

We Are Doing a Great Work!

Joy by Example Part 02
Philippians 1:4-8 1-17-2016

Summary: The Philippians' gospel partnership/fellowship (koinonia) with Paul was like the Fellowship of the Ring (band of unlikely comrades who would lay down their lives for one another and the cause of the Fellowship). But the Fellowship of the Gospel is dependent on our joy (through gratitude) TO God FOR people. God is the source of this fellowship, and God will carry on their work until the Second Coming, as evidenced by their tenacious devotion to Paul and the work. Their work was on par with his, even though theirs was a supportive role. And Paul felt Christ loving them through him. So realize the importance of your ministry, don't be distracted, and entangle yourself with the saints in the Fellowship of the Gospel.

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Philippians 1:3 I thank my God every time I remember you. 4 In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy 5 because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, 6 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. 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 in God's grace with me. 8 God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Introduction

The Fellowship of the Ring

If you have the same attention span problems I have, you may not have sat all the way through the movie *The Fellowship of the Ring* or read the book, so for those who don't know the story, it's a fellowship of nine characters who band together to protect a special ring, because that ring is the key to defeating the forces of evil. And it is an interesting band of characters to be the ones to save the world.

Two men, a wizard, an elf, a dwarf, and four little hobbits. An unlikely fellowship. The wizard had a lot of powers, but he typically operated alone. And the best you can say about the elves and dwarfs was they were like the English and the French – kind of a mutual attitude of superiority. Definitely no love lost between them. And the hobbits didn't have much of anything going for them other than loyalty. Basically children with giant feet. And when they were first thrown together there was more than a little animosity and disdain and suspicion within the group. But once they all realize the importance of the task, and they start their journey together, their disdain gives way to friendship, and before long they are willing to lay down their lives if need be for the progress of the group. In fact, before it's all over, two of them do sacrifice their lives for the others. This unlikely little brotherhood goes up against impossible odds as they fight against armies of monsters and orcs and trolls and balrogs and every kind of evil being in a valiant quest to guard that ring.

The Fellowship of the Ring Gospel

The reason I bring all that up is because last Sunday we began a study through the book of Philippians and in this opening section of the book, Paul talks about how much joy he gets from his partnership in the gospel with the Philippians. That word translated **partnership** is the Greek word *koinonia*, which is normally translated *fellowship*. A strengthened form of that same word appears again down in verse 7, (depending on your translation) where it says they are partners or partakers or sharers in Paul's ministry. That is the same word, *koinonia*. They were fellowshippers with Paul in the work of the gospel. I brought up the Fellowship of the Ring story because that is a perfect example of this use of the word fellowship. When we labor side by side in the work of the ministry in the church, we are the fellowship, not of the ring, but of the King. Or to use the words of Philippians, we are the Fellowship of the Gospel. Just as the nine devoted themselves to guarding the ring and using it to fight evil, so we are a fellowship devoted to guarding the gospel and using it to fight evil. And just as the importance of their task brought them to the point of deep friendship and willingness to lay down their lives for success of the group, so it must be with us. That is exactly the kind of relationship you see between Paul and the Philippians. Paul put his life on the line, and the guy the Philippians sent to help Paul (Ephaphroditus) also almost died for the work of the gospel.

So when I talk about fellowship in this sermon, I'm not talking about standing in the hallway with coffee and a cookie. I am using the word fellowship the way Paul used it here – a Fellowship-of-the-Ring type brotherhood in which we are laying down our lives with courage and valor and brotherhood and devotion in an eternally important task.

The Grateful Joy of This Fellowship

One big difference between the Fellowship of the Ring and the Fellowship of the Gospel is that the success of the Fellowship of the Ring didn't really depend on their joy or their gratitude to God. But for the Fellowship of the Gospel to have success, joy is essential. And the way to get the joy is through gratitude to God. One of the biggest joy-killers is self-pity, and self-pity and gratitude are like fire and water – they cannot coexist. Where one exists the other will not, and so as soon as you feel the fire of self-pity in your suffering, just pour on the water of gratitude to God, and your joy will return.

