

Partners for the Gospel

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Over the years I've commented from time to time on the approach to the Gospel that starts out with the premise that the first thing that you say in an evangelistic encounter is, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." I don't plan to go into all of the reasons that I think that may not be the best place to start in the proclamation of the Gospel, I mention it simply to state this, that the opening premise when people are introduced to Christianity is often presented in individualistic terms and there is a necessary element to that, it is necessary for an individual to repent and put his faith in Christ in order to be saved, in order to be delivered from the consequences of his sin and his sinful nature, but I would want you to be mindful of something else. When Christ saves a man, saves a woman, saves a young boy, a young girl, he's not simply saving them to bless them individually, when Christ saves us, he saves us in order to bring us into his body, to bring us into the body of Christ. We share this like precious faith with others who have come to know Christ by the grace of God, and there is a sense in which we are brought into a body and it is God's intention, it is God's plan for people to congregate with other believers, to have a common commitment to the Gospel, a common commitment to one another that is rooted in Christ, that is rooted in that common faith, that is rooted in a common sharing of the Holy Spirit. We're not meant to be, it is a gross distortion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to picture it as giving somebody a faith that saves them but allows them to continue their life in isolation apart from the people of God. God has broader purposes for his people than that. God intends his people to gather together for mutual edification, for mutual service, and when God saves a man, he gifts them with a unique blend of gifts from his Spirit that is not simply to be the private possession of the individual for their private edification, he gives us gifts so that we would be able to minister them to one another; that by our presence, by our love, by the abilities that he's given to us, by the resources, that we would come together and be part of a greater purpose in the advance of the Gospel. God intends for us to be partners for the Gospel when he saves us and that is going to give us a good frame of reference as we come back to the book of Philippians here this morning.

I invite you to turn to Philippians. You were just in the neighborhood of Philippians when we read from Colossians just a moment ago, and we are starting, for those of you that are joining us maybe for the first time in a week or two or three, and maybe you've been away for a few months, we welcome you back. We're glad to have everyone of you here with us. We welcome everyone that the Lord would bring through our doors to hear the

preaching of God's word. And for those of you that have been away, just a brief bit of review here. Last week, we had what I called a prelude to the book of Philippians and what we're doing here in these weeks is we are preparing ourselves to go through the book verse-by-verse. We haven't started that yet. If you're back with us for the first time maybe in a while, this is a great time for you to jump back in with us at the very start of a book, and I like to follow a pattern when I start teaching through a Bible book. I've followed that pattern in every major book that we've taught here at Truth Community Church, whether anyone else has noticed or not, I do that pattern. What I like to do is this, I like to start with an overview, a survey of the book so that we see the forest, so to speak, before we go looking at the trees. There is great great great value in seeing a book from a satellite perspective, seeing it from the big picture perspective, seeing it in the way that sections relate to one another so that you get a sense of the overall flow of the message at the start and then when we descend into the details verse-by-verse, there is a sense of understanding of how this relates to the greater whole. I think that that is vital to an understanding of God's word.

If I can say this by way of just a very minor tangent, it always frightens me in my heart when I say I'm going to go on a tangent because sometimes those go on longer than I intend, but something that would just help you be familiar and help that Bible that's on your lap or in your hands to be an even greater friend to you, familiarity with a friend breeds even greater relationship, this idea of the overview, the survey nature of messages I think is especially important because of the nature in which we hold our English Bibles in our hands today. We have no experience, most of us at all, with anything other than Bibles that are marked by chapter and verse divisions. We're so used to that that we think that that's probably the way the Apostle Paul wrote it. He said, "Verse 1," then he said, "Okay, now verse 2, and now verse 3," and we're conditioned to look at verses as individual units that are apart from their context. Well, that's not the way the Bible was written at all. The chapter and verse divisions that you take for granted in your Bible were additions that were added 1,200-1,500 years after the Bible was originally written. We've talked about that a little bit in the past. You say, "Well, what does that matter? Why is that important?" Well, as the Bible was originally written, it would come to you as a unit and you would read it together and you would read it collectively as a unit, you'd read the letter of Philippians as a unit. Today what we're conditioned to do is to go to a verse because it's often said out like it's a separate paragraph, and to lift it up out of its context and try to deal with it that way. Well, the survey kinds of approaches that we're talking about here that we're going to do today and next week, help us overcome that and help us see the way that the greater parts and the individual parts relate to the greater whole and what you're going to find as we go through the book of Philippians is the big picture is going to help you assimilate the details.

