

## **The Beauty of Gospel Partnership**

### Philippians 1:3-8

This fall and winter we are looking at Paul's vision for the church in Philippians, what we've entitled "Gospel Mission, Gospel Community." As we saw last week (and as we'll see again this morning), partnership in the gospel is the pivotal theme of this book—partnership in the good news of what God has done to accomplish his purposes, to deal with our sin and brokenness—the broken relationship we have with God because of our rebellion, and the broken fabric of this creation—God has dealt with it by sending his Son, Jesus Christ, to live, to die, and to rise in our place, to bring forgiveness and new life, a new beginning, a new identity, a new family, and a new mission. So, gospel community—a people saved by the grace of God in Jesus, reconciled to him, and being transformed by that same grace, and gospel mission—a people saved not merely *from* our sins but also *for* God's purposes, for God's mission of making much of his name through out our neighborhoods and the nations as more and more people find the hope and grace and new life available only in Jesus. We are bound together by Jesus in community and on mission. That is the heart of this book—partnership in and for the gospel.

We surveyed that theme last week and then saw how the foundation was already laid in Paul's greeting. Verses 1-2 formed a kind of overture to the melody of gospel partnership that runs through this book. We saw that it requires a posture of humility and recognizes our holy calling as God's people—we've been set apart in Christ *for* mission. And it does all this and moves forward as a community on mission only by the grace of God.

This morning we'll move into the first major section of the book, vv. 3-11 and Paul's opening prayer for gospel partnership among the Philippians. We're going to look at the motivation of Paul's prayer this morning—vv. 3-8 and the beauty of gospel partnership. And then we'll look at the content of Paul's prayer next week in vv. 9-11.

Partnership in the gospel is a beautiful thing. Let your eyes fall back over the lines in vv. 3-8. Listen to the gratitude, the thankfulness in Paul's voice: "I thank my God every time I remember you." Really? *Every* time? That's amazing! I mean, even the people we love the most, certainly some of our recollections and thoughts for them are not exactly happy. They can be downright painful. *Every time* he remembers them, he thanks God. That's beautiful. "In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy." Always? I mean, don't you just sometimes pray not because you want to but because you know you should? You're not exactly excited about it, especially because of how obnoxious that person has been, or how exasperated you are or even angry? *Always* with joy? Yes, he always prays for them with joy. This is an unwavering gratitude.

Verse 7: “It is right for me to feel [or think] this way about *all of you*, since I have you in my heart.” He holds all of them in his heart. Not just the ones that are easy to love or the ones that agree with him; not just the leaders and people serving their guts out, but all of them. Paul is genuinely thankful for the entire community. Listen to genuine affection displayed in v. 8: “God can testify”—this is big, you don’t throw God out there as your witness unless you really mean, because he’s obviously going to know if you’re lying—“God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.” The deep affection that Christ has for us overflows through Paul in his own affection for this community of believers. He holds them in his heart, he longs for them with thankfulness and joy and deep affection, such that he is moved to prayer. That is a beautiful picture of gospel community.

When do we experience something like that in our own lives—that kind of deep affection and gratefulness? Maybe a wedding day: that tremor in your voice as you try to recite your vows, welling up from the emotion inside, the gratefulness for this day and your deep affection for the person you’re about to pledge your life to. Maybe that’s a taste. Maybe when you first lay eyes on your newborn child: this infant that’s done nothing to deserve your affection and yet your heart burns with joy and love for that child. Maybe it’s even the simple things in life, sharing life together with good friends over a good meal with good conversation—there’s no place else you’d rather be at that moment than with these people, doing this thing. You begin to get a flavor for the affection Paul and the Philippians experienced in their hearts regarding their relationship with one another—mutual love and gratitude.

Now we ask a hard question: to what extent do our relationships here at Westgate reflect this kind of joyful communion with one another? Do we taste this beauty in our partnership? Do others see that beauty when they look in on us? And if not, why not? Of course we’re not perfect. We’re all still sinners. But so were they—so was Paul, so were the Philippians. So what is it that is able to bind a community together in the beauty of unwavering gratitude and affection—despite the fact that they still mess up and sin against one another? What is it that grows and nurtures that thankful affection, such that the joy of our relationship is able to bear the weight of disappointment and frustration and misunderstanding—conflict of all kinds?

