

Thank You Philippians 1:3 ZCC 11.17.13

2 Grace to you, and peace from God, our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 I thank my God whenever I remember you, 4 always in every request of mine on behalf of you all, making my requests with joy, 5 for your partnership in furtherance of the Good News from the first day until now; 6 being confident of this very thing, that he who began a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. (WEB)

I grew up in the mid-south. I like living in the rural south for many different reasons. One of those is the weather. I know, I know, you probably think I'm crazy. I like the hot. I like the storms. I like the fact that when it gets cold and snows, you know it will be gone. When I as a missile cop in the Air force, I worked in the missile field and I know what REAL snow can be like and I don't like it . I was in the field when the temp fell to about 5 degrees and it started snowing. Over the next twelve hours, it snowed about 48 inches while the wind blew about 50mph—then it cleared off, got REALLY cold and the wind came up :) When we got relief, it was by snow-cat or helicopter. I don't need any more of that.

I like the overall feel of the rural south. I like living where there are no really large cities close by. I don't mind driving 10 miles to a grocery store or 20 miles to a Walmart or 25 miles to a movie theatre. I like the farms and the animals and the trees and the fields in rural areas.

There seems to be a sense of the genteel in the south that I've not experienced elsewhere. We aren't quite as blunt or raw in the what we say or how we act.

We speak or nod to people we don't know—simply acknowledging the presence of another human being. I think we still have a stronger sense of manners and respect for others than you might find elsewhere. Where we lived in North Carolina, they still pull over and stop when a funeral procession comes by—out of respect.

We still talk about people, but we are just a little nicer about it. We use colorful terms instead of blunt statements. Instead of saying someone can't be trusted, we say they are “crooked as a snake” or if they are REALLY a criminal, we might say they are crooked as a BARREL of snakes. Instead of saying they are crazy, we may say someone is a bit addled or touched—or that their elevator doesn't reach the top floor. Even when we do come right out and say something bad about someone, we often end our statement with “bless his heart,” the official disclaimer of the rural south. “He's as dumb as a post, *bless his heart.*”

I HAVE noticed, though, that even where I grew up people often don't have time to honor the dead by stopping for a funeral procession or to hold the door for you or to drop a "thank you" note in the mail or even to say "thanks" when someone does something nice. I wonder if we are even thankful enough to God moment-to-moment.

Since we've been together for several months, you know that I have a heart for the church and Christians—a heart for challenging us to remember who and what we are and challenging us to REALLY be God's people in word and deed. I honestly believe Jesus' statement, "*by your love for each other they will know you are mine*" should be the basis for our evangelism. I've reminded us that its easy to go wrong and wind up being Pharisees or Sadducees—taking religion over relationship and even missing Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

But.

As I was thinking about the holiday season and working through some scriptures, I realized something. There is a lot "right" in who we are as Christians and there are a lot of positives in the church—especially here at Zion—and I wanted to point some of those out today.

Let me start by reading some words from Paul's letters—including those I read a little while ago.

Romans 1:8 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, that your faith is proclaimed throughout the whole world.

Philippians 1:2-6 Grace to you, and peace from God, our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God whenever I remember you, always in every request of mine on behalf of you all, making my requests with joy, for your partnership in furtherance of the Good News from the first day until now; being confident of this very thing, that he who began a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.

Philemon 1:4-7 I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, hearing of your love, and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all the saints; that the fellowship of your faith may become effective, in the knowledge of every good thing which is in us in Christ Jesus. For we have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

You notice that Paul's thanks is to God, not the two churches or Philemon—but I believe that they also deserve some credit.

We cannot have true faith and hope and love and fellowship without the grace of God—but if we refuse that grace, we won't have those characteristics.

Just as those positive characteristics were a credit to those who received the letters—those same characteristics in this church are a credit to each of you.

Paul was thankful, first of all, for their faith. They had heard the gospel of Jesus and they had chosen to believe and accept the gift that God offered. It's true that their faith had its beginning in the love of God made known in the sending of the Son—but they took the opportunity offered to them. Paul preached the gospel to them and they accepted the gift of eternal life.

Today, in this season of thanks, I am thankful for your faith. I am thankful that your mother or father or sister or brother or aunt or uncle or your neighbor—SOMEONE—cared enough about you to tell you about God's love and live God's love in front of you. I am thankful that in this church, or whatever church it might have been, there was a minister or teacher who cared about your life—and your soul—and that that caring was put into action through teaching or preaching Jesus as the Christ. I am also thankful for your personal commitment to Christ. I am thankful the words of God's love took root and grew and led to an eternal relationship with God.

