

Saturday Communion Service

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Date: 01 May 2010

Preacher: Chris Smart

[0 : 00] Can you please turn to that reading in the book of Philippians, and I want to look at the prayer there from verse 9 to verse 11. Tomorrow, God spares us. We sit around the table of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and we celebrate, really, God's great love towards us in the gospel, and giving Jesus to us for the cleansing from sin, for a new life to the power of His Spirit. And that celebration in the past has been called a love feast, and one of the key elements is its corporate nature. It's not something we do by ourselves in the privacy of our own homes, but we are showing our unity, and we are declaring a love for God and a love for each other as we drink from one cup and we eat from that one loaf to remind ourselves that we are now united together in a new life. And it really reminds us of the importance of love within the church of Jesus

Christ, and that no church can really function well without it. Can you imagine churches? Perhaps you have come from churches where it wasn't so much God's chosen people that made them, but God's frozen people. And you almost had to take Christianity out of the refrigerator in some churches and defrost it because there's been such a lack of genuine warmth, human understanding, and compassion towards the people that we sit beside with in the pews. And so what we have tonight, what we're going to look at, is the significance of love amongst us in the church, and we're going to do that simply by looking at one of Paul's prayers. The epistles are filled with his prayers. They are beautiful, and they are a great practice in our own spiritual lives that you can take them and use them as your own prayers as well.

And in verse 9 to verse 11, he tells us what his prayer is for the church in Philippi, this church that he was perhaps most closest to emotionally. And it's the church that we read of in Acts 16. And he went up there to the north of Greece to bring the gospel for the first time into the European continent. And then particularly in Acts 16, we read of three different people who were all touched by Jesus and brought into his church there. Lydia, the woman from the upper class, the slave girl from the underclass, the Philippian jailer from the working or the middle class.

And out of all of that diversity of background, God began to weld together a unity.

A new humanity, which is what the church of Jesus Christ on this earth is all about. The very thing that our politicians so often talk about in our multicultural society. They strive to somehow bring unity in the midst of such diversity. What we have here is one of the key elements that Christianity sees as essential to doing that. And it's all summed up in the word love.

[4 : 20] The love, like an elastic band, the word, it can be made to stretch over all kinds of different things. Often it's just synonymous in our society today for lust.

And love is very often loaded with very sentimental terms and images. But what we see in this prayer is that love is not less than sentiment, but it has to be more than mere sentiment. And you see that in his prayer in verse 9 when he says, this is my prayer, that your love may abound more and more in what? In knowledge and depth of insight. So what I want to do, first of all, is look at what love knows. And then secondly, at what love can create, what love creates. Because the kind of love that we see here is a love with knowledge. A love with knowledge, that you may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.

Do any of us really believe that love is blind, that love can't exist without real knowledge? Can you imagine any marriage today that could possibly exist where the husband was absolutely clueless about his wife's likes and dislikes, about the things that bugged her and the things that warmed her? If a husband was utterly without knowledge and refused to take the time and the effort to understand his wife, what kind of marriage could you possibly have? What kind of meaning would it have if he sent her a card on Valentine's Day saying, I love you? So we know, I think, instinctively, though we might not often articulate it as clearly as Paul does in his prayer, that love must have, if you like, a head knowledge. It must have the head engaged. It must have an intellectual component

to it, if you like, if you like. For only as a husband or wife, as spouses know each other really well, can they understand what will be for the best for the other person. So love must have degree of knowledge in it. And so his prayer here is that their love may abound more and more in this knowledge.

He wants love to go deep. He doesn't want some kind of superficial love amongst a diverse group of people in the church in Philippi. And God is saying the same to us tonight, that one of the keys for your future, for your growth, for your development as the people of God, as part of this congregation, is that there has to be an ever-increasing depth to your love. That the deeper the love, the better and more smoothly will the whole existence of the church go forward. Because at this level, love is like a river. The deeper the river D, or the dawn, runs, the smoother it is. It's rough and ready up, in the highlands, as it were. But as it comes towards the ocean, it's broadening out, it's running deeper, and it's running smoother because of its depth. And Paul is evoking that kind of picture, and he says,

I want you to have a love that abounds more and more. He's saying, I want it to overflow. I want it to abound. I want the capacity of your river to be so great. And because he says he wants it more and more, he's really reminding us of a simple truth. You can never say that you've loved enough. In the church, you can never say you've arrived, that you are a warm fellowship, that you are doing enough in that sense. There is, in his prayer here, a desire that there will be more and more. What kind of marriage will exist if the spouses basically say, well, we've arrived, we've got it comfortable, we've got it sorted, and we're just happy now to coast along, not to grow and deepen the love? Now, I suppose the reality is many marriages do end up like that. And what will it be like? It'll become colder and colder, and all too often, even worse. They split. And I guess it's the same then going to be for the church.

