

Only One Thing Can Be the Main Thing

Philippians 1:9-11

As we enter a fresh season of ministry coming out of a time of transition, one of the interesting and I think important questions to ask is: 20, 40, 80 years from now, looking back, what do we want to have marked us as a church during that time? What will it look like to have walked faithfully with the Lord? What kind of fruit do we dream and desire God to bear?

When I was in my own interim transition—after finishing my position at College Church and before coming here—as most of you know I was working in a warehouse shipping packages. One of the perks was that we were allowed to listen to an iPod or music, and so during that season I listened to about four hours of sermons, lectures, or interviews each day. As I would listen to some of the men who have really shaped the landscape of the evangelical church in recent decades, several of them in their final stretch of ministry, reflecting back on their lives, it forced me to ask a question: when I'm coming down my home stretch in ministry someday, how do I want my ministry to be characterized when people look back on it? What are the one or two things that I want to make sure I leave behind, such that I can die happy having accomplished by God's grace what he gave me to do. And I wanted to ask those questions now, on this side of the stretch, before I even stepped foot into this pulpit, so I knew where I was going, and could evaluate that along the way.

And there were two things that God has laid on my heart: I want to people to absolutely and utterly convinced that Jesus is the greatest treasure there is in life—that there is nothing better; that he is supreme, he is sufficient, he is everything. I want people to be absolute satisfied in Jesus. And second, I want people to know and love their Bibles. I want people to be familiar with the Word of God—how to read it, and to love reading it, and understanding and obeying and praying it. If I can look back and see that people are more in love with Jesus than life itself, and that they love God's Word and delight not only to read it but to do it by God's grace, then I can die happy. I would be thrilled. Because if you get Jesus, and you listen to the Word, everything else falls into place.

So, we can ask this question at a personal level: what do we want to have marked our lives and ministries in the end? But we can also ask it at a church-wide level. We can ask it specifically—and that's part of the visioning process that the church has been in for awhile, and something we'll be talking more about in the near future. But we can also ask it more generally. And I think that Paul in our passage this morning, Philippians 1:9-11, is dealing with this question at a general level: Where are we going as a church—not just Westgate, but as the people of God in Christ? What is the goal, the destination, and what will it take to get there? This is what Paul prays for God to do for the Philippians: to bring them to the proper destination, and to keep them on course in the meantime.

Philippians 1:9-11 is part of a larger section where Paul is praying for the Philippians in their partnership in the gospel. Last week we looked at the motivation for his prayer in vv. 3-8: how his heart has been moved to pray with genuine affection and thankfulness for these people because they are partnered with him and together as a community on mission for the sake of the gospel. And he is confident that God will be faithful to bear the fruit of the gospel in and through their lives, that he will complete what he has started, that their partnership in the gospel is not in vain. Paul is confident that just as God rescued these people through faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus on their behalf, so by that same power God will change them and use them for his purposes, and remain at work in them by his grace until the day of Christ. And so his heart is moved to pray joyfully for them.

But what does he pray? What is his actual request? That brings us to vv. 9-11, where Paul asks God to do in and through this community what needs to be done in order to bring them to that faithful finish on the day of Christ. Notice the repetition of the phrase “day of Jesus Christ” or “day of Christ” in vv. 6 and 10. Paul wants this church to be found faithful in the end. To arrive at the proper destination. And the get there you have to be on the right road. And you have to stay on that road, and not veer off course. So Paul’s prayer, as it unfolds, is for the Philippians grow in the love and knowledge that will keep them *on the road*, that will help them discern *what is best*—the main thing—so that they arrive at the proper destination, a faithful and fruitful finish in the day of Christ. Let’s read these verses again:

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

Paul’s prayer begins by asking God to make the Philippians’ love abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight. Think of these as the guardrails: love informed by knowledge.

