we go to church. We're devoted to the apostles' teaching, the breaking of the bread, remembering who Christ is and what he has done for us, holding each other accountable, checking in on our relationships. That's what that is.

I got here Tuesday, and I was walking around the building and praying for you guys. I was praying for our church. I'll tell you specifically something I prayed out loud. I said, "Lord, would you just grow my heart for them? Would you grow my heart for these people?" I said, "Lord, as you grow their hearts for *me*, as their hearts for *me* grow, help me to appropriately steward that toward you, that they would love you more and more and more."

As I prayed that, immediately, when I finished saying that, names began to flood my brain and my heart, and then I began to pray for specific people. I thought of Jim Cox who's here. He's going through a terrible disease called *ALS* where you slowly suffer. I thought about his family, and I thought about the decision of moving toward a wheelchair and trying to get around and just how hard and awful that disease is.

Then I thought about Blain Norfleet and his family. He had an aneurism. He's watching the Stars game a few weeks ago and just passes out, goes into unconsciousness, and remains unconscious to this day, so that the family would have to make horrible decisions that no one should ever have to make. I thought about the Hitchcocks, whose 21-year-old son was murdered in downtown Waco. They're here. They're part of our family.

Yesterday I was under this roof doing this young man's celebration of life because he's no longer here. This was his church. As I thought about those couples and those families, I thought about the Life Groups around them, carrying them in these seasons, carrying the burdens and celebrating the victories. Ecclesiastes says, "But pity the person who falls and there's no one there to pick them up."

Make sure you have God's people around you, that you're not doing this battle alone. Here's the application. I'm going to give it to you. Please, I don't want to say it in vain. When I say, "This is what I'd like you to do," I mean quite literally, this week, this is what I would like you to do. Some of you are going to be like, "Oh, I'm too cool. I'm too prideful. I have too much going on. I'm too busy." No, you're not. Stop it. Do this. Are you ready?

First, I want you to talk with your Life Group this week about how you're going to partner in the gospel. Have that conversation. Secondly, I want you to reach out to them and encourage them in the work you see God doing in their life, the process they're in. Thirdly, I want you to tell them what you're praying for them. "This is my prayer for you. I'm praying this for you." Now, I'm going to be honest with you, men. What I see right now is a lot of women ferociously writing things down and us kind of being like, "Yeah, I ain't doing that." But, please. I appeal to you. Would you please do that?

It has been a hard year. God is good. I believe he's so good. Never been better. A lot of you have reached out. "How are you doing?" I'm doing great because I read the back of the book. I know how it ends, and I read the part that says, "In this world you will suffer, you will have trouble." After losing my dad, just running, making decisions, we had a vacation and 16-year anniversary September 25. Somehow Monica has stayed with me for 16 years. We were going to celebrate in Mexico.

My sin struggle is I'll sprint toward the finish line. I'll carry more than I should. I'll see the finish line and kind of limp across it. So I really had way too much hope on this vacation. The day before we were supposed to leave, I was diagnosed with COVID-19 and had to cancel the trip. I know that seems like big-time first-world problems, like, "Aw, woe is you. I'm sorry. Did you have to cancel your trip to Mexico?" But it messed with me. It really discouraged me. It really, really discouraged me.

On the day of our wedding anniversary... I know it's pathetic, but I was in our bedroom. You know, the door locked. Kids can't come in. Wife can't come in. It was dinnertime, so I was going to heat up some chicken noodle soup that one of you graciously dropped off. I got this text that said, "Come over." It was from our neighbors from that Life Group 16 years ago who I didn't have anything in common with. They now live here. They moved to Waco with us.

I did. I left. I got to see the sunlight. Monica and I walked over, and they had this table set up eight feet apart. They were in masks, and they were wearing suit and tie and dresses, and they had ordered DiamondBack's, which I think is the most underrated steak restaurant in the country. Hot Sports Opinion. They served us this unbelievable meal by candlelight as we watched the sun set.

I know that's so tiny. I know that's such a small thing, but I will be soaring on that for months to come, because it's just somebody showing love. What's the application today? Walk through those doors and give more than you should toward people in your life. Just love them in the craziest way.

I did a funeral yesterday. Somebody is going to be doing your funeral. What I want them to say about you and what I want them to say about me is "Man, that brother loved as well as anybody I know. He just loved people." So, if you want to grow your affections for someone, serve them, partner with them in the gospel, see them in a process, and pray for them. Let me pray for you now.

Lord, we love you. We thank you for this amazing place, this home we call *church*. Thank you for the privilege to sing truths about you and celebrate who you are. Thank you that we can gather again. Lord, would you remove this virus from our land? Don't let anything prevent the gospel from penetrating hearts and us growing in it. I pray this would always be a place where we defend it and confirm it. Help us to grow in our love for you. Thank you for this ancient letter and the work you did in and through it. We love you, God. It's in Jesus' name, amen.