

Congregation,

Sometimes this period of isolation or social distancing feels a bit prison-like. Self-isolating for two weeks in our homes. Alone in a hospital room with no visitors allowed. Work from home. Unable to have visitors. Life gets lonely.

None of this isolation compares to living in a real prison like the Apostle Paul when he wrote the letter to the Philippians. Paul was likely in a jail in Rome or perhaps even under house arrest. He spent many hours a day all alone.

The late Nelson Mandela was jailed for protesting apartheid in South Africa. He spent 27 years in prison—much of it in solitary confinement—before being freed and going on to become that country's president. In his book, "Letters to Myself in Prison", he writes:

... the cell is an ideal place to learn to know yourself, to search realistically and regularly the process of your own mind and feelings. In judging our progress as individuals, we tend to concentrate on external factors such as one's social position, influence and popularity, wealth and standard of education.... **But internal factors may be even more crucial** in assessing one's development as a human being. Honesty, sincerity, simplicity, humility, pure generosity, absence of vanity, readiness to serve others... are the foundation of one's spiritual life.... At least, if for nothing else, the cell gives you the opportunity to look daily into your entire conduct, to overcome the bad and develop whatever is good in you.... You may find it difficult at first to pinpoint the negative features in your life, but the 10th attempt may yield rich rewards. Never forget that a saint is a sinner who keeps on trying.

Our time of physical distancing, unpleasant and difficult as it may be, is a gift to each of us. If we take Nelson Mandela's words to heart this time is perfect for spiritual growth, for seeking to become more like Jesus in our daily lives.

Unfortunately, we can easily waste this time doing **nothing** important and engaging in completely self-serving and self-satisfying activities. Can you imagine the Apostle Paul in his prison sitting around watching TV all day or playing video games? Of course not. They didn't have these things. What we see, friends, is that Paul's body is inside the prison, but his mind and heart are outside! That's because the gospel never calls us to stay inside. The gospel builds us up and then sends us out. We are partners in the gospel. Even when we are stuck inside or limited in our comings and goings, Paul shows us that we can have an outward focus.

The Apostle Paul first points believers to the grace of God and the comfort that Jesus is not going to abandon us. He'll complete what he started. He's way ahead of you! Then Paul shares with the Philippians his prayer for them. And that is the Lord's prayer for all of us still today. It doesn't matter if you're a child, a new

Christian, or a long-time believer, this needs to be the prayer of all of us. Listen to it again:

Php 1:9 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ^{Php 1:10} so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, ^{Php 1:11} filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

In a word, as Paul talks about pursuing growth, he teaches us that it starts with pursuing love.

Growing Love

Paul prays for growing love. My prayer is “that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.” Love is never an option for the Christian. It’s a command. And it’s never an inward focused thing. It always looks outward. Paul illustrates this in 1 Corinthians 13 where he says,

1 Co 13:1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

As individual Christians and as Christ's body, the church, we should be praying with Paul that our *love may abound more and more*.

Love is the central motivation for all we do as Christians. That’s because Christ showed us the full extent of his love—his outgoing love—when he laid down his life for us. Now he calls us to love others in a similar way as we see throughout the book of Philippians.

It is obvious that Paul knew the church in Philippi. He knew that the Christians there were deeply committed to Christ and to building up Christ's church; after all, they earned the title "partners in the gospel" in v.5. But that does not mean that the church in Philippi was perfect. There are hints throughout this book of things that are not as they should be in the life of the Philippian Christians. And that’s true for us too. That’s why Paul encourages believers to continue to grow in our love. We all can fall into the trap of selfishness that Pastor Hilary talked about with the people of Rinthrie. Even the best Christian needs to heed this call. We all have a long way to go if we want to love as Christ loved. This is a lifetime challenge.

A farmer who does nothing to his crop will receive very little fruit at harvest time. A good farmer, however, will add the necessary fertilizers to his crop. And if the weather is hot he will irrigate if he can. A good farmer works with what God has given him in order to grow the best crop possible.

Christians should be much the same with regards to love. We can get by loving like we do now, but if we never fertilize our crop, if we don't keep working at it, it will not even stay the same; it will deteriorate. If we simply take God for granted, our love for the Lord will become less and less. That was Paul's point to the church in Philippi. She had borne good fruit, but she wasn't bearing all that was possible. Their love wasn't bad, but it could be even better so that it abounded more in two distinct ways.

Growing Knowledge

First of all, our love for the Lord ought to abound in knowledge. Our text says,

Php 1:9 ...this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge...

