

Philippians 1:12-19

Faith-Sharing: “*Ignite the Passion*”

Have you ever been frustrated trying to read the Bible? Maybe you were reading ...and you weren't sure what you were reading *about!*

Reading the Bible isn't really as intimidating as others have made it out to be. I want to give a demonstration with our text today. We're reading from the letter to the Church in Philippi, a town around the Mediterranean Sea. St. Paul is writing – from prison. And we know that because he reports to us from the text.

READING Philippians 1:12-19

Paul declares that he is spreading the good news! That's remarkable by itself – because most of us wouldn't think of *imprisonment* as a place of blessing! But what Paul means is that he's telling anyone who can hear ...that he is *free!* He's a free man – inside! He has no bitterness; no resentment! No sin or hate! The good news, which is the same word as “Gospel,” is that Paul is living with the power and love of Jesus Christ in his heart!

We know he's in prison because he tells us: **Everyone here, including all the soldiers in the palace guard, knows that I am in chains because of Christ.** (vs. 13)

Literally, we understand these “chains” to be real iron links, tying Paul to a jail. We have a second witness from the book of Acts, *The Acts of the Apostles* in the New Testament, telling us Paul was in prison.

But not to worry: Paul tells us that his imprisonment has actually helped to spread the good news of Jesus Christ! This time in jail isn't a disadvantage after all! **I want you to know ...that everything that has happened to me here has helped to spread the Good News.** Being in prison has not been a bad thing! In fact, the soldiers or the guards ...are hearing about Jesus Christ! Why? Because Paul is telling them! He's sharing his faith!

Paul goes on to describe how God is using the “telling” and the “preaching.”

- **Because of my imprisonment, many of the Christians here have gained confidence and become more bold in telling others about Christ.**

But what I want us to see and hear is how Paul is living with the pulse of a new purpose in Christ! Though he may have had dreams of reaching the world, sailing to Spain to teach others about his Lord and Savior – he is content with the condition in which he finds himself right now, taking the opportunity to share privately, personally with those around him ...even embracing the prison guards! He's loving *them* – for the Kingdom of God!

And I wonder if you might accept this invitation – to share your faith in the places where you live your lives? I guess I'm talking about evangelism. But before you let that word scare you, understand this simple definition: “Evangelism is anything you do to help another person move closer to a relationship with God, or into Christian community.” [Martha Grace Reese; “*Unbinding the Gospel Series*”]

When you hear it like that, you might think, “I may be doing that already.”

Yes! Take a look at where you spend your time. Look at those who surround you at the ball field, at the office, and in your neighborhood. Is there “anything you can do to help another person move closer to a relationship with God, or into Christian community?”

I love this enthusiasm we find in Paul; this passion for others, this love for *strangers* for whom Christ died! Jesus wants to rescue everyone from the darkness of their own sin, and Paul is motivated from out of this love – for Christ and for his fellow man!

I know that passion and desire, too! It's what propelled me into ministry!

I grew up here in Parkersburg and after graduating from high school I went to Atlanta, entering the architecture program at Georgia Tech. For the first time in my life I was away from home, and away from a girl I liked. (No it wasn't Kim, yet.) And though I found new friends and loved the school and the program, I was really homesick. I think being away from the old routine allows you to think about different things, to think more deeply, and I found myself wondering about this Jesus. I had never really worshiped Him. But with all the other demands on my time at school, I found that God kept knocking on the door of my heart – quite literally!

In my freshman year, students attending Charles Stanley's Church were going door-to-door in our dorm, and they stopped to see my roommate, and to talk about the love they had discovered in Jesus Christ. Well, I was wanting that, too! And I knelt down to pray and invited Christ into my life – but nothing changed.

Has that ever happened to you? You wanted to experience ...something more with God – and nothing?

It wasn't until a year later, I visited some friends in the architect program who were Christian believers, and they recommended that if I wanted a new life in Christ, I begin to spend daily time with God in prayer and reading the New Testament.

I had a desire to do that, and about the same time I saw the movie "Jesus of Nazareth," and I wept at the crucifixion scene. To witness the reality of Jesus' death – for my sins – was an incredible grief for which I knew I had to give Him thanks!

And the thanks He desired was my life! He wanted to set me free from my sin, my fear, my insecurities – and love me!

As I began to spend daily time with the Lord, reading the New Testament story, I began to realize that the promise of love God was making in the bible was mine. God was reaching me through the power of this inspired book! And as I reflected on what I was feeling and learning, I knew I wasn't afraid anymore. I wasn't afraid of dying or going to hell! I knew I was a new man!

Returning home from college after two years in Atlanta, I began to experience God's call on my life to enter ministry, to help others come to this place of peace, to know the love of God! I was burning inside to tell my family, and within a few short years, if it was that long, I saw my two sisters and brother make decisions to faithfully follow Jesus! My Father and Mother were renewed in their faith and obedience to God!