Gratitude to God for What People Do

And that gratitude is a paradox. Paul is thankful to God for what the Philippians did – spend the rest of your life figuring that one out. You would think he would be thankful to them. When they sent him all that money, you would think he would write back and say, "I thank *you* for your partnership." But he doesn't say that. He says, "I thank God for what you did." Why? Because he understands what he was about to write in chapter 2.

Philippians 2:13 it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

You are the one who acts, and you are the one who wills, but when you do, somehow it was God who brought that about in you. He does things inside you that result in you, by your own free will, choosing to do what you want to do, and it ends up conforming to God's good purpose for you. So if somebody is nice to you, you can thank that person if you want, but the main person to thank is God. Because God did a lot more work to make that happen than that person did.

And here is the astonishing piece - God did all that work in that person as a gift to you. That is why it calls for gratitude.

If you want more joy in your life, give this a try. Cultivate gratitude in your heart for the work God did in the saints around in the Fellowship of the Gospel. Go to the back wall and go through the pictures one by one and cultivate a feeling of gratitude for what God has done in each person individually. God, I thank you for the fact that she is so joyful. Thank you for making him calm and steady. Thank you for all the work you did in him to make him so faithful. Thank you for making her smart. Thank you for that guy because he's just here week after week. Thank you for making him willing to teach my kids in children's church. You won't be able to get all the way from one side to the other without being filled with joy by the end.

Gratitude: An Expression of Love

And remember, gratitude is more than just saying, "thank you."

Gratitude is when you receive a gesture of love, and it sparks a response of love in you toward the giver.

You can tell how thankful a child is for a gift by how tight the hug is that you get. So don't just say, "thank you," but cultivate an attitude of thankfulness for the saints.

For People

Paul talks about being thankful more than any other Bible writer. And yet never once does he mention being thankful for things. I am sure he was thankful for his stuff, but that wasn't what he chose to talk about, because that wasn't the source of his greatest joy. Whenever he talks about his gratitude, it was always gratitude for people or for ministry. That is what brought him real joy.

Gratitude is a Choice

"Why don't I feel that?"

It takes effort. He says, **I thank my God every time I remember you.** That is talking about remembering them in prayer. It is intentional. His gratitude for the saints was a choice. Don't just sit around and wait for gratitude to happen in your heart. It won't happen by itself – no matter how many blessings God rains down on you. Gratitude is not a choice caused by a feeling; it's a feeling caused by a choice. Too often people think it's a choice caused by a feeling ("I'll wait until I feel grateful, then I'll say thanks.") That's not how it works. Gratitude is a feeling that arises out of a choice.

"What choice?"

The choice to focus your attention on God's gifts, and connect the dots from those gifts to God's love for you. And the choice to focus on what God is doing more than on what man is doing. And the choice to focus on the good and not the bad.

Do you think Paul was so thankful for these people because they didn't have any sins or problems? It was easy for him to be thankful, because no one in those churches was doing the same annoying, irritating, maddening things that so-and-so is doing to make your life miserable? No – they had problems and sins, and Paul was acutely aware of those problems and sins. That's usually why he was writing to them. So how was he so thankful for them?

When a buzzard flies over a desert, what does it find? A carcass. When a hummingbird flies over that desert what does it find? A flower. Why does the buzzard find a carcass? Because that's what it's

looking for. The hummingbird finds a flower because that's what it's looking for. Are you a buzzard or a hummingbird? When you fly over the desert of people's lives, you can find the carcasses or you can find the flowers. Gratitude is a feeling that comes from a deliberate act of the will that intentionally chooses to focus on the good things God is doing in people, and realize that those good things are a gift from God to you.

The Source of This Fellowship

Ok, so that brings us through verse 5, which is where we left off last time. And that's unfortunate because we left off in midsentence. It is one of Paul's infamous long sentences and so to help the English reader get a handle on it, the translations break it up into shorter sentences. So depending on your translation, your Bible might begin a new sentence in verse 6. The NIV is the only one that takes the more literal approach here and keeps the same sentence going right through verse 6.

4 In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy 5 because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, 6 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.

That's a helpful translation because it shows us the connection between verses 5 and 6. Verse 6 does not start a new idea.