According to our passage, our deep, joyful affection for one another is fueled by our partnership in the gospel and anchored in the faithfulness of God. It’s fueled by our partnership together *in* and *for* the gospel, and it’s anchored in the faithfulness of God.

Let’s look first at gospel partnership. In v. 5, Paul explicitly grounds his love and gratitude for this community in their partnership in the gospel. “I always pray with joy *because of your partnership in the gospel* from the first day until now.” So ever since Paul first shared the gospel with Lydia and her family and the jail keeper and his family and others in Philippi (you can read about that in Acts 16), this community has come alongside Paul in his work as a partner in the gospel. We see this again in v. 7: It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; *for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share [are partners] in God’s grace with me.*” So as Paul’s proclamation of Jesus lands him in prison, or brings him into them marketplace or before kings, this community has been partners

with him in grace, which is probably the grace of giving and of suffering together for the gospel.<sup>1</sup> Paul's thankfulness and love for them are fueled by this gospel partnership.

Now what does Paul mean by partnership in the gospel? We talked about this a little last week—how the word partnership here is the word *fellowship*. But also how what Paul means by fellowship isn't necessarily what we tend to think of. Christians today often think of fellowship as a very inward focused activity. It's what we do together for each other. But Paul's vision of fellowship, indeed a *biblical* vision of fellowship, is not just what we do as a community together, but also *as a community on mission*. A community with a purpose. It is a partnership both *in* and *for* the gospel. Again, there's movement in the language here. To quote Kent Hughes again, "This is the fellowship of compatriots bound together in a great cause."<sup>2</sup>

So what does this partnership in and for the gospel look like? I want to take a few minutes and take a quick tour of Philippians to see how this book unfolds the idea of partnership in the gospel—what does it mean? We'll look more closely at each of these things in the weeks ahead, but I want us to get a flavor for this kind of community on mission in Philippians.

1. **1:12-18:** Gospel partnership means *advancing the gospel by preaching Christ*. Verse 12: "Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me [his imprisonment] has really served *to advance the gospel*." How? By people speaking the word of God (v. 14) and preaching Christ (v. 15). Partnership in the gospel is partnership in the Great Commission, not just sending people out, but going ourselves to our neighbors or to the nations, in order to make disciples—*followers* of Jesus (cf. 1:18-26; 1:27-2:18).
2. **1:18-19:** Gospel partnership means *praying for one another*, just as the Philippians prayed for Paul in his trial. We carry one another's burdens to God in prayer—personal burdens, but also relational and missional burdens.
3. **1:20-26:** Gospel partnership means *making much of Christ is everything we do*. Jesus is the heart of the gospel message. It's what he's done for us through his life, death, and resurrection and how God is applying that by the Spirit that makes all the difference. And so everything we do, we do to make much of him. To give him glory. As Paul says in v. 21: "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Everything in gospel partnership is about Jesus.
4. **1:27-2:30:** Gospel partnership means *trusting the gospel to do its transforming work in and through our relationships*. When the community that's called to mission is still a bunch of sinners, that means we need the gospel just as much as the world does. The same grace that saves us from our sins also changes our hearts and lives as we grow by the Spirit, making us more humble, more joyful, more unified in our community and mission, more eager to lay our lives down for one another and for the world, and more resolved to persevere in the mission despite suffering and opposition.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. 1:29-30; 4:14-18; 2 Cor. 8:7. See G. W. Hansen: "When the Philippians partnered with Paul in the grace of giving to meet his needs in prison, they demonstrated that they were partners with him in the grace of suffering for the defense of the gospel" (*The Letter to the Philippians* [PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], 55).

<sup>2</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 19.

