

Your Partnership in the Gospel
Philippians 1:3-11
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Read Philippians 1:3-11

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." (2 Timothy 3:16)

Introduction

My dad just preached the final sermon of his long ministry career last Sunday at Grace Church in Florida. He celebrated 50 years of ordained ministry last year, and he just turned 75 years old last Saturday. He has actually tried retiring a couple of times, but this time he tells us that it's going to stick. He and my mom are coming here this Wednesday, so you all can congratulate him on his finishing up pastoring at his last church. I was looking through my files and actually found the last sermon that he preached to the church that I grew up in back when we lived in Pittsburgh, Beverly Heights United Presbyterian Church. Guess what Scripture text he preached from on his last Sunday with both of those congregations? Philippians 1:3-11! Let me be very clear that I am not preaching a goodbye sermon, that's not why I mentioned that! It's just a cool coincidence. This text is a wonderful one that is flexible to be used in several ministry contexts, I was excited that it was the text that just happened to be scheduled the morning that we are dedicating our church building.

(Audience participation) Complete these famous partnerships: Abbott and ? The Lone Ranger and ? Butch Cassidy and ? Bonnie and ? Batman and ? Bert and ? The Apostle Paul and ?¹ Some of you might have thought "Paul and Barnabas," some of you thought "Paul and Timothy," others "Paul and Silas," maybe someone thought "Paul and Peter." None of you said "Paul and the Philippian church," though, did you? Paul had a lot of partners, it's not as easy to associate him with just one person like those others. We're going to see today that Paul considered anyone who supported his ministry and was committed to sharing the gospel of Jesus a partner. And that certainly extended to the believers in Philippi (he called them saints in last week's text). This passage will teach us much about what makes someone a partner in the gospel for Paul, and how we can see Christian faithfulness, community, and fellowship with one another today.

How many of us know someone who has given up on "the institutional church" or "organized religion," preferring to practice their version of faith on their own terms? Not necessarily those who de-converted, but someone who is "done with church." It usually goes hand-in-hand with having had a bad experience with a church or not being able to find the perfect church that acts and believes up to their expectation level. But they don't necessarily want completely to dissociate from God and Jesus. Thank God for that last part, but the first part should grieve us. We should strive to produce healthy churches that love and disciple their members to grow in Christ, as well as reaching outside the walls of the church to extend Christ's love to the unchurched. Paul knew what a church that was pleasing to God looked like, let's learn from him.

The first thing that we see in this passage is that Paul is

I. Sure of Their Partnership and Affection (vv. 3-5, 7-8)

¹ Adapted from Adam Jones' sermon "Partnership in the Gospel" found at <https://www.sevenrivers.org/sermons/partnership-in-the-gospel?hsLang=en>

³ I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now...
⁷ It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

When do most of us pray? When things get difficult, when we are presented with a challenge, or something goes wrong in life. How many of us wake up thankful for everything and everyone in our lives? I would guess not many of us (though I may just be projecting my own sins and lack of prayer on the rest of you). We tend to take things for granted, we don't reflect on all the wonderful things that God has given us, and we aren't models of gratitude and joy. But Paul was, regardless of his circumstances. He mentions his imprisonment, which was most likely being on house arrest at the time, chained to a Roman soldier with the threat of execution hanging over his head. Despite that, he held the believers in Philippi in his heart and was so thankful for them that he prayed for them all the time. Paul had planted the church in Philippi ten years earlier; but he loved them so much that he was constantly praying for them and considered them partners in the gospel long after he had moved on physically.

Have you ever found out that someone prays for you constantly? I remember someone telling me that he was excited that he had organized his prayers during the week. When he and his wife were on the phone with his mother-in-law he told her, "I pray for you every Tuesday morning." She thanked him and then paused and said, "I pray for you every day." I think he was equally encouraged and rebuked. Now, you might say, "I don't know anyone who prays for me all the time." Are you sure about that? Romans 8:34 says that, "*Jesus... is at the right hand of God... interceding for us.*" The first application from this sermon is to stop and thank God for the wonderful people that He's put in your life as often as you can. The first thing we learn about a healthy, godly, loving church is that the people and leaders pray for one another.

