



GracePoint: A Weekly Sermon Discussion

1 - A Letter

Announcements:

7/14 @8:30 -

Sunday School

7/14 @After Service -

Special

Congregational

Meeting

7/21 -

Registration

Closes for

CLARUS

ICE BREAKER: What has been the best (most special) letter that you have ever received?

READ: Philippians 1:1-2

You can tell a lot about a letter by the way that it starts. “To Whom It May Concern:” means that some formal (and probably boring!) letter is sure to follow. “To my beloved:” is most likely the beginning of some sort of love letter. “Dear Grammy and Grandad” is how I started every thank you note written from the age of 5. “Good (morning, afternoon, evening) Church” is how I start almost every email to the church. We could go on and on. And so, thought it might seem like a bit of overkill to dwell so much on just two short verses to start our series through the Epistle (epistle is just a fancy word meaning letter) of Philippians. We can learn a whole lot about the letter, what its intention is, and importantly its heart, by being careful how we read this first part. So let’s dive in.

To anyone who has studied many ancient Greek letters (which I am sure is most all of us, of course!), these “two short verses” make for an exceptionally *long* opening to a letter. Usually Greek Letters started with three words. In English It would read like this: Paul, Philippians, Greetings. In what is actually a rather commonsensical approach, the writer of the letter would put his name first, so you didn’t need to wait to see who had written to you. Then the recipient. Finally the word *chairein* or just “greetings”. For each of these things Paul gives much more than just the basic information, and even that fact speaks to his heart in writing this letter. This is not a “to whom it may concern” form letter. This is not a thank you note written (if I am being honest) from equal parts gratitude, fear of punishment, and hope that a good thank you note means more presents down the road. Rather, this is a letter that springs from Paul’s heart to a people and a church that he loved.

DISCUSS: How does knowing that this is a “love letter” of sorts impact how we read and understand this book of the Bible? In what ways should we imitate this heart of Paul (i.e. love for “the saints” and for the church)?

From here we can dive into the things that Paul does and says that go above and beyond the “normal” introduction. He includes Timothy who was laboring with him, highlighting that even he doesn’t do everything alone. He gives himself a title, but not *apostle* or *founder of the church that you attend*, rather he is simply a “servant” (or more correctly translated, slave). He addresses the letter to the saints, *and* the overseers and deacons. Showing that it is not just Paul who can’t do everything alone, but them as well. He has changed the word *chairein* to the word *charis* (or changed “greetings” to “grace”). But there are two things that we didn’t highlight on Sunday morning that I would like to see here quickly. He highlights their *citizenship* and he highlights the nature of how God has saved them.

First to note is that they are “In Christ Jesus” and “at Philippii” In other words, from the get go, Paul is showing them that their first allegiance is to Christ, but that they still live in the world. In a real and tangible way this is Paul’s answer to the question that we spent all of Ecclesiastes wrestling through: How do we live life in the broken world? The answer here is clear and beautiful: by understanding that we are first and foremost in Christ, *then* we see we are those *in Christ* living here in the world. This gives us the grace that we need, but also the strength. On top of this is the thought *ah* *how* we live matters first as those in Christ, then secondarily as those in the world. Why must I be (humble, kind, “in one accord” etc.) well it is because of my identity in Christ. The exterior things around me may change, but that thought is forever.

DISCUSS: What part of this “dual citizenship” sticks out to you? How does one impact the other (think of this both ways, being in Christ affecting how we live in the world and being in the world impacting how we live “in Christ)?

Finally he says “grace to you and peace”. We might just read that as Paul being nice and wishing us grace and peace, but the truth is much more rich. As Gordon Fee notes: “there is significance to this order: the grace of God and Christ is what is given to God’s people; peace is what results from such a gift... The sum total of God’s activity toward his human creatures is found in the word ‘grace’... The sum total of those benefits as they are experienced by the recipients of God’s grace is ‘peace.’” In other words, we cannot separate these two, and the peace we experience comes to us as a result of grace (and in particular in Philippians, grace seen in the person and work of Jesus Christ). We have peace because of and through grace, and we have grace because of the goodness of God. And praise be to God for this.

DISCUSS: Why is the starting position of grace important? (Hint: read Romans 3:23) In what ways does grace bring peace?