Our boys and girls are usually eager to learn more about the Lord. They love to listen to Bible stories and read the picture Bible. But somehow as we grow older, into our teens and beyond, we feel like we know all there is to know. Or at least we become content with what we know. We might feel that at a certain point we are done learning about the Lord. Even in these days of separation and being home lots, we can still neglect making spiritual growth a priority. We spend lots of time watching reruns of sports we love, overdosing on computer games or binging on Netflix.

I will say that one thing that has impressed me over that last month is your faithful attendance at these online worship services and some of our other Bible Study and prayer times as a church. Keep that up. It helps your love grow in knowledge of Christ and his will for our lives.

One woman in times of struggling was told by another Christian to keep herself busy. That advice however suggested that we deal with God by avoiding him—stay busy. The troubled lady did not take that advice. Instead, she went to Lord. She wrestled with him. She spends time in his word and getting to know her Father in heaven. When you talk with her, she can't help but tell you about the latest thing that God has done for her. She can't stop talking about her salvation, and about her Saviour. Her love has grown in knowledge. When our love for Christ abounds more and more in the true knowledge of who he really is, our faith is strengthened and we begin to love others with the same kind of love that we've found in Christ.

Growing Wisdom

Listen again to Paul's prayer and for the second part of our growing love.

Php 1:9 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight...

Paul's desire for us is to use our knowledge in a wise way. Depth of insight is wisdom, which is the practical application of knowledge.

It is one thing to be smart; it is another to be wise. Some people know a lot about God but are not wise. They could pass a test in theology but they can't apply what they know to their lives. Their knowledge is just a pile of intellectual facts or theories that they can use to show others how smart they are but their knowledge is not fed by a love of Christ that overflows with wisdom.

Other people may have very little formal education, but their love for the Lord abounds in a growing knowledge of God as well as wisdom. These are people we go to for advice because we know they walk with Jesus. They cannot live

without him. These are the kind of people, for example, that we want to serve as elders and deacons. Their mind is on the Lord—to know him and to do his will. They are able to assess situations and make Bible-based choices or decisions. This is the result of their love for Jesus abounding more and more in knowledge and depth of insight. Their beliefs shape their lives and their lives are a blessing as people to look to them in times of decision or questioning.

For us as individuals and as a congregation this means that if we want to be vibrant and alive, living a life of love as Christ commands, then we need to grow in knowledge and wisdom—regardless of our age.

Mandela's definition of a saint being a sinner who keeps on trying helps us remember that walking with Jesus is a lifelong journey. Jesus makes us righteous. He calls us saints—people set apart for his service—and he helps us to keep trying, to continue growing in faith, hope and love.

We all have everything to gain from it. Growing our love for the Lord takes time and effort. Paul understands this but he tells us that it also pays dividends.

Growing Payoff

He says that he prays that our love may abound more and more in knowledge and wisdom. Then he gives the reason in verses 10 and 11:

Php 1:10 so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, ^{Php 1:11} filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

Isn't that awesome? Paul wants us to know that the more we strive to know God and walk in his ways, the more we will know his will and the more holy and blameless our lives will become. God's will for us is to be pure and blameless, filled with the fruit of righteousness. God is basically saying, "Let your love for me abound and the result will be holiness in your life. You will do my will. You will know how to manage temptation. You will steer away from Satan's snares. You will increasingly bear spiritual fruit of love that is good in your home, workplace, school, church and everywhere you go. Your mind will be in tune with the mind of Christ." This is what sanctification is all about—walking with Christ as we go through life.

Growing in love for Christ will affect your relationship with people. You'll begin to see people through the eyes of Christ. You'll start responding in more Christ-like ways when you meet people who bother you, people who are needy, even people who despise you. You'll understand better how to respond when things go wrong in the home, in the office or workplace. In short, you'll act wisely.

As you develop the mind of Christ, you'll be an increased blessing in the church as well. As you grow in knowledge and wisdom, you become a greater blessing in society. You're able to serve more effectively, not only in the church but in all areas of God's kingdom. As you become more mature, it helps us all. It will bless our neighbours and friends. As we get to know Christ better and walk with him, our love moves us outward because that's the kind of love that we see

demonstrated in Jesus himself who laid down his life to love others. He is now completing that work of love in us that he has begun when he saved us.

Remember, dear people, in our time of social distancing and isolation, we have a unique opportunity to grow in our love of Christ. He is working in us and goes ahead of us. So Paul assures us that pursuing growth in our relationship with Christ will lead to all sorts of blessing. As our love for Christ grows, life gets sweeter because we know Jesus better and know how to live lives of outgoing love to the glory of God.

Amen.