

Text: Phil. 4:20-23

Title: "Our Goodbyes When God is Our Father"

Time: 3/27/2022

Place: NBBC

Introduction: Two weeks ago I spent some precious time with fellow pastors at a fellowship in Pennsylvania. There were roughly fifty or so of us there, and each of those men, some of whom I met for the first time, became precious co-laborers to me by the end of the week.

On Thursday afternoon it was time to say goodbye. After spending a few days away from home, we were all anxious to get back. But there is something special about having to say goodbye in a context like that. You have been blessed all week by these men. You have enjoyed their teaching and their generosity. Some of them you have known as fellow-soldiers in the cause of Christ for many years. Many, you know, are going back into battles that can be difficult at times – the work of the ministry in Jesus's local churches.

When we all said goodbye on Thursday afternoon, there were handshakes and hugs and expressions of love and promises of prayer. We wished each other God's blessing, and as we headed to the car we even may have felt bad that we failed to say a proper goodbye to one or two.

I have had to say goodbye to many in my life, and not every goodbye is like the one I experienced in PA two weeks ago. Our lives are filled with difficult goodbyes in our fallen world of sin. Abandonment, divorce, betrayal, words said that cannot be retracted – these are goodbyes that are common and painful experiences in the world in which we live.

The Apostle Paul is saying goodbye to the Philippian church in our passage this morning. In all his epistles, the Apostle

never seems to fail to say a good goodbye. Here, he says goodbye to a church for whom he expressed thanks to God whenever he remembered them (1:3). He knows that the geographical distance between himself and them caused them concern at times, so he uses his goodbye to remind them of the connection they shared, which transcends geography – they shared the same Father (“God our Father”; v. 20).

This morning, I want us to spend time thinking about our goodbyes when God is our Father. At times we say goodbye to one another expecting that we shall meet again soon. One of the wonderful things about worshipping together on Sunday as a local church is that we can say a goodbye each week with the hopeful expectation that it will only be seven days that we have to be apart. With our weekday prayer times and Bible studies, seven can be cut down to just a few.

But sometimes you are at a conference with others you love, and you know that God has put great geographical distance between you and them. Sometimes you send a child off to college. Sometimes you know that this goodbye in the hospital room of a loved one may be your last. Whatever the context of our goodbyes, they can always bear the special qualities found in these verses when God is our Father.

Those qualities fill an amazing quarry of truths, which is both deep and wide. We will fail to mine them all in our brief time this morning, but notice with me three things about saying goodbye when God is our Father.

I. When God is our Father, our goodbyes to one another seek His glory (v. 20).

Application: You may remember that a few weeks ago we introduced ourselves to the tabernacle, and we said that the tabernacle of Israel was God’s sanctuary or holy place. We

learned that what made it God's holy place is that God put His glory there for man to apprehend (Exod. 29:43).

Because we are made in the image of God, humans can apprehend the glory of things in a way that animals cannot. We were made especially to apprehend God's glory. That is what is meant when the *Westminster Catechism* tells us that our chief end as human beings is to enjoy God forever.

But it also tells us what our verse here says, namely that it is also our chief end to glorify God. Not only can we apprehend His glory; we also can glorify Him or bring Him glory. We do that by displaying and proclaiming the glory of God. As believers, this too is our chief end. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "Whether, therefore, ye eat or drink or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

It is an amazing privilege for mankind, not only to apprehend God's glory, but also to do things to His glory. Humans seek their own glory, however. Herod is a prime example of this tendency that infects every one of our hearts. His seems especially relevant to those who stand to speak at public gatherings, as I am doing this morning (Acts 12:20-23). Herod accepted the adoration of his listeners. He gave not God the glory. No sinner naturally does (Rom. 1:12-23).

Application: So, what does giving God glory have to do with the way we say goodbye? Unfortunately, we all know that even many goodbyes between believers happen for reasons that have little to do with seeking God's glory. They have more in common with Herod's pursuit of his own glory than they do with Paul's desire to give glory to God.

And lest we exempt ourselves from susceptibility to that kind of a goodbye, let's remember the trouble that Paul himself and Barnabas had in this regard in Acts 15:36-41. A

sharp disagreement can be a reason to say goodbye, but in those circumstances, one or more of those goodbyes are rooted in self-will rather than the pursuit of the glory of God.

Are we committed to seeking the glory of God in all we are and do today, even in our goodbyes to one another?

II. When God is our Father, our goodbyes to one another are goodbyes to His holy family (vv. 21-22).

Illustration: Back in 2018 my son's basketball team at Trinity Christian School played a school in Manchester called Holy Family Academy. It is a Roman Catholic parochial school, and its name is based on the Roman Catholic idea of the holy family. It was a good game, and I was glad it took place. But because we always had played only like-minded schools prior to that game, I was concerned that some of our students might come away confused by the idea that "Holy Family Academy" must be another likeminded school.

It just so happened that I was scheduled to preach in chapel the next morning at TCS, and the message the Lord laid on my heart I titled, "Why we need to guard our hearts and ministries from Roman Catholicism."