So that's what we're going to start on here today and I couldn't be happier to be able to do this with you here today. You know, there are a lot of different things that you have to teach when you're a pastor in all of this, but to teach these big picture things of the Bible, of Bible books, is something that I just especially cherish the opportunity to do. So thank you for sharing in this time with me as we look to God's word for what he would have for

us as individuals and, more importantly, what he would have for us as a church, as a gathered body of believers together.

What is the big picture in the book of Philippians, then? What is the overarching theme that we would want to see as we start to dive into it, as we circle the airport before we come into a landing as we see the lay of the greater landscape? What is it that we should see? I would suggest to you that it is this: Paul as he is writing this book to the Philippians, as he's writing this letter to the Philippians, he does so viewing them as partners in the Gospel. They are partners with him in the proclamation of the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. They have been an encouragement to him. They have supported him and he has them in his heart as the one who was the founding pastor, so to speak. He founded the church of Philippi in Acts 16. Paul preached the Gospel to them, people were converted and he had this formative influence upon them at the very start, and in the years that followed, they proved themselves to be faithful participants in the Gospel, faithful loyal supporters of his ministry, promulgators of his doctrine and receptive to the things that he taught, and now after a period of a few years after Paul had started the church, now he writes to them later, writes to them when he is personally in prison, and what is the message? He's viewing them as partners in the Gospel and he does some things. The Spirit of his letter is this: he thanks them for being partners in the Gospel. He encourages them in their walk and in their service to Christ. He tells them that he is praying for them and he gives them specific ways in which he is praying for them. But as the letter goes on, he doesn't simply stop there. This is Paul's pattern, by the way. With the exception of the book of Galatians, his general pattern is that he will open with statements of love and affirmation of people, he affirms people as saints in Christ even to the distorted church at Corinth, he would refer to them as saints in Christ Jesus. So he opens with affirmation, he opens with love, but he goes on and it's not simply statements of encouragement, he goes on to give them instruction, he goes on from that position of strength and calls them to be even better.

What's the call in the book of Philippians? Well, he tells them – we're going to look at all of this. I'm giving you an overview of the overview before we get into the overview, the survey of the survey. He tells them that they can improve, they can improve by living in unity with one another. They can improve by guarding against false teachers. They can improve by cultivating an attitude of joy. And what excites me as we start this book of Philippians is recognizing that this is the very instruction that's going to benefit our church here in the 21st century as we go through God's word together, to find these exhortations to unity and the reasons that you live in unity with one another as believers in Christ, to guard us against false teachers, to cultivate within us an attitude of joy. These are wonderful themes for us to anticipate going through in the coming months. I expect this to change our church. I truly do. Why would I think that? Because as best as we can, this church belongs to the Lord, you are his people, this is his word, God's Spirit is at work amongst us, I would expect God to take his word, to use it in our lives to sanctify us through his truth, and at the end of this study of the book of Philippians to be more conformed to the image of Christ than we are as we start here today. Now I don't know about you but I think that's a pretty lofty goal to pursue and I say we get started.

Now here's what we're going to do with this survey message. I'm going to break it into two parts, this week and next week. For today, we're going to do a really quick tour of Philippians 1 and 2, and next week we'll do a twoer of Philippians chapters 3 through 4, and as we do that, we are going to find fundamental principles that are intended to define the nature of a local church, the nature of Christians living together in love for the sake of Christ and in unity with one another because, beloved, because, beloved, because this is so very important to understand: God did not save us simply to live in isolation from one another, God did not save you simply so that you could have an individually satisfying Christian life. He saved his people, he saves his people so that they would be partners together for the greater goal of the proclamation of Christ, for the knowledge of Christ. We are partners for the sake of the Gospel and that becomes the unifying factor of everything that we do in a local church. It's not simply that I have a better life and the edges of my trials are softened and your trials are softened and we find friends that we want to hang out with. No, there is a much higher, a much loftier and eternal purpose for which churches like this are brought into being by the Spirit of God, it is for the sake of serving the purposes of God and the purposes of God are served when Christ is effectively proclaimed and we each have a part to play in that, and that is what Philippians is going to help us see.

