

Sermon 28: Philippians 4:21-23: Valedictions

OUTLINE

Gospel greetings
Gospel benedictions

INTRODUCTION

Every culture has a way of saying goodbye. This can involve a physical act like a hug; a kiss; a handshake; a salute. There are often words spoken, some form of blessing or well wishing. We see in the Bible that the gospel renovated the ordinary acts of greeting. The gospel took the ordinary and familiar thing and made them new in light of the gospel realities we now experience in Christ. This is clearly seen in the formal opening and closing of all of Paul's letters. Many scholars have commented that with Paul there are no wasted words in both his introductions and his closing remarks. Ever the teacher, and with a deep desire to constantly reinforce gospel truths he demonstrates and weaves these truths into the opening and closing words of his letters. There are two things we will see as we look at Paul's closing words. Firstly, the greetings have undergone a gospel reorientation. Secondly, the benediction speaks of a new gospel reality in our lives. These will be our two points.

Gospel greetings

V21-22, 'Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. ²²All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.' Three gospel perspectives can be seen in these verses. Firstly we see a new gospel identity. Paul greets these Philippians Christians not as Roman citizens; not by their race; not by their class, or sex, but as saints in Christ Jesus. Every believer, no matter what other things they are, they are first and foremost saints. This word means holy ones. It is used of angels; in fact Jesus himself is described as the Holy One in Mark 1:24. It speaks of those who are set apart or consecrated for God's use alone. It was used to describe the OT people of God and now Paul uses it to describe this church made up of ex-soldiers; Gentiles; slaves and free; Roman citizens; Jewish converts. We have a bad history with this word because we only use to speak of exemplary people. If we call someone a saint we mean that they have done some remarkable task or lived a long life of outstanding merit. Paul does not use this word to describe ones performance but ones position. How can we be described with the same word we would use to describe the angels, or Christ; or God Himself? This is something that the gospel accomplishes. Here Paul is revisiting a theme he spoke about in 3:8-9, 'Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.' Paul calls these Philippians saints in Christ Jesus because, in Him we have a righteousness not our own that comes from our performing of the law; but a righteousness that comes to us from outside ourselves, the righteousness of Christ, which makes us at least legally speaking the righteousness of God. There are two technical words that we need to understand to understand how a sinner can be a saint. This righteousness that we receive by faith is alien and imputed. Alien is the opposite of native; it comes to us from outside ourselves and not from within

ourselves; it is not the result of our own good works but the works of Christ on our behalf. Imputed means credited to our account. This reckoning of an outside righteousness to us makes us justified, it declares us righteous and this makes us 'saints'. How does this relate to being holy? We live holy lives because first we are saints; we are not saints because first we live holy lives. We do not live holy lives to save our life and get into heaven; we are saved by grace through faith, and by that faith we are credited with a righteousness not our own making us holy in God's eyes, and saints; and now from this new position we go out and seek to live in accordance with the will of the One who saved us. If you are a one day old Christian you are a saint; if you a 100 year old Christian who has done great things, you are no more a saint than the one day old Christian because we are all righteous in Christ not ourselves.

The second gospel reality we see in Paul's greetings is gospel inclusion. You will notice that there are 4 groups of people the saints in Philippi; the Christian leaders with Paul; the Christians in Rome; and in particular those in Caesar's household. Unity has been a major theme in this letter, a unity built upon the fact that we are all one in Christ. Paul's greetings reflect this new relationship we have to one another. Notice how Paul insists that 'every' saint be greeted. Anyone who is in Christ is one with Christ and has full inclusion in the people of God. There is no half-membership in Christ, this means that whether you are a Roman citizen or a slave; disabled or talented; sick or healthy; male or female; young or old; in Christ we all matter. When we believe upon Christ, we receive the Holy Spirit, we are grafted into the body of Christ and are co-members with each other. Secondly, notice the use of the word 'brothers' in the greetings. Here Paul emphasizes the new family of which we are all a part. In a family every family member matters; every family member gets heard; gets protected; get provided for; gets celebrated on their birthday; gets loved. What is significant is that Paul is using this word to describe the leaders who are with him, people like Timothy and Epaphroditus, those with 'rank'; a public profile; who do important tasks yet in Christ are simply brothers. Their family connection is more properly basic than the offices these men bear. Thirdly, notice the wonderful fact of the greetings being given from the Roman church to the Philippian church. Most of these people will likely not meet; they are 800 miles apart; but their oneness in Christ opens up a set of shared realities which makes strangers more deeply connected than we are to our countries of birth. Imagine you are travelling as a tourist in Europe and suddenly you see someone wearing an All Blacks jersey, you would automatically feel a connectedness to them; but imagine you see your brother or sister. This is the new connection we have with every believer. Paul is reinforcing the unity we have in the gospel; the unity that he urges Euodia and Syntyche to preserve and live out. This unity carries implications. Our world is divided over many things. Who you vote for; what your opinion is on climate change; whether you think everyone should wear masks and lockdown during Covid. But in Christ we have the most important thing in common that transcends the usual stuff that separates us. We are to be a loving and accepting community that shares family affection with one another as a counterpoint to the world's disunity.

