

## **EASTSIDE COMMUNITY BAPTIST CHURCH**

**SUNDAY, JANUARY 10, 2021**

**SERMON: “Understanding the words”**

**TEXT: PHILIPPIANS 1:1-11**

### **INTRO**

I have often heard that English is the hardest language to learn. Perhaps one reason is that the words we use have a bad habit of wandering all over the map in their use and meaning. If you used older meanings of words, you would live in a world where “naughty” meant “nice” and “awesome” meant “terrible.”

Judith Herman wrote an article that appeared online ([11 Words With Meanings That Have Changed Drastically Over Time | Mental Floss](#)) where she dug into how some of our words in use today have changed substantially.

In the 1300’s, “Naughty” meant people who had “naught” (nothing). It meant people who were poor and needy. Overtime it started to be used for people who had issues with morality or who were deemed wicked. On the flip side, if a gentleman may get his face slapped if he called a lady “nice.” This word has Latin roots from the word “nescius” which meant “ignorant.” Have you ever been kept up at night wondering why “awesome” means wonderful or inspiring, while “awful” means really bad? After all they both come from the same root “awe” and at one point they were synonyms. Originally they had a negative and positive meaning and overtime “awful” absorbed the negative while “awesome” represented the positive.

Words are important as we will see the importance of defining words as we begin a new study looking at Paul’s letter to the Philippians.

Let’s start by reading Philippians 1:1-11:

**1 This letter is from Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus.**

**I am writing to all of God's holy people in Philippi who belong to Christ Jesus, including the church leaders and deacons.**

**<sup>2</sup> May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.**

**Paul's Thanksgiving and Prayer**

**<sup>3</sup> Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God. <sup>4</sup> Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy, <sup>5</sup> for you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now. <sup>6</sup> And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.**

**<sup>7</sup> So it is right that I should feel as I do about all of you, for you have a special place in my heart. You share with me the special favor of God, both in my imprisonment and in defending and confirming the truth of the Good News. <sup>8</sup> God knows how much I love you and long for you with the tender compassion of Christ Jesus.**

**<sup>9</sup> I pray that your love will overflow more and more, and that you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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.**

**KNOW THE LANGUAGE!**

As a pastor and a believer in Jesus, I firmly hold to the fact that the Bible is as relevant to us today as it was for the original recipients. Time and time again, as I have preached and taught, it is incredible how appropriate the

words are for our time and how they inform us about who God is and what our relationship is to be. But a problem that I encounter fairly often is the fact that the everyday reader of the Bible forgets that they are dealing with and ancient text written in several languages. The annoying reality is that words can often change in meaning overtime or, at least, our understanding of the word. I once had a parishioner ask me if she had to learn biblical Hebrew and Greek to properly understand scripture. I think she was a bit annoyed when my answer was "absolutely!" This is the way it is when you interact with any piece of literature or document that is written in a foreign language. As we read the Bible, we must be aware that at times the "best" interpretation runs the risk of being "lost in translation." This is why Bible study is so important. There are many tools out there, if you stubbornly refuse to become fluent in ancient Hebrew, biblical Greek, and Aramaic, to help shine the light on what words meant in Paul's day.

So what is the point to all this? In the first 11 verses of Philippians, Paul heaps praise on the church that he founded. Within the words of praise, we can find a definition that we can use to model how we act as the "church of Jesus Christ" today. Frank Thielman, in his commentary on Philippians, identifies some of the words that are troublesome in our modern thinking and we need to understand what Paul is saying to the Philippians and to us. We are going to look at four such suggested words:

### **SLAVES (1:1)**

Starting off in the very first verse, Paul describes his and Timothy's relationship to Jesus as one of being a slave and our 21<sup>st</sup> century, politically correct minds start to do flip-flops. I have read many comments in articles about Christianity, left by individuals who would define themselves as "atheists," who decide that the Bible is "pro-slavery" and should not be seen as authoritative.

The first image that comes to mind, is the most common image we know of slavery. The evil institution that is closely related to the American South and it's economy practiced before the American civil war. An institution

that is steeped in bigotry and white supremacy that still, sadly rears its ugly head far too often.

