

A Godly Response to Criticism (Part 2): Abounding in Love

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Philippians 1:9-11 is a practical prayer to pray for our own spiritual life, family members, spouse, children, churches, and ministries, etc. This passage provides us with a concise overview of the nature of Christianity. Many of the primary truths of the gospel are set forth here in ten phrases. Paul prayed for the believers in Philippi to abound in love in the face of persecution and criticism (1:9-11, 27-29). He prayed for three things (1:9)—for *love, knowledge, and discernment to increase* in their lives. Next he described *the result*—what happens when these requests are answered (1:10).

⁹This I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰that you may approve [recognize and stand for] the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, ¹¹being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (Phil. 1:9-11)

- B. In the city of Philippi, a great stigma was attached to receiving Jesus as their Lord. The believers experienced the effects and tension of the stigma in their family, friendships, and workplace, and were tempted to draw back from their boldness in following Jesus with their whole heart.
- C. Today, the call to pursue Jesus with wholeheartedness carries a stigma (even in the Church). Jesus loves us with all of His heart, and, out of gratitude, we seek to love Him with all of our heart.
- D. ***The day of Christ***: At the heart of this prayer, Paul was crying out for God to equip His people, so that they would have no regrets when they stood before Jesus at the *judgment seat* (2 Cor. 5:10). In a practical way, “the day of Christ” speaks of a time after a believer’s physical death when they stand before Jesus. Eschatologically, the day of Christ is associated with the day He returns to earth.

¹⁰For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. (2 Cor. 5:10)

¹³...each one’s work [life choices] will become clear; for the Day will declare it...the fire will test each one’s work...¹⁴If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward.

¹⁵If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he will be saved, yet so as through fire. (1 Cor. 3:13-15)

- E. The judgment seat of Christ is the greatest appointment in our life; it is the day we will stand before Jesus to receive His evaluation of our lives. It will be a glorious day, because He will evaluate and reward His people with great generosity. He will reward even the smallest acts of obedience—such as giving someone a cup of water (Mt. 10:42). Paul was praying that the Philippian believers would make life choices that they would not regret when they stood before Jesus on the day of Christ.
- F. We are to seek to walk in godliness *all of our days*. Jesus spoke of the necessity of obeying Him to the end of our life. Our commitment to obey Him is to be continually renewed throughout our life.

¹²“...lawlessness will abound...¹³But he who endures to the end shall be saved.” (Mt. 24:12-13)

²⁶He who...keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations. (Rev. 2:26)

II. PRAYING TO ABOUND IN LOVE: FOR THE CHURCH, OURSELVES, AND OTHERS

- A. Paul prayed for God’s people to abound in love in the face of the stigma of the true gospel message. The challenge today is to discern the truth—to see clearly through the “fog of confusion” in our culture related to the truth of what God wants in the lives of those who truly seek to abound in love.
- ⁹*This I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment,*
¹⁰*that you may approve [recognize and stand for] the things that are excellent... (Phil. 1:9-11)*
- B. Today, social media offers many differing opinions of what God means by “excelling in love.” Many are being “discipled by social media” instead of by God’s Word. They accept whatever views seem the most popular. This results in much confusion and distortion of the true gospel of grace. Many are embracing ideas and activities that are not truly supported by God’s Word. But on the last day, this will be of no benefit at all. Paul was praying that they not get lost in a “fog of confusion.”
- C. ***Your love may abound:*** In praying that we would abound in love, we are asking the Spirit to inspire us in three ways: to abound in greater understanding of God’s love for us; for the Spirit to tenderize our hearts so that we abound in love for Jesus; and to cause love to overflow in us for others.
1. In Philippi, persecution and a stigma were associated with the gospel. Paul’s prayer was not that persecution would be lifted, but that they would abound in love in the midst of pressure.
 2. Jesus asked the Father to impart the very love that He has for Jesus into our hearts (Jn. 17:26). I want love for Jesus to be the primary life goal that I realign my heart with again and again. Any who seek to love Jesus with all of their heart will surely overflow with love for people.
²⁶*...that the love with which You [the Father] loved Me [Jesus] may be in them. (Jn. 17:26)*
 3. We must define love on God’s terms. God *is* love. Jesus is the only Man qualified to define love. All of His commands come from love (no matter how costly and demanding some of them are). God’s commands are motivated by love and they produce love in us and through us as we embrace them. His commands are not burdensome, nor do they contradict love.
- D. ***Still more and more:*** We are to walk in the tension of being grateful for a small measure of love, yet hungry for increased measure. This affects our view of others as we pray, “God give them more love!” We are to recognize with gratitude even the smallest measure of love in people we pray for.
- E. ***In knowledge:*** Love grows in us as we receive more of the knowledge of gospel truths, with a focus on the knowledge of God’s heart and personality. There is a relationship between abounding in love and increasing in the knowledge of God. We are set free by knowing gospel truths (Jn. 8:32). We are equipped to love more by receiving the knowledge of His affection for us (Jn. 15:9; 17:23).
1. I use the term “gospel truths” to speak of the gospel of grace—who we are in Christ, what happened at the cross, our authority as believers, and our privileges in the grace of God. The truth of God’s grace and His desire for us fills us with gratitude to respond to Him with love.