Thirdly, we see gospel power. Paul takes great pleasure in singling out greetings from those believers in Caesar's household. This would have been of particular interest and encouragement to the Philippians. You will remember that Philippi was a little Rome and had the rare honor of being Roman citizens and took the honor very seriously. To know that there were believers in Caesar's household would be a point of honor and encouragement. Caesar's household refers not

only to Caesar's family, but any who were in his employ. For example, if any Praetorian guards had converted as a result of Paul's preaching, they would be a part of Caesar's household. How encouraging in a context where the Roman machine was a tool of persecution against the church, to know that the power of the gospel was so great that it could turn your prison guards into brothers in Christ. To know that the gospel is so powerful that it can reach into the very house of the most powerful man in the world and plunder his house of souls. This would also encourage the Philippians because if these Romans can serve Christ in the den of Caesar, then so can they.

Gospel benedictions

The first thing we should note is that all Paul's letters end with what we call a benediction. Our word comes from Latin. Bene means well, and dictio means say, so say well is the literal meaning and it is usually in the form of a wish or prayer at the end of a religious service. A prayer or the utterance of God's blessing upon someone is a ubiquitous practice and courtesy not restricted to Christianity. However, Paul takes a usual custom like a basic greeting and he renovates it to make the Christian realise what they have in the gospel. In the greetings at the beginnings of his letters he begins a new practice combining the usual Hebrew greeting of peace and a common Greek greeting of grace. He talks about the peace and grace which are ours through God and Christ. Not only does he co-opt letter introductions to suit his gospel purposes but the valedictions, the formal greetings at the end of a letter as well. He highlights how a well-intended wish for someone becomes reality in the gospel. One author reckons that there are 27 of these types of blessings in the NT.¹ The shortest of which is 4 words, 'Peace be to you,' 3 John 15. The most common ingredient, as is found with ours is some form of 'Grace to you.' Even the last words in the Bible are Rev. 22:21, 'The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.'

Now you may have noticed that we end every service with a benediction, why do we do this? Are we merely caught in a formalist trap and just repeat old and dead things from the past, is it merely a meaningless relic from a time where the church was bogged down in sacramentalism? Are we getting our religious mojo on by pulling out some archaic and religious sounding things? No! It is obvious in the first place that it is a biblical and apostolic practice. We know that in the OT God commanded the priests to pronounce a blessing upon the people of God, Numbers 6:22-27, 'The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ²³ "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. ²⁷ "So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them." Think about why they do this. The priests God's appointed mediators act as a go-between between a holy God and a sinful people. They, in accordance with God's commands offer sacrifices for the forgiveness of Israel's sin would then speak words of blessing given to them by God. This is summarizing the gospel. A priest has offered a sacrifice on behalf of the sinner; God without violating His holiness can pour out His goodness upon the sinner and not His justice; this is signaled by the priest announcing God's blessing upon the sinner whose sins have been atoned for. It has been suggested that just as the priest would raise his hands in a sign of bestowing blessing; and the people putting out their hands in a sign of receiving blessing; the pastor and church should adopt a similar

¹ <https://feedingonchrist.org/hands-outstretched/> accessed 11/9/2023

posture. Here we apply the regulative principle and highlight how there are no NT commands to do this, and we will not mix up our worship by borrowing things not commanded.

In the NT Jesus pronounces a priestly blessing upon His disciples when He resurrects from the dead. In John 20:19 we see, 'Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." And again in v26. What is the message here? Jesus the greater High Priest has offered the greater sacrifice and secured a greater blessing, the blessing of our salvation by His crosswork and resurrection, a blessing that He now bestows upon His people. Paul is the most avid user of the benediction. Why then does Paul use it so regularly? The answer to this question comes in understanding the nature of a benediction, is it a well-intended wish or a reality, is it someone that we have or something still to be obtained, is it a promise or a prayer? It is more than well-wishing, Paul tells in Romans 5:2 that we have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand. Grace is the reality of our existence in Christ. This is not something we gain only after a sermon, though more of it is given, it is the common atmosphere of our lives if we are in Christ. So in that way it is both a promise, because it is ours and more of it will be ours, and a prayer for more of what God has already given and pledged to give more of to His children.