Knowing that your family is saved from hell by the grace of God ...can be such a relief!

And some of you may confess, "I used to feel that passion. I remember when God had my heart...! But now, I don't know how to get that feeling, that passion, back."

Well, maybe we can find help with that today.

How do you reclaim the love of God's Spirit?

You won't ever re-claim the love of God – apart from God! We can't find that spiritual love or power without the One who *is love* and power!

Let's go back to the wisdom of the saints: find some daily time with God! You can do that through prayer, through music and song, reading the Word He's sharing with you, in worship or fellowship with other Christian friends.

In order to grow spiritually in God's love, Christian believers have to come out of isolation and get involved in harmony with the Holy Spirit's symphony. And I mean, we have to get active with where God's Spirit is active! What are *you* doing to get involved?

If you take time to examine how you first came to your Church, some of you arrived through family ties. You may have been born into this Church family; others were married into the family. There may have been no real "crisis" or need ...for a relationship with Jesus, and

you've just been kind of cruising along – and the Lord has never been a real priority.

But every once in awhile, while you've been in Church ...or sometime since you joined the Church, you've been moved a little bit inside. You caught yourself being stirred, wondering about someone else's story, someone else's confidence expressed in a testimony, and you thought, "Could God have something like that for me?" Or maybe the chords of a song or the power of the Spirit in a message made your heart "leap" with expectation – and again you wondered "...What does all this mean?"

Just so you'll know, those unusual impulses are the trigger from God, the nudging of the Spirit, the sign to which *all* the saints respond ...as the presence and promise of God *in the moment!*

It's in those nudges that God is prompting you to the *deeper life*; to yield more personally, more directly, to simple obedience with Him! Jesus is inviting you to commit your heart and your life to His purpose, power, and plan! He has something great for you! And it's in these moments that God may be providing instructions for action, or counsel and direction for your life!

Are you going to answer God? It is in following those nudges that we find God pouring His love into our lives! We can't miscalculate or downplay the absolute urgency of answering God, obeying the Spirit of God, because the riddle is that as you say "Yes!" to God – you find the Spirit of God growing with greater power and presence in our heart and mind!

STORY: One summer I took six weeks to help a dozen third- and fourth-graders in a place loaned to us by a public school. Each was far behind in school. Each came from a family struggling to make it. The most needy two came from a local boys' home. Throughout the summer I helped them learn to read, spell, do math, and write. We played on the playground together. I visited their homes and met their families. Clearly these kids needed the love and presence of God through our time together.

But they weren't the only ones to benefit that summer. God changed *my* life. Though a middle class, well-educated outsider, I felt at home. I learned about the ways families struggle and how the educational system works. My vision for God's work and sense of His presence became sharper. I found my voice and leadership to a degree previously unsuspected. My awareness of God's love stretched; I saw each person on the street – each child, family, beggar – as someone for whom the Lord gave His life. ("*Men of Integrity*" Devotional, January 20, 2008)

Jesus made it clear that obedience is a condition of intimacy with God. Our hearts are changed when we give ourselves to Him!

The sign of a healthy Christian and a healthy Church¹ is being in love with God, being part of a Church you love, and caring about other people who do not live with this faith. And you can see how the imprisoned Paul lived out of this love! Faith sharing focuses on *relationships*, not "bringing in more young people to the Church," or "Helping our Church to grow." When we talk like that our focus is on the institution of the Church! Evangelism or faith-sharing is *motivated* by a growing love and a burden for those who don't know Jesus! At the *heart* of a healthy faith is *love* – a love for God, a love for His Church, and a love for others!

You see, when I found Jesus in my life, the people that mattered to me most – right then – was my family. But also people I didn't even know yet ...who were not living with this *relationship* with God! I found I had a new purpose for my life! A new mission. In fact, I am a missionary in the United States! Do you want the heart of a missionary, too?

¹"*Unbinding Your Heart*"; Martha Grace Reese, pg. 4

How can we re-ignite the heart of love? God's love?

Let's repeat it again: You won't ever re-claim the love of God – apart from God! You have to spend time with God, getting involved where God is involved. What will that mean for you? I believe that as you pray and pay attention to opportunities and the circumstances that come to you, you'll find ways to re-connect with God simply by agreeing to love better, to forgive, saying "Yes!" to help when someone is in need, to stop arguing and start listening! We also re-connect with God more formally through worship, study groups or what we now call "Christian Conferencing" – which means meeting with other believers to share, learn, study, pray, and exchange ideas in small group gatherings. You're going to find needs that you can meet – if you'll practice new habits and separate yourself from the entertainment routines with which we typically surround ourselves! Embark on a new journey! Get real – with Jesus!