"I have joy in your partnership with me, being confident of this..."

Confident of what?

6 ...that he who began a good work in you will carry it on

He is saying, "I'm happy about the partnership because God will carry on the good work." What **good work**? What is the **good work** that God will carry on until the Day of Christ? The popular answer is that the good work is their salvation. So the idea is that God is the one who started their salvation, and he will bring it to fruition. The problem with that view is it totally ignores the context. It is true that God is the Author and Finisher of our faith, and other passages talk about that, but that is not what this passage is talking about. He is not talking about their salvation; he is talking about their gospel partnership.¹ That is the **good work**. Follow the timeline in verses 5-6:

4 ...I always pray with joy 5 because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, 6 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.

So far it has been going from the first day the Philippian church started up until the writing of the letter, and Paul is confident God will keep it going from the writing of the letter all the way until the Second Coming. What has been going from the first day until now? Their partnership in the gospel. There is absolutely no reason to assume Paul is making a sudden change of subject in midsentence where he stops talking about their gospel partnership and suddenly starts talking about their personal salvation without letting us know that's what he's talking about. Especially since in the next verse, Paul's right back to talking about their partnership.

7 ... whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me.

When he says **God's grace**, that is just another reference to Paul's gospel ministry. Paul very often referred to his ministry as his grace that he received from God.² So he never leaves the topic of their

¹ While this is the minority view, there are reputable scholars who hold it, including John Eadie, Meyer, and Hawthorne.

² And Paul's grace (his ministry) was the proclamation of the gospel. **Ephesians 3:8 Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.** He calls his ministry a grace there in Galatians 2:9, Romans 1:5, 12:3, 15:15, 1 Corinthians 3:10. So when Paul says in v. 7, "all of you share in God's grace with me," he is talking about their partnership with him in the gospel.

partnership with him. And there is nothing in the context about their personal salvation. The first reference we see to their salvation is not until the last paragraph of the chapter where Paul makes a passing reference to the fact that they believe on Christ (1:29).

So the popular interpretation doesn't fit the context, nor does it fit the language. That phrase *good work* always refers to something we do, and it is never used to describe our salvation.³ This phrase always refers to an action that God produces in us, but that we perform. For example:

Ephesians 2:10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

2 Corinthians 9:8 And God is able to make all grace abound to you so that ...you will abound in every good work.

Good works are things that we do as a result of God working in us. That fits perfectly with the interpretation that the good work that God will carry on to completion is the Philippians' partnership in ministry with Paul. The Philippians were the ones who sent the money and offered the help, but they did so because God worked in them to do it, which is why Paul is thankful to God for what they did.⁴

So all that to show us the source of this fellowship. First he points us to the joy of the fellowship of the gospel, now the source. And the source is God. And because of that, we can be assured of the next point – the longevity of the fellowship.

The Longevity of This Fellowship

God will **carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus**. Everything they have done in partnering with Paul's gospel ministry will have ongoing results all the way until the Second Coming.

Not in Vain

All this work they have been doing to help Paul – none of it was in vain. And that's important, because you can see how they might be tempted to think otherwise. They bet their whole wad on this one horse, and now he's in prison. People are turning against him, his ministry seems to be in ruins, all the churches he has planted have tons of problems – some of them even embracing heresy. What returns are

The same is true of your ministry. Whatever ministry God has entrusted to you at this time in your life is your grace. In Ephesians 4 Paul speaks about their unity – one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God. However, even with all that unity and oneness, there is still uniqueness and variety in the body, because we each have our own unique gifts and ministries. Ephesians 4:5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. 7 But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. Then it goes on to talk about how we have each been given a gift. So your gifts and calling – that is your personal grace from God.

³ There are 11 other times the phrase *good work* or *good works* appears in the NT, and in every one of those it's talking about good deeds performed by people. Acts 9:36, Ro 2:7, 2 Cor 9:8, Eph 2:10, Col 1:10, 1 Tim 2:10, 5:10, 2 Tim. 2:21, 3:17, Tit. 1:16, 3:1.

