

TWENTY SECOND SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11.

I thank my God upon all my remembrance of you, always in every supplication of mine on behalf of you all making my supplication with joy, for your fellowship in furtherance of the gospel from the first day until now; being confident of this very thing, that he who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ: even as it is right for me to be thus minded on behalf of you all, because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as, both in my bonds and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, ye all are partakers with me of grace. For God is my witness, how I long after you in all the tender mercies of Christ Jesus. And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and all discernment; so that ye may approve the things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and void of offense unto the day of Christ; being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are through Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.

PAUL'S THANKS AND PRAYERS FOR CHURCHES

1. First, the apostle Paul thanks God, as his custom is in the beginning of his epistles, for the grace whereby the Philippians came into the fellowship of the Gospel and were made partakers of it. Secondly, his desire and prayer to God is for their increase in the knowledge of the Gospel, and their more abundant fruits. His intent in extolling the Gospel is to admonish them to remain steadfast in their faith, continuing as they have begun and as they now stand. Apparently this is a simple passage, especially to learned and apt students of the Scriptures. They may not think it holds any great truth to be discovered. Yet we must explain this and like discourses for the benefit of some who do not fully understand it, and who desire to learn.

2. These words give us an exact delineation of the Christian heart that sincerely believes in the holy Gospel. Such hearts are rare in the world. It is especially difficult to find one so beautiful as we observe here unless it be among the beloved apostles or those who approached them in Christlikeness. For in the matter of faith we today are entirely too indolent and indifferent.

3. But the Christian heart is such as inspired Paul's words; here its characteristics are shown. He rejoices in the Gospel with his inmost soul. He thanks God that others have come into its fellowship. His confidence is firm regarding certain beginners in the faith, and he is so interested in their salvation he rejoices in it as much as in his own, seeming unable to thank God sufficiently for it. He unceasingly prays that he may live to see many come with him into such fellowship and be preserved therein until the day of the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall perfect and complete all the defects of this earthly life. He prays these beginners may go forth faultlessly in faith and hope until that joyful day. Thus the godly apostle expresses himself, pouring out the depths of his heart – a heart filled with the real fruits of the Spirit and of faith. It burns with love and joy whenever he sees the Gospel recognized, accepted and honored, and the Church flourishing. Paul can conceive for the converts no loftier desire – can offer no greater petition for them than to implore God they may increase and persevere in the Gospel faith. Such is the inestimable value he places upon possessing and holding fast God's Word. And Christ in Luke 11:28 pronounces blessed those who keep the Word of God.

I. THE DUTY OF GRATITUDE

5. Now, the first thing in which Paul is here an example to us is his gratitude. It behooves the Christian who recognizes the grace and goodness of God expressed in the Gospel, first of all to manifest his thankfulness therefor; toward God – his highest duty – and toward men. As Christians who have abandoned the false services and sacrifices that in our past heathenish blindness we zealously practiced, let us remember our obligation henceforth to be the more fervent in offering true service and right sacrifices to God. We can render him no better – in fact, none other – service, or outward work, than the thank-offering, as the Scriptures term it. That is, receiving and honoring the grace of God and the preaching and hearing of his Word, and furthering their operation, not only in word, but sincerely in our hearts and with all our physical and spiritual powers. This is the truest gratitude.

6. God calls that a “pure offering” which is rendered to him “among the gentiles” (Malachi 1:11), where his name is not preached and praised from avariciousness, not from pride and presumption in the priesthood and in the holiness of human works. These motives actuated the boasting Jews, who, as God charges in this reference, presumptuously thought to receive honor from him for every trivial service like closing a door or opening a window. But the offering of the gentiles is joyfully rendered from a sincere, willing heart. This kind of thanksgiving and sacrifices are acceptable to God, for he says in Psalm 110:3, “*Thy people shall be willing*”; and in 2 Corinthians 9:7, “*God loveth a cheerful giver.*” The knowledge of the Gospel should inspire us with gratitude of this order. Let us not be found unthankful, and forgetful of God's infinite goodness.

INGRATITUDE DENOUNCED BY THE HEATHEN

7. The heathen everywhere, despite their ignorance of God and his grace, condemned to the utmost the evil of ingratitude. They regarded it the mother of evils, than which was none more malevolent and shameful. Among many examples in this respect is one left us by a people in Arabia called Nabathians, who had an excellent form of government. So strict were they in regard to this evil that anyone found guilty of ingratitude to his fellows was looked upon as a murderer and punished with death.

