**Real Community**

*Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!* Why would I say that? Because I want God’s grace and peace to be yours!

I stole that greeting from the Apostle Paul (and his friend in ministry Timothy). It comes from Philippians 1:2.

Philippians is an epistle or a letter… one of 13 letters written by Paul in the New Testament.

Paul wrote this letter to the church at Philippi from Prison. He’d been falsely accused of defying the temple in Jerusalem, so he was arrested and then transferred to Caesarea to be protected from people that wanted to kill him, and then as a Roman citizen he appealed to have his case heard in Rome… some say he was imprisoned for nearly 5 years. He was most likely chained to a soldier or guard, under a house arrest of sorts. It wasn’t the worst of imprisonments but still nothing to be desired.

Even though he was in chains, Paul still preached the Gospel every opportunity he had. I often wonder if I were in Paul’s shoes, would I be able to remain so focused on the work God had for me.

Paul had a great affection for the Christians in Philippi. He had a close relationship with them for 10 years. In this letter he is very encouraging and positive to them. You see Paul’s not sure if he is going to survive his imprisonment… if he’ll ever see them again… it’s a letter from his heart… to friends that are close to his heart… he writes to them about the Gospel, Unity, Suffering, Joy! His partnership with them in the Gospel is always concrete – its connected to friendships, serving, giving…

It’s amazing to think about this Real letter, written from a real human being… to a group of real people that Paul dearly loved. Sometimes we read the Bible and we forget about the real friendships, bonds and experiences the people had with each other. We sometimes forget that they were normal people just like us… trying to live out their faith, trying to live out the gospel in everyday life. They had many of the same concerns, desires, hopes, hurts, struggles, joys and sufferings that we have…

Paul follows the normal format of letters at the time. The sender lists their name first, then the people addressed, followed by a greeting, then in Paul’s case, he liked to add a thanksgiving and prayer. This was followed by the body of the letter and then a conclusion that usually includes greetings, farewell and then Paul liked to add a benediction, a good word from God!

Verses 3-11 of chapter 1 are the thanksgiving and prayer part of his letter. If you look at this thanksgiving and prayer he writes for the church at Philippi… you really start to see how much Paul cared for his friends at Philippi, how grateful he was for them… you begin to see what Real Community is all about!

In fact, maybe a better way to say it is that… You actually begin to see the Real You. You see Philippians is one of those great books of the Bible that is filled with what you might call coffee cup Bible Verses! Or Greeting card verses… or Verses for Graduates….

“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” (4:13)NKJ

“Rejoice in the Lord Always. I will say it again: Rejoice.” 4:4 NIV-2010

“whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things.” 4:8 NIV

“I thank my God every time I remember you.” 1:3 NIV

And From chapter 1:6 – which is the top verse for Christian Graduation cards…

“…he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” 1:6 NIV

Let me say that again… “…he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” 1:6 NIV

What do you think of when you hear “you” – “a good work in you?” Are you thinking “a good work in ME” or a good work in US”?

On a coffee cup or a graduation card… we think a good work in ME. That’s partly because of the verse is sort of taken out of context… and partly because we live in a culture of individual identity, not group identity. In fact when we hear the word “you” we hardly ever think of it in the plural. Uncle Sam wants YOU. Who are YOU? YOU can do it! (you’re good enough, you’re smart enough and doggone it, people like you). In our popular cultural there’s a quest to find the real You.

But when St. Paul says… “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus…” When Paul says “you”… it’s not a ME thing it’s an US thing. It’s in the plural. If you’re from Texas I guess you could say “a good work in y’all”… or Philadelphia… “a good work in youse guys…” or “a good work in you guys”…

Unfortunately when we hear Paul’s words cut from the context, and the underlying grammatical realities… we only think about ourselves… and we neglect the REAL YOU. The Real YOU in Philippians, and the Bible itself really, is in the plural. It’s all about finding our identity in community. Not just any community… like a bike club, or a quilter’s club, or a sports league… or whatever… it’s a community centered around Jesus Christ. A community that IS the body of Christ.

**[Testimony Here]**

Paul says “you” or “your” 11 times in the first 11 verses. Every time it’s plural, every time he is talking not to one person – but to a group of people – the Philippian believers, the saints, his friends, his family, God’s people –

When we start to see the Real YOU in the first 11 verses of Philippians… the word of God challenges our culture’s obsession with individual identity and perhaps our own selfish desires and perspectives. But his words are also quite liberating.

To be honest, a lot of my life has been spent trying to further myself… a lot of times I’ve bought into it being all about me. The cold reality of that is actually quite depressing. In the end you are either left with an overly inflated and distorted view of yourself or depressed and disappointed at your failures.

When we begin to see that its more about us as God’s people… we find real community and that community centered in Jesus brings us Holiness (1.1), Grace and Peace (1.2), partnership in the Gospel (1.5). we realize that God has begun a Good work in US! And He will carry it on to completion when Jesus comes again (1.6).

Paul says a powerful thing in verse 7. “all of you share in God’s grace with me…”

There’s something to be said about being with others who share in God’s grace. There’s something freeing in living life with people who know they’re sinful, who know they’ve failed, who know that it really isn’t about me – and we don’t have to rely on what we accomplish, do, achieve. God’s Grace covers us all… we share it together… it binds us together and creates us as His People – Real Community –

As you dig in to this text… think about the real you…And

*9 I pray that your love will overflow more and more, and that you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding. 10 For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return. 11 May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation-- the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ-- for this will bring much glory and praise to God.* (Phi 1:9-11 NLT)

*Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!*