

**Sermon for Sunday, October 6, 2013**  
**Rev. Eric Stiller**  
**Joy in People**  
**Phil 1:1-11**

We're beginning a series today in which we're looking at a letter written by the apostle Paul to the church in the ancient city of Philippi. A very famous letter. Even if you're not a Christian or if you're not very familiar with the Bible, Philippians is filled with some of the most famous verses in Scripture. You know: "He who began a good work in you will complete it until the day of Christ Jesus." "To live is Christ, to die is gain." "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." These verses are incredibly famous. So famous, in fact, that a lot of times we hear them in a way that is completely detached from their original setting. And because of that they lose their power. They end up becoming kind of sweet, syrupy, Hallmark greeting cards, but without any power to really change our life because they're not grounded in the original setting of the letter. But when we realize that Paul wrote this letter from prison, it completely changes things. In fact, the things he says in this letter are almost unbelievable when you consider the circumstances of his life when he wrote it. He was literally in chains. And it's because of that that this letter has the power it does. It's like the power of a crucible. A crucible is a container that is capable of sustaining incredible heat. And it removes all the impurities of whatever you put into it so that you come out with something beautiful and pure. But in order to get it you have to turn up the heat. And the heat is turned way up in Paul's life right now. But the things that come out are beautiful. If you read this letter, one of the things you see is that he is just overflowing with joy.

And that's really counter-intuitive for us, because the things that are going on in Paul's life right now should lead to anything but joy. His career as a church planter is derailed. His personal freedom is lost. His reputation is shattered by the shame of incarceration. And on top of all that, there's a very real danger that he's going to lose his life. And yet he says, "I rejoice." How can he say that? What's more, how can you say that? Because some of you have the heat turned way up in your life, too. Maybe your career is derailed, or you're having a hard time just getting it on the tracks. Maybe your personal freedom is constrained. Students, you know what that feels like. "Why can't my parents ever let me do what I want to do?" Or parents, there's nothing like having children to curtail your personal freedom. Or maybe the heat is turned up in other areas of your life: your reputation, your relationships, your finances. Or maybe, like Paul, your life is on the line, whether it's through a life-threatening illness, or just the fact that you're getting older. Some of you right now have the heat turned way up in your life.

And if it's not right now, it will be. The circumstances of our life are like the weather in St. Louis. It can change overnight. And if your heart's deepest joy is tied to your circumstances, then you're in trouble. Your joy is in constant danger. But what if there was a way to find a joy that could never be threatened, so that no matter what else is going on in your life, your joy can never be taken away? The first chapter of Philippians actually shows us how. In fact, there are two big things here that Paul says he rejoices in. We're going to look at one of them this week, and the other one next week as we continue through the chapter. This week we're going to see three things about Paul's joy: the reason for his joy, the shape of his joy, and the heart of his joy. First, notice

**The reason for his joy** – Paul begins this letter the same way that he begins many of his other letters, with a prayer. In verses 3-4, he says, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer." And up until this point, it sounds like a lot of his other letters, like Ephesians or Colossians. He begins with a prayer, but this prayer is different. Because he tacks on these two little words at the end of verse 4: he says "I'm making my prayer *with joy*." And

then, before he even gets to the prayer itself, he spends the next four verses talking to them about why he has so much joy.

He gives two reasons. And the first is this. Verse 5: “because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.” Now, that word *partnership* can mean a few different things. But here, it means something active. It means something they were doing with Paul. They were like investment partners with Paul in the gospel. That means that they were doing things like praying for him, encouraging him, sending people to visit him, supporting him in his ministry of the gospel, and also engaging in their own ministry in the city of Philippi. It meant all of those things. But there was one more thing in particular Paul probably had in the forefront of his mind. They were supporting him financially and doing so sacrificially. In his other letters Paul talks about the financial generosity of the Philippians, and one of the main reasons he’s writing to them now is to thank them for their generosity. They gave generously, and sacrificially. So the first reason Paul rejoices in them is because of the good work they’re doing for God.

But that’s not the only reason, and it’s not the ultimate reason. If he had just stopped here, it would be easy to think that the only reason Paul was rejoicing was because their generosity had made the circumstances of his life a little better. His joy would have been completely self-focused. But in **verse 6**, he tells them the reason their good work for God gave him so much joy. “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.” The reason Paul rejoiced in their good work for God was because it was evidence of God’s good work in them. The priority of Paul’s joy was not tied to the circumstances of his own life, but the transformation of someone else’s life. Paul is saying, “I’m rejoicing in your good work for God, but not because it made my life a little easier. I’m rejoicing in your good work for God, because it’s evidence of God’s good work in you.”

