

**Family Mail**  
**Catawba Family Weekend, 9/27/09**  
**Barry R. Sang**  
**Micah 6:1-8**  
**Philippians 4:8-9**

Given the fact that my head looks like someone took a bottle of White-Out and dumped it over me, you might be just a bit amazed to hear that I can still remember quite a bit about my years in college. I still remember looking wistfully out over the dormitory parking lot as my parents drove away, leaving me to the first day of my college experience. (I also remember that YES feeling in celebrating my new-found freedom!) And I remember band rehearsals, choir tours in Europe, studying in the wonderful smelling library stacks where I liked to cloister myself, walking alone in the frigid Wisconsin winters (contemplating the deep things of life and love), hours of deep conversations with my professors, and laughing an awful lot with my crazy friends, most of whom were in Music—go figure! Many of those experiences continued through my years in graduate school and, of course, many of those experiences changed. But one of the most persistent events throughout all of my education—one that persists in some ways even to this day—was the feeling that I always had when I went to my mail box. I would always start looking hard at my box, as soon as I entered the campus mailroom, straining to see inside, hoping, praying, even yearning to find something there. I was so desperate for mail that I even was glad to receive junk mail—those ads or

announcements that held little interest for me, but which still filled the empty void of my mailbox, even though they couldn't fill the loneliness in my soul. Of course, the biggest "prize" in the mailroom was to get a package slip which meant that I had a care package from home—usually including Mom's fabulous oatmeal cookies or kalochies—but, as wonderful as that was, the most precious thing I could ever find in that mail box was a letter from home. Most of those letters were hand-written by my mother—although Dad would pitch in once in a while—and just seeing Mom's flowing cursive script made me feel as if she were right there with me. I could almost see Mom smiling as I read, and I certainly felt her love as she wrote about family news and also as she tried to encourage me in my studies and musical performances. How I loved to "feel the love" from those family letters!

One of the many benefits we derive from studying the world and times in which the New Testament was written is that exploring that historical background helps bring us into the lives of the New Testament authors, helping us appreciate their full humanity. It is actually fun to learn about the settings of the authors of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and, as the students in one of my current courses hopefully will tell you, it is especially fascinating to learn about the life and times of the Apostle Paul. That ex-Pharisee-turned-Christian had quite a job on his hands, trying to build and sustain unity among the many churches that he founded

in the Mediterranean cities. Because Paul was so busy traveling, the main way that he tried to hold the churches together was through his letter writing. Every one of his letters was written to try to solve at least a few of the problems in the churches to which the letters were addressed. As scholars have studied letter writing in Paul's time, they have discovered that, just like today, there were several types of letter styles—among which were business letters—like, “I'll give you sixty drachma for 100 minas of Twizzler's black licorice;” or, formal letters to persons in authority, --like, “Oh mighty and majestic Caesar. What should I do with all of these Christians?”and, of course, family letters like, “Dad, please send money.” However, the majority of the family letters we have from Paul's time were usually written by fathers who were away on business or on some job for the state, and those family letters primarily served two purposes<sup>1</sup>: 1) to express the author's affection for his family; and, 2) to strengthen the family relationships. Now, when we look closely at Paul's letters, we've learned that they match the family letter form—that means that Paul chose a writing format that would be recognized by his readers as treating them like his family. And there's a very good chance that the most common reason Paul wrote his letters was to 1) express his love for those churches and, 2) preserve and strengthen the relationships within them.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986 , p. 71.

What this means for us, of course, is that, when Dr. Turner read from Philippians today, he was reading us family mail. And that shouldn't surprise us. If you will sit down for just a few minutes later today and read Paul's letter to the church at Philippi—yes, that is a homework assignment but it's not very long and, yes, parents, I will email you your tests—if you will read Philippians tonight, you'll quickly see that this is a letter of love. Even though Paul does address a few challenges facing the Philippian Christians, most of his letter consists of his expressions of love for that church. Two of his messages to the Philippians are especially outstanding, and both of them are classic examples of the purpose of a Greco-Roman family letter—that is, they both express love and both seek to strengthen relationships in the family of God.

The first of those two special Pauline messages to Philippi deserves 10,000 sermons and is one of the most powerful expressions of Christian faith ever written. I'm speaking of course of the Christ hymn that Paul uses in Philippians Chapter 2, verses 5-13, where Paul exhorts his Philippian "family members" to have the same mind as Christ—a mind of servanthood to each other. We'll not be talking about that chapter this morning, but if you've not read Philippians 2, then make that a special focus of your homework.

In my opinion, the other outstanding message in the family letter that we call Philippians is this morning's reading from Chapter 4. These verses are part of

Paul's closing remarks in his letter, and since he often makes his most powerful points in his closing remarks, we should pay special attention. This particular point is indeed powerful, although it seems simple at first—once, again, Paul says,

<sup>8</sup> Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, carefully consider (λογίζεσθε) these things. <sup>9</sup> Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Let's notice just a few things about these verses from the get-go. First, did you catch the family language? Paul calls the Philippian Christians "brothers and sisters." In these words he is not only expressing his affection for them, but he is also reminding them of their family identity, since they are indeed members of the body of Christ--simple words, but a profound meaning: we need each other.

