

Tangible Grace

A Study of *Philippians* Sermon 1

Philippians 1:1-14 | November 5, 2023

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Paul's letter to the Philippians begins: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" and it ends likewise saying "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit." Grace. It's a word Christians throw around all the time, like glory, and holiness, and righteousness. But sometimes it loses its sense of meaning.

Grace refers to the free gift of the gospel given by God to those who receive it by faith. It always carries that basic meaning in the letters of Paul. But here in Philippians, God's **transformative grace** to us in saving us through Jesus has become very, very **tangible**. The word for grace in the original language can also refer to a *gift*. And the Philippians were famous for sending financial gifts to Paul to assist him in his spread of the Gospel.

They sent financial gifts to Paul on three occasions that we know of in Scripture. Philippians 4:16 tells us about how Paul received a gift from the Philippian church while he was ministering in Thessalonica. 2 Corinthians 11:9 reveals another gift that was sent by the Philippians while Paul was in Corinth. Lastly, Philippians 4:10 reveals another gift that was sent by the church at Philippi, while Paul was under house arrest in Rome.

Philippians is a letter about how **transformative grace** (God's work of salvation in individuals) is inseparable from **tangible grace** (the sacrificial work of God's people empowered by God's Spirit). As we'll see in this series, the work of salvation is generated by God and completed by God; but God graciously incorporates us into the action.

We'll look at today's passage through two lenses: tangible grace (the work God does through us) and transformative grace (the work God does in us).

I. Tangible Grace

The word “joy” appears 14 times in the letter to the Philippians. That’s the most references to “joy” of any letter in the entire New Testament. It is eclipsed only by the Gospels of Luke and John, with around 20 occurrences of “joy” each. However, those books are about four times longer than the four-chapter Philippian letter. Not only that, Philippians is a prison letter, written while Paul is captive on house arrest in Rome. Why would Paul be so joyful in lock up?

Happily, he tells us in verse 5. Paul makes his prayers with joy “because of [the Philippian church’s] partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.” The word here is *koinonia*, which is the same word used for “Holy Communion” in 1 Corinthians 10 and “fellowship” in texts like Acts 2:42. Yet, here it is translated as “partnership.” Why?

It all has to do with the financial gifts the Philippians had been sending to Paul. The Philippians had been transformed by the grace of the gospel, the free gift of salvation by faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But that **transformative grace** had led to **tangible grace**—sacrificial giving to the mission of God in the ministry of Paul.

What’s more, Paul says later in 1:12-14 that his imprisonment has paradoxically “has really served to *advance* the gospel.” The Gospel’s power to break out of the constraints placed upon it by cultural elites and life circumstances had proven to be compelling to the imperial guards. The word has spread widely in Rome about Paul’s imprisonment for Christ. This had made Christians in the region go gangbusters for the Gospel; speaking about Jesus even more boldly and fearlessly.

This leads to Paul in verse 6 saying he is confident “that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” There is a double meaning in this sentence that cannot be detected in the English translation. First, it refers to God’s transformative grace of salvation in believers. God begins the work of salvation; God will complete the work of salvation. But the reason that Paul is “confident of this” is because **God’s saving work in the Philippians** is directly linked to God’s saving work **through the Philippians**. God’s transformative grace is evident in the Philippians’ acts of tangible grace. And both are from God.

Likewise, the phrase “he who began a good work **in** you” can also be translated as “he who began a good work **through** you.” The good work of salvation begun by God **in the Philippians** is sacrificially poured out through the work of God **through the Philippians**, and not in random ways. Specifically by

means means of their tangible sacrificial giving to Paul. A tangible grace that was bearing incredible fruit under the unexpected circumstances of house arrest in Rome.

The same thing is going on with verse 7, when Paul says “for you are all partakers with me of grace.” The word “grace” can refer to the Gospel at work in us, but in the original language Paul includes the definite article, “the.” This means the line could also be translated as “for you are all partakers with me of *the gift*.” A reference to a specific, tangible expression of the grace by which they are saved.

We should pause here and ask: how does Paul’s teaching on the tangible aspect of grace, grace not only as **personal salvation** but **self-sacrificial giving** apply to us? There are numerous tangible graces we could explore if we had the time. We’ll focus on one today on one—sacrificial giving. The topic is timely since next week is our annual Commitment Sunday when many of us will pledge to give sacrificially to the life of our church over the next ministry year.