8. No sin is more abominable to human nature, and of none is human nature less tolerant. It is easier to forgive and to forget the act of an enemy who commits a bodily injury, or even murders one's parents, than it is to forget the sin of him who repays simple kindness and fidelity with ingratitude and faithlessness; who for love and friendship returns hatred. In the sentiment of the Latin proverb, to be so rewarded is like rearing a serpent in one's bosom. God likewise regards this sin with extreme enmity and punishes it. The Scriptures say: "*Whoso rewardeth evil for good, evil shall not depart from his house.*" Proverbs 17:13.

9. Thus we have the teaching of nature and of reason regarding the sin of men's ingratitude toward one another. How much greater the evil, how much more shameful and accursed, when manifested toward God who, in his infinite and ineffable goodness, conferred upon us while yet enemies to him and deserving of the fires of hell – conferred upon us, I say, not ten dollars, not a hundred thousand dollars even, but redemption from divine wrath and eternal death, and abundantly comforted us, granting us safety, a good conscience, peace and salvation! These are inexpressible blessings, incomprehensible in this life. And they will continue to occupy our minds in yonder eternal life. How much more awful the sin of ingratitude for these blessings, as exemplified in the servant mentioned in the Gospel passage for today, to whom was forgiven the debt of ten thousand talents and who yet would not forgive the debt of his fellow-servant who owed him a hundred pence!

10. Is it not incredible that there are to be found on earth individuals wicked enough to manifest for the highest and eternal blessings such unspeakable ingratitude? But alas, we have the evidence of our own eyes. We know them in their very dwelling-places. We see how the world abounds with them. Not only are the ingrates to be found among deliberate rejecters of the acknowledged truth of the Gospel, concerning God's grace, an assured conscience and the promise of eternal life, terrible as such malice of the devil is, but they are present also in our midst, accepting the Gospel and boasting of it. Such shameful ingratitude prevails among the masses it would not be strange were God to send upon them the thunders and lightnings of his wrath, yes, all the Turks and the devils of hell. There is a generally prevalent ingratitude like that of the wicked servant who readily forgot the straits he experienced when, being called to account for what he could not pay, the wrathful sentence was pronounced against him that he and all he possessed must be sold, and he be indefinitely imprisoned. Nor have we less readily forgotten how we were tortured under

the Papacy; how we were overwhelmed, drowned as in a flood, with numberless strange doctrines, when our anxious consciences longed for salvation. Now that we are, through the grace of God, liberated from these distresses, our gratitude is of a character to increasingly heap to ourselves the wrath of God. So have others before us done, and consequently have endured terrible chastisement.

11. Only calculate the enormity of our wickedness when, God having infinitely blessed us in forgiving all our sins and making us lords over heaven and earth, we so little respect him as to be unmindful of his blessings; to be unwilling for the sake of them sincerely to forgive our neighbor a single slighting word, not to mention rendering him service. We conduct ourselves as if God might be expected to connive at our ingratitude and permit us to continue in it, at the same time conferring upon us as godly and obedient children, success and happiness. More than this, we think we have the privilege and power to live and do as we please.

Indeed, the more learning and power we have and the more exalted our rank, the greater knaves we are; perpetrating every wicked deed, stirring up strife, discord, war and murder for the sake of executing our own arbitrary designs, where the question is the surrender of a penny in recognition of the hundreds of thousands of dollars daily received from God notwithstanding our ingratitude.

12. Two mighty lords clash with each other like powerful battering rams, and for what? Perhaps for undisputed possession of a city or two, a matter they must be ashamed of did they but call to mind what they have received from God. They would be constrained to exclaim: "What are we doing that we injure one another – we who are all baptized in one name, the name of Christ, and pledged to one Lord?" But no, it will not do for them to consider this matter; not even to think of it. They must turn their eyes away from it, and put it far from their hearts. Wholly forgetting God's benefits, they must wage war against each other, involving nations, and subjecting people to the Turk. And all for sake of the insignificant farthing each refused to yield to the other.