⁴ A third evidence for this interpretation is the parallel passage in Colossians 1. Paul wrote these letters around the same time, and they have a lot of very close similarities, including the opening prayer.

Philippians 1:9-11

Colossians 1:9-11

I pray -----praying
abound in knowledge-----growing in the knowledge
in all discernment-----in all wisdom and understanding
being filled-----you may be filled
fruit of righteousness-----bearing fruit
to the glory and praise of God----according to the power of his glory
good work (v.6)-----every good work

Those prayers are very, very similar in language and meaning. And in the Colossians prayer, the phrase **good work** refers to something the Colossians did. **Colossians 1:10** we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work...

the Philippians getting on their missionary dollars? Has all this expenditure of time and effort and money been foolish? Paul assures them: No – the things you’ve done to contribute to this partnership – that was something God did through you. It was a good work, brought about through you by God, which means it’s not over. God is just getting started. The glorious outcomes and results of what you have done will have an impact in the kingdom of God⁵ from now until Jesus comes back!

And that is exactly what happened, isn’t it? They supported the Apostle Paul, and what did he do? Well, for one thing he wrote the book of Philippians. And here we are 2000 years later benefiting from that ministry. If you are thankful to God for Paul when you read Philippians or Ephesians or any of his books, you should be just as thankful for the Philippians, whose partnership with Paul made that possible.

Look what all God has done in the last 2000 years through the combined efforts of Paul and the Philippians. When you do something that furthers the progress of the gospel, you are reaching far beyond your own life span and touching untold millions of lives from now until the very end.

The Tenacity of This Fellowship

Now, is that guaranteed? Does verse 6 guarantee that God will bless the ministry of all churches until the Second Coming? No – some churches have their lampstand removed altogether. 1 Corinthians 3:12 says that some people’s ministry is like wood, hay, and straw - no lasting value. Some Christians really do waste most of their lives. They pour their time and effort and energy into things that don’t have eternal impact. So how can Paul be so sure that won’t be the case with the Philippians? He defends that in verse 7.

7 It is right for me to feel this way about all of you...

The word translated **feel** means *to make an assessment*. It is justified for me to make this assessment about you. I’m right and justified in assuming that God will continue your ministry all the way to the end. Why?

7 It is right ... since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God’s grace with me.⁶

That word **share** – that’s *koinonia* again - the Fellowship of the Gospel.⁷ What he is saying is that the Philippians’ fellowship in the gospel with Paul – their partnership with him, was tenacious. They were loyal to that fellowship. They didn’t drop out when things got rough. They didn’t bail on Paul when he lost popularity. They didn’t lose interest during those times when Paul was just sitting there in chains and not being very productive as a missionary. And that tenacious devotion to the fellowship of the gospel put them in his heart in a way that made it clear they were for real.

Paul had seen his fair share of short-termers - the rocky or the thorny soil types, where they are all excited about the gospel ministry for a while, but when things get hard, or things get boring, or the allure of earthly treasures comes along, or the worries of life take hold, they drop out of the Fellowship. Paul had seen that, and he could tell, this isn’t that. These Philippians were devoted. It is right for me to have this assessment about you because I have you in my heart on the basis of your tenacious, faithful partnership - you always share in God’s grace with me rain or shine.

⁵ That word translated **carry it on to completion** (you Bible might say **bring it to completion**), sometimes that word means to finish or complete, other times it just means to carry something on. For example, **Hebrews 9:6 ... the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry**. Either meaning would make sense in the context, and I’m not sure it matters which one we picked because either way, we end up with pretty much the same meaning.

⁶ The verse must be taken as a whole. If one stops after the first clause (“It is right for me to make this assessment ... since I have you in my heart”) it wouldn’t make sense. How would having them in his heart justify the assessment that their ministry will continue long term? Paul’s point is more complex. He is saying, “I’m justified in making this assessment, because I have you in my heart on the basis of your faithful, tenacious devotion to the fellowship of the gospel.”

⁷ The term in v.5 is *koinonia*, and the word in v.7 is *sug-koinonos*. The *sug* prefix means “together with.” So it is an intensified form - “partners together with.”