As much as there are similarities in Paul's day there are some major differences as well. Often the "slave" was a type of indentured servant. A person who was in debt or could not provide for their families would willingly "sell" themselves for a period of time, to the rich and powerful as servants. In some households, the slave was considered a valued member of the family, many times being a caretaker and even educator of the children in the household. Sadly, there were other slave owners who mistreated and abused these individuals because it was their right to do so within society. The indentured servant (slave) gave up any rights over their freedom and gave that control to the "master."

Whether right or wrong, it was the centuries old, established practice in Romans society (and many others of the era) and Paul was ministering in that society. Paul knew many slaves and slave owners, and he would offer his support and advice and would minister to both.

So why would Paul describe himself as a "slave?" Paul is using a powerful metaphor that his readers would understand given the practice of society. As Thielman states in his commentary:

***"It is a description that clearly illustrates the total claim of God on the believer's life. Paul is Christ's slave because Christ's goals are his goals and God's call is his mission, and because it is his responsibility to fulfill the command of his master even when doing so is personally inconvenient."***

### **SAINTS (VS. 1)**

Often times in many of our translations we hear people referred to as "saints." In our understanding, often we think of "saints" as people of great piety, who have done incredible things for humanity and have been elevated to a revered level of respect and are given "sainthood." Many believe that we should pray to these departed souls so they might intercede on our behalf before God.

If we take note of how “saint” is used in scripture and often by Paul, we soon learn that he is using a different definition of the term. At times, in Paul’s writings, these saints that are in his church plants will often be chastised and disciplined. Some of the “saints” are involved in incredibly offensive sins that Paul tells them “even pagans find offensive.”

To be a “saint” means to be:

***“...set apart as a believer, and sometimes “saints” live in ways that are displeasing to God. Every believer is a saint as a result of experiencing God’s gracious work of redemption, not as a result of some prior act of courage, sacrifice, or theological brilliance.”***

### **JOY (1:4)**

The third term that Thielman suggests we need to have proper understanding is one that Paul will use fourteen times in this letter and one that forms a major theme. That word is “JOY” (also paired with rejoice). Today, joy is often a feeling we get when life is good, and we don’t have a care in the world. It is based on surroundings, events, and circumstances. You might think that Paul is joyful because the Philippians have made his life easier and more comfortable.

In reality, joy is actually a divine gift granted by the Holy Spirit that we often list as a “fruit of the Spirit.” True joy can only be bestowed on us by God! For Paul, joy means that his calling to spread the gospel message of Jesus is succeeding! The fact that he can preach with all the persecution and trials he has faced, brings Paul joy! Joy is defined even more when we put Philippians into the category of being a “prison epistle.” Paul is writing to his beloved church, while he is under house arrest in Rome, waiting for the outcome of his trial that will eventually see him put to death! There is a good chance he knows his life will soon be over...and he is filled with JOY! Paul’s joy comes from the fact that the Philippians are fulfilling their role as co-workers in the ministry as they practically live out Paul’s teachings and live in unity and love.

### **PARTNERSHIP (V. 5)**

The final troublesome term that Thielman suggests is “partnership.” Why does Paul give thanks for the saints at Philippi? It is because he feels a true partnership with them. The Greek term used is “koinonia.” Partnership is more than just an attitude. It is a very real action.

Thielman goes on to say:

***“The Philippians are partners with Paul and participants in the work of his calling because they have contributed money and personal encouragement to his missionary enterprise out of their poverty and personal sacrifice, not simply because they “share” his convictions.”***

To be partners in mission means more than just agreeing with someone’s vision but to be willing to make practical, hands-on sacrifices for the goal of the gospel message.

## **FOR TODAY**

How does Paul’s opening statement reflect on our churches today. It goes right to the heart of why we do what we do! Are we a gathered group who is interested in God but worry more about our own comfort and traditions? Or are we a group gathered in the name of Jesus Christ, purposefully turning all that we are and all that we have over to Jesus to be used as He sees fit. Are we willing to move out of our comfort zones knowing that the changes and choices we make will be used through the power of the Holy Spirit to attract those looking for truth? Are we doers of the Word and not hearers only as we get our hands dirty in the name of Jesus to see the Kingdom of God grow exponentially. If we are...we can expect true biblical joy that can only come from God. Words matter...may we be defined by God’s definitions and not by the worlds.

Let’s pray...