I grew up totally skeptical of the churches and ministries asking for money. And for good reason. So many churches I encountered were theologically half-baked, hurtful, and institutionally untrustworthy. I also saw a steady dose of holy rolling weirdos on Christian TV saying and doing bizarre things, and insisting that if I sent a one-time gift of \$49.95 I would receive a free prayer handkerchief soaked in the magical oil of some heretical charlatan huckster in a ridiculous suit that looked like it formally belonged to Elvis. Of all the things I could do with half a hundred dollars, buying the essentially soiled handkerchief of a wide-eyed weirdo who would then use the funds to purchase his eighteenth personal jet was about the least likely or attractive option for me in terms of financial investments and transactions; and it still is. But I do confess to occasionally watching clips of these folks on YouTube as a bizarre form of inexplicable entertainment. Perhaps, their handkerchief truly does calteth unto me.

When I became a Christian and learned that real Christians actually give frequently and sacrificially, and that like Paul and the Philippians, God uses sacrificial giving as a tangible grace by which he carries out the proclamation of the Gospel. He does it through local churches, for the sake of the mission of God. I realized that Jesus taught that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” and that Paul taught in 2 Corinthians 9 that, “Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

Still, when I first became a Christian and became a member of a local, rag-tag church plant, I recall the pastor saying in the membership interview: 'Based on what you're telling me, you spend way more on coffee per week than in giving to the mission of God.' In my residual skepticism, I said 'God loves a cheerful giver; not a coffee-less giver. How can I possibly give cheerfully without a sufficient amount of caffeination alongside the Holy Ghost? Yes, the Christian runs on the Spirit; but friend, *America* runs on Dunkin.'

I'm still learning what it means to give sacrificially and joyfully; we all are. And it still feels sort of counter-cultural and counter-intuitive to give to a church. These days though, I find my soul longing to hold loosely in my heart to money, and I desire to be in a situation to give even more. When I see what God has done through decades of tangible grace here at TFCA from the saints out ahead of me, I find myself understanding Paul's message here.

As a side note, I've become more fiscally responsible by switching to Instant Coffee. That's an even worse heresy for some of you coffee snobs here than not sacrificially giving to the church. I invite you to take this week to intentionally examine the tangible grace of giving to God's mission. To consider how it caused Paul's captivity in Rome to be a catalyst for Gospel growth in the most unlikely of circumstances to the most unlikely of recipients—his captors and the entire city of Rome. If God can do that through Paul in prison; what are the limits of what he can do through us, living on the borders of our nation's equivalent of Rome?

II. Transformative Grace

The reason that tangible works of grace manifest is because of the transforming work of the Gospel on individuals. In verse 8, Paul longs for the Philippians, not with his own fleeting emotional feelings but with the very "*affections of Jesus Christ*." And in verses 10 and 11, believers are said to be "pure and blameless on the day of Christ" because they are "filled with the fruit of righteousness *that comes through Jesus Christ*." Paul feels with the perfect feeling of Christ. Paul insists that we stand forgiven and bear fruit by the perfect righteousness of Christ; not by anything that we contribute.

This theme of salvation in Christ is a common thread right through Philippians. Theologians refer to it as salvation by union with Christ or participation in Christ. It's what Paul means in texts like Galatians 2:20 when he says "It is no longer I who live **but Christ who lives in me**." Or, Colossians 1:27, where

Paul speaks of the mystery of the Gospel is “**Christ in you**, the hope of glory.”

In Philippians 1:8, Christ’s own affection for others replaces our unpredictable emotions. Transformative grace leads to tangible grace because it doesn’t rise and fall based on the whims of our biophysical and psychological responses but on Christ’s perfect compassion being formed in us. Likewise, in Philippians 2:1-11, Paul exhorts Christians to have Christ’s mind among themselves, observing Christ’s pattern of sacrificial living for the sake of others, rather than self-interest and self-directed sanctification. In Philippians 3, the theme continues. Our righteousness is Christ’s righteousness. And our hope is in being conformed to and transformed by his sufferings, his death, and his resurrection.

Christ’s affection. Christ’s mind. Christ’s Righteousness. Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection cascade.

Paul’s imprisonment was not a Gospel impediment; it was a paradoxical means of Gospel progress. A peculiar yet providential investment of the tangible grace of the Philippian gift. For Paul (and for us), containment acts as a catalyst. It doesn’t extinguish faith; it ignites it. God is not a restricted Lord, he is a resurrected Lord. The world and the devil tried once to swallow up life into death; it didn’t work. The result wasn’t indefinite confinement; it was Easter.

When we are at our most vulnerable point; we tend to feel like we cannot continue with meaningful, redemptive living until we are freed from our present afflictions. Until we are healed. Until our financial situation shifts in a more favorable direction. Until we have certainty about the future, stability. Until we regain control. Once that happens; then we’re back in business. But until then, we reckon, the Gospel sadly remains on pause. It just cannot go forward in transformative ways if we are inhibited from living it out in tangible ways. Yet, the truth is precisely the opposite.