Partners for the sake of the Gospel. The question is: what does that look like? What's the mark of that kind of partnership? What is, in other words, let's put it this way, what is the greater whole to which you are a part if you belong to this church? If you are committed to this church, what is the greater whole that unifies us even as we are living our individual lives for Christ? Well, we're going to see in the first two chapters three aspects of the partnership that Paul lays out and it's actually very clear, as you go through the text you can find this. First of all, what does that partnership for the sake of the Gospel look like? 1. It is a partnership of gratitude. It is a partnership of gratitude. If you're taking notes, and I encourage you to take notes to kind of refresh your mind on these things later on, it is a partnership of gratitude, of thanksgiving, of grateful appreciation for one another.

Now, Paul here in Philippians was writing to a local church. A local church. He's not writing to an individual here like he did when he was writing to Philemon, for example. He's writing to a local church. He's writing to a group of believers and that immediately prompts our interest here today because we're gathered together as a group of believers in a local church so we want to listen in to what Paul says. He starts out here in verses 1 and 2, he says,

1 Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons.

To all of you, including your leadership structure, I write and I say these things to you. He says in verse 2,

2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Those are his opening words: grace to you; peace from God our Father. Now writing as the authoritative apostle appointed by Christ for exactly this purpose, to bring Christ's instruction to his people, he moves in to verse 3 and what does he do? What's the first words out of his mouth after this introductory greeting that he gives to them? It's a statement of gratitude. He immediately expresses his thankfulness for these people that he is writing to.

Look at verse 3, he says,

3 I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, 4 always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all,

What a wonderful spirit to start with, to have a man of Paul's authority, Paul's position expressing to these people, "I'm grateful for you. I'm thankful that you're a part of my ministry. I'm grateful that you're a part of my life. I'm grateful for who you are and therefore I pray for you with joy, with a sense of gladness that I have you as partners in the Gospel with me."

Why is he grateful? On what grounds does he pray with joy? Look at it here in verse 5 and see this idea of partnership coming together. He says, "I thank God for you, I pray for you,

5 in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now.

We'll look at what all these verses mean in closer context later as we go through our exposition, but what I want you to see for now is the fact that he's saying, "I am thankful to you because you have participated with me in Gospel ministry from the very start. From the time that I showed up in Philippi," in Acts 16, "and Lydia believed and others believed, the jailer believed, you guys have been with me. You have shared in this Gospel ministry together with me and that brings me joy. I am encouraged by that. I remember that, I remember our history together and it floods my heart with joy to such an extent that it bursts out in thanksgiving to God for you."

Then he goes on to encourage them that their labor is not in vain. Verse 6, he says,

6 For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.

He says, "Our partnership from the beginning was a work of God. God did that." Now he says, "I want you to know that I'm confident that what God began, He will finish; that His purposes will be accomplished; that there will be no falling short along the way. No one is going to fall out of the hand of Christ in this work that God has done," he says to the Philippians, "so I am confident." He is praying with gratitude. This is a letter written from the position of great spiritual strength and the church at Philippi as they receive this, put yourself in their sandals, if you will, as they are hearing this read to them for the first time, their beloved founder, their apostle, has not forgotten them even though he's

removed geographically from them. He remembers them. He loves them. He's confident in them and he's giving them a Spirit-inspired assessment of where they're at as a congregation.

Well, immediately you're drawn into this. We're all more responsive to people that are affirming and confident and loving toward us than we are to people that are hostile, and Paul goes on to say in verse 7, he goes on and look at it with me, this thanksgiving, this joy, this confidence with which he writes, look at what he says about it in verse 7, he says,

7 For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me. 8 For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Notice one of the terms that he uses there, "You are partakers of grace with me. We share in grace together. You have participated in the Gospel with me. We share in grace together." Do you see how this theme of partnership, of common sharing together in the things of Christ rises to the surface in his initial words? We're on the same team. We're on the same side. We're in this together. Paul's not writing to them as one hostile to them. "We're together. We're partners for the sake of the Gospel," he says.