In the Philippians passage, Paul was thankful for their faith—but also for their containing faith. He was thankful that they had not sprung up quickly and then withered just as quickly. Jesus talked about that kind of temporary faith when he told the parable of the sower—where the seed fell and sprouted but was not well-rooted and soon withered and died. You've seen that happen on the individual level. Some Christians come into the fold all gung-ho and yet seem to slip away as quickly as they came. Was their faith real? Was their commitment real? Maybe so or maybe not—only they and God know that.

Today, I am thankful to God and to you for your continued faith. Sometimes expressing your faith in a small congregation can be trying. There never seems to be enough time or money or people to go around. Often there is more to do than there are resources to do them.

If you are member or not, whether you come when you can—or if you are in the church, as we say in the south, “every time the doors are open” I thank you for your continuing faithfulness—both to God and to this church.

That faithfulness brings another positive thing to bear—notoriety. Paul was thankful that the faith of the Roman church was being discussed by others.

Their faithfulness and their actions were being observed and talked about in the community. We do not exist in a vacuum. Everything we do has bearing on the believability of what we say. It is our actions—our lives—that are the only truly effective means of sharing our faith.

We are being watched by others—other churches and others in the community. I am thankful, just as Paul was, that your faithfulness and your works are the subject of conversations in the community.

In this we have to have great care. Churches have a reputation for in-fighting and I think that is what the community keeps an eye out for. A good reputation takes a lot of time and work to build. A good reputation is a vapor—fleeting and easily forgotten. If we do good works, people may notice or they may not. BUT I promise you that if we fight—if we fail to show our love for one another—EVERYONE will notice and keep noticing. One slip, one incident, can wipe out everything in its path.

I am thankful for the positive reputation and the legacy this church has built and is building. You have held on and held out. I am thankful to God and to you. If we remember who we are—and whose we are—and remember that we are the gathered church, the people of God assembled together in to fellowship and learn and serve, we will continue to keep on.

In Philemon, the continuing faith Paul is thankful for is made known in love, joy, encouragement, and refreshment. Love and joy are an important part of the reputation I was talking about. Again, it is by that love that we are known as his disciples. The back side of that is that if we don't have it, the world won't believe we are his. Instead, they will believe that we are just an exclusive club of hypocrites. If we honestly love each other and those around us—around the world and around the next pew, it makes our faith real and good and acceptable. It makes others believe we are truly Christians.

There there is joy. We express our joy in different ways. I don't smile on the outside much—I really don't know why, that's who I am. BUT I smile on the inside and I am a happy person. I am thankful that your Christian joy is easy to see. You laugh at my dumb jokes. You smile at one another. You bunch up and fellowship with each other. That joy spills out into the community and you share it when you leave this place—and I am thankful. Some people believe that Christians don't have fun and that we are sour. I'll bet Christians taught them that—but not you. And I am thankful.

The last two characteristics I am thankful for are encouragement and refreshment. Philemon's faith was and an encouragement and refreshment for others.

I am thankful to God and to you that you are also both of these. I know each of you do these things for others, but let me be personal.

I grew up in one those battling baptist churches—and Vonna did also, but a different church. That experience continued later as Vonna was secretary to a church that split. We were scarred, literally, by the dumbness and meanness and stubbornness that was ANYTHING but Christ-like.

With all that going on in my head, I was NOT happy about having a sense of calling. I didn't want to be a “preacher” because I knew I'd have to deal directly and personally with the people of God and I had been burned by them. I was afraid. I bargained that I could work for a Christian publication as a writer or artist be a missionary or chaplain.

God thought he knew best—and it seems he was right.

We had a wonderful experience at Smyrna and I am thankful for how we are starting out this relationship. Thank you for your encouragement and thank you for already making this a great experience. Thank you for refreshing my family and me through your love.

Please continue to exhibit those positive characteristics:

- **Faith that continues over time**
- **Faith that is talked about by others**
- **Faith made known by your love for each other and others**
- **Faith that brings joy to you and spills over onto others**
- **Faith that is encouraging and refreshing**

We are far from perfect but we are getting better by the grace of God. I am thankful for that part of the journey already completed—those things we have gotten right.

Today I invite you to commitment. Do you need to commit to being better than in the past? Does your faith need a renewal? Do you need faith in the first place? Would you like to declare your faith and be a part of this church? Listen to the Spirit of God as we sing.