It’s interesting that Paul doesn’t specify the object of love here. Is it love for God, or love for each other? As is often the case in Scripture, it’s probably both. And you really can’t have one without the other. If you love God, you will love his family. 1 John 4:20 says (rather bluntly): “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar.” And you can’t really love his family if you don’t love God. You won’t know what love is or how to give it. Biblical love is much more than affection (though it’s not less). Sometimes to make it easier to love each other we say things like “I can love him, but I don’t like him.” That’s nonsense. Love involves affection, though it is more than affection. It might be an *undeserved* affection—it might be a compassion and desire to see good done to someone even though they have rightfully brought scorn upon themselves. Love has a temperature, and it’s *warm*, not cold.

At the same time, biblical love involves commitment. Just as God’s love for us is loyal and steadfast, committed to our good and his glory, so love for one another among God’s people should be committed to the good of each other for the glory of God. Love has a *posture* as well, and it is *toward* one another and *for* one another.

Third, biblical love shows itself in sacrifice. Ephesians 5:1-2 says “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Love has a *price*. Saying no to self and yes to the other.

And because love is *warm* and *for* the other person, it's willing to do what is necessary to see God's good purposes accomplished in that person's life; love is willing to pay the price.

So Paul wants the Philippians to abound more and more in love. He wants the fires of their hearts to burn hot for one another. But he also wants that love to be guided and guarded by knowledge. I pray "that your love would abound more and more *with knowledge and all discernment*." Again, he leaves the object unspecified. Knowledge of what? If we keep reading in Philippians, it's almost certainly knowledge of Christ. Listen to Paul's greatest desire in Philippians 3:8-11:

I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, . . . [He continues in v. 10:]¹⁰ I want to *know* Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Paul wants their love to be informed by an ever-increasing, personal knowledge of Christ. A relational knowledge—knowing Jesus like you know your wife, not a book. Knowing Jesus gives boundaries and direction to their love: practical discernment or insight in how to love. And both love and knowledge are necessary. One of my friends and mentors describes this like a fire in a fire place. Love is a fire; it burns and gives heat, which is a good thing. But fire also consumes and destroys if it's not contained. And so love without knowledge is like a fire without a fireplace; it lacks the boundaries and direction to do what it's supposed to do, and instead gives way to reckless zeal and passion that can take a church in any number of unhealthy directions. Knowledge, like a fireplace, provides those boundaries and direction. But knowledge without love is like a fireplace without a fire. It may be pretty, but it's not doing anything. It's not good for what fireplaces are good for. Instead it becomes an ornament of cold pride; you just look at it and say, "Wow, how wonderful our knowledge is." As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 8:1, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."

Love gives heat; knowledge gives direction. And together this informed love is able to keep the Philippians on course. He wants their love to abound in knowledge *so that* (v. 10) they may be able to "approve what is excellent" or "be able to discern what is best"—to stay on course.

What is Paul talking about when he says he wants them to be able to discern what is "best" or "excellent"? The word he uses here suggests that he wants them to be able to tell the difference between *secondary matters* and *primary* ones; between *good things* and *the main thing*. As one commentator writes, "Paul's concern here is not the choice between what is good and what is bad, but between what is good and *what is best*."¹ The main thing. And only one thing can be the main thing. Only one thing can be "best" or most "excellent" in the Philippians' gospel partnership. Only one thing can stand as the central navigation point, giving shape and direction and significance to everything else. So what is that main thing? It has to be the gospel itself. The good news of Jesus—the one thing in the world Paul is willing to lose everything else for: to know Christ.

The gospel stands at the center of Paul's vision for the church. Everything flows out from and

¹ G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 60.

points back to what God has done for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Again, the word gospel simply means “good news,” but it refers to the whole plan of God to redeem and restore what is broken and sinful in this world, not least our own lives and relationships. Paul wants us to see the centrality of the gospel for all of life. As another author comments on Paul’s prayer here, “It takes only a moment’s reflection to see that all these petitions are gospel-centered. These are gospel prayers. That is, they are prayers offered to advance the work of the gospel in the lives of the Philippian believers.”² Paul wants their love and knowledge to grow in order to keep them fixed on the gospel, the most excellent thing.

