


LOVE more than Rules

By Anthony J. Chvala-Smith,
Scripture and Theology consultant



I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.
—Philippians 1:3–11 NRSV

Nothing helps focus the mind like the prospect of one's imminent execution. So observed the 18th-century English writer Samuel Johnson. I don't know the context of his remark, but he easily could have had St. Paul in mind.

The apostle wrote Philippians from an imperial prison, uncertain of the outcome of his case. Execution was a real possibility, because a few lines later, Paul contends with the likelihood of his death. Mortality and impermanence aside, the opening verses of the letter plunge us into a four-chapter love fest. Even the casual reader can tell that Paul and this community shared a bond of deep affection.

Concerned for his well-being, the Philippians had sent support in the form of money. There's a complicated backstory, but Paul wrote this letter partly to thank the congregation for its kindness and generosity. Ever a conscientious pastor, he also wrote to assure the Philippians that whatever his fate, God would see them through.

The letter's opening is like a big verbal hug, which means it's easy to gloss over a specific remark:

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best....
—Philippians 1:9–10a

Paul rehearses here his ongoing prayer for the Philippians. "I'm praying that your love may overflow so much, that it gives you everything you need to help you determine what's best...." Savor these words: You...determine...what is best!

It's shocking to say—scandalous, really. Don't rely on me, the apostolic authority figure, implies Paul: helping you figure out what's best is no longer my department. Not the Bible (because there was no New Testament yet, and these non-Jewish Christians in Philippi likely didn't know their way around the Jewish scriptures very well, if they had access to them at all). Not a code of conduct Paul drew up for them, which any reader of his other letters knows Paul is quite capable of doing. Instead, Paul writes the Philippians, knowing it could be the last thing they ever hear from him. And what he so surprisingly tells them is, in the Christian spiritual journey, you have to plan on figuring a lot of things out for yourself.

It's as if Paul were saying, I can't give you a list of bylaws for the journey ahead. There are no blueprints, no statutes, no decrees, no Google maps with steps. I'll pray for you, but not that you'll "win"; succeed; make no mistakes; manage it all perfectly; have an easy, conflict-free passage into the future; or no discomfort or uncertainty. And I'm definitely not praying that the signposts will always be crystal clear for you, or that there'll be signposts at all.

Rather, I'm asking God that your love may overflow—indeed, that in its superabundance, you'll have what you need to figure out what's best, step by step, as you go.

In a few extraordinary but easily bypassed words, Paul unveils his vision of the Christian life. What Paul wanted the Philippians to see could hardly be more vital for us today: The great journey of living in companionship with Christ is a trek into increasing spiritual freedom, not a descent into a religious policy manual. This glimpse is so breathtaking that a few translations fudge on accuracy and make Paul sound like he's locking infants in a car seat, rather than daring us to claim as part of adult faith that we and God will have to puzzle out a lot of things while on the road.

Candidly, more often than we care to admit the spiritual journey is frustratingly devoid of signposts. Historians have noted that when Alexander the Great led his Macedonian armies across ancient Persia nearly to the edge of India, he ran out of, shall we say, route information. Necessity required him to "march off the maps." A trip into foreign territory, without signage, pointers, landmarks, mile-markers, or road atlases.

The Christian life often is exactly that kind of expedition—minus (one should hope) the conquest, violence, and empire-building. Long stretches of our pilgrimage are all about improv.

When we have to wing it, though, we know at least one thing: the one thing that matters. Because the journey we're on is in, with, and toward God whom we know in Jesus Christ, it can be only about love. Love, of course, can make rules and sometimes has to; but love is infinitely, inexhaustibly more than rules. Paul tells his readers: Let your life together on this journey with the Spirit be about love, more than rules. Appropriately, he prays "that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best...."

Evelyn Underhill, the early 20th-century spiritual guide, author, and scholar of the mystical tradition, expresses it this way:

[The spiritual life] is produced by [God's] steady attraction and our humble, self-forgetful response to it. It [the spiritual life] consists in being drawn, at God's pace and in God's way, to the place where God wants us to be; not the place we fancied for ourselves....