In that message I explained what Roman Catholic dogma teaches about who "the holy family" is. I shared this quotation from thepracticingcatholic.com with the students: the holy family is comprised of "Joseph (the saint), Mary (without sin), and Jesus (God incarnate)." So the Roman Catholic holy family is Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, and it is a holy family because Jesus is God incarnate, because Mary is without sin, and because Joseph is a saint.

The website suggested a prayer be prayed to the holy family:

“O Jesus, look graciously upon our family here before you. Once more we consecrate ourselves before you – our trials and joys – that our home may ever be the shrine of peace, purity, love, and faith. Protect and bless all of us, both absent and present, and be merciful to those departed.

“O Mary, loving mother of Jesus, and our Mother, pray to Jesus for our family, for all the families of the world, to guard the cradle of the newborn, the schools of the young, and their vocations.

“O Joseph, holy Guardian of Jesus and Mary, assist us by your prayers in all the necessities of life. Be present at the pillow of the sick and dying so that we may all be united to Jesus and Mary and you for all eternity. Amen.”

According to the website, Roman Catholics should pray to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, the holy family, for a healthy home.

Application: Two terms are used for all believers in our Scripture passage – *saints* and *brethren*. Biblically, all believers are saints, and all believers are brethren. *Saints* means *holy ones*, and brethren are a family, therefore according to the Bible, all believers are God’s holy family. We pray together to God, not to other members of the holy family.

As God’s holy family, our Holy Father wants us to be unified in Him (John 17:11, “And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are”). This happens to the degree we allow ourselves to be sanctified, or set apart from sin, Satan, and the world, by God’s Word (vv. 12-19). We are unified when we are in the world, but not of it.

So, believers are brethren who are saints. We are God’s holy family. But notice too that all the saints are comprised of “every saint” (v. 21). Our identity as the holy family of God

is determined by every brother and sister. Our unified witness needs each one of us to be sanctified by God's Word.

Are we allowing that work of God's Spirit in our lives through His Word, which sets us apart as the holy family of God? Every one of us is needed in that work.

III. When God is our Father, our goodbyes to one another rely on His grace (v. 23).

Application: Some saints were of Nero's household. The contrast between graceless Caesar and the grace of Christ is stark in this passage. Some had been saved from the graceless existence of Caesar by the powerful grace of God. Grace is all the blessings of God's generosity, none of which we deserve, none of which we can earn, and all of which we must receive as a free gift by faith.

If we are saved from our sins this morning, it is not because we worked for forgiveness or earned it or deserve it. It is because we received forgiveness as a free gift by faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, the message that He died in our place and rose again (Eph. 2:8-9, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast"). Have you been saved from your sins by God's grace?

Similarly, if we are growing into greater Christlikeness this morning, we are growing by grace in the knowledge of Christ (2 Pet. 3:18, "But grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever. Amen"). Jesus gets the glory both now and forever for whatever change in my life, which has made me more like Him. Knowing Jesus Christ better and obeying His commands with greater love for Him is a work of God's

grace in me, a free gift I do not deserve, but one that I can receive by faith.

Conclusion: We have learned some things about Paul's goodbye to the Philippian church this morning. It was a goodbye to those who have God as their Father. It was for God's glory, in recognition of the true holy family, and dependent on grace.

What we do not know about Paul's goodbye to the Philippian church is whether he ever saw them again. We do know that the Lord continued to use this church. Early in the second century, some two generations after the close of this Epistle, the Philippian church was an encouraging stop for Pastor Ignatius on his way to Rome for martyrdom. Ignatius's friend, Polycarp — the Pastor of Smyrna and a former disciple of the Apostle John, wrote the Philippian church to commend them for their ministry to Ignatius.

But Polycarp's letter is the last that history knows of the local church of Philippi. The day came when God's plan for this local church was complete, and the Lord Jesus removed their candlestick from the prominent place it had served for gospel light in this dark world.

In 1944 C. S. Lewis published an essay titled, "On the Reading of Old Books." He hoped that his readers would be reminded of our need for what he called "the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds," so that we might set "the controversies of the moment in their proper perspective." He wrote, "We need intimate knowledge of the past. Not that the past has any magic about it, but because we cannot study the future, and yet need something to set against the present, to remind us that the basic assumptions have been quite different in different periods and that much which seems certain to the uneducated is merely tem-

porary fashion” [quoted in Alistar McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life*].

It turns out that learning to say goodbye to our fellow believers is a very important part of our service to Christ and His local church. Each of us is going to say a goodbye to other believers today. What will our goodbyes be like?

Will they be said for the glory of God? Will they be said with a desire to maintain the unity and sanctity of God’s true holy family? Will they be said because of God’s grace, because He saved us by grace and because we are growing in the knowledge of Christ by grace?

Or will our goodbyes be motivated by a fleshly desire for what Lewis called “merely temporary fashion”? The last word of this Epistle is *Amen*, which means *true*. We need to be honest and truthful with ourselves as we think about what it is like to say goodbye when God is our Father.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching