

The church in Philippi was one of three churches in the Roman province of Macedonia mentioned in the New Testament. The apostle Paul had a special relationship with these churches, and the church at Philippi particularly gave him much joy. But like all churches, it was not perfect, and Paul had to encourage them toward unity. The prayer with which he opens this letter anticipates the instructions which he will give. His prayers offer a pattern for our prayers and this prayer particularly can help us understand what we need to practice unity and how to pray for one another. Paul specifically desired two qualities in the Philippians.

I. Paul desired that the Philippians have abounding love.

In the Bible, love means seeking the best for another person without regard for yourself. The excellent description of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4–8 shows that it requires right actions, right motives, and a right manner. Paul’s prayer gives us three important facts about such biblical love.

1. *Fact No. 1: Love has no quantity limit.*

You cannot love too much. The Philippians had already shown much love toward Paul from the very first days of their faith: hosting the missionary team, sending gifts when they left, and helping other believers materially beyond their ability to give (2 Corinthians 8:1–4). Yet Paul desired that they abound more and more in love. According to Hebrews 10:24 we are to encourage each other to love and good works.

2. *Fact No. 2: Love does have quality limits.*

God defines the quality or character of love which limits what is truly loving. Like a beautiful, peaceful stream that heavy rain can be turn into a destructive flood, love can become something that is no longer loving. For this reason Paul prays that their love might abound in “knowledge and depth of insight.” Truth (“knowledge”) and how principles relate (“insight”) help define what is loving. We learn such discernment through the study of the Word of God and practicing it (Hebrews 5:12–14).

3. *Fact No. 3: Love is not an end in itself.*

Verse 10 continues from verse 9 both grammatically and in thought. It expresses a purpose of abounding love: to be able to discern (test and approve) those things that are best. The “best” things are those things which really matter for eternity. Among the “good” things which could fill our lives, we should focus on that which is excellent and not let the “good” drain our energy and resources. High quality love seeks the best for another person, not just something adequate.

II. Paul desired for the Philippians spotless character (v 10b–11).

1. *“Spotless” character is “pure” and “blameless”.*

- The “pure” person has no “dirt” in their inner life, but is like gold or silver that has been purified in a fire. It expresses itself in outward action so that the person will be “blameless.” That means, no one can blame them for having stumbled (as in sin) and neither have they caused others to stumble.
- Abounding love leads toward a pure and blameless life, because the more we act in love toward others, the more we fulfil the second great commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves.

2. *Three conditions go along with such a spotless character: a proper perspective, a proper lifestyle, and a proper goal.*

- There is a perspective in life which looks toward the time when Jesus Christ will return and He will judge every believer. That should motivate a believer to lively purely now (1 John 2:28–3:3).
- There is a proper “custom” or “habit” of life, being “filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ.” By grace through faith in Jesus Christ God declares the believer to be righteous. Believers by having this new righteousness will produce spiritual fruit in their lives. Paul will treat this in the rest of his letter.
- There is also a proper goal. A proper goal of wanting to glorify and praise God drives proper living. A spotless character displays the glory of God and causes God to be praised. This also implies that there is more and much greater to expect beyond this life. Live now for the glory of God throughout eternity.

Here is a pattern for our prayer. We may and should pray for material needs, just as Jesus taught to pray for our daily bread and safety. But there are much greater and important things. Pray for a holy life. Pray for strength against temptations. Pray for contentment with little or much. Pray for growing faith.

Pray for unity, but remember to pray for those things that contribute to unity: abounding love in you and in others, and pure and blameless living.