And you know what? That’s the gospel. If you’re just beginning to explore Christianity, or even if you’ve been a Christian for years, it’s so easy to think here’s the way it works. “If I do good work for God, he’ll do a good work in me. If I clean myself up, get my act together, if I’m a good person, and I live a good life, and do good works for God, then he’ll love me, accept me, bless me, and take me to heaven when I die.” But that’s not the gospel. The gospel is not, “If I do good work for God, he’ll do a good work in me.” The gospel is “Because God has already begun a work of renewal and restoration in my life through Jesus Christ, now I have the motivation and power to live a good life and do good work for God. Because God has already begun to work in me, therefore I can begin to work for him.” In every other religion, our work comes first. It’s all up to us. But in the gospel, God’s work comes first. It’s all up to him. The reason for Paul’s joy was not because the Philippians were working for God. The reason for his joy was because God was working in them. Rather than being focused on himself, Paul had a joy that was focused on God’s work in other people. And that leads to our second point.

**The shape of his joy** – How did Paul get there? And how can you and I get there? Paul had a joy that wasn’t focused on his own circumstances or how well his life was going. That means that no matter what was going on in his own life, he had a joy that could never be taken away. How do we get there? I believe the actual prayer he prays for the Philippians in verses 9-11 shows us how he got there. And it all comes down to one simple principle. Here’s the principle.

Your highest love determines your deepest joy. In other words, there are a lot of things in this world that are worthy of love, but they’re not all equally worthy. For instance, I love a great cup of coffee. Anyone who knows me knows I love good coffee. And that’s good. Coffee is worthy of being loved. God made the world, and everything in it. And he intends for us to enjoy it. But if I love coffee more than my wife, then my loves are seriously out of order. If coffee is higher on my love list than my wife is, then my

love is disordered. And that would mean that my capacity for joy in life would be completely dependent on whether or not I can get a good cup of coffee. That's not a very secure basis for joy. And finding a joy that can never be threatened means taking all the things in my life that I love, and getting them in the right order. Your highest love determines your deepest joy. Look at how Paul expresses this.

In **verse 9** he says, "It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment." So first, he acknowledges the reality that we all love something. The question is not whether we love, but what we love. What is our love focused on? Well, it depends on what's shaping it. When I was a kid, my mom used to grow tomato plants in our backyard. And in order for the plants to really flourish, she built a lattice for them. It was a wooden frame that shaped and guided the plants as they grew. Your love is being shaped and guided by something. When you turn on the tv, or go online, or walk into a store, you are being shaped and guided by images that marketing companies use to sell you a vision of what you need in order to be really happy. And we buy it. I've got to have that smart phone, or these shoes, or that outfit, or that body, this car, or that house. When you read the newspaper or a blog, or watch a movie or tv, you are being shaped and guided by ideas of what is true, what is right, and what is good. Your love is constantly being shaped and guided by something. Paul says he wants our love to be guided by the latticework of knowledge and discernment. Why? **Verse 10**: "so that you may approve what is excellent." That word "approve" means you put something to the test. It's like taking a car for a test drive. You can see a car commercial on tv and say, "Wow!" You can read about it in auto magazines and think, "Sounds impressive." But the only way to know if it really lives up to all of that is to take it for a test drive. You put it to the test. Paul wants us to test out the things that are excellent. And that word "excellent" is a word that means not just what is good, but what is vital, what is essential, what should be highest on your love list.

So here's what Paul is saying. I want your love to be shaped in such a way that you're able to set it on that which is highest. Because your highest love determines your deepest joy. Your joy is tied to whatever is highest on your love list. So let me ask you a question. What's highest on your list? Do you know? Be careful how you answer. Because you can say there is something at the top of your list, like God or your family, but if someone were to look at the way you actually live, they might see that regardless of what you say, functionally speaking, something else is really highest on your list. Do you know what it is?

A good way to find out is to answer some questions. What do you spend your time on? What do you spend your money on? What do you think about, talk about, dream about? What absorbs you? Or, to come at it from another direction, what do you worry about? What makes you anxious? What are you most afraid of losing, or not getting? The way you answer these questions can go a long way toward helping you discover what's really highest on your love list. Paul is saying, "I want your love to be shaped in such a way that you're able to set it on that which is highest." Your highest love determines your deepest joy. If you want a joy that can never be taken away, your love needs to be shaped toward that which is highest. And that brings us to our last point, which is

**The heart of his joy** – Because here's a question. Paul's joy was focused on seeing God's work in other people. But what shaped his love in that direction? What shaped his heart in such a way that God's work in other people became the thing he approved as highest? If you're anything like me, than your own life and your own wellbeing is going to feel a lot more compelling to you than what's going on in someone else's life. What shaped Paul's heart so that his joy was wrapped up in seeing God's work in other people?