13. The world permits the very devil to saddle and ride it as he pleases. It seems to be characteristic of every phase of life that one will not yield to another – will not submit to any demand. Everyone is disposed to force his arrogant authority. The presumption is that supreme honor and final success depend upon an unyielding, unforgiving disposition, and that to seek to retain our possessions by peaceable means will prove our ruin. Even the two remaining cows in the stall must be brought into requisition, and war waged to the last stick, until when the mutineer comes and we have neither cow nor stall, nor house nor stick, we are obliged to cease.

RETRIBUTION FOLLOWS INGRATITUDE

Oh, had we but grace enough to reflect on how it would be with us did God require us, as he has a perfect right to do, to pay our whole indebtedness, none being forgiven! grace enough to think whether we would not this very moment be in the abyss of hell! But so

must it finally be with those who disregard the question and continually heap to themselves the wrath of God, being at the same time unwilling for him to deal otherwise with them than he did with the servant he forgave. But against that servant was finally passed the irrevocable sentence which, without mercy, delivered him to the tormentor till he should pay the debt, something he could never do.

14. Nor is there any wrong or injustice in this ruling. For, as St. Bernhard says, ingratitude is an evil damnable and pernicious enough to quench all the springs of grace and blessing known to God and men; it is like a poison-laden, burning, destructive wind. Human nature will not tolerate it. Nor can God permit you, upon whom he has bestowed all grace and goodness, all spiritual and temporal blessing, to go on continually in wickedness, defiantly abusing his benevolence and dishonoring him; you thus recklessly bring upon yourself his wrath. For God cannot bless you if you are ungrateful, if you reject his goodness and give it no place in your heart. In such case the fountain of grace and mercy that continually springs for all who sincerely desire it, must be quenched for you. You cannot enjoy it. It would afford you an abundant and unceasing supply of water did you not yourself dry it up by the deadly wind of your ingratitude; by shamefully forgetting the ineffable goodness God bestows upon you; and by failing to honor the blood of Christ the Lord, wherewith he purchased us and reconciled us to God – failing to honor it enough to forgive your neighbor, for Christ's sake, a single wrong word.

15. What heavy burden is there for the individual who, in submission and gratitude to his God, and in honor to Christ, would conduct himself something like a Christian? It will cost him no great effort nor trouble. It will not break any bones nor injure him in property or honor. Even were it to affect him to some trifling extent, to incur for him some slight injustice, he should remember what God has given him, and will still give, of his grace and goodness. Yes, why complain even were you, in some measure, to endanger body and life? What did not the Son of God incur for you? It was not pleasure for him to take upon himself the wrath of God, to bear the curse for you. It cost him bloody sweat and unspeakable anguish of heart, as well as the sacrifice of his body, the shedding of his blood, when he bore for you the wrath and curse of God, which would have rested upon you forever. Yet he did it cheerfully and with fervent love. Should you not, then, be ashamed in your own heart, and humiliated before all creatures, to be so slow and dull, so stock-and-stone-hardened, about enduring and forgiving an occasional unkind word – something to be suffered in token of honor and gratitude to him? What more noble than, for the sake of Christ, to incur danger, to suffer injury, to aid the poor and needy? in particular to further the Word of God and to support the ministry, the pulpit and the schools?

16. It would be no marvel had Germany long ago sunk to ruin, or had it been razed to its very foundations by Turks and Tartars, because of its diabolical forgetfulness, its damnable rejection, of God's unspeakable grace. Indeed, it is a wonder the earth continues to support us and the sun still gives us light. Because of our ingratitude, well might the heavens become dark and the earth be perverted – as the Scriptures teach (Psalm 106) – and suffer

the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, no longer yielding a leaf nor a blade of grass, but completely turned from its course – well might it be so did not God, for the sake of the few godly Christians known and acknowledged of him, forbear and still delay.

EXAMPLES OF INGRATITUDE FOR THE GOSPEL

17. Wherever we turn our eyes we see, in all conditions of life, a deluge of terrible examples of ingratitude for the precious Gospel. We see how kings, princes and lords scratch and bite; how they envy and hate one another, oppressing their own people and destroying their own countries; how they tax themselves with not so much as a single Christian thought about ameliorating the wretchedness of Germany and securing for the oppressed Church somewhere a shelter of defense against the murderous attacks of devil, Pope and Turks. The noblemen rake and rend, robbing whomever they can, prince or otherwise, and especially the poor Church; like actual devils, they trample under foot pastors and preachers. Townsmen and farmers, too, are extremely avaricious, extortionate and treacherous; they fearlessly perpetrate every sort of insolence and wickedness, and without shame and unpunished. The earth cries to heaven, unable longer to tolerate its oppression.

