

Praying for Ordinate Love

⁹ And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment,
¹⁰ that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, ¹¹ being filled with the fruits of righteousness which *are* by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (Phil. 1:9-11)

I did not grow up in a family of mechanics, but I did marry into one. So, occasionally, I've been standing in front of a car with the hood up, and having the parts explained to me. But pretty soon as the words *manifold, carburetor, injection, piston, cam-belt, and cylinder head* start coming at me, I confess that my eyes glaze over as I try to appear like I'm comprehending. I don't find it boring; I just don't understand it very well, and mechanics have a habit of being a little too detailed for someone like me, who wants the broad schematic. But once you do understand it, you can fix it, you can take it apart, and put it back together.

There are a few passages in the New Testament where Paul lifts up the hood on the car of the Christian life, and shows us the engine. Like a technician, he takes things apart and gives us the stages of how it works. Just like a mechanic will tell you that the petrol is pulled from one place and then converted into a spray somewhere else and then injected, and then ignited with the spark which pushes the pistons, so Paul sometimes does this with the Christian life. Interestingly, he almost always does this in his written prayers to the churches. You will see one of them in Ephesians 3:16-18, and another one in chapter 1. In Colossians 1, he prays and again shows you a mini-version of the Christian life.

He does that again in Philippians 1:9-11. After his greetings, and his explanation of why the Philippians bring him joy, Paul gives another under-the-hood description of the Christian life. On one level, these prayers are prayers we can adopt into our own prayers for each other. Praying Paul's prayers is a wonderful way to align your thoughts about other believers with the Bible's thoughts. But on another level, we are seeing Spirit-inspired insight into how the Christian life works, and what we should strive for. We need to be able to understand the parts of the Christian life, so we can take it apart, and put it back together. We need to know what part in our Christian lives is broken, what needs repairing or fixing or maintenance.

Now as we study this, there is a danger that just as my eyes glaze over when I hear too much about valves and carburetors, so our eyes can glaze over when we hear about love, knowledge, discernment, wisdom. We must not allow overfamiliarity with these words to let us miss how Paul the technician is going to show us how they relate. Because the end point of Paul's prayer is a God-glorifying life, a life of worship that pleases God.

Now it is easy to see the stages in this prayer because you can spot three instances of the word "that". ⁹ And this I pray, **that** your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment,
¹⁰ **that** you may approve the things that are excellent, **that** you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, (Phil. 1:9-10)

I. God-Glorifying Christians Grow in Ordinate Love

⁹ And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, (Phil. 1:9)

The prayer begins that the love of the Philippians would abound, or grow, even more in knowledge and all discernment. The Philippians had shown love to Paul in their fellowship in the gospel, and Paul wanted this love – this agape – to grow, to overflow. Not just their love for him, but their love for one another, and because it is the source of it all, their love for God.

Love is meant to grow, not remain static. And if your love grows, so does your joy and your pleasure. A growing Christian life is one where love increases and grows in quantity.

But what is love? It's notoriously difficult to define. In one sense, love is a desire out of need: we love water when we are thirsty, we love our family for support and strength, we love a Saviour who can rescue us. Here love could include the ideas of dependence, trust. But in another sense, love is a desire out of sheer gift: we love a sunset, we love glorious music, we love helping the needy, we love a holy God for His glory. Here love could include the ideas of admiration, enjoyment. Love is both a need we have and a gift we give. It desires the blessing of another and desires to be a blessing to another. We know this in marriage.

That's why the Bible has multiple words for love in the Greek: *phileo*, *storche*, and *agape*. These words aren't opposites, they overlap, and take on different shades. Here Paul uses *agape* to carry the deepest theological idea of a noble high love that wants the pleasure of pleasing, and needs the blessing of being a blessing.

But you'll notice that Paul does not simply say that a Christian's love should merely grow in quantity. You'll see that he says it should grow in a particular quality. He gives you a boundary for this growing love, a shape, a mold that this love is to be poured into. It must grow more and more in knowledge, and in all discernment.

What does this mean? First, for love to grow properly, it must grow in knowledge. Whatever we love, we should know the meaning and the nature of the thing or person we love. In fact, this word for knowledge is the word that means intimate, experiential knowledge. To love God, you must know who He is, what He is like, what He loves, and what He hates. To love another person, you must know the person's strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, moods and quirks, problems and successes. This applies to anything, from people to music, to food, to ideas. You cannot love what you do not know.

Christian love is not the creation of an emotion of pleasure, directed indiscriminately. Christian love is not a hazy feeling of niceness towards humanity and the world in general. Christian love is not optimism, or being cordial, or well-mannered. Christian love is based on knowledge. In fact, when we gain knowledge about certain things, we should not love them. If we are growing in God's love, we will hate what God hates.

