

Following Jesus Starts with Saying, “Thank You”

Pastor Shelley Cunningham

PHILIPPIANS 1:1-11NRSV

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:

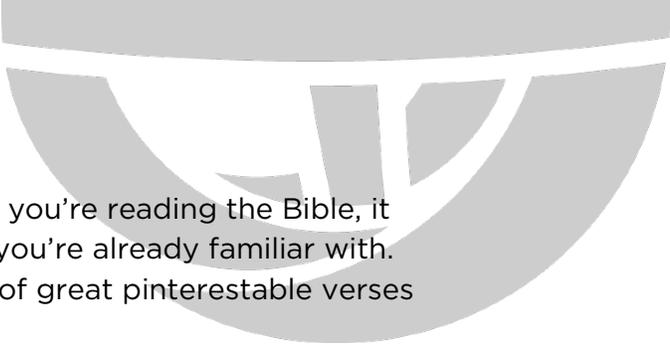
²Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

From time to time, people will say something like, “Pastor Shelley, I want to read the Bible more, but I just don’t know where to start.”

I almost always guide them to the book of Philippians.

- 1) It’s short – only four chapters. You can read the whole thing in about 10 minutes.
- 2) It’s a letter – there’s a lot of different types of writing in the Bible, and knowing the literary style often helps you understand what you’re reading. Tell someone what they’re reading is apocalyptic literature or a book of laws and they might look at you like you’re speaking Greek. But tell someone they’re reading a letter, and they get it right away.

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- 3) It's got a lot of well-known soundbites – when you're reading the Bible, it can be very affirming to come across a verse you're already familiar with. *Oh, that's where it came from!* There are a lot of great pinterstable verses in Philippians.
 - 4) It's uplifting and encouraging – not everything in the Bible is rainbows and roses, of course, but if you're just getting your feet wet it helps to read something that makes you want to read more.
 - 5) Its themes are just as relevant today as they were in the ancient world: *Why are deep relationships and community so important? What do I do about people who seem to be working against me? How can I have strength and courage in the face of hardship? Where can I find peace?* It's all there.

With a set-up like that, I'll forgive you if you want to pick up that pew Bible and start reading right now.

But if you can wait just a few more minutes, stick with me here. Because today I want to dig into a key theme of Paul's letter: thankfulness.

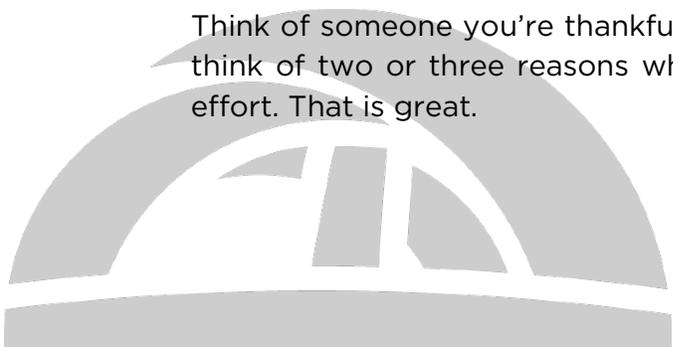
For Paul, saying thank you is one of the first steps in following Jesus. It reframes our perspective by reminding us of the many gifts we have already received from God.

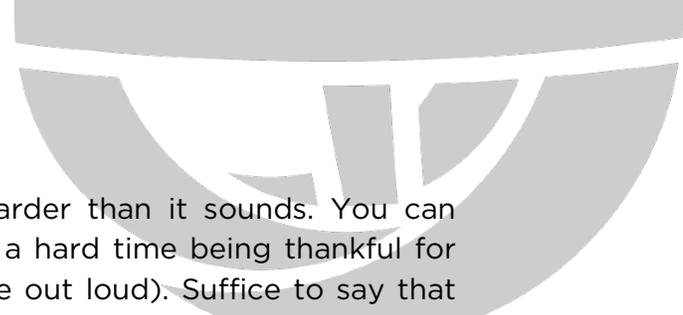
You may already do this. Maybe you already keep a gratitude journal or participate in the happiness project or mark your social media posts with #blessed. Last fall we did a sermon series on how we find gratitude in the many areas of our lives. Pastor Lisa encouraged us to keep a list of something we were grateful for each day. Zumbro member Sue Reed found this practice so impactful that she included a picture of her list in her Christmas card. Next to the list she offered some insights as to why she was grateful for that particular item. Her explanations were sweet, and poignant, and funny. "I realized my list told a story about me," she wrote in her card. "I want to share some of that story with you ... because I love you."

I love that. Our lists tell our stories. What we name as gift says a lot about where we see God present in the world.

But while it's great to feel thankful for things like snuggly blankets and spring breezes and a cup of really good coffee, it's even better when we can feel truly thankful for people.

Think of someone you're thankful for – say their name out loud. You can probably think of two or three reasons why they mean so much to you without too much effort. That is great.





