

## **“What Your Pastors Appreciate”**

*Reading: Philippians 1:2-11, 2:1-13*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

Today after our worship service you have organized a meal to show your appreciation for your pastors, and so for our sermon for today I thought it might be appropriate for me to turn the tables on you a bit. This is a message I've been wanting to preach in one form or another for quite some time: when a church interviews a pastor, you've got certain things you're looking for in that person, certain skills and characteristics and qualities. But pastors are doing the same thing to you, you know; we're also looking at a church and assessing its qualities as a potential fit. So what are some of the things that your pastors are looking for in this congregation? While you prepare to show your appreciation to us, what are some of the things we appreciate about you?

But this is not just Pastor Luke and Pastor Carey's word to you, though this is a very personal word. This sermon is not just the product of our own personal preferences, and in fact I would go so far as to say that probably just about any other pastor should be able to preach this sermon, or something very much like it, to their church. This really comes straight from the word of God, because what a pastor appreciates about a church is, or should be, when that church is being the church, and that state of being comes as a result of God's action and our response to Him. While we do have to deal with things like salaries and parsonages and church buildings, and we do appreciate getting a paycheck and having a place to live, what we *really* appreciate is seeing the body of Christ responding to Christ's call.

I can say with some certainty that this is a fairly universal message of appreciation from pastors to churches because this message comes from the Apostle Paul, writing nearly two thousand years ago. He wrote a letter to the church at Philippi, and the tone of the letter is quite positive. That wasn't always the case; many times he had to write to churches to correct some major problem or even, in some cases, to reprimand them for their failures. But that's not the case here; he starts the letter by saying, "I thank my God every time I remember you," and based on the rest of the letter, I think he actually means it. He's not just flattering them; we quickly sense that Paul and this church have a deep relationship of mutual love. And what we see Paul reminding them of is what the church is intended to be; that's what he thanks God for.

Beginning in verse 9, he goes into detail about what specifically his prayer for them is. He says, "This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ — to the glory and praise of God." There are a lot of elements wrapped up in just those few words, but of course it begins with love. We will be known by our love, Jesus told us, and Paul appreciates a church that is growing in that love in such a way that it is also growing in knowledge of God and praise to God, and this then in turn leads to a greater ability of discernment and deeper holiness that produces the fruit of righteousness. This is the core of the church, and it works itself out in countless practical ways, but this is what we're called to be: a community built on and motivated by the transformative love of God and one another.

Again, there are countless ways to manifest this love, but in chapter 2 Paul points them to what may actually have been an early hymn of the church, singing of Jesus' example of humble self-sacrifice, and how that humility led in turn to God's faithfulness in raising Him up. "Make my joy complete by being like-minded," Paul says, by thinking like Jesus did and having the same love that motivated Him to set aside all of His glory as God, to lower Himself to the point of taking on the nature of a servant, humbling Himself in obedience even to the shameful death of a condemned criminal. That humble faithfulness leads to God's faithfulness in response: as we trust God and walk according to His ways, He is then faithful in saving us. And this is what Paul is pointing the Philippian church to, this sort of love that makes manifest the love Christ showed us. That's the core definition of a church; without that, you have something that isn't a church, and Paul appreciates that the Philippians are putting that call into practice.

Your pastors appreciate the same thing. Hopefully you saw the front page of the Pocono Record last Thursday, which had the headline, "Pocono church remembers its Bible passages." We're the Pocono church they're talking about, if you didn't get the chance to read the article. And when they say that we remember our Bible passages, they don't mean that we can quote Bible passages or pass a Bible trivia test or even that we remember to read our Bibles regularly. They're talking about Five Loaf House, where we are using our time and energy and resources to resurrect an old building for the purpose of serving others and loving our community. They're talking about the fact that we know and love the word of God so deeply that we're doing what it says. He who began a good work in Pocono Lake Wesleyan Church is being faithful to take it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. In humility, you are valuing others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but the interests of others. Your love is abounding more and more. Do you know how exciting it is to be the pastors of a church that is living out the call of the church to the point that when the local paper reports about us, they can't help but recognize, "Yep, that's a church that remembers what the Bible says." It's a call to active love, a call to love that transforms and redeems and resurrects, and we appreciate the sacrifices you have made in your time, your energy, your finances, and your prayers to heed the call to love.