All knowledge can be put in one of two categories: special revelation and general revelation. Special revelation is knowledge that comes from God's Word, rightly interpreted. General revelation is knowledge revealed in creation and culture, and humans have discovered what God has embedded in the world. And just as people can misinterpret special revelation, so they can also misinterpret general revelation. You need the right interpretation of either or both to have true knowledge.

But there is a second, twin way that our love must be shaped. As we grow in knowledge, we must equally grow in all discernment. This is a word which means the ability to understand circumstances, to have insight into the meaning and consequence of things. In the Greek version of the Old Testament, it was the word used for wisdom.

Knowledge tells you who someone is or what something is. But discernment tells you what the response should be. Discernment tells you what is the appropriate, right, fitting way to love this person, or this thing.

Knowledge tells you who God is; discernment tells you what God deserves. Knowledge tells you

who your child is; discernment tells you what kind of love is needed right now.

This is why we talk much in this church about ordinate love or ordinate affection. Ordinate just means fitting or appropriate. We are not supposed to love all things to the same degree. Some things should be loved more than others. We are not supposed to love all things in the same way. Some things must be loved differently than others. You must love your neighbour more than your dog, and love your brother in Christ more than your neighbour, and love your God more than anything else. You should love your dog as an animal, not as a spouse; you should love your child as a child, not as your ultimate source of joy; you should love your God not as a child or a spouse or a pal, but as a Holy God.

Just as the world is teaching us that hate is the ultimate wrong, so it is teaching us that love is always right, and it doesn't matter how, in what degree or in what kind. Many Christians are oblivious to one of the greatest dangers of pop culture and that is sentimentality. Sentimentality is the warping of love into something too sweet. Whether it's syrupy songs or Disneyfied love stories or kitschy art, it damages us. It gives us a shallow substitute for love by just giving us sweet feelings. We feel like we are loving, but we aren't really. One of the evidences of this is that if you grow up drinking at the font of sentimentalism, you can't deal with the problem of evil. You can't understand a world in which there is torture and rape and genocide. You can't understand the doctrine of Hell. You can't understand the exclusiveness of Christ. You can't understand election, and you can't understand judgement. In sentimentalism there is no such thing; it's all good, and all will end well.

You also can't understand the fear of the Lord. There can't be awe and trembling before the god of Disney, or the god of Pixar, or any other pop entertainment. So awe and reverence just sounds grim and gloomy and sombre. Why? Because love is jolly and chipper and familiar.

Many Christians have confused their own feelings of niceness and benevolence with love. They feel warm towards something or someone. They decide to give money to a certain cause, and they feel good. They feel warm towards a certain person or group or belief, and they feel that this good feeling is love, and therefore it must be right. But the Bible has a term for that sort of thing. It is called "being wise in your own eyes".

If all Paul had said was, let your love grow more and more, then we could fill this word *love* with anything we want, good feelings, happiness, optimism. But Paul says, Christian love grows in knowledge (what is) and discernment (what it deserves). That's ordinate love: love bounded by, and chastened by truth.

Now as Paul lifts up the hood of the Christian life, he now shows where the pipes and valves of this thing called ordinate love lead.

II. God-Glorifying Christians Love What God Loves

¹⁰ that you may approve the things that are excellent, (Phil. 1:10)

This little phrase has a world of meaning. If you have ordinate love, you will then be able to examine and approve something. What will you approve of, what will you love? You will approve of the things that are excellent. This is one Greek word which means the things that are superior, things better and above the inferior, things that differ from the mediocre.

Notice how absolute the Bible is. It doesn't refer to the things that "seem excellent to you" or the things that are "beautiful to you". No, the Bible regards certain people or things or ideas as

excellent in themselves, objectively beautiful, objectively good, whether or not you see or recognise it to be the case.

Beauty and excellence is there, and the eye of the beholder doesn't change it one bit. One of my professors once said, if you meet a man who says roses are ugly and rubbish dumps are beautiful, it doesn't change a thing about roses and rubbish dumps. It will only change one thing: your opinion of that man. You will know something is severely warped and deficient in him.

A growing Christian can make the right assessment of what is worth admiring or honouring or loving. He can tell the difference between what is pleasing to God, that which God is pleased with, and that which He is not. Later on in the book, Paul is going to give us another list of the kind of thoughts we should have, and they give us a helpful way of understanding this idea of excellence.

⁸ Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things *are* noble, whatever things *are* just, whatever things *are* pure, whatever things *are* lovely, whatever things *are* of good report, if *there is* any virtue and if *there is* anything praiseworthy-- meditate on these things. (Phil. 4:8)

The growing Christian approves what is true, not what is false, what is noble, not what is dishonourable, what is just, not what is unfair or corrupt, what is pure, not what is defiling, what is lovely, not what is ugly or degrading, what is of good report or commendable, not what is reprehensible, what is excellent and praiseworthy, not what is poor and disgraceful.

