

“A Vision for the Church: Finding True Joy”  
Philippians 3:10-16; 4:4-9  
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### *Introduction*

Over the last few weeks, we have been listening closely to Paul’s letter to the Philippians ... a tender letter, filled with encouragement and brotherly advice to his beloved church. The briefest of letters, it distills the essence of Paul’s theology – the heart of his hope in Jesus Christ our Lord, a hope he knows he shares with them. Early in the letter, Paul shares his transparent affection in these words: *“This is my prayer for you: that your love grows stronger and stronger, with true insight and keen discernment, so you can determine for yourselves what really matters, ... through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.”* In the chapters that follow, Paul spreads out before them the substance of this prayer:

- First, Paul makes clear that the love he prays will grow rich in their lives is not merely a feeling or a sentiment, but a muscular love, a self-emptying love, the kind of love that was made breathtakingly clear in the life and death of Jesus. It is this decision of love -- this mindset of Christ – that Paul prays his church continues to invigorate and strengthen.
- Second, Paul tells us that the way this love grows is through the hard work of discernment. There isn’t an easy way to do this – no quick reference guide to four spiritual laws or ten fundamentals that will answer all the tough questions Christians face; and if it was true then, how much more complex our moral dilemmas have grown now. Paul’s goal is that believers “determine for yourselves what really matters,” and the only way to get there is through “true insight and keen discernment,” done in the community of faith.
- And finally, as we’ll explore today, Paul reminds us that Christian love and discernment are not accomplished only by self-will and discipline, but rather through the presence and goodness of Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Listen now to the word of God as it comes to us in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, 3:10-16 and 4:4-9.

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Last week I made the case that if we are to love well, we need to work hard at discerning, at sorting out right from wrong, bad from good. Financially. Politically. Morally. In business practices and investing decisions. In our political choices and attitudes about our country. In the personal decisions we make every day, at home and at work and at school. I doubt that these decisions have ever been easy; nevertheless, we are hampered on two fronts. First, for the last half-century, the rate of biblical literacy has plummeted, to the point that most of us in the West have become ill-equipped with the basic doctrines of Scripture and classic moral thought, and for that I place the blame on the shoulders of pastors like myself. Second, the decisions that we face have grown increasingly complex in our medically advanced and economically globalized

environment. Tracing the threads between our actions and their consequences is a tangled enterprise indeed. So where on earth do we start?

One essential tool in developing moral clarity is to learn to recognize what is *wrong* when we see it: in cheating, corruption, infidelity, and so on. It's how a good half of the 10 commandments are written: you shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet. It's like learning which snakes or spiders you have to watch out for ... a very worthwhile skill indeed. The unfortunate aftermath of the 70s "I'm OK, you're OK" movement was an eerie illusion that everything was "fine." We spent a number of years and a lot of heartache discovering what wise people have known all along: that, as *The Merchant of Venice* reminds us, "all that glitters is not gold."

Yet naming the dross is rarely easy, and never popular. My friend Bob Dunham, a pastor in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, has been leading a discussion of Tim Tyson's novel *Blood done Sign My Name* ... and it's raised a hard, hard question among many in his congregation: "If we were blind to many of the injustices that prompted the Civil Rights Movement in this country, to what injustices are we blind today?" Dunham suggests the most obvious answer was spread before our nation in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina: we have been blind to "the injustice of poverty in the midst of unprecedented abundance. ... It is insidious" ("The Breath We Breathe," preached 9/4/05, University Presbyterian Church, Chapel Hill, NC). Denial is a powerful defense, and it's threatening to us to face the facts of poverty on our own shores.

That deep discomfort is why it's never safe or popular to name what is damaging or immoral or wrong. The apostle Paul himself was utterly maligned by fellow Christians whom he unmasked either as legalist or licentious. It's not become easier. Modern Christian martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose fight against Nazism cost him his life, simply calls a stand against insidious evil the "cost of discipleship" for every person who considers him or herself a Christian.

Yet there is a flip side to true discernment: while the capacity to recognize the wrong and fight against it is essential, it is not enough. True discernment also requires us to see the good for what it is, and to stand up for it. And this is the direction the apostle Paul takes us in today:

"Whatever is true, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, or anything worthy of praise, think about these things, ... and the God of peace will be with you."

Lest we be trapped in a culture of blame, Paul implies, let our discernment focus on looking for the good ... even in the unlikeliest places.