[9 : 51] Unless we are desiring to see more and more love, the church will grow up to be a cold place, or Christianity will be back in the freezer. And that in itself can lead to all kinds of problems in churches and denominations. So he's saying he wants to see the little boat of our congregation, or the little boats of our own individual lives, part of a fleet, a narmada, sailing down a rather tranquil river, tranquil river, because it's got depth to it. And the more depth to it, the easier it'll be for all the boats to float down that river together. And so it's got to have depth. Depth of what?

Depth of a love, yes. But what kind of love, he's saying? A love that abounds more and more in knowledge and depth of insight. He's saying you've got to know what God is all about, what his desire is for the church. You've got to know your theology. You've got to know what the components are of discipleship, what it means to be a Christian and to go on knowing.

But you've also got to know each other. You've got to have that kind of a composite knowledge at that level. And then he says you've got to be able to essentially put that into practice as well.

That's kind of the difference in the words that you've got in verse 9, that you may abound more and more in knowledge, knowing God's plan, knowing your theology, and knowing each other too, and depth of insight. What's the difference between those two phrases? What's he asking?

He's telling us what will give us great love. Well, for some of the older folks in the congregation here, you'll all remember the colonel. He used to be part of the congregation here. And for those of you who don't, well, his title gives it away, ex-military man. And I think if he was here and I could put words in his mouth, he would say the difference is the difference between strategy and tactics.

Strategy is the knowledge. Tactics is the discernment. Strategy, the knowledge of what needs to be done, the big game plan, where the church should be going forward in its mission, and its mission to bring Christ to all the nations, and how Christians grow. But then you've got to have not just the wider strategic plan, you've got to know your tactics, how you will implement that plan at various stages. And the Greek word here for depth of insight would seem to have something of that more practical edge to it, that it's the what you've got to do, but also the how you put it into practice. So for you as a church, you have got to know each other well enough, and know what God's vision is for Bonacard, and then you've also got to have the know-how to put that all into practice in each other's lives. Now, I have to do that, David has to do that pastorally all the time as ministers. We can deal with caseload after caseload, where you know what may need to be done. If there's a problem in a marriage, if there's somebody fighting with some particular sin in their life or whatever they're dealing with, and you kind of know where we should be going, how our Christian life should develop, what kind of fruit we should be producing.

[13:59] You get that picture, and you listen to their story, but then you've got to know how to apply the gospel specifically to them. So you're looking for ways, you're asking questions that will be more revealing of the specifics of that situation. And you are all called to be pastors to each other.

But how well do you know each other? How well do you know God's big picture of what He wants for the church and for individual Christian growth? And can you fuse it together with the how-to, with being able to apply it with more precision to individual circumstances and personalities?

You see, only that kind of knowing, insightful love will produce a healthy church. A shallow knowledge will equal a shallow love. A shallow knowledge of God, a shallow knowledge of each other, will lead to a shallow love in a congregation. And that will lead to critical failure to meet each other's real pastoral needs. So it's not rocket science, is it? When He prays from His own heart of love that your love, that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight. But what will that look like in practice? You're going to have to know each other that well to be able to love each other, to be ever increasing the spiritual temperature within your fellowship, within this family of faith.

You've got to put it into practice. It's not enough, is it, to come along on a Sunday morning and sit in a pew. Not even enough to go downstairs and have a coffee after the service. It takes more than that.

[16:16] And I think more and more, and perhaps you're even, you're doing a lot of this already in your own congregation, discovering the value of getting people into groups where they can really get to know each other.

You've got your youth fellowship groups. You have your home groups. We in the Black Isle, we've got an art class on a Tuesday night for some of the folks that go there.

And they get to know each other. They get to connect. They pray for each other at that. So what are Wednesday prayer meetings are meant to be about as well? Because you're giving up a little bit more time to be with each other as well as to pray to God.

And each of these little places, it's like creating a little pot, a little container, where you're putting in the people, and you're putting in this call to love. And with this knowledge that we're being asked for here, that we gain from God and from knowing each other, love can be created more in those containers.

Without that, a church would be very coldly functional at best. So do you spend time with each other in that way?