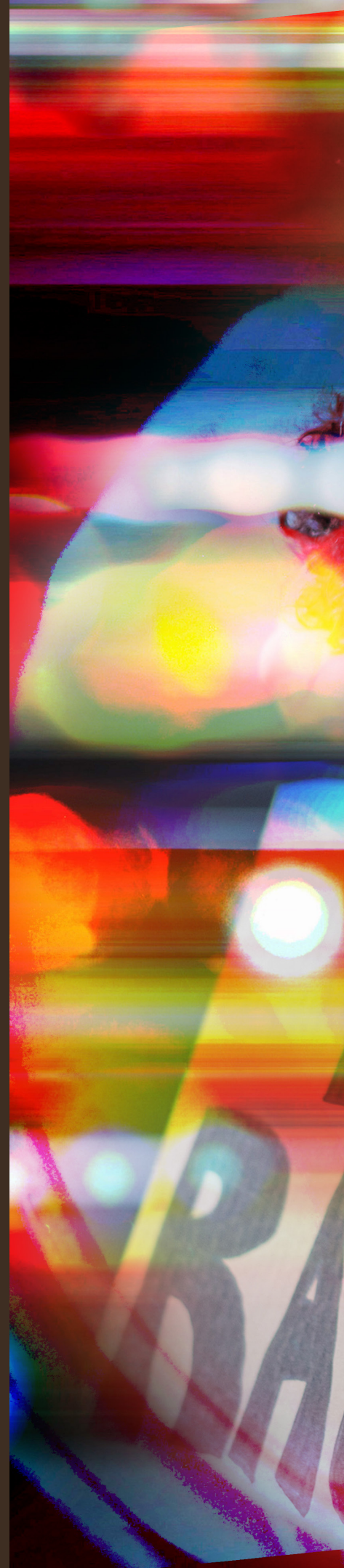
—The Spiritual Life

Spirituality, as Underhill regards it, is not all about our activity, but really is an act of divine creation in and with us. Creativity is key: The spiritual life is not some kind of "mass production"—as in a factory. God is not in the business of stamping our identical "spiritual" people. Rather, Underhill says, spiritual formation and growth are more like the "creation of a salad," and "no two salads are ever quite alike."

It's a great image. We shouldn't be surprised that whatever the commonalities, no two paths on our shared journey into God's life are ever quite alike. On the contrary, they often will be markedly different. Paul knew this when he wrote Philippians: Thus, he says the way ahead for you is loving discernment in community. An overflow of divine love in our midst is precisely what we need to live unbegrudgingly with the fact that there's more than one way to the top of the mountain.

Paul prayed in his letter for an abundant runoff of compassion so the Philippians would have all they needed to manage the uncertain way ahead. We need that, too. We need to be reminded, as much as they did, that it's about love, more than rules.

Rules have their place, of course. (I have been a camp counselor more than once.) But rules can immobilize the spiritual life. The 17th-century writer Brother Lawrence was a latecomer to devotional life. A simple man whose injuries from military service left him with a limp, he joined a Carmelite monastery and became the cook.





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Over time it was noticed that the good brother who ran the kitchen had a deep, visible, contagious connection with God. People, including his superiors, wanted to know his secret. Brother Lawrence admitted that the rigorous style of prayer—done in a certain way following a set pattern—had left him cold. The rules were killing his spiritual life.

He finally decided that what he really wanted was simply to “practice the presence of God,” by which he meant bringing his thoughts and intentions constantly back into the presence of God. Whether washing pans, dealing with his brothers, or making unwelcome journeys to get provisions for the monastery, he always could think about God. The rules had not helped him find the thing he wanted most: to know God. But love, expressed as a constant turning of the heart toward God, had. It wasn’t in the Carmelite playbook, but it worked (which is why one still can read Brother Lawrence’s little book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, today).

Love, more than rules, is key to deeper life with God. Those who seek this deeper life at some point will encounter a curious, intensely devoted, odd assortment of figures from the ancient church called the “desert fathers and mothers.” By the fourth century, as Christianity was becoming the favored religion in the Roman Empire, some followers of Jesus found the churches increasingly to be home to superficial Christianity. These disciples wanted more.

So they withdrew from the big churches in the cities for the solitude of the Egyptian and Syrian deserts. Imitating Jesus and Paul, who both had done a stint in the desert, these monastics yearned for a radical spirituality that touched the deepest roots of their lives. The collected sayings of the desert fathers and mothers have captivated spiritual seekers for over 15 centuries.

The life of these monks was severe. Living in the harsh landscapes in solitary huts, eating little, working hard plaiting palm leaves into baskets to sell for meager rations, they spent much of each day and night in prayer and reflection. Commonly on Sunday, these solitaries would gather at a synaxis—a common solemn worship gathering at a desert church.

There’s a noteworthy story about one of these gatherings and a monk name Abba Poemen. Some old, experienced monks came to Abba Poemen, asking how to deal with a problem at weekly gatherings. They asked, “What should we do about brothers who sleep during the synaxis? Shouldn’t we wake them up so they can be watchful?” Basically, they were tattling and wanted a regulation for dealing with the slackers. Abba Poemen replied, “Well, for my part, when I see a brother dozing, I put his head on my knees and let him rest.”

The disciple’s journey is not a forced march. You don’t get extra credit for staying up all night in prayer and censuring those who couldn’t. Compassion, not outing the sleepers, is the way ahead. That’s good news because it’s a long, long trackless way into the infinite depths of God. We’re often going to get lost, turned around, and weary. Sometimes we just need a traveling partner to tell us, “Take a nap. There’s no rush. It’s really OK to rest.”

Much more than rules, we need that kind of love because it’s really about God on this journey we’re all on. So, let’s relish Paul’s prayer. He surely won’t mind if we apply it to ourselves. When we must march off the maps, may our love overflow. May we boldly embrace the scandalous freedom we have in Christ to decide what’s best: for our communities, for us, for this time, for our imperiled world, for the sake of the reign of God, which is changing everything.



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