



# Christian Crusaders

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## Living the Jesus Life: His Plan for You

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TEXT: Philippians 1:3-11 (ESV)

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

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Dear friends,

Has anyone ever made the statement to you: "I think God has plans for your life"? I remember hearing that from my pastor was a teenager. He would say to me now and then "Steve, I believe God has a plan for you. You're going to be a pastor." And I'd smile and chuckle and think "who knows?" Well now I'm a pastor, I guess he was right. As a pastor, I sometimes have had people say to me "I'm wondering what God's plan is for my life. I wish I could figure it out." By the way, how about you? Do you believe God has a plan for your life, and have you figured out what it is?

As we continue our series on “Living the Jesus Life”, today's passage in Paul's letter to the Philippians is helpful for us because it tells us that God does have a definite plan for your life and mine. A dream for you. He has things He wants to see happen in your life. You've heard the old saying “God accepts you as you are but He loves you too much to leave you that way”, well it's true. He has plans for you.

Last week we studied Paul's greeting to the Philippians where he reminds them of who they are in Christ, and also of the rich inheritance that is theirs to claim. Now, as Paul moves into the main body of the letter, he touchingly expresses his love for the Philippians and he also tells him that he's praying for them. In fact, he goes so far as to tell them what he's praying about for them. He says “I thank God for you.” He affirms their love for them and their partnership with him in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. He basically says “from day one you have been such supportive friends and partners in my life and ministry, and I'm joyfully grateful for you.” They really had been supportive, financially as well as spiritually and emotionally. The statement from Paul had to make them feel loved and affirmed. Just think of how you feel when someone says they thank God for you and your friendship. Paul goes on, then, to write that he not only gives thanks to God for them but he prays for their spiritual progress, their spiritual growth. He knew when God plants the seed of the gospel in a person's life, and with faith in Christ through the Holy Spirit, that God has this growth plan ahead for you. That you will bear fruit to the glory and praise of God. Jesus actually said something like that to His disciples one time. He said “I chose you and appointed you that you should bear fruit.” Here we're told that at the top of the list of fruit that glorifies God is love. He says “I pray that your love may abound”, which means overflow, “more and more, with knowledge and all discernment. I pray that your love will grow.” The most important mark of a maturing Christian, you see, is love. Yes, doctrine is important, we need to think correctly. Service is good as well, and personal mystical prayer-like experiences may be nice. And faith is wonderful, but love is greater than all these. Paul says it this way in 1 Corinthians 13:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I'm only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge of God; if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I'm nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor, surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

Then he goes on to say, at the end of the chapter, “faith, hope, and love. The greatest of these is love.” Friend, the main evidence that we're growing Christ is not exhilarating prayer experiences or giftedness or smarts, but it's steadily increasing, humble love for other people.

Now the word for love that Paul is using here is the Greek word “agape”. It's a sacrificial type of love. It's an act of the will that gives of self to others. It's self-giving love, and selfless. It's Jesus-style love. It goes way beyond sentimental feelings. It actually acts on behalf of other people. Paul also tells us that this “agape love” must be grounded and informed by knowledge. It needs to be a “smart love”. He said “I'm praying that you going to grow in smart love.” Growing love needs knowledge, you see. Knowledge, he says, of the recognized truths and principles from the word of God about what love really is. Our human reasoning alone isn't enough to discern truth from error. We are flawed people. The best protection against deception is to know God's revealed truths, which we find in the Bible. You see, it's in the Bible that we receive the knowledge of Jesus, and of His revealed love for you and all people. Ultimately laying down his life at a cross to be the sacrificial payment for our sins and rescue us. It's there that we learn not only about God's great commandment to love Him with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love our neighbor as ourselves, but we also learn answers to questions that we have like “well then who is my neighbor?”, and “what does it look like to really love people in the name of Jesus?”

Growing effective agape love not only requires growing in knowledge, but it requires growing in discernment, which means basically insight, wisdom. Not only must our love be smart love, it must be wise love. Life situations, as you know, can get complicated. Some things are clearly good and bad, but sometimes the boundary line is not so readily visible to us. And it takes discernment and insight as we discern what's the best course of action. We need to be guided by scripture, of course, to have that. We also need to talk to our brothers and sisters of the faith community, especially the mature ones, for insight. And of course, we always should seek God's direction in prayer, ask for His wisdom. We need ask questions as we consider love and options for loving: “is this harmful?” or “is it helpful?” In 1 Corinthians 10 we read “all things are lawful but not all things are helpful.” Is this action I'm thinking about doing going to cost someone else to trip in their faith? Will it harm my testimony? Will it be a turn-off for an unbeliever? Is it scriptural? Smart love, wise love.

Then Paul explains why it's so important for our love to be growing and abounding with knowledge and discernment. He says “here's why: so that you may approve what's excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory praise of God.” “So that you may approve what is excellent,” the first part of that statement. That simply means so that you may make the best God-pleasing, God-glorifying decisions in loving Him and loving other people. As we grow in our understanding of what it means to follow Jesus, we will increasingly be able to choose and to practice what is excellent in God's sight. It will help us to be our, as the book says, “utmost for His highest.” Paul says

“then you’ll start becoming pure and blameless”; not perfect, mind you, that’s not what Paul is talking about here. He’s talking about you’re going to start being conformed to the likeness of Jesus, looking more and more like Jesus with attitudes and His actions working in your life. He said “then you’ll be ready for the day of Christ.” You and I know Christ has come and is coming again in power, and every knee will bow before Him and call Him “Lord”. The day is going to come when you will find yourself kneeling before Him, and what do you long to hear Him say? Simply this: “well done good and faithful servant.”