So he goes on and he said, remember in verse 4 he said, "I'm always offering prayer with joy for you all," well, in verse 9 he picks up and he says, "Let me tell you how I pray for you. I'll tell you how I pray for you specifically." He says, "And this I pray." Paul had gone on a tangent in verses 5 to 8, now he picks up and tells them how he prays. He says,

9 And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, 10 so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; 11 having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

He said in verse 6, "I am confident that God will continue the work that He's begun in you." Verses 9 through 11 is his expression of prayer of how he wants God to develop that. He says, "I know God will do this. Now I am praying for God to do it, and in the specifics I'm praying that your love will grow and that your discernment will grow." That will be pretty important as we go on through the book. His prayer life is an introduction to the themes that we find in the rest of the letter. There is a continuity, there is a unity to his thought throughout these four chapters and it's all woven together. You lose that sense, you lose that perspective if you don't see the big picture. That's why we're doing it. But Paul starts out expressing partnership and his gratitude for the partnership that he's had with this church in the proclamation of the Gospel. Pretty cool.

Now secondly, he goes on to state that it's a partnership of commitment. A partnership of commitment and just with a word of modern application, I guess. You know, I understand that commitment is a virtue that's in short supply in the culture in which we live. People can't stay married. People can't stay at a particular job for a period of time. Friends come and go. And this idea of a long-term commitment to relationships is rather foreign to the spirit of our age. What I want you to see here in the book of Philippians is that when it comes to being a Christian and our perspectives toward the believers that we are with, there is not that individualistic sense of, "take it or leave it; I'll come and go," that kind of stuff is not the spirit that is at the essence of the partnership of the Gospel. Paul is expressing that this Gospel partnership is one of commitment and you see this as you go along.

He writes from prison and although he is in prison, the Gospel is still advancing and you see his commitment carrying out in the rest of chapter 1 in a way that is really staggering when you see the broader context of what he's saying. He says in verse 12, he now turns to a report on his personal circumstances and he says in verse 12 this,

12 Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel,

"Yeah, I'm in prison, but do you know what? That's incidental to the fact that the Gospel is progressing. We're partners for the Gospel." And he says, "I can be in prison as long as the Gospel is advancing." He says, "It's turned out for the greater progress of the Gospel." Verse 13,

13 so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, 14 and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear.

He says, "The fact that I am a prisoner, that I don't have my freedom, is incidental to the greater cause that we're all sharing together here. The greater cause is the advance of the Gospel. If I'm in prison and that's advancing the cause of the Gospel, all is well," he says.

Now he goes on and he recognizes that there are people whose motives are not the best in this advance of the Gospel. Verse 15, look at it with me. He says,

15 Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; 16 the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel;

Do you see it again? The Gospel. The Gospel. The Gospel. He said,

17 the former [meaning those who preach Christ from envy and strife] proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. 18 What then? Only

that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed;
and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice,

He says, "The Gospel is the purpose of all of this and even though these people are personally hostile to me, even though they are preaching out of sinful motives that are evident," the fact is that these opponents that he's talking about, are somehow preaching Christ and he says, "As long as Christ is being preached, I'm content because it's about the Gospel, it's not about me personally. It's not about the individual motives of men. If the Gospel is being put forward, if Christ is being elevated and preached, then that is the purpose of our partnership and I can rejoice in that even if it's not all that it otherwise could be." He says, "I rejoice in that. In this I rejoice," there in verse 18. Look at it there.

Then he goes on. He emphasizes his point. He says,

Yes, and I will rejoice, 19 for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, 20 according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

Beloved, time out. Take a breath. Let's step back for a moment and realize and reemphasize what we've been saying all along here. Paul is saying that the central dominating theme of ministry, of life in the body of Christ, is the Gospel which is another way of saying that the central dominating theme is Christ. "It is Christ that matters, so much so," Paul says, "that Christ is so important, the Gospel is so exalted, it is so central to everything that we do, that it is subordinate that people oppose me in the preaching of the Gospel. It is subordinate that they do so and that they preach Christ with envy and selfish ambition. Yeah, they shouldn't do that but that doesn't detract me from the fact that the Gospel is being proclaimed because the Gospel is central."

