

Nuggets and Gems from the Bible

**THE CHURCH
IN PHILIPPI —**

**PARTAKERS
OF GRACE**

WITNESS LEE

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In this booklet we shall consider certain features of the church in Philippi. Philippi was the chief city in the province of Macedonia of the old Roman Empire ([Acts 16:12](#)). Through Paul's first ministry journey to Europe ([Acts 16:10-12](#)), a church was raised up in this city, the first church in Europe.

ESTABLISHED IN GOOD ORDER

In [Philippians 1:1](#) Paul says, “Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the overseers and deacons.” This verse indicates that the church in Philippi was established in good order. Notice that Paul speaks of “the saints...with the overseers and deacons.” This is the only place in the New Testament where such an expression is found. It is significant that Paul speaks of the saints *with* the overseers and deacons. In every local church the unique group consists of the saints. The saints are the components of a local church. Among the saints there are leading ones,

which the New Testament describes as elders or overseers. Overseers are the elders in a local church ([Acts 20:17, 28](#)). “Elder” denotes the person, whereas “overseer” denotes the function. When an elder functions, he exercises oversight. Hence, he is an overseer. Here overseers are mentioned instead of elders to indicate that the elders were proper in their responsibility.

In [Philippians 1:1](#) Paul also mentions the deacons. Deacons are the serving ones in a local church under the direction of the overseers ([1 Tim. 3:8](#)). The English word *deacon* is an anglicized form of the Greek word *diakonos*, which means a serving one.

FELLOWSHIP UNTO THE GOSPEL

The church in Philippi also had fellowship with Paul in the furtherance of the gospel. In [Philippians 1:5](#) Paul speaks of “your fellowship unto the gospel from the first day until now.” Fellowship here means participation, communication. The same Greek word is translated “contribution” in [Romans 15:26](#) and “sharing” in [Hebrews 13:16](#). The saints in Philippi had fellowship unto the gospel, participating in the furtherance of the gospel through the Apostle Paul’s ministry. This participation included their

financial contributions to the apostle ([Phil. 4:10, 15-16](#)), which issued in the furtherance of the gospel. This kind of fellowship, which kept them from being individualistic and diversely minded, implies their oneness with the Apostle Paul and with one another. This gave them the ground for their experience and enjoyment of Christ, which is the main point of this book. The Christ-experiencing-and-enjoying life is a life in the furtherance of the gospel, a gospel-preaching life, not individualistic but corporate. Hence, there is “the fellowship unto the gospel.” The more fellowship we have in the furtherance of the gospel, the more Christ we experience and enjoy. This kills our self, ambition, preference, and choice.

As the Philippian believers were sharing in the furtherance of the gospel, in the furtherance of God’s move on earth according to His economy, they were partakers with Paul of grace. Those who partake of grace are those who share and enjoy the processed Triune God as grace. The apostle was such a one in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, and the saints at Philippi were joint-partakers with him in this grace. Grace is the Triune God processed to be our enjoyment. By having fellowship unto the

gospel with Paul, the Philippians enjoyed this grace. According to the expression in Greek, they became partakers of Paul's grace, of the very grace he enjoyed.

The church in Philippi also prayed for Paul (1:19), made his joy full and caused him to rejoice (2:1-2), and supplied his material need. There is no doubt that this church was very good.

DISSENSIONS AMONG THEMSELVES

Although the church in Philippi was established in good order and had fellowship with Paul in the furtherance of the gospel, there was nevertheless dissension among them. By this we see that it is very difficult to avoid dissension. It can exist anywhere and at any time. The source of dissension is our opinions. Opinions come from the mind, the main part of the soul. In the book of Philippians Paul speaks often of the soul, the mind, and thinking. In 1:27 he uses the expression "with one soul," and in 2:2, the expression "joined in soul." In 2:20 he uses the term "like-souled."

In Philippians Paul makes it clear that we need to be one in soul. In order to be one in soul, we need to be transformed and renewed in our mind. Romans 12:2 speaks of being transformed

by the renewing of the mind. It is quite possible that your mind is very old. This may even be true of young people. But if your mind has been renewed, it will be new and fresh, even though you may be an elderly person.

The only defect in the church in Philippi was the dissension caused by different opinions. In [Philippians 4:2](#) Paul said, “I beseech Euodias, and I beseech Syntyche, to think the same thing in the Lord.” These two leading sisters were co-workers with Paul. However, they were not one in their thinking. The differences in their thinking were probably not concerning secular matters, but concerning God’s move on earth. Concerning this, they had different opinions in the soul. Because they were still one in spirit, these sisters were not divided. But in practice there was dissension between them because of their different concepts. This dissension was a shortcoming in that very good church at Philippi. As a result of the dissension among them, the Philippian saints were not one soul in preaching the gospel ([1:27](#)).

What does it mean to think the same thing and to think the one thing? Both expressions are found in [2:2](#). In [4:2](#) Paul besought Euodias and Syntyche to think the same thing. The same thing

is Christ Himself, and the one thing is the pursuing of Christ to gain Him, lay hold of Him, and possess Him. We should not regard anything other than Christ as the “same thing” spoken of by Paul. The context of Philippians makes this very clear.