And Paul says finally “and you be filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through life with Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.” Imagine this: automatically doing the right things, the God-pleasing things, the loving things; delighting in His will and walking in His ways, through the power the spirit of Jesus Christ working in you. Christ’s love will actually flow through you into the lives of others. That’s God’s vision, and he says “it will bring glory and praise to God.” And that, my friend, is what the Jesus life is all about: bringing God glory and praise.

I can’t help but think also about the personal advantages for us of having this kind of love working in our lives. Think of the improved and enriched relationships to be had at home and church and work, with God and the people around you, as you’re growing in this love. It will make you an improved, effective witness for Jesus. You’ve heard the statement “who you are speaks so loudly I can’t hear what you’re saying”, right? Well, it’s true - who you are speaks loudly to those around you. If you’re obnoxious and selfish and unloving, more than likely they’re not going to listen to you. But a person who is “walking the talk” will always get a fair hearing. There’s a story I came across in John Trent’s book that he co-authored for Promise Keepers. He tells this story:

When I led a Young Life group, I did my best to round up kids who really needed to hear the gospel when we went to summer camp. Mark was one of those kids.

Bob Mitchell, the main speaker that week, called most of the shots—including when meals would be served. So “Mitch” was always talking with the cook.

The cook loved her work, but it was exhausting. She always looked tired.

Whenever she talked to Mitch, he got up and gave her his chair—and a moment’s rest—while they discussed meal plans.

Nobody noticed Mitch doing this . . . except Mark. Mark hadn’t come to hear about Jesus. But when he saw Jesus’ love lived out in that simple act of kindness by the camp speaker, he began to listen to Mitchell’s talks. Later that week, Mark asked Jesus to be his Savior.

It wasn’t because of the messages, Mark said, but because of the love he saw in Mitch. “If that’s what it means to be a Christian,” Mark said, “I want to be one.”

Finally, not only will your relationships and testimony be improved as you're growing in love, doing the right and loving thing will lead you to greater joy in your life. You see, joy equals obedience to the directions of Jesus. He told His disciples one time, as He was instructing them about loving each other, He said "I said these things to you that my joy, joy I have, may be in you, and your joy may be full." So no wonder Paul writes to them: I'm praying about your love life, that it will grow and you'll begin to look more and more like Jesus. Because that's where the joy is to be found. You might be wondering now: how can all this happen in a person's life? How can I meet these spiritual goals that God has? Truth is: you can't...on your own. But the good news is: God can. Back in verse six Paul says "I'm confident that He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it." He's saying there that God has stepped into their lives and only God can change a life, make you more loving than you could ever imagine yourself being. And we have to remember Paul is praying to God for these things to happen in their lives, because he knows only God can make it happen. You see, you and I are every bit as helpless and transforming ourselves into loving people as we are in saving ourselves from sin and death. But thanks be to God! God's grace, which saves, also energizes and empowers. God, the Holy Spirit in you, can make this love happen. This kind of love that Paul is praying for in their lives is referred to as the "fruit of the Holy Spirit, whom God is given us in order to grow us up and conform us in the likeness of his Son, Jesus." That great evangelical pastor and writer John Stott said years ago in one of his messages on spiritual growth: "consequently, all the glory and praise belongs not to believers but to God, for He has redeemed them by the work of His Son and has implanted within them His Spirit to produce the fruit of righteousness." Did you hear that? "The fruit of righteousness" that Paul's talking about here.

God is at work in us through His Holy Spirit. That's the truth that lies behind those little saying you sometimes run across on Christian posters and on t-shirts: "be patient with me, God isn't finished with me yet." Or have you ever seen that one with the road sign which reads "construction zone"? Well we are a "construction zone" when we're in Christ. God is working in us, doing an "extreme makeover" in our lives. He's making us more loving.

Now, I don't want to give you the impression that you are to just sit passively by and wait for that love to take over in your life; no, no, no, no! It's vital, you see, that you put yourself in places and have practices that the Holy Spirit can use to build you up into a mature, loving person whose actions and attitudes look like Jesus more and more. There are a means of grace that God has provided to grow people like us in love. First of all, it begins with prayer. As Paul said "I pray for you", we are to be praying for

ourselves as well, and for one another, asking for His help in making us grow in love; helping us to love. To get past ourselves and start looking out for others. And, of course, there's the word of God. As we go through the Bible and we study it and learn about God's great love for us that He's shown us in Jesus Christ so unconditionally, and we start believing in His love for us, and we start trusting in Him as we take His words and His directions about love and apply them and obey them, we grow. And worship: we need to get to worship. There, we get the Word fed to us, the gospel. And we come to the table of the Lord, and God builds us up. And as we live in community with others, brothers and sisters in Christ, we know from Proverbs that "iron sharpens iron", "love sharpens love". And then there's service, as we step out towards others and give ourselves a way. Make the decision to do that: it's going to grow us in our ability to love. It's going to make us wiser and smarter in our love and compassion for people.

Living the Jesus life is about abounding and growing in smart, wise love for God and people, because love is the official trademark of the authentic Christian. And that, my loved ones, is God's plan for your life: to grow you up, to shape you into a loving person like His son Jesus Christ. When you think about it, that really should not surprise us. After all, Paul did not dream this up on his own. Jesus himself has told us, and Paul knew this. Jesus said "a new commandment I give to you: love one another as I have loved you. By this all people will know that you're My disciples." So may our daily prayers for ourselves and other followers of Jesus always be: "Lord, shape me and mold me into a loving person. Empower me to love as Jesus has loved me. For Your glory and praise."

Amen