

First Fifteen: January 24-28
Focus Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Monday: Philippians 1:9-11

Going Deeper: Love is a funny word, at least in the English language. We love our spouse, children, and our dog! We also love ice cream, french fries, and our job. I know we recognize we are using the same word in each example, and our meaning for these expressions of our love is different. As a follower of Jesus, we love God, and we are called to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. You may be tempted to think of these loves as being different, I do not. I see and understand the love of God, neighbor and myself are intimately tied together, inseparable from each other. I believe this based upon the teaching from 1 John 4:7-21... *“Dear friends, let’s love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.”* (1 Jn 4:7 – CEB) I recognize this love described by John ebbs and flows; it fluctuates throughout our day often affected by our inner thoughts, or responses and reactions to both circumstances and people. I think Paul understood this as well, I believe this because of his prayer for his brothers and sisters in the faith at Philippi. As you read this prayer what phrases or words stand out for you? Is there some aspect of Paul’s prayer that speaks specifically to you in your current situation? I encourage you read these verses several times allowing Paul’s prayer to soak in and through you.

Prayer: Our Lord of infinite love... be present with me through this day. Help me be attentive and aware that in asking this, I know this will be true, and from this place of faith in your love and presence help me to be more fully present and loving with others as well. Amen.

Tuesday: Philippians 1:12-18

Going Deeper: We are at times tempted to believe God’s blessing comes primarily through moments of joy or answered prayer where what we hoped for and wanted to happen actually did. These times, while joyous may not always be a sign of God’s blessing. What I mean by this comes from my own experience, as well as from these words from Paul. For me I can honestly say the moments in my life that were truly filled with enduring blessing, and growth in my faith, character and maturity came from or through hardship and even sorrow and loss. Paul is writing this letter from a Roman prison, and yet he is filled with hope and expectancy about what God is doing though his hardship. He sees his present struggle as part of God’s work to build God’s kingdom, as well as continue the work in expanding Paul’s understanding of his faith. He acknowledges that there are some within the community of faith, most likely in the church at Philippi, who are using his circumstance for their own benefit, and while that would burn my biscuits, Paul understands God is using all of it, everything that is happening to advance the message of love, hope and salvation found in Jesus. How is this possible? Paul understands he is simply one part of God’s plan, he is deeply loved and held within God’s grace, but there are many moving parts in the work of God’s kingdom... some of which include you and me.

Prayer: Our God who wastes nothing... help me trust all that happens will ultimately lead me closer to you, experiencing your hold upon me more deeply as I am held within your love. You see far beyond my view, and yet you desire to use me in your work of healing restoration. Open my eyes Lord and deepen my faith and trust in your work in our world. Amen.

Wednesday: Philippians 1:27-30

Going Deeper: Paul encourages us to *“stand firm, united in spirit and mind as you (we) struggle to remain faithful to the gospel.”* In this one phrase there is much to unpack! He acknowledges the diversity within the body of Christ. This is something we must learn to accept, as we learn to respond to one another gracefully and kindly. Our diversity and different ways of understanding do not need to create disharmony. In fact, I believe Paul’s call for us to *“stand firm, united in one spirit and mind,”* reveal that he understands the challenges of diversity, but also realizes our faith, and our trust in God’s grace and God’s kingdom revealed in the Good News (this is what the word gospel means) shared to us by Jesus call us to seek the common ground of our faith in God. What might this be? Trust in God’s lovingkindness, and releasing our fears of those who are different, whose ideas are not like our own. My experience of God’s love is uniquely my own, as is yours! Even though we read the same book of faith we call the Bible we all bring our own experiences, and due to these experiences, we often read the same verses but hear very different nuances within the words on the page. This does not invalidate either of us, or our experience... but it does invite us into a conversation of listening and learning. We may still see things differently, and that is the point. We are not called to fix, change, or correct anyone... the only directive we are given is to love one another.

Prayer: Lord of Light... shine brightly! Lord of Wisdom... open our hearts to one another so your love may flow within, through and around me... bringing unity, understanding and grace throughout this day. Amen.

Thursday: Philippians 2:1-7a

Going Deeper: These words in Paul’s letter to the Church at Philippi are thought to be one of the earliest hymns or statements of faith by first-generation Christians. Read them again, taking time to allow specific thoughts, ideas, phrases, or words to capture your attention. What do they tell us about Jesus and his priorities? How do the opening words of this early Christian text direct Paul’s guidance for the Church in verses 1-4 of this 2nd chapter of Philippians? Thinking about where we are today as the church and society... how do Paul’s words of instruction call us to engage our community and where will this be the most difficult for you and those you love? As you think about Paul’s instruction where do you feel it’s clearest direction for you? How can you begin to put it into practice today?

Prayer: Lord of Grace and Mercy... send your Spirit of encouragement to guide me through this day as I navigate the tasks and engage those who you bring into my path. Help me remember the life and choices Jesus made... how he did not live for his own needs and desires but was

aware and sought to include the care and needs of others even before his own. Lord... this is a hard teaching, grant me courage, and share your tender mercy with me. Amen.

Friday: Philippians 2:12-16

Going Deeper: How we live each day matters. Our lives when we are living in alignment with our faith shine like stars in darkest of nights... according to Paul. Although I suspect you already know this, just as I am sure you, in the same way I do, notice distinctive acts of faith by others as they happen around you. We all do... if and when we are looking up and attentive to our surroundings rather than our own concerns. It is a very human trait to notice what others are doing, paying attention to those who have what you hope to also have someday; this is something we all have done and most likely if we are honest still do. Although, I hope as we grow older and wiser and more mature in our faith what we notice changes, as well as allowing it to challenge us as we seek to learn from the lessons and missteps of our past. Looking ahead, and not behind is ultimately what Paul is talking about in these verses. We must let go of what happened yesterday. If needed make amends for something you could have done better, then move on as you seek to continually grow in your understanding of how our lives matter, and how each day is a renewal of our faith in God and our desire to serve others by sharing from the blessings God has bestowed upon us.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, my teacher, Savior, and guide... lead me at the close of another week. When I am tired give me patience with others. When I am distracted help me look up to see the need of others. When I am frustrated by others, share with me your grace and mercy... for I am sure there were days when you were frustrated with your disciples as well. Lord Jesus, my teacher, Savior, and guide... hear my prayer. Amen.