To think the same thing—Christ—and the one thing—the seeking after Christ to gain Him—causes our mind to be dealt with and renewed. To be renewed in our mind is to have a metabolic change in which the old element is discharged and a new element is supplied. Something of Christ is infused into our being to discharge the old element and to replace it. This process causes our minds to be renewed.

LOVE THAT ABOUNDS

The excellence of Paul’s writing is shown in the way he did not directly point out the defect of the Philippian saints. He did not say, “Dear Philippians, I want you to know that you are short of love.” Instead, in 1:9 he said, “And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in full knowledge and all discernment.” These words indicate that their love was not adequate, not sufficient. Paul admitted that the Philippian believers had a certain amount of

love, but there was still the need for their love to abound more and more.

It is significant that Paul prayed that their love would abound “in full knowledge and all discernment.” The Philippian believers had much love. Yet their love needed to abound, to overflow more and more, not foolishly, but in full knowledge; not in ignorance, but in all discernment, that they might prove by testing the things which differed. This should include discernment of the different preachings of the gospel in 1:15-18 and of the different peoples in 3:2-3.

Paul did not pray that the Philippians’ love would abound in zeal or in the affection of a good heart. As we all know, love is related to emotion. However, Paul prayed that their love would abound in full knowledge and all discernment, both of which are related to the mind. According to common human experience, love is blind. When a person exercises himself to have a sober mind, when he is calm, clear, and knowledgeable, love is gone. It seems that being loving and having a sober mind cannot exist together.

Paul prayed that our love would abound more and more in full knowledge and all discernment. The Greek word for discernment means sensitive perception, moral tact. Discernment is the

ability to sense things. Paul did not want the Philippians to love in a foolish way. On the contrary, he encouraged them to love with a mind full of knowledge and discernment, sensitive perception, and moral tact.

The knowledge and discernment about which Paul speaks in [Philippians 1:9](#) are actually Christ Himself. When we experience Christ, He becomes our knowledge and discernment. The reason we lack the knowledge and the discernment to differentiate between the different kinds of preaching is that we are short of the experience of Christ.

DISCERNMENT

According to the context of [1:9](#), Paul's meaning was that the Philippians needed knowledge and discernment to distinguish between Paul's preaching and that of the Judaistic believers. Deep within, Paul realized that some of the Philippians had been distracted by the preaching of the Judaistic believers. In these verses Paul seemed to be saying, "Philippians, certain of you have been distracted from God's economy by the preaching of the Judaistic believers. I agree that you need to love these people. However, your love should abound in full knowledge and all discernment."

Don't love others foolishly—love them soberly, with knowledge and sensitive perception.”

No doubt, certain of the Philippian saints appreciated the preaching of the Judaistic believers. For this reason, Paul prayed that their love for such ones would abound in full knowledge and all discernment. He encouraged the Philippians to love, but to love in knowledge and discernment, not in foolishness and in blindness.

TESTING BY PURITY

Paul also prayed that the Philippians would “prove by testing the things which differ” and “be pure and without offense unto the day of Christ” ([Phil. 1:10](#)). The Greek word rendered pure means judged by sunlight, that is, tested as genuine; hence, pure, sincere. To be without offense means not to be offending, not to cause others to stumble. In discerning things, we need to be pure. In particular, the motives in our heart must be pure. Otherwise, we shall offend others. It is not easy to be discerning in a way that is pure and without offense. This depends very much on our motive.

THE FRUIT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

In [verses 9 and 10 of Philippians 1](#) Paul prayed

three things on behalf of the Philippians: that their love would abound in full knowledge and all discernment; that they would prove by testing the things which differ; and that they would be pure and without offense unto the day of Christ. The secret to these three matters is found in [verse 11](#), where Paul speaks of being “filled with the fruit of righteousness, which is through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.” According to the grammar, [verse 11](#) is a modifier related to the three items for which Paul prayed. Having been filled with the fruit of righteousness, the Philippians could abound in love, prove by testing all things, and be pure and without offense. This indicates that being filled with the fruit of righteousness through Jesus Christ is a necessary condition for these three matters. In order for our love to abound, to prove by testing the things which differ, and to be pure and without offense, we must first be filled with the fruit of righteousness which is through Jesus Christ.

[Verse 11](#) actually refers to the experience of Christ. Once again we see that the key is the experience of Christ. We know that [verse 11](#) refers to the experience of Christ because of the phrase “through Jesus Christ.” The fruit of

righteousness is through Christ. It comes to us through our experience of Christ. From the Christ we enjoy and experience, we have the fruit of righteousness. The more we experience Christ, the more this experience will issue in the fruit of righteousness. The fruit of righteousness is the living product of a proper life with a righteous standing before God and man. This could not come about by the believers' natural man for their boast, but through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God. Our love, therefore, should abound in a way that is according to God's economy. If we experience Christ, our love will abound, we shall prove things by testing, and we shall be pure and without offense.

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