The Importance of This Fellowship

Support Ministries

That is what's so encouraging about this is that Paul is saying all this to some people who were playing mostly a support role. It's easy for us to think of someone like Paul having a long-term impact way beyond his death. Missionaries, church planters, big, famous preachers – those people might have an ongoing legacy and touch the lives of people even after they die, but what about everybody else? What about the support ministries? You just provide the finances, or do some other support type ministry. You're not really out there proclaiming the Word to the masses; you're just doing something that facilitates something else that helps something else that makes it possible for someone else to proclaim the gospel to the masses. That is the Philippians. They had a support role, and yet they were considered equal partners. When we say we are benefiting from the ministry of the Apostle Paul, it is just as accurate to say that we are benefiting from the ministry of those faithful saints in Philippi who just went to work every day, earned a living, and did what they could to scrape together a few extra dollars to pitch in toward supporting Paul. And Paul speaks of them as equal partners.

And I don't mean to say giving money was all they did. They were holding forth the word of life as a church (2:16), and they were proclaiming the message, and they were suffering persecution for it (1:27-30, 4:14-15). So it wasn't just a mindless writing of a check. They were sold out for this ministry. But it was mostly a support role, so one of the things we learn from this book is that in the kingdom of God, you get just as much credit for doing a support ministry as you do for getting up and doing the preaching or evangelism or church planting yourself. When a football player scores the winning touchdown, which deserves more credit, his heart or his lungs? Or hands? Or legs? It's a silly question. The man (the whole man) scored the touchdown because all the various parts of his body were working together, and the credit goes not to the individual parts, but to the man. If you are a heart or a lung, don't lose sight of the fact that you're in the Superbowl. If you are a chef serving the troops, don't lose sight of the fact that you're contributing to the war effort.

You Are Doing a Great Work!

Don't ever think your ministry is small. The Fellowship of the Gospel is the biggest thing going in the universe, and you have a key role. Realize the importance of your task! Be like Nehemiah. His enemies tried to distract him from the project of building the wall; he's up there working on the wall and they try to get him to come have a meeting with them at a nearby village.

Nehemiah 6:3 ... "I am doing a great work and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?" 4 Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer. 5 Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message...

It didn't matter how many times they tried the same thing; it was never going to work. He was never going to be distracted or pulled away from what he was doing because he realized, it was a *great* work. If you are doing something small, it doesn't matter much if you keep at it. But when you are doing a great work – something really big time, you can't let yourself be distracted or pulled away from that work by lesser things.

If Satan can't get you to rebel against God's call on your life to do something evil, plan B is to send a million good things your way to distract you from what God wants you to do. If Satan can't derail your progress with rebellion, he'll do it through distraction. You can't accomplish anything worthwhile if you are constantly chasing distractions. Every mother of young children knows that. You try to get something done, and you're not more than five minutes into the project and some little voice comes up, "Mommy, can you help me..." "Mommy, can't you take me to..." "Mommy, I'm hungry." You can't get anything done while you are constantly going off on distractions.

Jesus is a great example of rejecting distraction. In Luke 9:51 it says he set his face resolutely to go down to Jerusalem to die on the cross. He is finally crucified in chapter 23. And from chapter 9 until chapter 23 there is one distraction after another trying to pull Jesus off course – opposition, trouble passing through Samaria, Pharisees trying to get him to turn back, Herod – but Jesus absolutely refused to be distracted by any of it.

Luke 13:33 I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day

He was accomplishing the greatest work ever done, and even though people were bringing up some pretty strong reasons why he should take a detour and do this or that, he would not be distracted from his task.

How distractible are you from your work? It depends on how great you think that work is. If you think you are one of the nonessential personnel in the kingdom of God, and your task is of minor importance, then you may be faithful, you may not. You may continue on through hardship and obstacles and trouble and resistance, or you may just get tired of it and quit.