He goes on. What he had just said in verse 20, look at it there with me, he says, "I won't be put to shame in anything." He says, "With all boldness, Christ will be exalted in my body whether by life or by death." He says that the partnership in the Gospel, the centrality of Christ is so surpassing, so glorious, so preeminent, that even his own life is incidental by comparison. If Christ is exalted whether by life or by death with me, as long as Christ is exalted, I can come and go. I can live or die as long as Christ is elevated, as long as Christ is proclaimed, as long as Christ is known. That's the central theme, the central commitment around this partnership that they have in the Gospel.

The contrary motives of his opponents didn't dissuade him and yet, beloved, what I want you to see as the letter moves on is this: despite Paul's adversity, even though he declares a certain indifference to the continuation of his life, "Whether by life or by death, whatever, whatever, Christ is proclaimed, Christ is exalted, you say? I can come or go. I'm just a passing wisp of air on this planet anyway. As long as the enduring preeminence of Christ is magnified, that's what matters to me," he says. What a great theme, what a great perspective for a local church to develop in their own interactions. You know,

whatever our different lives may be, our different roles, our different participation in it may be, whatever our contribution to the partnership may be, our perspective if it's going to be biblical is this, "Is Christ being proclaimed? Is Christ being exalted? Ah, then all is well. Then the central theme is being accomplished and the work of God is moving forward like a powerful force that cannot be stopped. That's what matters. These other things are incidental by comparison to Christ," Paul says.

But I said that he's talking about a partnership of commitment and how does that fit with what he has said? You could take that, take what Paul said and say, "Well, maybe Paul doesn't care about us so much. He says he doesn't care if he lives or dies, what does that say to me? How does that relate to us?" Verse 21, again you see the preeminence of Christ in the deepest heart affections of this great man, this great apostle. He says, verse 21,

21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

But then he comes back to this commitment, this horizontal commitment to the Philippians. He says,

22 But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. 23 But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better;

It's like he can't go three breaths without emphasizing the exaltation of Christ and the preeminence of Christ. Every breath this is coming out of him. It would be much better to be with Christ, and yet this sense of commitment comes through in verse 24,

24 yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.

He says, "It would be better for me, my position would be far enhanced to simply die and go away and be in the presence of Christ. That's so much better than anything else for me." But he says, "I recognize for a time that it's more important in the plan of God for me to stay here in the flesh and be with you. Why? Because I need to minister to you. Why? Because God has purposes in our partnership and purpose for me in this that need to be completed before I move on to that promised glory with Christ." Paul is speaking here to the Philippians is what we're talking about and he says in verse 25,

25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again.

Paul's commitment – this is just, you get a window into the sanctified nature of his soul – he loves Christ, he proclaims Christ, he wants to be with Christ, that he knows is the highest good for him, but he says but even that desire to be with Christ is counterbalanced by the fact that he has a purpose that is not yet completed with the

Philippian church and he says, "I will gladly accept, I will gladly submit, I will gladly defer to the providence of God. I can wait on heaven, even, for your sake. I can wait on heaven for the sake of being here to minister to you to complete the work that the Lord has here for me to do with you." And he expresses it in a way where he says, "I'm glad to do it. I'm glad to continue so that you would progress in the faith; so that your joy would be advanced. Mine can be deferred. I'm happy to be with you and I'm convinced that I will be with you and I'll minister to you and I'll do so gladly with all my heart while the Lord defers my home-going."

Beloved, do you see it? That is what Christian commitment looks like, a surpassing love for Christ; a surpassing heart affection that is rooted in him so much that Paul can't speak full sentences without invoking the name of Christ, his exaltation and his desire to be with him. That's the highest principle of Christian commitment. What you see as you study the book of Philippians is this, is that that does not make a man an island unto himself, it does not make him someone who is only pursuing his own interests as is so pervertedly the pattern in Christian circles today, "What's in it for me? I'm the consumer, give me what I want or I'm out of here." What we need to see is to recognize the spirit of our age and say that's not what the Bible presents as biblical Christianity, selfish pursuit of our own desires. Paul as an apostle had every exalted, every pure motive to say, "I just want to go and be with Christ." And he says, "But do you know what? I can set myself aside for your sake and I'll gladly do it for your progress and joy."