But let's be honest, though: that can be a lot harder than it sounds. You can probably just as quickly name someone you have a hard time being thankful for (and don't worry: I won't make you say their name out loud). Suffice to say that some people can be challenging. They say unkind things and forget our birthday and hurt our feelings. They can be clueless and rude and downright mean sometimes. Some days you might be tempted to make a pros-and-cons list to see if the relationship is worth keeping. Keep in mind: it can be easier to be thankful if you remember that their list about you might have more cons than pros.

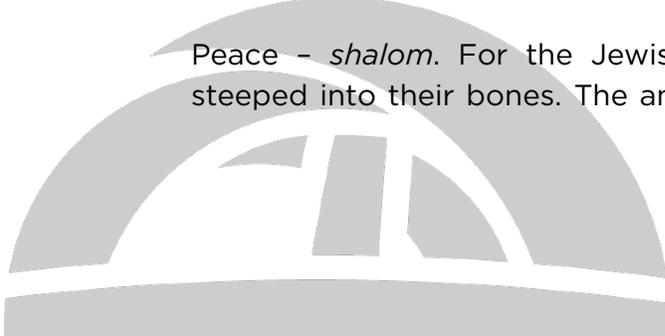
Reading Philippians, it doesn't seem like Paul needs this kind of list. He's a little effusive with his affection here – twice, he talks about how thankful he is. Three times, about how glad he is. Once, about the joy he feels. An introduction like this makes Philippi sound like a model congregation filled with practically perfect people. But it wasn't. More likely, like most house churches of the day, it was barely hanging on. The believers in Philippi didn't have much going for them. Many of them were probably slaves. They didn't have much, if any, money or status. They were a mix of Jewish Christians and Gentile converts, which means they probably argued about the 'right' way to do things. Keep reading this letter and we begin to see the challenges they're facing – false preachers, infighting, mistrust. Paul even calls out by name some of the people who've been making life difficult for the community. And Paul is writing from prison. There's little to no chance he'll see them again. But still, he says, I am thankful for you.

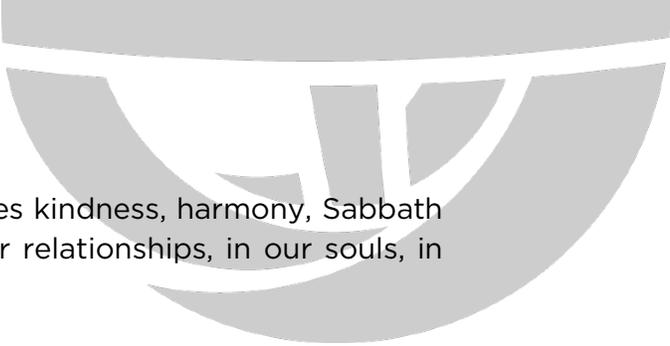
Could that be the key: to be thankful for the people we have, not the people we wish we had?

Maybe. And one way to do that is to start where Paul starts: by encountering everyone with two qualities that come straight from God: grace and peace. This is part of Paul's usual greeting, of course: *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ*. It's one of those familiar lines from Philippians. You may have grown up hearing it at the beginning of every sermon. Or maybe you've read a form of it in another of Paul's letters. You may not realize that even this greeting builds a bridge in Paul's community. It brings together two themes that resonate with different parts of the congregation:

Grace – *charis*. This was a word the Gentile members of Paul's church would know well. *Chairein* was a common greeting among Greek-speakers. When Paul uses it – and he does in his letters, a lot – he modifies it to make a direct connection to Christ's love and mercy.

Peace – *shalom*. For the Jewish Christians in Paul's churches, this concept is steeped into their bones. The ancient greeting of peace is a direct connection to





God's promise to bless and keep all people. It invokes kindness, harmony, Sabbath rest. At its root, shalom is about wholeness - in our relationships, in our souls, in our faith.

Before Paul tells the people at Philippi that he is thankful for them, he reminds them they already share in the grace and peace of Jesus - the one thing that can bridge their differences, mend their brokenness, and give them true and deep and abiding joy.

Think back to that person you might not be so thankful for. How might you experience them differently if you used these things to reframe your perspective. There are very few situations that can't benefit from an extra measure of charis and shalom. You don't have to say it out loud ... it can be just as effective as a theme running through your head. When your spouse is driving you up a wall: *grace to you and peace*. When you encounter a difficult coworker: *grace to you and peace*. When you just can't let go of a mistake you've made or a thoughtless thing you've said, say it to yourself: *grace to you and peace*.

Friends, saying thank you may be the first step in following Jesus. But we can only take that first step because Jesus shows us the way. That's what made Paul so grateful. That's what let him be still and know that God was God. Even in the midst of his struggles, even when he was separated from the church he cared about, even when the people he loved weren't acting very lovable: Paul remembered that he had been given the grace and peace of God the Father and his Lord Jesus Christ. And that was enough.

Is that enough for you? Some days, maybe just barely. But hang on. Because that grace and peace is there for you. That unending well of love is there for you. And when you tap into it, like Paul, you can begin living joyfully. Amen.