2. We must avoid two errors—pursuing biblical knowledge in a way that *does not inspire love*, and pursuing humanistic love in a way that *does not express God’s truth*. Humanistic love is not defined by or formed by truth. Some approach this love as if “love is God.” God is love, but humanistic love is not God, and some of it is in opposition to what God defines as love.
 3. We define love on God’s terms. Jesus is the only Man qualified to define love. All of His commands are motivated by love and they produce love in us as we embrace them.
- F. ***In all discernment:*** Discernment is the ability to apply biblical knowledge in a way that is excellent in God’s eyes. We make small decisions in thousands of life situations, including how we spend our time and money, and how we speak to people who criticize us. Blessed is the person who has clarity and confidence about the way they spend their time and money, how they respond to adversaries and pursue their ministry and occupational goals, and what entertainment they engage in.
- G. ***That you may approve (recognize) the things that are excellent:*** Spiritual discernment gives us the ability to approve (or recognize), stand for, rejoice in, and promote that which God calls excellent. We must *define love on God’s terms*, according to His Word—by what He esteems as excellent—such as pursuing the two great commandments as seen in the Sermon on the Mount lifestyle.
1. What does God rejoice in and call excellent? It involves more than that which He *requires*. I am not content with just being saved; I want to honor His leadership *with excellence* in my obedience to Him. At the end of my life I want Him to say, “Well done” (Mt. 25:21). I want to bring a lifelong testimony of the excellence of faithfulness to the judgment seat of Christ.
 2. What does God want us to focus on? The enemy wants us confused, so that for years we embrace wrong things in the name of excellence. If he cannot get us to embrace wrong things, he will seek to get us entrenched in things that are of secondary importance. Paul taught that a believer can be saved, yet still “suffer loss” of their potential eternal rewards (1 Cor. 3:15).
 3. This issue of what God calls excellent is at the center of the debate in the Church. Studies tell us that “millennials” (those under 30) are different from other generations in that they define love, truth, and justice by *what they feel is right*, without reference to God’s Word.
 4. In some parts of the Church, there is a great stigma attached to those who pursue Jesus with diligence and wholehearted obedience. A cultural stigma accompanies the things God calls excellent. Arguments in the Church against a life of wholehearted obedience are promoted by taking Bible verses out of context as some “salt erroneous arguments with Bible language.”
 5. Any sincere believer can know what God considers excellent. It is clearly set forth in the Scriptures. With the indwelling Spirit, an open Bible, and the fellowship of like-minded believers, anyone who is sincere can discern that which God calls “excellent.”
 6. We must be bold and clear, yet tender with humility, in standing for love as God defines it.
 7. The Lord wants His people to walk in these three things—to abound in love, grow in knowledge (that inspires love and expresses truth), and to possess discernment of how to apply love and knowledge in the many small situations of our lives.

- H. ***That you may be sincere and without offense:*** The ability to recognize what God calls excellent is promised to those who sincerely search God’s Word for truth and who vigilantly resist offense. We position ourselves to gain discernment to approve the things that are excellent by cultivating a sincere quest for the truth of it in the Word and by refusing to allow offense to take root in our lives.
- ⁹***This I pray, that your love may abound...¹⁰that you may approve [recognize] the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ,¹¹being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (Phil. 1:9-11)***
1. ***Sincere:*** Those who are deeply sincere are eager to want to know the truth of what the Bible says about lifestyle issues. However, some believers search the Scriptures with a predisposed mindset to find Bible verses to validate and affirm the compromises that they are living in.
 2. ***Without offense:*** The enemy works to lead people into offense so that they cannot grow in the Spirit. The enemy wants us to disregard the Holy Spirit’s leadership in our life, so that He is grieved (or offended) by our lifestyle choices. The enemy seeks to cause us to be offended by God’s leadership (what He does or doesn’t do for us): not experiencing a breakthrough in finances, favor, influence, healing, etc. And the enemy also wants us offended toward others.
 3. You can make life choices that the Lord calls “great” by living in obedient love for God that overflows in love for others. This can be true of you even if your love is not seen by others.
¹⁹***“Whoever...breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom...but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt. 5:19)***
- I. ***Being filled with the fruits of righteousness:*** This includes the *gift* of righteousness that is to lead us to a *lifestyle* of righteousness as we prepare our life for the day of Christ. Making righteous life choices is an important aspect of loving Jesus (Jn. 14:15). We are to view the call to a righteous lifestyle through the lens of loving Jesus. Walking in righteousness is our glory and our liberty.
1. The subject of righteousness is politically incorrect in many parts of the Body of Christ today. Holiness, love, and righteousness are different facets of one diamond.
 2. Much unrighteousness pervades the Church today under the banner of “being tolerant.” This has opened the door to widespread immorality in the Church, even in the prayer movement. We must raise our voice for righteousness and stand against unrighteousness in our lives.
- J. ***Which are by Jesus Christ:*** The fruit of righteousness comes through receiving the free gift of righteousness by Jesus’ work on the cross and experiencing His presence in our heart (Rom. 3-5).
- K. ***The glory and praise of God:*** God’s eternal purpose includes the Father expressing His excellence, grandeur, power, and beauty through His people in a dark world. In this present evil age, people are able to see *glimpses of the excellencies of God* as His people live lifestyles of abounding love and righteousness, especially in responding to mistreatment, temptation, and pressure. But the display of God’s excellencies through our broken lives is not a perfect expression of His grandeur. After Jesus returns, the whole earth will be filled with the glory of the knowledge of the Father (Hab. 2:14).