Notice how he describes the way he feels about them. Remember in verse 6 he said the reason he rejoices in them is not because of their good work for God, but God's good work in them. And then in **verse 7** he says, "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." This is passionate language. "Don't you know how I feel about you? I hold you in my heart." This is love language. Our capacity to feel that kind of passionate love for someone is usually pretty limited. We feel that way about our spouses, or our children, or our immediate family. But to feel that way about dozens, or hundreds, or even thousands of other people, as Paul did, is almost inconceivable. Where did he get a love that big, that wide, that powerful?

He tells us in **verse 8**: "For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus." Paul yearns for his friends. He longs for them. He says "with affection." And you know, our English word "affection" isn't really a strong enough word to communicate what Paul is saying here. "Affection" just sounds a little mild. If someone said to you, "I have affection for you," you might feel a little warm and fuzzy, but you won't feel overwhelmed. Because "affection" is kind of a safe word. But the word that's translated here as "affection" is the Greek word *splanchnon*. That's kind of a fun word to say. *Splanchnon*. And if you dig into it, you find out that it means something a lot stronger than affection. Literally, it means the vital organs, or innards, or viscera. The old King James said it like this: "I long after you in all the bowels of Jesus Christ." It's a word that comes from the deepest, innermost part of someone. In fact, here's how I would translate it. Paul's saying, "I long for you with a love that comes from the gut." It's not just affection. It's gut love.

Now, how did Paul get this gut love, and how can you get it? By seeing that this it doesn't come from ourselves. It comes from Jesus. You see, he says, "I long for you all with the gut love of Christ Jesus himself." It's not Paul's love that's shaping him. It's the love of Jesus. Whenever the verbal form of this word is used in the New Testament, it's a word that's used all but once of Jesus. It's almost like his calling card. So when the gospels talk about Jesus being moved with pity or compassion, this is the word. The only way your heart can be shaped so that your deepest joy becomes God's work in other people is to get the gut love of Jesus in your life. And there's only one place you can get it. And that's at the cross.

Because on the cross, you see the God of the universe completely focused on others. If there was one being who could rightly be completely focused on himself, it's God. He is the source of all life, and light, and love, and everything. If there's one being who ought to be totally focused on himself, it's God. And yet God came to earth in the form of a man, and allowed himself to be nailed to a cross. Why? And why did he do it? Hebrews 12:2 says that Jesus, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross. That's an amazing statement. Jesus, the eternal Son of God, sat on the throne of heaven with the Father and the Holy Spirit from all eternity. Can you imagine that there was anything lacking? Can you imagine that anything was missing? If you're God, by definition, you lack nothing. And yet this says that there was something missing, there was some joy that he didn't have, and the only way he could get it was to die on the cross. What was that joy? What did Jesus get on the cross that he didn't have before? He got you. He got us. He got people who otherwise would have been lost forever.

We are constantly setting our deepest joy and our highest love on things that can never last, on things that aren't really worthy of the worship we give them. There are all kinds of things in this world that are worthy of love: our marriages, our families, our work, our pursuit of good. But when we give them our highest love, when we turn them into objects of worship, our love becomes twisted, it becomes a disordered. Because there's only one thing that's ultimately worthy of our highest love, worship, and devotion, and that's God. But even though we fail to find our deepest joy in God, he sets his joy and his

love upon us. Jesus loves you from the gut. Literally. Because when he was on the cross, they thrust a spear in his side, right into his guts, and the blood came pouring out for you.

Jesus loves you from the gut. And when you see him pouring out his love for you like that, completely focused on you, that shapes your heart. That shapes your love. That shapes your joy, so that you become a partner in the gospel. In other words, you become focused on others as well. Your highest love determines your deepest joy. And when your highest love becomes the God of the universe dying on a cross to save you, in other words, a love that is completely focused on other people, then you have a joy that can never be taken away, never be threatened, never be in danger, because it's a joy that doesn't depend on how things are going with you, but is completely wrapped up in seeing the love of God at work in the lives of other people. Is that your joy? Do you have that love in your life? Pray that love would abound more and more in you. Study it, meditate on it, gaze upon it, and let it turn you into a partner in the gospel. Let's pray.