Paul uses the word "joy" for the first time in this letter in verse 4. It's the first of 16 times that he will mention joy or rejoicing, way more than he mentions it in any of his other letters. Our theme phrase for this sermon series is "Pressing on in Joy and Humility," which ties together three of the main ideas. I was thinking about how harsh Paul is in some of his other letters, notably Galatians and Corinthians – does that mean he loved the Philippians more than he did those other churches? No, definitely not. Even Paul's rebukes and corrections were made in deep love. Like a father who has to be stern with one child but encouraging with another depending on the situation; he loves them both deeply, they just require different approaches.

The Greek word that Paul uses in verse 5 for partnership is *koinonia*, which is a rich word that indicates a deep fellowship and the sharing of a common faith. The book of Acts talks about the early church devoting themselves to *koinonia*/fellowship. I think we've taken a little bit of richness out of that word today - usually if we say that some event is a "fellowship event," what we mean is that we're just going to talk and get to know one another better, and that there won't be a Bible Study or any other kind of ministry activity. But "fellowship" in Paul's mind is deeper than that. In verse 7 Paul says that they are partners with him because they support him in his imprisonment and they share in his mission - spreading the gospel. Were they all perfect models of faith and Christlikeness? Of course not, as none of us are; there will be rebukes later in the letter. But Paul was still grateful for them and considered them all partners in ministry. If you're waiting for the perfect Christian community, you'll never find it and you'll end up being a lone ranger Christian who never experiences the joy of fellowship and ministry within a committed body.

If you have the King James Version, your verse 8 that here says *“I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus”* will say *“the bowels of Jesus Christ.”* The Greek root word can mean heart, love, affection, but also physical inner organs. Bowels is an awkward way to say it, so I’m glad newer translations have changed it, but “affection” probably doesn’t do it justice either. Dennis Johnson says that “Paul is really speaking of the kind of deep emotion that you ‘feel in your gut.’² It’s the same word in Matthew 9 where Jesus had compassion on the crowds. Perhaps the New Living Translation has it best: *“God knows how much I love you and long for you with the tender compassion of Christ Jesus.”* In other words, Paul doesn’t just get the “warm fuzzies” when he remembers the Philippians, he has an intense, longing love and depths of compassion that wants the best for them, that is enabled by his being strengthened by Jesus. You may have heard this saying: “If people aren’t on your heart, they will get on our nerves.” That’s so true in churches, isn’t it? Christian community that Paul modelled should see us getting below the surface with one another, sharing and caring deeply, allowing ourselves to be deeply moved by what happens to one another – rejoicing with those who rejoice and mourning with those who mourn (Romans 12:15).

Paul is thankful for the Philippian’s partnership, not only because it helps him, but because it stands as evidence and confirmation of their spiritual growth. Verse 6 shows us that Paul is

II. Sure of God’s Work in Them (v. 6)

6 And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Paul had been instrumental in the proclamation of the Gospel to many of the believers in Philippi, he could have taken credit: “I began this good work in you, so finish it well.” But he recognized that it was God who works the miracle of salvation. *“He... begins the good work”* in each of us by the effectual calling and drawing us into a relationship with Him, and then the Holy Spirit transforms our hearts in what we call regeneration, new life. That is the point in our lives where we realize what Jesus did for us on the cross – dying in our place, paying the penalty for our sins, and offering us salvation and eternal life in exchange for following Him. And then God continues to work in us to justify us in His sight, to adopt us into His family, to walk through life sanctifying us, and eventually leading us home to glory. All of those things come together in what is called the Order of Salvation, or sometimes the “Golden Chain of Salvation.” It’s summed up in passages like Romans 8:29-30 – *“For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified.”*

This is one of the great passages that we point to that shows us the Perseverance of the Saints, I could spend an entire sermon on just this one verse. But the gist is that when God takes a heart of stone that is inside of an evil, rebellious person steeped in sin and works the miracle of regeneration and rebirth in that person, He works it in such a way that that person will receive all of the actions of salvation. The bottom line is that God does not just accomplish the work of salvation in our lives and then say, “Good luck, hope you can figure it all out on your own. See you on judgment day, we’ll find out if you’ve made any progress and whether I’m going to let you into heaven or not.” No, God continues His work in us to bring us to that day.