[17:34] Do you, and are you forming that kind of connection with people? Well, you can't do it with everybody, but you can do it with somebody. Some churches do prayer triplets.

Two or three friends meeting together. An older Christian with maybe two younger Christians. Are you doing anything like that? So you get to know them and pass on the knowledge of what God wants in their lives.

You know them well enough to discern how to apply that knowledge to their lives. It's a great calling. And it's little wonder that Paul was making it a prayer, because ultimately it's God who will empower us and enable us to live like this with each other.

Think of what it might look like in a practical example. Let's invent a girl called Jill. Jill, she comes to Bon Accord from little or no background, but just drifts in through an invitation from a friend.

And as she's in the congregation, she begins to meet a few people. And an older woman, Jane, meets her and really takes her under her wing. Invites her to one of the home groups in the congregation.

[18:50] And she goes through some form of discipleship course. And in that time, they grow in their knowledge of what God wants in their lives and in their knowledge of each other.

Then the day comes that now Jill feels that she's able to open up a little bit about something that happened to her in her past. That's still giving her big issues in the here and now.

And you can fill in the blank, whatever that may be. But unless Jill deals with that, she will not grow. She will not be able to really move on in her new faith in Christ unless it's dealt with. But because of this situation, because Jane is now there, and if she's got the wisdom and the discretion and the depth of insight, she'll ask the probing questions.

She's able to gently uncover a little bit more about what's happening and specifically apply gospel truths to real pastoral issues.

[20 : 06] And if you have a church with some Janes in it, then God will send you a lot more Jills.

But if a congregation doesn't have that kind of depth of love abounding more and more, then I guess God will not be so quick to send these precious Jills into our fellowships.

But the more we grow with this kind of love, the more we pray for it and work at it and create the practical environments to express it and to get to know each other, I think you will ever, we will ever become more and more surprised at how many people God has out there that He is just waiting to send into our congregations.

Now, you might not even have to do much in the way of evangelism, but God will send them to you when He knows that His church is ready to receive them.

They're too precious for God to send into a refrigerator. He doesn't want to put them into cold storage. He wants them to go into an environment of real warmth, a hothouse that will produce real growth.

[21 : 42] So there's a great hope here. If we work on this and pray for this, this is the kind of church that will really, really grow and will grow deep, strong Christians.

And then you see also here some of the things that will be the fruit of that. Love must know. It must have a head knowledge. But it's a love that will then go on to create when the head and the heart are fused together.

Just briefly, some of them that he mentions here. First of all, he talks there in verse 10 about discernment. We've touched a little bit on that.

The picture there of discernment is of smelting metal. Being able to test the caliber and the quality of metal.

To have that kind of discernment of what's really there. And for the church to grow, it must have this kind of knowing love that will produce discernment.

[23 : 00] If it's all love and feeling and lacks the head knowledge, then discernment will go out the window. And very often in Christianity, there is such an emphasis in some branches on just what you feel is what counts, that we lose track of what we think and how important that is as well.

You're surrounded in Aberdeen with churches that have been gutted by what we call theologically liberalism, which has put the emphasis upon feeling.

So long as you feel something to be true, it doesn't matter if it actually is. It doesn't matter what you actually believe, so long as the feeling is there.

And that's a real danger in certain branches of the evangelical church as well. And we've got to guard against that. Instead of what we are being called to, it is not some kind of cold head knowledge where it's all theology, which is sometimes where our own particular tradition may lead us.

But it is the fusion of piety and theology, good understanding. It's the fusion bringing them together. When you've got this first part of verse 9, that kind of knowing love, knowing love, then you'll get discerning people and a discerning congregation.

[24 : 33] It's one of the fruits that this creative, knowledgeable love will bring about. Next one it will bring about is purity. It says there, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure.

The idea, I think, there is of your inner life. What's going on inside you? Can it stand up to examination? If the sun can get its light into you, what will it reveal?

What is your inner life like? What are you when you are alone? That's who you really are in some ways.

And it's saying, well, what's the inner life like? If we have this knowing love, this discerning love for each other, then we will be able to understand, as it were, the insight of fellow Christians into our hearts and lives.

That we will not maybe wear our sleeve and our heart before every Christian, but we will know some Christian, at least one fellow believer that we trust. Trust enough to open up our inner life and have a degree of personal accountability with them.

[26 : 05] It will be a great gift for many of you. Some of you will be quite lonely. And in that, there's a danger sometimes that you'll hide things.