But here is the thing you need to understand: if you are doing anything that contributes to the success of the ministry of the church, *you are doing a great work*. It doesn't matter if it's direct ministry or a support role. If it contributes to the success of the overall work of the church it is a great work, because this is God's household, the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth, and the temple of the Holy Spirit, which is the very dwelling place of God. It is the headquarters of God's presence from which he dispenses grace in this world. It is a royal priesthood and a holy nation. It is the Israel of God, and the body of the Lord Jesus Christ in this world. It is the bride of Christ. It is the field where God is raising up his harvest. It is the place where the Word of life is held out to the world by saints who shine like stars in the universe in a crooked and depraved generation. It's the kingdom of God. It's the banquet of God where we invite the world to come and be satisfied. It's the only hope this world has. It's the only light in this present darkness. It is God's plan A, and there is no plan B.

When you are doing something – anything – that contributes to the success of the church of the living God, do you realize you are doing a far greater work than Nehemiah ever did? He was building a physical wall around an ancient city; you are building the very kingdom of Almighty God. Agape - you are doing a *great work*.

Long Term View

Sometimes churches develop a 3-5 year plan, or a 10 year plan. Paul had a 2000 year plus plan. A “from now to the Second Coming” plan. The most important thing is not where this church will be in 10 or 20 or 100 years from now. What is important, and exciting, is to think about what kind of fruit there will be as a result of what we are doing now on that Day when Christ returns. On that day God will assess our ministry by looking back at all the people who were saved, all the spiritual growth that took place, all the people reached by the missionaries we supported, and then all the people who were impacted in later generations by those converts and their children. One of our Sunday school teachers leads a little kid to the Lord, and that kid grows up raises a godly family, and his kids raise godly families, and so do their kids; some of his hundreds of great, great grandkids start churches, others go reach some unreached people groups in the mission field, and on it goes. All of that from the work of one Sunday school teacher. Multiply that times the whole number of people in the congregation at that time, and then add all the new people who will join the congregation as the years go by. The fruit that can come from this one, little church is absolutely staggering to contemplate. You are part of a Fellowship that is doing a great work!

So many times we shoot ourselves in the foot by walking around with a woefully short term perspective. Things don't happen on our timetable, and we give up. Some of the seeds you are planting won't be ready for harvest for another eight or ten generations. We need to serve in the church with a “from now till the Second Coming” view.

The Love of This Fellowship

The Love of Christ

In the Fellowship of the Ring they became friends and comrades, but in the Fellowship of the Gospel, it is a much more profound kind of love.

8 God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

He loved them with Christ's affection. That word **affection** is *spagna*, the word for the internal organs in your midsection where you feel especially strong emotions. It is one thing to like someone; it's another thing to have love so deep that you feel it physically in your body.

Did you know that if you are a believer, Jesus Christ has that kind of gut-level emotional feeling of love for you? That is what he means when he says **the affection of Christ Jesus**. Christ's feelings of affection. If you are a Christian and you think, "God doesn't really like me all that much. I think he mostly just tolerates me," that's not humility. It is flat out false doctrine.

Ephesians 5:25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church

So if it is really true that Jesus Christ doesn't care much for you, or is indifferent about you, then all of us husbands are free to stop loving our wives. Because Christ's love for us is the standard for husbands.

But we know that's not the case. Paul describes Christ's love for you in terms of marital love. We might expect him to say Christ's love for us is like the love of a king for his subjects, or a father for his children, or even the love of brothers or friends, but to compare his love for us to marital love? Is that appropriate? Yes, it is, because he wants us to think about his love for us in terms of the deepest, most intimate, most intense, and most permanent kind of love that we can imagine.⁸

If you are part of this Fellowship of the Gospel, Jesus Christ loves you with that kind of love. The kind you can feel in your stomach. But that's not the point Paul is making. His point is that he has Christ's affection for the Philippians inside him. Paul can literally feel Christ loving them through him. Have you ever experienced that? Have you ever thought, "Wow, I can feel Jesus loving that person through me"? That is what Paul was experiencing.

And if you think he's exaggerating, read verse 8. He knew people would think he was exaggerating, so he swears an oath.

8 God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

He is actually calling God as a witness. We all know what the Bible says about frivolous oaths. You don't swear an oath like this unless it's something very serious and very solemn. Paul really wanted them to understand that this was true.