We don’t have time to go into all the questions this raises: “I knew a Christian kid who went off the deep end and left the faith; are you saying he was never saved to begin with?” That’s possible, but it’s also possible that he is a prodigal son who will come back to the faith. I don’t know. But it’s a

² Johnson, p. 26.

comfort to me that God does not leave us or forsake us, that He does not disown the adopted children in His family. If we are truly saved, we don't have to worry that we will fall short and not make it to heaven because we were deficient. Kent Hughes says it this way: "As I reflect on my fifty plus years in Christ it is indeed God who has kept me. It is not my grip on God that has made the difference, but his grip on me. I am not confident in my goodness... in my character... in my history... in my perseverance. But I am confident in God."³

The final area of certainty for Paul in this passage is that he was

III. Sure of Their Maturity and Fruit (vv. 9-11)

*⁹And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment,
¹⁰so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,
¹¹filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.*

Did Paul believe that because God is working salvation out inside you that you can just sit back and do nothing? Absolutely not! We will get to chapter three, where he says that "*I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*" (3:14). In 2 Corinthians 7:1, he said, "*Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.*" Our Christian life, our sanctification, is a cooperative endeavor in which both God and each one of us works. And here in these three verses, he is praying that they grow in love, knowledge, discernment, purity, faithfulness, and in bearing much fruit for Christ. That is a lot of areas of growth to address!

Love is listed first, perhaps because, like 1 Corinthians 13 says, "*if I have all faith... but have not love, I am nothing... faith, hope, and love abide... but the greatest of these is love.*" Love enables us to exercise every other Christian fruit and virtue; without it we are not spiritually complete. Paul wants their love to abound more and more. As opposed to what – let your love stay the size it is, don't try to care too much, be careful in rationing out your love too much? The very nature of love is to grow, but it does take some work, some intentionality.

Knowledge and discernment (end of verse 9) are so important for the Christian life. I've been around Christians who are kind of anti-knowledge, as if learning more automatically means that we'll stop loving God and other people and just love knowledge for its own sake ("don't go to seminary, it'll ruin you!"). But think about when you're really excited about something new, maybe a hobby or a sport or a job – it's just natural to want to learn more, to attend classes, to read books, join discussion groups, listen to podcasts. Learning more about God will not destroy your faith, particularly as you put what you learn into practice. "Theo" = God, "ology" = study of; so theology is the study of God. It is vital "to read the Bible regularly, memorize Scripture, listen to sermons... and pick up a good book to read and discuss with someone. There is always more to learn about God and his love!"⁴ Love and knowledge should not be mutually exclusive, like a teeter-totter where only one of them can be up at a time. No, this should be a "both-and" not an "either-or" – strive for both generous love and discerning knowledge.

Verses 10-11 - Love and knowledge are a beautiful combination that lead to us approving what is excellent, striving for obedient lives as we bear good fruit. The Christian life for most of us is a long road, it's a marathon not a sprint. We must continually commit ourselves to walking in obedience and striving for Christlikeness so that we will bring glory and praise to God, empowered by Jesus.

³ R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), p. 29.

⁴ Doug Serven & Bobby Griffith, *Philippians: Birth of Joy* (Oklahoma City: White Blackbird Books, 2017), p. 16.