5. **2:5-11:** Gospel partnership means *following the model of Christ* in our relationships within the body and in our sacrificial love for those in the world. Just as Jesus laid aside his glory and did not consider his equality with God something to be exploited for selfish gain, but rather died, so we join him in laying down our lives in humility and love.
6. **3:1-11:** Gospel partnership means *being fully satisfied in Jesus*. Not only do we do everything to make much of Jesus, when he himself is our reward and our joy and satisfaction, we are freed to love and serve and die according to his pattern. If Jesus is everything, there's no room left for self.
7. **3:12-4:1:** Gospel partnership means *living today in light of the end*. When Christ is the goal, Christ is the prize, and we have our full hope that when he returns he will finish what he started, then we have confidence to persevere together in our personal growth and relationships and to stay the course in our mission.
8. **4:2-9:** Gospel partnership means *dealing humbly with conflict by rejoicing in Jesus*, not in self.
9. **4:10-20:** Gospel partnership means *sharing together financially in the cause of the gospel*. The monetary support the Philippian church shared with Paul was an offering and sweet aroma to the Lord—an act of worship

So partnership in the gospel is community on mission, where all of life is centered on, shaped by, and empowered by Jesus and the grace of his Spirit, as God rescues and changes us, and through us rescues and changes others for the sake of his glory. It is in fact a very beautiful thing. And seeing this kind of partnership fans the flame of Paul's joy and affection for this community, moving him to prayer, as should our own participation together in the gospel's advance fan the flame of own affection and joy and love and overflow in prayer for one another.

But what happens when we waver in our call? What happens when the beauty we see here and long for and expect in our relationships as we move forward together on mission actually looks rather ugly and leaves a bitter taste in our mouth? What happens when the fruit of gospel ministry is delayed, and results seem far off (or downright hopeless)? It's easy to begin thinking that there must be something wrong with the process; the gospel must be broken. Perhaps the grace of God through Christ isn't capable of bringing about the repentance and transformation we're looking for. Perhaps working together to proclaim the gospel and to pray and live according to the gospel is simply not enough to accomplish all that God expects of us in mission. Perhaps we have been wasting our time by waiting on the gospel of God's grace through the Spirit to change our hearts and relationships and perspectives among our community and for our cause. Perhaps this kind of beauty and joy is simply naïve.

So how can our partnership generate this kind of unwavering gratitude and affection if we're still a bunch of sinners who let each other down, who make selfish decisions and say the stupidest things, who are tempted every day to neglect this mission and ignore this community? How is this kind of beautiful partnership possible?

Whereas the basis for Paul's grateful affection is the Philippians' partnership, the *consistency* of his joyful affection—the fact that it doesn't go up and down depending on the behavior of the community—the consistency of this affection does not rest on what the Philippians are able to accomplish in their partnership, but rather *on what God has promised to accomplish in and through them by means of the gospel*. Paul's love for them is fueled by the partnership but it's anchored in the faithfulness of God. He is able to pray with unwavering thankfulness and abounding love because underneath this missional community there is a faithful God who will finish what he's started in and through their gospel partnership. That is what v. 6 is all about.

“I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, *that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus*” (1:4-6). Now we often apply this verse individually—that what God has done in saving us he will complete by sanctifying us, changing us. And that's true, and it does apply that way. But Paul has a much wider scope in view. Paul ties this good work that God has begun directly to the Philippians' partnership in the gospel. The success of our gospel partnership, and therefore our joy in it, does not rest in our own ability, but in God's ability. And he will be faithful to do it.

We may not see the beauty now. The flower of our love and joy together in Christ and for Christ may not be in full bloom. But the seed is planted, and it's growing, and God is the one who causes the growth. And I believe that this vision of gospel mission and gospel community is already breaking through the ground, like a sprout. We can't see what shape that plant or flower will take yet. And it will not take full bloom until the Lord returns. But we can *anticipate* the beauty. We can enjoy the beauty in part, because we have confidence that he who began a good work in us—the good work of gospel partnership—will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

When our confidence in the fruit of our mission and community is anchored in Christ and his work, his faithfulness, then our affection and joy and gratefulness for one another will flow out of Christ's heart through ours and toward one another. A consistent affection and joy despite the circumstances of our partnership—because our confidence is in God, not one another. And he is stable. He is steadfast. He is the only sure foundation for the beauty of gospel partnership.