Next, Paul commands the Philippians to do one very important thing. (Yes, it IS a command—it is in the imperative. This shows us that Paul means business.) Paul commands them to carefully consider whatever is true, honorable, just, kind, and worthy of praise. And then he sums these things up in one word—one of the most powerful words in ancient Greek culture—he calls these things "excellence/areth." This is what is most praise-worthy, Paul says. And, there are two things the Philippians are supposed to do with that excellence: first, they are to carefully consider what it means to be honorable, just, truth-seekers, and kind people; and then he tells them to live it! "Keep on doing these things," Paul says

in verse 9. In other words, this second important message to the Philippians is that they should carefully consider what it might mean for them **to be their best, and then to actually do it.**

We need to notice that Paul does not list specific talents that we should be the best at. Rather, he describes in these verses **qualities of character** that should persist throughout everything we do—whether that might be singing or preaching or playing God’s favorite instrument--the french horn--or studying or teaching or playing football or tennis or soccer or volleyball or swimming or writing or being a college president or directing choral music or dancing or whatever! Whatever we are doing, within it we should consider and live those primary virtues of truth, honor, justice, and kindness. If we pursue these in the midst of everything we do, then we are pursuing life with excellence.

But why should we do what Paul says? Why should we listen to an old, dead apostle anyway? Why should we “Give of our best to the master; give of the strength of our youth”? Why should we contemplate excellence and live excellence? I think that the prophet Micah gives us one of the most direct answers:

God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Why should we pursue excellence? Because God requires it, says Micah. And did you hear some familiar words in Micah's words? Did you hear about justice and kindness? God insists that we be the best that we can be.

But we could also ask another question about this—you can tell that I like questions--why would God require us to pursue excellence? I think that the answer to that question lies at the heart of both the Old and New Testaments. It is at the core of the covenant relationship that God has with the Hebrews, and it is at the core of Jesus' teaching. God wants us to be the best we can be and do the best we can do because we are the most fully human when we love God and when we love our neighbor: "Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul and mind. And love your neighbor as yourself." When we pursue excellence, we express our love for God, and for others. How so?

Being and doing our best loves our neighbor because it says to our neighbors that "I will give you the most that I have and be truthful and honorable and kind in my dealings with you because you are God's creation too, and because you matter to me. I will give you my best because I love you." Being and doing our best can mean many things. Sometimes it can mean taking the risks that sometimes are required of us if we are to love our neighbor—the risk of stepping out and caring even when we're not sure how to care—or perhaps the risk of being honorable when others practice only self-interest. Sometimes pursuing excellence can mean

**seeking that which is best in others**—I believe that President Turner actually holds that sentiment as his life’s motto. Once again, seeking excellence in all that we do **for** and **with** others says that they matter, that they are worthy of our love.

Being and doing our best loves God as well, because it takes full advantage of all of the possibilities for caring and beauty that God, our Creator, has put within us, and continues to place before us day after day. Being and doing our best says “thank you” to the One who makes us all we can be. Didn’t we just sing, “all your works shall praise your name in earth and sky and sea”? We are part of God’s creation and one way that we praise our Creator is to live lives of excellence.

Professor Oakley has said several times that we should always try to do our best in worship because of Who it is that we are worshipping. When we seek excellence in worship, and in living, it says to God, “I will respect and honor you with justice and truth and honor and kindness in whatever I do, and I will never quit trying to understand these virtues and what they mean for my living; and I will do this forever because, of all that is, You are the one; in what is most fundamentally real and true and beautiful, in the very depths of my being, You matter to me, Dear Lord. You are the ‘heart of my own heart.’”

Of course part of the good news of the gospel is that we are not alone in our pursuit of excellence, in our seeking to do our best. God has promised us that when we get on our knees to pray, that God will give us the words to say; God



will help us live day to day.’ “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age,” Jesus says at the end of Matthew’s gospel. ‘I will not leave you alone,’ John’s Jesus says, ‘but I will send you my Comforter,’—that same Holy Spirit Who shows us God’s way and Who empowers us to follow it. God prods us to be and live our best, but God doesn’t leave us alone to do it. If the cross of Jesus Christ says nothing else, it says this: that even in the midst of life’s greatest suffering, God will not leave us alone; God will suffer with us. God lives with us to live our best.

So, dear friends in Christ, we’ve got mail. It’s G-mail, and it’s family mail. And the purpose of this mail is to express God’s love for us, and to strengthen our relationships with God and with each other. And that mail, written in the flowing script of the God Who expresses God’s love for us with the life of God’s Son, that mail both loves us and commands us to excellence, that our relationships with God and with each other might be strengthened; that God’s creation might be one. Blessed be the Name of the Lord! So be it! Amen.