When we are locked up or chained down by the circumstances of life and the whims of the devil; that’s precisely the time when the Gospel breaks through and breaks out in ways that surprise the saints and captivate the watching world. It’s precisely those times when the supernatural staying power and redemptive resilience of the Gospel is on full display.

And it’s not merely hypothetical. It’s real. It shows up most often in a place you’d least expect it: in the

hospital. Now, a hospital is hardly a place we associate with strength. But when you're standing at the bedside of a saint who has spent their life living out the transformative grace of the gospel in tangible ways—in self-sacrificial service, prayer, Scripture study, worship, and Gospel witness—the legacy of their life in Christ breaks the bonds of the hospital-bound and reaches out to you in transformative ways through them, even if they are barely hanging on to life.

I've had many experiences like this over my two decades of ministry. I recall one occasion in particular on which I came into the hospital to pray with a dear sister in the Lord who was very sick. She was extremely weak, unable to speak beyond a faint, occasional whisper, and not able to leave her bed. This woman was well-known to everyone as being a person who lived a life of self-sacrificial service, worship, and prayer. A stunning example of someone who exercised long obedience in practicing tangible, transformative grace. As Anglicans, we're lucky to have the heritage of the Book of Common Prayer, because when we don't have words to pray, there they are, and they are usually prayers taken directly from Scripture.

Not knowing what to pray, or if she could even hear me, I began praying the *Ecce Deus*, which is a prayer from Isaiah 12, with my eyes closed.

Surely, it is God who saves me;

I will trust in him and not be afraid.

For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense,

and he will be my Savior.

Something told me 'Open your eyes and minister directly to this woman.' When I did, I noticed that with all of her energy, she was silently mouthing the prayer. She had memorized it.

Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing

from the springs of salvation.

And on that day you shall say,

Give thanks to the Lord and call upon his Name

She continued,

Make his deeds known among the peoples;

see that they remember that his Name is exalted.

Sing the praises of the Lord, for he has done great things,

and this is known in all the world.

Cry aloud, inhabitants of Zion, ring out your joy,

for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel.

I had come there to minister to her, and I did. And yet, beautifully, God ministered to me through her. Her body was bound; weighed down with a terrible burden; but the word of God was not bound. There was a heaviness to her disease, but there was an inexplicable, supernatural lightness to the disposition of her soul that seemed to shout strongly in the silence: "The Gospel is true. The Gospel is life. The Gospel breaks our chains." Looking upon her I didn't feel helpless pity; I felt holy admiration. Transformative grace; tangible grace. A legacy for Jesus etched eternally in the soul that outlasts the best efforts of the oncologists. There is death; yes, its sting is fierce and terrible; but O, is there life. Life in Christ. Life eternal. Life now and forever, in him.

It's the kind of thing that makes you really know what it means when we say:

I believe in the Holy Spirit,

the holy catholic Church,

the communion of saints,

the forgiveness of sins,

the resurrection of the body,

Questions for small groups:

Members of your small group are encouraged to listen to the sermon if they were not there on Sunday. We also encourage you to begin your small group meeting with prayer and then by reading Philippians 1:1-14. The below questions are suggestions for how to have a meaningful discussion about the passage—but you may have better questions that come up in your group.

1. In addition to the tangible grace of sacrificial giving, Paul highlights the importance of prayer in the letter to the Philippians. In 1:19, Paul says “I know that **through your prayers**, and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.” How does prayer function in your day-to-day life? Do you pray like your life depends on it; or do you view it as a basically benign, inconsequential religious practice? Does it matter if you pray? What does Paul say elsewhere? What does Jesus teach?
2. How does the concept of the union with Christ impact the way you live and worship? That is, how does the concept of being saved to have Christ’s affections (Phil. 1), to conform our thoughts to Christ’s mind (Phil. 2), on the basis of Christ’s righteousness (Phil. 3:1-11), leading to a share in Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection (Phil. 3:12f) change our relationship to God and the experience of daily life.
3. What would have to change in our lives to make our last day on earth like the legacy of those dear saints out ahead of us whose tangible graces have shaped them for resilient, resurrection faith, even in the midst of great adversity and death?
4. What is your relationship with sacrificial Christian giving? How does discerning in this area constitute obedience and faithfulness? How might it increase joy even as it depletes funds?

5. Give seventeen reasons that Nescafe is a legitimate coffee choice, and if time allows, describe why Starbucks coffee tastes like stale burnt car tires (Go Boston, America runs on Dunkin).