You're looking great at the YF. You're looking great in the prayer meeting. You'll be looking great around the table tomorrow. And you'll be looking great at the YF. You'll be looking great at the YF. You're looking great at the YF. You know, the church will have people in it that you can trust enough to open up to and have personal accountability before them to help you with some of your

struggles.

The Puritans would talk about having a friend of the soul. I don't quite remember the term that they used. I will boo somebody, but a spiritual level, somebody, at least one good friend that they could really almost say anything to. Do you have anybody like that?

And as a congregation, do you create people like that? The more you do, the more inner purity there will be amongst your people, that the light can shine inside us, so we see it reveals what's really going on inside us. And then it says not only pure, but blameless, and that's maybe more the picture of your outward behavior rather than your inner life. And the picture there of that word blameless is the idea of not causing others to stumble. So if we go back to our illustration of little boats floating down the river, this knowing love produces a more blameless behavior amongst us, so our little boats aren't colliding with each other on the river because the river is deep.

The river can therefore flow more smoothly, and the boats won't collide. And this kind of knowing love amongst the fellowship of Christ's people means the current is deeper. There's less collision, less damage done. People have more of an openness so they can say to the person that's got problems and got issues and say to them, well, look, do you not realize how you're coming over, how you sound, and what you sound like. Unless you've got that degree of integrity and love within the congregation, it's very hard to be honest with each other. And one of the biggest problems in this church is that we can look so good on the outside, but we are all talking about so-and-so who's got real issues but is blind to them. And we need to have the kind of relationship with each other that we can actually say. My friend, you've got problems. In one congregation up north, there was one older man in the congregation who just simply smelled terrible, and it was a dilemma. What do you say to someone like that? Did we have the undergirding relationship where he could trust us if we were to tell him the truth of how awful it was to sit beside him? A very difficult one. Do we have that kind of relationship with the woman who's got such a critical spirit that she's wounded and lashed out that umpteen different people in the congregation and umpteen different committees and whatnot in the congregation is so difficult to deal with? Is there that kind of relationship with her, with this knowing love that she can be spoken to, to encourage a blameless life so there'll be less collisions in the church? That is surely a beautiful thing. Don't you think these things are sometimes missing from our churches? Discernment, purity, blameless lives, and endurance is the other last picture here.

[30 : 40] That you be pure and blameless until the day of Christ. He's asking, will our little boats, our little fleet, as it sails down the river through all the rapids and all the problems and all the potential troubles on a river, will it get to journey's end?

Will we endure? Will all our little boats float down? Well, if we've got this kind of deep love, knowledgeable, discerning love, then it will facilitate the spirit of endurance.

How many people in Bonacord over the years have just drifted away? How many people have we lost to the faith? Here in this congregation, in any congregation, some are still sitting on the pews, but they're dead inside. Others have long since given up the habit of darkening the door of any church. They did not endure. There will always be Sam that will respond that way to God's Word, but there's others perhaps that the church ever grows and develops this kind of love more, that we'll be able to hold on to them. And together, we'll make it to the end of the river.

As it says there, until the day of Christ. The word until can also mean against, against the day of Christ. This knowledgeable, knowing love helps us to stand on the day of Christ. You see, when we all float down the river in our little boats, we get to the ocean, we get to what? The perfect storm. The great day of judgment. When we are confronted with Christ and all of His splendor and glory, and His rays shine into our innermost hearts and recesses and reveal all that we are, all of our faults and failings and sins, will we endure that? We will endure it better, it's saying.

[33 : 00] We will, pure and blameless until the day of Christ. We'll endure that day better if the church is characterized, sustained, nurtured by a knowing love.

We will all be there to face that perfect storm, but we will face it better if we have sailed in the company of a church with this knowing love about it. That's the church that will be filled with the fruit of righteousness, the fruit that the righteousness of Christ produces within us through the gospel. As we float down this river together, all our little boats, like banana boats, are all packed with fruit. The more collisions that we have, the more problems that we have, the more fruit will be lost overboard. But the deeper the river is because of this knowing love, the greater purity, the greater blamelessness, the greater endurance, the more fruit will make it to the very end of the river. We're

all on this journey.

And the best way Paul is saying here, and God is saying to you tonight, God, as you work at having this knowing love amongst you. Praise God, it's there already, but He wants more and more.

And then He wants some more and then He wants more. So tomorrow, feed that love.

Feed it with the bread and the wine. Feed it with Christ by faith. Feed it by doing that together.

Feeding on Christ together. It's an essential component. That can lead to an explosive growth as you turn this church evermore into a hothouse of growth for the gospel. May it be so. Amen.