To put it another way, the Christian loves what God loves and hates what God hates. To what does this apply? It applies to doctrine. It applies to behaviour – a growing Christian knows what kind God loves. It applies to speech. It applies to the human body, what we do with it and to it and put in it and on it. It applies to entertainment. It applies to art and music. It applies to corporate worship.

Put simply, Christians judge. The more they grow, the better they judge. The more like Christ they become, the more they love what He loves and hate what He hates.

Now notice the logic here. Paul didn't say you must judge well, so as to love well. He says, you must love well so as to judge well. When you love with knowledge and discernment, you will then judge properly and approve of what God approves of.

The Bible teaches that right love is the basis of proper judgement. First right affections, then come right judgements. Judgement is not a purely intellectual thing; it is a moral choice, based on what we love. Remember what Solomon told us? The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. First we love God rightly, then we wisely judge the world.

This is why people who are warped in their loves become warped in their judgements. The deeper you get into a warped love, the more you say, "What's wrong with it? I can't see a problem?" The deeper people go into irreverent worship, the less they can see how irreverent it is. The more immodest a person becomes in dress, the less she can see how immodest she is. The more polluted you become in thought, the less you notice it. The opposite is true. The more reverent a person becomes, the more he sees where he is not, and how he should be. The more you love beauty, the more you see what is ugly.

The real rudder of the ship of our lives is not the reason, but the heart. The loves, the desires determine where you are going, what you desire, what you will approve of, and that in turn shapes your reason, and your thinking. This is what Jesus meant when he compares the eye to the loves or

desires of the heart. He said, ²² "The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. ²³ "But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great *is* that darkness! (Matt. 6:22-23)

The eye is what lets light into the being of a person so he can understand. If the eye is damaged, the whole person is incapacitated. If the eye is healthy, the person deals with the world well. So, if the loves are corrupt, then that filter warps the perception of everything, and your whole judgement of life is skewed. If the loves are right, then you are seeing the world as God made it.

Love with knowledge and discernment, and you will love what God loves. That leads to a third stage.

III God-Glorifying Christians Become Consistently Christlike

that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, ¹¹ being filled with the fruits of righteousness which *are* by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (Phil. 1:10-11)

Here is the third result: you will be sincere and without offense. Sincere means spotless, without evil. Without offense means blameless, not causing others to stumble. Positively, you are holy; negatively, you don't cause others to fall or sin. That's a simple way of saying, you are Christlike. And that's confirmed by the next phrase: being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ. You become that branch abiding in the vine, bearing fruit of godly character, Christlike love. And a fruitful Christian is a useful Christian: being an ambassador for Christ, sharing the gospel, obeying the one another commands, drawing others to the Lord.

Again, let's try to trace the stages in this Christian engine. If you love God, people and the world according to correct knowledge and with discernment, you will end up approving what God approves of. You will love what He loves and hate what He hates.

But if you do that, your words, thoughts, and deeds change. What you enjoy reading changes. What you enjoy listening to changes. Who you enjoy spending time with changes. The things you want to talk about change. Your thought life changes. How you want to spend your money changes. How you want to invest your time changes. Your priorities and goals and motives change. Your friendships change. Your leisure time changes. If loving what God loves becomes the heartbeat of your life, you are becoming Christlike.

And that lies at the very heart of sanctification. Holiness is not cleaning the outside of the dish, merely setting rules and regulations. There is nothing wrong with rules and limits and boundaries. But if the heart is set on sin, they actually provoke that sin nature all the more.

This is why when you try to change behaviour without focusing on what the heart loves and desires, you will always end up either with a Pharisee, keeping outward rules while the heart grows more corrupt, or you will end up with a deeply discouraged Christian who tries to change outwardly but keeps failing.

When the heart is regenerate, and desires to love rightly, then the life becomes increasingly pure, and increasingly blameless, and increasingly fruitful. And like Paul said in verse 6, so here again, he expects this to be true of believers until the day of Christ. True believers are a work that God will not abandon: He will finish it.

Why? The same verse tells you: to the glory and praise of God. This becomes a matter of worship: Christlike believers bring maximum glory to God.

This is a good time then, to remind ourselves that the greatest commandment is not evangelism, not discernment, not fellowship, but to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. If we receive through grace new hearts, we can love God. But not with just any feeling or sentiment. With a love that feeds on knowledge and wisdom, so that it loves what God loves. Flowing out of that love, will be holiness, service, evangelism, fellowship, making disciples, and honouring God before the world.