We must continually remind ourselves that the gospel is not just for non-Christians. Some of us here this morning may not be Christians. We may not be sure what that means. Perhaps you haven’t recognized the ugliness of your own sin and rebellion against God, how like the rest of humanity you have sought to knock God off his throne and run life yourself. Perhaps you’ve never realized that you’ve committed treason against heaven, and that God’s just punishment for that is eternal death. And so you’ve never had your eyes open to see and embrace the love of God in sending Jesus to take your sin and the punishment for it, to take the very pain of hell itself onto himself, in order to rescue you from your sin, to cancel your debt, if you will only believe. If this is you, then you need to turn away from your sin and turn toward God and put all your hope and trust in Christ who offers you a new life and a new family. If you’re not a Christian, you need the gospel—the message of Christ.

But if you are a Christian, you still need the gospel. As long as we struggle with sin, as long as we are tempted to make much of ourselves at the expense of others, as long as we are sinned against by others, as long as we are tempted to give our deepest affection and allegiance to things other than God, we remain in need of God’s grace, which is available only in the gospel. The gospel of Jesus must be our central navigation point. Or to switch the image, if love and knowledge are the guard rails, then the gospel is the road. It’s the path we must walk for the whole of life. It’s not just the onramp, but the entire highway, the *only* highway, that will take us safely to our destination—to be found faithful before God at Christ’s return. Nothing but the gospel of Jesus and his Spirit is able to guide us and carry us to where God wants us to be.

There are a million things that threaten this main thing. As a church, we are always being tempted to put something other than the gospel at the center of our community and mission. And many of them are good things. Things like family, small groups, music, preaching, missions, youth group, food pantries, liturgy, choir, children’s ministries, outreach, and so on. All good things. But none of them are the main thing.

None of these things are able to give shape and direction and significance to *everything* we do. None of them are able to empower everything we do. And therefore none of them should stand at the center. And when we take a secondary thing and make it primary, we actually distract ourselves from our real mission and feed fragmentation among our community.

Think about what happens if I put family at the center of our community and mission. So we want Westgate to be a safe place for families. We want all our ministries to help equip families or to provide a platform for families to serve together. Sure, we’ll have other ministries, but the

² D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 22.

ones we're really excited about are the ones that build up families. Strong marriages, well-behaved kids. That's what we're about. And if thirty years from now people can look back and say, "Westgate—that's a place where they knew how to do families," then we'll be tickled pink.

Now are families a good thing? Yes. Should we invest in building stronger families? Yes. Are they the main thing? What about single people? What about the woman who has longed for a husband for decades, only to have her heart broken at every prospect? What about the childless? What about those who at one point had a family, but lost their child to a car accident or cancer? What about the husband and wife who have longed to hold in their arms a child of their own but for whatever reason God has never answered that prayer? What about families that have been fractured by adultery or divorce? If we're all about families, where do they fit in? Do they all of a sudden become second-class citizens of church? What about children whose parents aren't interested in church? What about marriages that are divided over the things of faith—an unbelieving spouse? What about children who wander from the faith? Does that mean their parents just didn't get it, despite hours upon hours of prayer and discipleship and sharing life with their child? What about the teenager who gets pregnant? Is there any room for her in a family-centered church?

Families are a good thing. But they cannot be the main thing. Rather, what's the one thing that can speak into every family situation, broken or unbroken? What's the one thing that can minister to the heart of the childless, the widow, the orphan, and the family bursting at the seams? Only the gospel of Jesus. The gospel is for the pregnant teenager just as much as it's for the happily wed couple. And this is true for every other good but secondary thing—music, youth group, choir, children's ministries—what's the one thing that can unite our hearts, unify our passions, give shape and direction and significance to all that we do in the name of the Lord? Only the gospel of Jesus.

