



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

## Good Works, Good Memories

Philippians 1.3–8

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### Introduction

Do you remember the cell phone commercial where a girl excitedly calls her dad to tell him she has received an A+ in Advanced Physics only to be met with his disapproval over the high number of cell phone minutes she's used? While somewhat humorous in making its point for the cell phone service, that ad hit a little too close to home. Yes, there's usually room for improvement in nearly any area of life we might think about. But it is also true that we can focus on areas needing improvement in ways that leave the impression that little good happens, or that the good that does happen doesn't count for much.

Paul showed a better way, pointing to an area of life where it is too easy to emphasize the need to grow to the point that we never talk about the growth that has occurred. Typically, he began his letters with words of encouragement, stressing some things that were *good* in the churches. He did this for problem-filled churches like Corinth (1 Cor 1.4–9) and in churches like Philippi where there were fewer problems. Our text focuses on good works and good memories of the Philippian believers.

<sup>3</sup> I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, <sup>4</sup> always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, <sup>5</sup> because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus (Phil 1.3–8).

### Analyzing the Text Paul Wrote

As a preface to our analysis, remember that in this letter Paul repeatedly refers to the way the Philippian church felt about and supported him (see 1.5; 2.25; 4.10, 14–16, 18); it's evident that they wanted him to be pleased.

How thrilling, then, it must have been for them to hear the first words of his letter: “I thank God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy” (1.3–4).

Paul’s theme here is thanksgiving. But it’s not thanksgiving for generic “blessings,” or even for the gifts they had sent (cf. 4.17). No, Paul’s gratitude, expressed to God, was for *them*. Specifically, he was grateful, first, for their partnership, or fellowship (κοινωνία, *koinōnia*), in the gospel from the first days of their existence as a church (v. 5). This idea becomes a recurring theme throughout the letter, as we see in four other texts where we find various forms of *koinonia*.

- 1.7 — It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all *partakers* (συγκοινωνός, *sygkoinōnos*) with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.
- 2.1 — So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any *participation* (*koinōnia*) in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy ...
- 3.10 — ... that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share (*koinōnia*) his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,
- 4.14–15 — Yet it was kind of you to share (συγκοινωνέω *sygkoinōnéō*) my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership (κοινωνέω, *koinōnéō*) with me in giving and receiving, except you only.

Second, he was grateful for the confidence that God had done, was doing, and would continue to do a good work in them (v. 6; ESV’s “I am sure of” translates the perfect tense participle πεποιθώς, *pepoithōs*).

In light of the things for which he was thankful, Paul says that it was right for him to feel (or think, NRSV, CSB; φρονεῖν, *phronein*) that way about them. The verb φρονέω (*phroneō*) is also a thematic word in Philippians, appearing ten times (in 1.7; 2.2, 5; 3.15, 19; 4.2, 10 [twice in 2.2; 3.15; 4.10]). Paul used it to refer to having a true or false mental attitude. In the Old Testament, especially the Wisdom literature, it had the prevailing meaning of discernment. The word meant to think, judge, give one’s mind to, but it cannot be separated from a person’s behavior and overall direction of life. Thus, *phroneō* “expresses not merely an activity of the intellect, but also a movement of the will; it is both interest and decision at the same time” (Goetzmann 1976, 617). Paul’s use reflects the “total person” aspect of *phroneō*. What he knew of the Philippians and his history with them prompted a certain attitude (including feelings) toward them, an understanding of *phroneō* bolstered by his reference to holding them in his heart (keep in mind the Jewish idea of the heart, much broader than the idea of emotions so common in our culture). (Except where otherwise noted, the overview in this paragraph is taken from O’Brien 1991, 66–67).

Why did Paul esteem them so highly? Because they were so involved with the priorities he cherished. As “partakers with [him] of grace,” they understood that such sharing encompassed all of the Christian experience, not just the good [comfortable] parts. Accordingly, they shared in his imprisonment and the defense and confirmation of the gospel (v. 7).

Because of the evidence of their involvement and growth, Paul could affirm in the strongest of terms (with an oath) that he longed for them with the very affection (or compassion, NRSV; *σπλάγχνον*, *splagchnon*) of Christ Jesus himself.

### Analyzing How Paul's Text Applies Here

Both the text for this study (cf. v. 6) and the verses that follow (vv. 9–11) show that Paul did not intend to suggest that there was no longer room for growth among the Philippians, that they had somehow arrived, any more than he would suggest that he had arrived (cf. 3.12–14). Both texts do show us that there are times when it is not only appropriate, but essential to stop and reflect on the good that has been done.

To that end, let me apply Paul's prayer to you: "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy."

Let me also share some reasons for that gratitude,<sup>1</sup> beginning with this church's longstanding "partnership in the gospel."

- As seen in the commitment I see here to let the Word speak above all else, that studies and prepares for a class with the ultimate authority of Scripture in view.
- As seen in the regular conversations about how we can serve faithfully and keep trying to reach those around us.
- As seen in the desire to apply personal creativity to developing ideas for how we can be of better service and make a difference.
- As seen in the willingness to give to a good work, and especially to give to a good mission work.
- As seen in the actions that deliver meals and donate other supplies to HopeWorks,<sup>2</sup> get involved in our local elementary school, pitch in and help for various activities designed to reach out to the community, etc.
- As seen in the efforts of so many to send cards, call, minister to, and generally encourage those who are dealing with various trials.

Second, I'm thankful for a church where God is, has, and will do good works until the day of Jesus Christ. I've touched on some of these already, but want to especially focus on the spirit we see here.

- A spirit of care, love, and friendliness; one that rallies around one another when times are tough and brothers or sisters are down.
- A spirit that refuses to be satisfied with the status quo but wants to know God better; that wants to increase in knowledge, be more committed to study, and grow in prayer.
- A spirit that realizes that much has been learned, but that not everything has been learned; so, there are some who, in the words of someone a few years ago, "look at the Bible with eyes wide open" in the interest of being convicted where needed and changed where appropriate.
- A spirit that looks at a task like the specific mission project set before us this year and says, "I think that will work," foreshadowing the effort that will be made to make it work.

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- A spirit that seeks ways to teach children, but also to encourage and train children, both as the church of today and the leaders of tomorrow.

## Conclusion

We have much for which to be thankful. So much that there is a real danger in the kind of reflection we've done today: the list is not complete enough. The above is my list, and I have no doubt that we could work together to add many items to it.

A second danger is that we miss the real focus of both Paul's gratitude and ours: the Philippians were willing servants and partners in the gospel. But they were such outstanding servants because *God* was working in them, changing them, growing them.

Let us, then, look without flinching at what God has done and is doing in our lives. Let us also look clearly at and embrace what he yet will do as together we continue to submit in service to him.

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## Works Cited

- Jürgen Goetzmann. 1976. "Mind, *phronēsis*." *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. ed. Colin Brown. Vol. 2, 616–620. Zondervan Publishing House.
- Peter T. O'Brien. 1991. *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This sermon was preached in a congregation with which I worked in Memphis, TN and the reasons for gratitude mentioned here were based on my observations in that time and place.

<sup>2</sup> HopeWorks is a Memphis parachurch organization affiliated with churches of Christ that is committed to "empowering Memphians with **work** and **hope** in Jesus Christ to eliminate poverty" (vision statement). They "help people in Memphis and the Mid-South find meaningful employment through Adult Education, Employment Services, and Holistic Reentry." Learn more at <https://www.whyhopeworks.org/>