One of the issues that surround these benedictions is who has the right to say them. In the OT the priests of God would pronounce the benediction of peace on God's people. This blessing would of course depend on the proper administration of the sacrifices, the priesthood and the temple, we have it secured by the perfection of Christ's sacrifice and priesthood. Unfortunately this translated into the distortion of Roman Catholic priests assuming to themselves the power of being conduits of God's grace. Grace became a substance that was handed on by the 7 sacraments properly administered by a properly ordained priesthood. We need to state that the grace that Paul is speaking about is ours not because of the office of the person announcing it but because of the gospel that secures it. In certain Reformed traditions only an ordained minister may announce the benediction but a layman can only pray it. I insist that this grace is ours not because of who announces it but because of the Christ who secured it for us. It rests for its effectiveness not in my office but God's gospel. And so when you utter the Amen after the announcement, utter it with a sense of surety that this is the grace that is ours by the gospel. Have a certain assurance in your heart that the grace spoken of is yours in Christ. And so when you go into the week that lies ahead you go with this last word spoken over you, that you go with God, that you go in His grace, and all that is provided by His grace because you are a child of God is yours. It is uttered as a prayer that will be answered, as a promise that will be fulfilled.

This is how grace is announced, but what is grace and how do we get it? A typical definition for grace is unmerited favour, or the acronym, God's riches at Christ's expense. Grace is God's disposition to unworthy sinners, and I think the best definition is de-merited favour. Which incidentally is a not a word my spell checker likes, but is a most important way to define grace. A W Pink uses a well-known illustration. If you are walking down the street and you see man begging and you give him something if he is willing to do some work in your garden, that is not grace that is works, he merits the money you will be giving him. If he is begging and you give him some money without him doing anything for you, that is unmerited favour, and is often the definition of grace that we use. However, closer to the truth is the fact that the beggar attacks you and stabs you and

steals your wallet, and the next time you see him you forgive him and give him more money still, that is de-merited favour and the grace of God towards us. Works is giving you what you have earned, unmerited favour is giving to you when you have not earned it, but grace is giving you the opposite of what you have earned, even when you have demerited God's goodness to you. You deserve hell, you deserve pain and torment and punishment for the horrible things you are and do. God does not give you the things you do deserve but more He gives you eternal life, eternal riches, eternal joy and peace. He gives you the best that He can give. If we bring it back to our illustration it is like going down the street seeing the beggar who mugged you and adopting him, taking him into your home to live not just for a meal, and making him an heir and friend. This is God's disposition towards you.

And the reason we end every service with a benediction is because this is not a one off gift, but a disposition of God towards His children. Goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives. The description that Paul gives us of grace is specifically 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.' What does he mean by this? No doubt this is an attempt to distinguish the grace that specific to Christianity to the grace that made up the usual way of well-wishing someone in the ancient world. If we want to look at it in terms of theological categories we can divide God's grace into common grace and saving grace. Common grace is that goodness of God that He bestows upon all of His creation where he gives rain and seasons, and life and marriage and childbirth and the gifts of creation to the good and the bad alike. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is a grace distinct from common grace, it is saving grace.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ should also not be pressed to mean that grace is from the Son but not the Father, all the works of the Trinity are one. Rather we should think of the grace that comes through Jesus Christ, or on account of our union with Christ, think of Christ as a treasure chest that any who have Christ get the riches that God has for us in Him. All of God's grace to you from beginning to end is in Christ.

It is interesting that Paul's most common benediction is just simply 'grace to you.' But what is so impressive is that this one word is a summary of God's saving work towards us. In eternity past God set His love upon us not because He looks into the future and saw what we would or would not do, but unconditionally elected and loved us in Christ. It was not because of any good or value in us, but because of His free choice. When God first acted to save us, it was not because we caught His eye; or we met Him half way; we were not seeking Him, but He sought us. And when we needed a salvation that would pay our sin debt, He did not contribute 99% but 100% of what we needed, it was all of grace. And when we believed no one comes to Christ but the Father draws him. We are saved by grace; kept by grace and one day rewarded by grace, it is grace from beginning to end. And as surely as you have Christ this grace is yours. If you have believed this gospel, that you are sinner but God is a willing Savior who has freely provided all we need in Christ and you come to Him for mercy. He will not cast out any who come to Him; all who believe upon Him will receive eternal life. If this is you then when you hear the words of benediction not think of them as a religious full stop to induce a pious feeling; know them as a promise and a certainty of what is yours in Christ.