One of the reasons most churches don't experience the kind of beautiful community we saw last week in the opening of Paul's prayer—the unwavering gratitude and affection for one another—is because they don't share a common cause. They don't have one main thing that binds them together. They chase after a bunch of mini-things in all sorts of different directions, and become fragmented and ineffective in ministry. But if we are growing in our love for one another—for the *whole* body—and if that love is informed by knowledge of Christ, then those guardrails are going to push us back into the proper center, the gospel of Jesus. Not the gospel of family, not the gospel of music or small groups or a certain style of preaching. Only the gospel of Jesus is able to bind us together in community and on mission, giving shape, direction, significance, and power to everything we do.

Nothing but the gospel of Jesus and his Spirit is able to guide us and carry us to where God wants us to be.

And carry us home it will. Look at the fruit of a gospel-centered vision for life, beginning in the middle of v. 10: and so "be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God."

Paul describes this faithful finish in several ways. He wants us to be found “pure and blameless.” That is, Paul prays that the transforming power of the gospel will have had its effect. As one author clarifies, this “is not the result of a self-improvement program, but the good work of God.”³ Remember how Paul’s confidence back in v. 6 was not in the Philippians to get their act together or to manufacture good works out of their own human effort, but in God to finish in them the good work he had started. When Paul tells the Philippians later in chapter 2:12-13 to “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,” he follows it by saying, “for it is *God* who works in you to will and to work according to his good purpose.”

Paul wants us to finish faithfully, filled the fruit of righteousness through Jesus Christ. So he prays for genuine change. But it’s the gospel that brings about the change in us—the fruit of right living. This is not about being saved by good works; we’re saved by faith in Christ. This is about the fact that the gospel doesn’t leave us the way it finds us; rather God changes our hearts and minds by the Holy Spirit to live differently than we lived when we were still rebels in the world.

Paul expects real change. But this change comes “through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.” Everything flows out from the gospel and points us back to the gospel. That means God both supplies the strength for right living, and gets the credit for right living. He gets the glory. The ultimate goal of a faithful finish is not to make much of ourselves, but to make much of God—that his beauty and power and incomparable worthiness would be on display.

Only one thing can be the main thing for a community living each day on mission. Only the gospel can stand at the center. At the center of our lives, and following Paul’s lead here, at the center of our prayers. As D. A. Carson says, “Put the gospel first. And that means you must put the priorities of the gospel at the center of your prayer life.”⁴

The call of this passage is not only *to live* this way, guarded and guided by an informed love, centered on the gospel for all of life, and confident of God’s faithfulness to bring us to a joyful finish, but also *to pray* this way for each other—for our lives, our relationships, and our ministries. And so as we prepare to come before the Lord’s Table, let’s join our hearts in prayer to this end.

Discussion Questions

1. We opened by imagining what we hope will have marked our lives and ministries when we come to the end. How would you answer that question personally? How do you think Westgate Church should answer that question?
2. Paul prayed for the Philippians’ love to abound more and more in knowledge. What are some things that God has used to help grow your love for God and one another?

³ Hansen, 61.

⁴ Carson, 22.

3. Reflect back on the relationship between love and knowledge in v. 9. What's at stake when we have one without the other?
4. How do we cultivate a deeper knowledge of Christ (cf. 3:8-11), such that our love can be guided and guarded by this knowledge? What has helped you personally?
5. We suggested that what Paul prays for them to be able to discern is the difference between *secondary things* and *primary* ones, between *good things* and the *main thing*. What secondary things are most likely to encroach on the main thing (the gospel) in your life? In your family and friendships? At Westgate Church?
6. How is the gospel exclusively qualified to be the main thing? How might the gospel give shape, direction, significance, and power to everything we do in life, community, and ministry? Think through some specific examples like marriage, worship music, missional engagement, home fellowships, or children's ministry.
7. What does a faithful finish for the Philippians look like in vv. 10-11? How is that end rooted in the gospel? How does having a vision of this end move our hearts and shape our desires?
8. How might Philippians 1:3-11 shape your prayer life for your family and church? Spend some time praying for one another after this gospel-saturated pattern.