18. But why multiply words? It is in vain so far as the world is concerned; no admonition will avail. The world remains the devil's own. We must remember we shall not by any means find with the world that Christian heart pictured by the apostle; on the contrary we shall find what might be represented by a picture of the very opposite type – the most shameless ingratitude. But let the still existing God-fearing Christians be careful to imitate in their gratitude the spirit of the apostle's beautiful picture. Let them give evidence of their willingness to hear the Word of God, of pleasure and delight in it and grief where it is rejected. Let them show by their lives a consciousness of the great blessing conferred by those from whom they received the Gospel. As recipients of such goodness, let their hearts and lips ever be ready with the happy declaration: "God be praised!" For thereunto are we called. As before said, praise should be the constant service and daily sacrifice of Christians; and according to Paul's teaching here, the Christian's works, his fruits of righteousness, should shine before men. Such manifestation of gratitude assuredly must result when we comprehend what God has given us.

19. Notwithstanding the world's refusal to be influenced by the recognition of God's goodness, and in spite of the fact that we are obliged daily to see, hear and suffer the world's increasing ungratefulness the longer it stands, we must not allow ourselves to be led into error; for we will be unable to change it. We must preach against the evil of ingratitude wherever possible, severely censuring it, and faithfully admonish all men to guard against it. At the same time we have to remember the world will not submit. Although compelled to live among the ungrateful, we are not for that reason to fall into error nor to cease from doing good. Let our springs be dispersed abroad, as Solomon says in Proverbs 5:16. Let us continually do good, not faltering when others receive our good as evil. Just as God causes his sun to rise on the thankful and the unthankful. Matthew 5:45.

20. But if your good works are wrought with the object of securing the thanks and applause of the world, you will meet with a reception quite the reverse. Your reward will justly be that of him who crushes with his teeth the hollow nut only to defile his mouth. Now, if when ingratitude is met with, you angrily wish to pull down mountains, and resolve to give up doing good, you are no longer a Christian. You injure yourself and accomplish nothing. Can you not be mindful of your environment – that you are still in the world where vice and ingratitude hold sway? that you are, as the phrase goes, with “those who return evil for good”? He who would escape this fact must flee the boundaries of the world. It requires no great wisdom to live only among the godly and do good, but the keenest judgment is necessary to live with the wicked and not do evil.

21. Christianity should be begun in youth, to give practice in the endurance that will enable one to do good to all men while expecting evil in return. Not that the Christian is to commend and approve evil conduct; he is to censure and restrain wickedness to the limit of the authority his position in life affords. It is the best testimony to the real merit of a work when its beneficiaries are not only ungrateful but return evil. For its results tend to restrain the doer from a too high opinion of himself, and the character of the work is too precious in God’s sight for the world to be worthy of rewarding it.

II. THE DUTY OF PRAYER

22. The other Christian duty named by Paul in this passage is that of prayer. The two obligations – gratitude for benefits received, and prayer for the preservation and growth of God’s work begun in us – are properly related. Prayer is of supreme importance, for the devil and the world assail us and delight in turning us aside; we have continually to resist wickedness. So the conflict is a sore one for our feeble flesh and blood, and we cannot stand unvanquished unless there be constant, earnest invocation of divine aid. Gratitude and prayer are essential and must accompany each other, according to the requirements of the daily sacrifice of the Old Testament: the offering of praise, or thank-offering, thanks to God for blessings received; and the sacrifice of prayer, or the Lord’s Prayer – the petition against the wickedness and evil from which we would be released.

23. Our life has not yet reached the heights it is destined to attain. We know here only its incipient first-fruits. Desire is not satisfied; we have but a foretaste. As yet we only realize by faith what is bestowed upon us; full and tangible occupancy is to come. Therefore, we need to pray because of the limitations that bind our earthly life, until we go yonder where prayer is unnecessary, and all is happiness, purity of life and one eternal song of thanks and praise to God. But heavenly praise and joy is to have its inception and a measure of growth here on earth through the encouragement of prayer – prayer for ourselves and the Church as a whole; that is, for them who have accepted and believe the Gospel and are thus mutually helpful. For the Gospel will receive greater exaltation and will inspire more joy with the individual because of its acceptance by the many. So Paul says he thanks God for the fellowship of the Philippians in the Gospel, and offers prayer in their behalf.