This is more proof that verse 6 is valid. I know God is going to bless your ministry long term because of the type of love I have for you. I don't love you like people in the world love their friends. Atheists will have affection for people who send them gifts and show them a lot of kindness. If I had that kind of affection for you, that wouldn't be proof of anything. But the love I have for you is the very affection of Christ. I feel this way about you because Christ feels this way about you. No atheist loves anyone like that. And Paul's point here is that he couldn't love the Philippians like that unless they were the real thing. The fact that he has that kind of love in his heart for them is evidence that their commitment to the gospel partnership is real, and that God will continue to bless it all the way to the

⁸ Someone might say, "But Ephesians 5 is talking about Christ's love for the church as a whole, not for the individual members." If you think there is a way that Jesus can love the church as a group but not love the individual people within the church, you have a warped idea of what the church is. The church is the individuals. That's all the church is. If Jesus doesn't love the individuals, then he doesn't love the church.

Second Coming. When our love for another saint runs low, that's probably a sign that we're not spending near enough time thinking about how much Christ loves that person.

Conclusion: Entangle Yourself with People in Ministry

So what is the bottom line of all this? What is the relevance for today? Very simple: devote your entire existence to the Fellowship of the Gospel. Don't do your ministry in a corner. If you maintain your privacy, and keep your relational distance at church, you can maintain control. You can protect yourself from getting hurt, you can avoid all kinds of trouble, and you can keep the boat from rocking in your life. You don't have to worry about accountability to anyone. Just do what you want, the way you want to do it.

Why do people isolate themselves like that? They do it because they think it will make them happy, and dealing with people threatens their happiness. But what they don't realize is that there is a far greater joy that comes from fellowship in ministry that makes all the headaches of dealing with people worth it. God built you to need the kind of joy that comes from toiling together with some comrades in some major task. If you want to go beyond the shallow happiness, comfort and ease, and have the rich, profound, overflowing joy that is greater than all your sorrows, entangle yourself with other people in ministry.

What would happen if we took a snapshot of the whole congregation and then took a marker and drew lines connecting all the people who are laboring together in some ministry? How many lines would be going out from you? The greater the number of lines, the greater your capacity for this kind of joy.

Someone might say, "That's not true – I've got a million lines, and no joy at all. The more lines I get, the less joy I have." If that's the case, it could be that you've lost sight of the purpose of the work. You might be doing various tasks just because someone asked you and you couldn't say no, or you felt guilty for not doing much, or any number of other reasons beside the fact that you have a driving passion for the success of the work of the gospel. But the more you entangle your life with the lives of others in pursuit of the cause of the gospel, the greater will be your capacity for joy.

Wives, take your helpmate role seriously. God called your husband to a task that he can't do without your strengthening support and help. You are playing a god-like role in his life. Really lean into that. Pour yourself into it and you will find an intimacy and oneness deeper than what you have known before.

Josiah Gallo and I were talking about this last week – about how this principle applies within your own family. Work at ministry together with your family. Whether it be folding bulletins, or raking leaves, or collecting all the used communion cups after communion – some task that will be your family's responsibility, and your kids can be teamed up with the rest of the body of Christ in the overall effort of the ministry of the gospel.

Teach them the principle that the Philippians get just as much credit for Paul's ministry as Paul, even though they had a support role.

You have been thrown in with this unlikely band of brothers and sisters here in this room. The baton of the Fellowship of the Gospel was handed from the Philippians down to others and others until now it's in our hands. This is our generation, and as members of the Fellowship of the Gospel it is upon us now to lay down our lives for this work. We must realize the importance of this fellowship, and nurture the love and joy and gratitude of this fellowship, so that we can maintain the tenacity of loyalty to the fellowship. And we will be able to do that because the Author and Finisher of this fellowship is God, and he will carry on the work until the Day of Christ Jesus.

Benediction: 1 Corinthians 15:58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Application Questions (James 1:25)

- 1) How would you describe the role you're called to in the Fellowship of the Gospel?

- 2) What kinds of things pose the greatest threat to distract you or discourage you from the work?
- 3) What kinds of things generate the greatest encouragement and enthusiasm in you for the work?