Conclusion

How do we apply all of this? There are tons of ways, but let me just suggest that the best place to start is to look at Jesus and what He has done for us, and then pursue that:

- Jesus loved people, whether they were obvious sinners or dignified sinners – we can love those inside and outside our church
- Jesus humbled Himself by taking on flesh and suffering the indignities of this life; we should embrace humility by putting others first (more about that in Philippians 2)
- Jesus sacrificed His life; surely we can sacrifice some of our time, some of our preferences?
- Jesus forgives you and me a vast multitude of sins and offenses; how can we hold grudges against others and withhold forgiveness?
- Jesus left the comfort of heaven and came to earth, taking on flesh – we can't exactly do that, but we can leave the comfort of our homes to join with one another and be Jesus' hands and feet in the world.
- Jesus affirmed every word of the Scriptures, He said that not an iota or a dot would pass away until it's accomplished. Let's not forget fully affirming the Bible, sola Scriptura, as our rule of faith and practice will help us have knowledge, discernment, and pure, blameless living.

There was a woman at the first church that I worked at who told me a story of holding a grudge against another woman in the church for years, like a decade. And I said something like, "Why didn't you just try to talk about it and reconcile?" I was 25 or something at the time, and she said something to the effect of, "Oh, you poor naïve optimist." Well, I was a young naïve optimist then, and now I'm a middle-aged (older?) naïve optimist. We can actually treat people like Christ treats us, and grow deeper and stronger as a church body.

I was just talking with our new members Tuesday night about how I have seen many people come into churches that I've worked at and just hang around the fringe, expecting to be fed and nourished by the congregation. But they didn't attend the church picnics or men's/women's/youth events, they never invited anyone over to their house... and then they wonder why they feel disconnected and unhappy. Now, there's always a balance, every church should go out of its way to wrap their arms of love around new people and fringe people. But it's a two-way street, and the bottom line is that the more you get involved in activities and ministry, the more you will feel known and loved. You're risking conflict and bad experiences, of course, those go hand-in-hand with any situation involving human beings. But as anyone who has gone on a mission trip or been part of a small group or worked on a ministry project with a team knows, you grow together as you minister together, as you partner in the gospel. If you are just a consumer or act like a customer of this church, you won't be around long; you have to be a coworker to really reap the deep rewards of community!

Let me read you a couple excerpts from letters that I received for my one-year anniversary of being the pastor here (if you ever wonder if I keep your encouraging cards, I have an entire file of them). I was overwhelmed again at how kind they were:

"Your entire family is incredibly special to CenterPoint and to us, especially! We are truly blessed and thankful... that we are able to call you friends and brothers and sisters in Christ!"

"Congratulations on being here almost a full year... although it's been a crazy ride, I'm so grateful for you guys." (that person's letter quoted Phil. 1:9-10!)

"We have loved getting to know each of you this past year and are truly so thankful to have you all as part of CenterPoint. You were an answer to prayers and we could not be happier."

And on and on, I could have quoted a dozen just like those. I read those not because of what they say about me, but because of what they say about you! This church sure knows how to encourage

its pastor! (I'm just here for the money and the fame.) You all model the spirit of Paul in heaping encouragement, and I can only hope that I am able to do the same. And this pastor's heart is warmed as I see you all making meals for those who just had a baby or were in the hospital; as you care for one another's children; as you pray for those who have lost jobs or loved ones; so many ways that you build one another up in love. Jesus pours His love into each one of us, and it is meant to spill over in love for one another.

Today we are dedicating this building for God's glory. After I close this sermon in prayer, we will move into the part of the service where we will read Scripture, pray, and dedicate this space and this church's ministry here to the glory of God. And for some people, the building is the ultimate expression of a church. I used to hear some version of this all the time: "You're not a real church if you don't have a building." But that's absolutely not true. If you can find a New Testament passage that urges a group of believers to build a building to be a legitimate church, please direct me to that passage, I have never seen it before. A church is the people, whether they meet in a cathedral, a school, a pub, a home, or a field. God has blessed us with a great facility and we are doing the best we can to make the most of it. But if we don't have a spirit of encouragement, of love, of partnership in ministry, defending and confirming the gospel, of learning, of choosing godly obedience and behavior, then this building will be a wasted space. Let's glorify God and love Him with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength, and love one another, Amen.