Think for a moment about the alternative and what that does to this beauty. What happens when our confidence for the fruit of our ministry in a person or a program? If my confidence is in my gospel partners instead of the gospel itself, then I'm going to *look at them with the world's categories*. I'm going to elevate the things that the world elevates—things like success and numbers and money—because I want our mission to succeed, and that's what success looks like, right? I'm going to gather around myself the kind of leaders who make it big in the world, even if that means overlooking gifted and godly leaders with less glorious careers and fewer successes. I'm going to put a lot of energy into reading the right books, building the right programs, finding the right strategies, because if I can get that right, then I might not have to depend on God so much.

If we put our confidence in our gospel partners instead of the faithfulness of God, then we're going to evaluate each other *based on performance*, and our gratitude and affection for each

other will be *contingent on that performance*. We may have beautiful dreams of what God is going to do through us, and that might excite us and we might be thrilled with each other at the prospect of moving forward and being used by God. And when we see fruit, we're going to rejoice and be thankful and grow in love. But what if somebody doesn't get it? What happens if somebody doesn't share our passion, or their ideas about how to implement it don't line up with ours? What if we don't see fruit? What if some of the same old conflict and sin patterns pop up? What if somebody lets us down, or hits the eject button, or throws in the towel altogether? What happens to our gratitude and joy? Our patience grows thin. Competition and suspicion begin to brew. We've overtaken by fear, which gives way to anger and manipulation. Everything becomes personal. We try harder in order to compensate for our guilt and hide our shame. The beauty of affection and gratitude that Paul demonstrates here is replaced by an ugly pride that betrays the very gospel message we're partnering to proclaim.

Now there's nothing wrong with being a successful leader in the world, or working hard, or thinking creatively about structures and programs. In fact, gospel partnership calls us to great sacrifice and hard work; we do have a responsibility to trust God and obey. The problem is that when we put our confidence in people and programs that are, in and of themselves, incapable of producing lasting fruit for the gospel—something only God can produce, we make way for the ugliness of our hearts to overshadow the beauty of our partnership.

But gospel partnership truly is beautiful if we will look to God himself to provide the results. If we trust in God to complete the work he has started. Again, we won't experience the full beauty of all the gospel of Jesus is producing in and through our lives until the Lord returns (Phil. 3:20-21; cf. Col. 3:1-4; 1 Jn. 3:2). And yet if we are convinced that he is faithful, *even when we're not*, then we're able to appreciate the beauty we can see today, even as we anticipate the beauty to come. We're able to experience the mutual affection that triumphs over our disenchantment, over our pride and our rivalry; the consistent gratitude that overflows into joyful prayer for one another; the quiet patience that knows God is at work to accomplish his purposes, even if behind the scenes where we can see what he's doing or quite know what to expect.

When our confidence is in God himself and his faithfulness, we can be unwavering in gratitude and love in our relationships and our cause, because we know that *our partnership in the gospel is not in vain*.

### ***Discussion Questions***

1. Read back over the description of Paul's affection for the church in Philippi in 1:3-8. How does this portrait of gospel community strike you? Have you experienced this before? Do you experience it regularly now? Is it realistic to expect this kind of unwavering gratitude across our church, or is this something unique to Paul and the Philippians?
2. In vv. 5 and 7 Paul identifies the Philippians' "partnership in the gospel" as the fuel for his gratitude for them. What other kinds of things often generate joy and affection in the church today? How do these things compare to gospel partnership?

3. Discuss as a group how you understand the phrase “partnership in the gospel.”
4. Look back through the brief survey of gospel partnership in Philippians. How does this clarify or shape your definition? How might this begin to translate into our own lives, relationships, and ministries as a church?
5. Read vv. 3-6 again, with an eye toward v. 6. How should we understand God’s “good work” in the context of Paul’s discussion? What precisely do you think Paul is trusting God to do?
6. Talk about the difference between putting our confidence for the fruit of ministry in our gospel partners versus putting it in the gospel itself (i.e. the faithfulness of God). How do you tend to react when things you’d like to see changed within the church or your Christian friends go unaddressed? What does this tell you about who you’re confidence is in? How might resting our confidence in God shape the way we deal with delayed or missed expectations in community and mission?