PRAYER FOR OTHERS

24. Yes, it should be the joy of a Christian heart to see multitudes accept the offer of mercy, and praise and thank God with him. This desire for the participation of others in the Gospel promotes the spirit of prayer. The Christian cannot be a misanthrope, wholly unconcerned whether his fellows believe or not. He should be interested in all men and unceasingly long and pray for their salvation; for the sanctification of God's name, the coming of his kingdom, the fulfilment of his will; and for the exposure everywhere of the devil's deceptions, the suppression of his murderous power over poor souls and the restraint of his authority.

25. This prayer should be the sincere, earnest outflow of the true Christian's heart. Note, Paul's words here indicate that his praise and prayer were inspired by a fervent spirit. It is impossible that the words "I thank my God upon all my remembrance of you, always in every supplication" be the expression of any but a heart full of such sentiments. Truly, Paul speaks in a way worthy of an apostle – saying he renders praise and prayer with keenest pleasure. He rejoices in his heart that he has somewhere a little band of Christians who love the Gospel and with whom he may rejoice; that he may thank God for them and pray in their behalf. Was there not much more reason that all they who had heard the Gospel should rejoice, and thank Paul in heart and in expression for it, praying God in his behalf? should rejoice that they became worthy of the apostle's favor, were delivered from their blindness and had now received from him the light transferring from sin and death into the grace of God and eternal life?

26. But Paul does not wait for them to take the initiative, as they ought to have done to declare their joy and their gratitude to him. In his first utterance he pours out the joy of his heart, fervently thanking God for them, etc. Well might they have blushed, and reproached themselves, when they received the epistle beginning with these words. Well might they have said, "*We should not have permitted him to speak in this way; it was our place first to show him gratitude and joy.*"

FEW BELIEVERS NO REASON FOR DISCOURAGEMENT

27. We shall not soon be able to boast the attainment of that beautiful, perfect Christian spirit the apostle's words portray. Seeing how the apostle rejoices over finding a few believers in the Gospel, why should we complain because of the smaller number who accord us a hearing and seriously accept the Word of God? We have no great reason to complain nor to be discouraged since Christ and the prophets and apostles, meeting with the same backwardness on the part of the people, still were gratified over the occasional few who accepted the faith. We note how Christ rejoiced when now and then he found one who had true faith, and on the other hand was depressed when his own people refused to hear him, and reluctantly censured them. And Paul did not meet with more encouragement.

In all the Roman Empire – and through the greater part of it he had traveled with the Gospel – he only occasionally found a place where was even a small band of earnest Christians; but over them he peculiarly rejoices, finding in them greater consolation than in all the treasures on earth.

28. But it is a prophecy of good to the world, a portent of ultimate success, that Christ and his apostles and ministers must rejoice over an occasional reception of the beloved Word. Such acceptance will tell in time. One would think all men might eagerly have hastened to the ends of the earth to be afforded an opportunity of hearing an apostle. But Paul had to go through the world himself upon his ministry, enduring great fatigue and encountering privations and grave dangers, being rejected and trampled upon by all men. However, disregarding it all, he rejoiced to be able now and then to see some soul accept the Gospel. In time past it was not necessary for the Pope and his officials to run after anyone. They sat in lordly authority in their kingdom, and all men had to obey their summons, wherever wanted, and that without thanks.

29. What running on the part of our fathers, even of many of us, as if we were foolish – running from all countries, hundreds of miles, to Jerusalem, to the holy sepulcher, to Compostella, St. James, Rome, to the heads of St. Peter and St. Paul; some barefooted and others in complete armor – all this, to say nothing of innumerable other pilgrimages! We thus expended large sums of money, and thanked God, and rejoiced to be able thereby to purchase the wicked indulgences of the Pope and to be worthy to look upon or to kiss the bones of the dead exhibited as holy relics, but preferably to kiss the feet of His Most Holy Holiness, the Pope. This condition of things the world desires again, and it shall have nothing better.