We forget sometimes just how sophisticated St. Paul was. Educated in faith by the Pharisees, educated in the classics by the best of schools, Paul was equally fluent in the languages of religion and of culture. He knew his way around the arguments of various philosophies – the Epicureans who advocated pleasure as the key to happiness;

the Platonists who aspired towards a perfect ideal; the Stoics, who strove to live with perfect discipline, the first of the self-made men. In that ancient era of globalization, paved by Roman roads and international commerce, ideas travelled with what was then extraordinary speed, creating what was essentially an open market of ideologies, and Paul seemed to be familiar with them all.

What is remarkable to me is what Paul does in that presciently post-modern context. Instead of striking out at culture uniformly, Paul *critiques* the culture through the eyes of Christian faith. Where he sees horrible ideas, he is quick to say so: “beware the dogs, the evil-doers,” we heard from him last Sunday. But he is equally quick to point to places where he sees goodness, even when it’s utterly secular in origin. So it is that the list we have in front of us today -- “whatever is true, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable” -- is straight out of popular Greek philosophy. One commentator notes that this catalogue “would fit more readily in Epictetus’s *Discourses* or Seneca’s *Moral Essays* than it would into any [holy Scripture]. (Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 415), cited by Patrick J. Willson, Pastor, Williamsburg Presbyterian Church, Williamsburg, VA, in an unpublished paper for the 2002 meeting of the Moveable Feast). Paul is loath to reduce discernment to a simple “culture war” of faith vs. the secular culture; instead, he invites us to look for the good in the world around us, and celebrate it as a blessing from God’s hand.

He invites us to look for the good, and in it to see the fingerprints of God ... in the midst of the world, and even in the sufferings and struggles of our lives.

And note well that Paul does not gloss over struggles, even as he calls for joy. Rather, our joy in Christ comes in spite of and even through our struggles. It has been noted that “joy” is used in Paul’s brief letter to the Philippians more frequently than in any other book of the Bible. Yet look at the circumstances in which he calls them to rejoice: Rejoice, even though Paul writes this letter as he sits in prison. Rejoice, even though both Rome and the synagogue are breathing down these early Christians’ necks. Rejoice, even though the Philippians are struggling to figure out what on earth it means to follow Jesus Christ. Rejoice not because they are already so spiritually mature that they have all the answers they’ll ever need, or because they’re materially secure, or because they’re the victors in the culture wars of their time. No, rejoice in the Lord *always*, Paul tells them; rejoice, because of this: “the Lord is near.”

And so we hear his word to us echo this day: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. The Lord ... the Lord is near.” And when we grow tired, and when we grow jaded, and when we become bent down under the load of our suffering, or the pain that we carry for those we love, Paul invites us to look up, and see, that, still, the true, and the honorable, and the just, and the pure keep showing up in spite of everything. And it is the Lord’s doing.

It was not a minister or a PhD in theology that taught me how to look at things this way; it was our youth director in my prior church, Deb Helms, who didn’t have a day of formal seminary education. But in her prior life, before she joined the church staff,

Deb was a special education teacher; and I suspect it was her day-to-day encounter with mentally and physically challenged children that made her see the hand of God touching everything. And so it was that on that church's work trips, at the end of each day, Deb would coach the kids and counselors alike to ask this question: "Where have you seen the Lord today?" For one, it is in the small gesture of someone offering a bottle of cold water after pounding nails on a roof in the heat of the afternoon; for another, it is in the beauty of the sunset that they didn't have time to notice before; for another, it is the first "aha" of what it means to be poor. "Where have you seen the Lord today?" is what she always asked, and I believe it is the question Paul is urging us to ask ourselves as well.

The challenge for us today, in an age of cynicism and faux indifference, is to dare to look for the hand of God in our own lives. In the kindness of a stranger; in forgiveness from a friend, the Lord is near. And in the tender sympathy our church extends when we lose our dearest loved one; in the casseroles and cards that carry love with them, the Lord is near. And in the money we raise for the victims of Hurricane Katrina, and in the week-to-week ministry of Sunday School teachers, and in the work so many of you do supporting charities that help the poorest of the poor, and in the ethical manner in which you strive to conduct your business. The Lord is near. In whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, in any excellence and anything worthy of praise, in all the things that really matter: the Lord is near. All we have to do is open our eyes, to see him.

"This is my prayer for you: that your love grows more and more, with true insight and keen discernment, so you can determine for yourselves what really matters, ... through Christ, to the glory and praise of God." For the Lord ... the Lord is near. Amen.