And we appreciate the ways in which that love we are called to has been evident through our times of suffering. Though these are exciting days for our church, they have also been deeply painful for many of you. We have lost dearly beloved friends and family members, and we've suffered through unexpected and difficult health crises, and we've been through hard economic times. And your pastors have noticed how you have loved one another. You have encouraged one another, prayed for one another, visited one another, and called one another. This is part of our call to love that abounds more and more, this unity in times of trial. The Philippian Christians were facing persecution from their culture, but Paul tells them later in chapter 1 that their unity is a sign to those outside the church of God's salvation. Our unity in love in the name of Christ shows the world that God can be trusted even in the dark times; suffering does not invalidate our mission of love and trust in God's goodness.

And on the topic of unity, we appreciate the ways in which you join in the movement of this congregation even when you're not entirely comfortable with where we're moving. We know that not everyone was thrilled with Five Loaf House, and we know that not everyone is thrilled with every song we sing or decision we make or program we begin or end. We certainly do not expect everyone to agree with everything. We do not have to agree completely to be united in missional love. We

appreciate that you love Christ and His church enough to join in work that you don't completely agree with or always enjoy, whether it's climbing through the crawlspaces of Five Loaf House or investing in the next generation through children's church, even when our children are, shall we say, less than focused. That willingness to move forward with the work of God takes humility, the mindset of Christ Himself, because God has done a good work in you and He is being faithful in bringing it to completion.

We appreciate that when you aren't in complete unity, you fight like Christians. If we had continued reading in chapter 2, we would have heard Paul say this: "Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, 'children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.' Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky." Pastor Carey and I don't often hear much grumbling and arguing in this church, and you have no idea how much we appreciate that. There have been exceptions, of course, but it makes our jobs so much easier when you fight like Christians. We're going to have our disagreements, and that's fine. I want to hear from you when you have a difference of opinion. And when we have problems with one another, we need to be bold enough and loving enough to address that problem, but we sure do appreciate it when you do it without grumbling and arguing, and you stay blameless and pure. We really appreciate those of you who maintain that focus on what really matters; that's one of the best gifts you can give your pastors.

We appreciate the ways in which that spirit of unity has overflowed in grace toward us. Paul talks about how he always prays with joy because the Philippians have been in "partnership in the gospel [with him] from the first day until now," and we get the sense in this letter that Paul and the Philippians have a special relationship with one another. You have been our partners in the ministry of this church, and we appreciate that. Pastors do not exist to do the ministry of the church; pastors exist to equip the church to do the ministry of the church, and so there ought to be a partnership. And as our partners, you have shown us grace, and you have no idea how much that means to us. Sometimes we drop the ball. Sometimes we don't have the answer. Sometimes we get things wrong. Sometimes we have bad days. Sometimes we're just worn out and need a day off. We appreciate the grace that you show us when we're not perfect, and we appreciate it when you don't expect us to be perfect. We don't expect you to be perfect, either, so we try to show you some grace, too. We do expect that we're all moving on toward holiness, though, by the grace of God, together. It is a joy to be a partner with you in this gospel mission to which we are called.

We also appreciate how this is a church where all of us can, as Paul says, "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" in response to God's work in our lives. Though we enjoy the unity we have in Christ, this is not a uniform church. We hold fast to the gospel message that *anyone* who will come to Christ is welcome to enter into His kingdom, that we are *all* sinners in need of God's grace, and that grace is extravagantly offered. We are all at different points on that journey toward the kingdom, and yet we are together on that journey. This is a church that does not look down its nose at people who don't have it all together, or people with messy families, or people with a past, or people who don't have all the answers. We invite one another and encourage one another and love one another toward Christ, and in response to God's extravagant grace, we have extravagant trust in God's ability to save and transform. Your pastors appreciate it when you help one another work out your salvation.

This is not a perfect church, of course; there is no perfect church before the return of Jesus. And we have many things yet to do together in the name of our Lord Jesus. But in spite of our moments of weakness and our mistakes and our unfinished work, the church of Jesus Christ is a beautiful thing, and He who began a good work here in Pocono Lake will be faithful to carry it on to completion. Your pastors thank God for you and pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel. Therefore, let us continue to share in God's grace together, let us have the mind of Christ, and let us abound in love more and more.



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