Do you see, beloved, what the nature of a partnership in the Gospel is? It's a partnership of commitment, a partnership where Paul is showing his commitment to the well-being of these people that look to him as their leader, as their apostle, as the appointed representative of Christ, so much so that he would set aside his own interests to go to heaven, to be with them. That gives us a flavor of what partnership in the Gospel looks like, it's a partnership of commitment, so much so, beloved, so much so that we could say this: their deep partnership – oh, hear me out, please hear me out – that deep partnership, that mutual commitment in love to the well-being of one another shaped Paul's motives in his life. He says, "I'm motivated to be with Christ but my commitment to you is such that that can wait. I'll stay for your well-being. I'll stay for your progress in the Gospel until my work in promoting your maturity in Christ is accomplished. I'll stay. I'm not going anywhere," Paul says. "I want to be here for you." And what you find, then, as you look at that opening section of Philippians, he's grateful for them, he's thankful for them, and he goes on and he says, "And I'm committed to you. I'm grateful for you and I am committed to you."

Now how does that fit with the modern practice of people flitting around from church to church, you know, and just serial church attenders? I'll let you sort that out. I'll let you sort that out. My point this morning is simply that a partnership in the Gospel is a partnership of commitment, a partnership that endures tests of time, that endures tests of difficulties, that endures tests of conflict because it's not about me, the Christian says, there is something greater than me. There's something greater than what I want that's at stake. What's at stake is the proclamation of Christ, the exaltation of his glorious being. The proclamation of the Gospel is the surpassing issue here and when that is clear in a

Christian's mind, it filters down and makes him grateful for other Christians who share Christ with him, that share that kind of commitment to Christ, and it filters down and says, "Do you know what? You share Christ with me, we have a common bond in the Spirit, then do you know what? I'm going to give myself to you." That's Paul talking, Paul in the context of departing and being with Christ says, "It can wait for the sake of my love to you." This pulls back the blinds, opens up the window, let's a lot of fresh air in to what we're used to seeing over the years around us. I don't mean just within Truth Community Church but just the whole mindset of the way people approach Christianity today. That's what I'm talking about, a whole spirit and mindset, the consumer mentality, "Give me what I want. If you don't have the programs I want, I'm out. I'll go and find somebody that gives me what I want."

What I want you to see is how contrary that is to the spirit that Paul expresses in Philippians and Paul shows gratitude, he shows commitment to them, now thirdly, we're going to see a third aspect here and it's this: a partnership for the Gospel is a partnership of unity. A partnership of unity. As you read on in chapters 1 and 2, you see that Paul wanted to protect this partnership from developing threats. From developing threats. They were threatened by conflict within, they were threatened by false teaching from without. We'll see the false teaching aspect more next week. But Paul having expressed this gratitude and this sense of commitment now turns a corner, he pivots and he instructs them. He exhorts them. He tells them, "As grateful as I am for you, as committed as I am to you, I want you to know that there is room for growth and improvement in you." That is a legitimate part of pastoral ministry and pulpit exposition is to call to people's attention that there is room for you to grow and you need to do it, and not simply affirm and never confront. Paul confronts them about a developing threat.

Look at verses 27 through 30 of chapter 1. He says,

27 Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ,

Do you see it again, the Gospel of Christ? Do you see how the Gospel of Christ is at the center of everything that he's saying? He says, "Because the Gospel is preeminent, because Christ is high and exalted, because Christ is the reason that we exist, because our lives are devoted to His glory, because that is the overarching thing, the overarching theme, our overarching affection, our overarching purpose," he says, "in light of that you have to live in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ. Your life is a living response to the Gospel," he says, "and I want your living response to the Gospel to be worthy of our Lord.

Verse 27 he says,

so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit,

Where is there lack in worthiness of the Gospel? Division. Conflict within. It says it's worthy of the Gospel, it says, "conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel." What is it that you want from us, then, Paul? "I want to hear that

standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.

There it is again. It doesn't stop, does it? He says,

28 in no way alarmed by your opponents--which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that too, from God. 29 For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake [His sake, there it is again], 30 experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me.

What were the threats to the partnership? You get an overview here in what follows: internal division and false teachers were threatening the partnership. So Paul is writing to protect that partnership, writing to repair some of the initial damage maybe that has been done; writing to strengthen it, to deepen it so that this partnership that has started so well would continue well for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of Christ. Therefore he says in chapter 2, verse 1, he says, "Therefore." He says, "Therefore in light of the prominence of the Gospel, in light of our commitment to one another, in light of the fact that we have surpassing eternal reasons for our existence, therefore in light of all of that, here is what I want from you," he says.

1 Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, 2 make my joy complete [return the partnership commitment to me by doing this] by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.

He says, "Beloved, the purpose of a Gospel partnership can only be advanced in unity." He says, "Unity is the nature of a defining Gospel partnership. I know there's conflict here," and so he calls them to unity and he gives them negative and positive instruction. We'll go through this really quickly, mindful of the fact that we're going to pick this up in weeks to come. He says,

3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; 4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Why, you might ask, this emphasis on unity? It's not unity – I'm going to make a pretty bold statement here – it's not unity just for the sake of unity, it's not just so that horizontally when we get together we can enjoy each other and not have to have that sinking feeling in the pit of our stomach, "Oh no, there's a problem here." It's not about

that at all. It's incidental. The purpose of the unity that he's calling them to is to protect the partnership in the Gospel. The Gospel will be clouded, the purposes will be hindered, humanly speaking, if the body of believers is fractured and at conflict with one another. So he says, "There must be unity for this greater sense of the greater progress of the Gospel because it's a partnership in advance of the Gospel and unity is necessary for the advance of the Gospel," he says. That's why he's making this emphasis.

Then he goes on and he illustrates what that attitude looks like as he points to the example of Christ.

5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. 8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Do you know where this self-sacrificial attitude that Paul had toward his own life, setting aside his own interests for the sake of the Philippians, do you know where it came from? It wasn't natural to Paul. Remember, Paul was a persecutor who wanted to kill Christians early on. No, this sacrificial attitude, laying aside self for the sake of others, comes from Christ himself. He says, "What I'm calling you to is the very example that Christ exhibited when He came to earth from heaven in order to give Himself as a sacrifice for sin. Christ set aside His prominence in heaven, set aside the glories of heaven to come down. Christ was content to let heaven wait for the sake of His people. In like manner," Paul says, "I'm willing for heaven to wait too for the sake of you people." And you start to get a flavor, you start to get a taste of what true Christian life looks like, what the true spirit of Christians toward one another is, it's this attitude of a complete abandonment of what your own self-interests are for the sake and the betterment of the fellow believers that are around you. Paul says Christ had that attitude.

Verse 9,

9 For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

He has given them the perfect illustration of the attitude that he calls them to. If Christ did this for us, how much more do we manifest a similar attitude, we mirror an approach to life that reflects what Christ did for us?

Then he goes and he applies it in verse 12, he says,

12 So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

And his point there is a point about unity, as you see in what he says next in verse 14 when he says,

14 Do all things without grumbling or disputing; 15 so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world,

And he goes on. Beloved, Paul said that this attitude of unity amongst believers is light in a crooked and perverse world. He says this attitude comes from the very fountain-source of our salvation, it comes from Christ himself, and therefore it is to spill out, it is to spread out into everything that his body is and represents, and he says as you do that, that is the antidote, that is the testimony to a crooked and perverse generation. Beloved, beloved, we live now in a crooked and perverse generation, this unity of which Paul speaks is the way that we testify.

Do you know what that means? That means that our interrelationships with one another within a local church are really really important. It's not so important that you or I get exactly what we want at any particular time in any particular situation in the body life of Christ, what matters is this surpassing prevalence of Christ, and what matters is that there would be a spirit of gratitude and commitment and unity that precedes and supersedes in a personal consideration. Paul says, "Don't merely look out for your own personal interests, look out for the interest of others." That's the spirit of true Christianity. That's the spirit that marks a true local church is the spirit of looking upward to Christ, looking outward to fellow believers, not directed to anyone in here, just at the spirit of our age. Not asking first, "What's in it for me? What's here for me?" That's the entirely wrong way to pursue a church. That's entirely the wrong spirit to bring to a local body, "What's in it for me?" The surpassing question is, "Is Christ proclaimed in this place? It is? He is? I should say, Christ is proclaimed here? Well, let me give of myself to this place because there is a greater purpose at stake than what I personally want."

That's the spirit of true Christianity. A true Christian prioritizes in his heart affections Christ, the proclamation of Christ, and looks for a place where he can contribute to that greater goal and with gratitude for the fellow believers that God brings around with a spirit of commitment to that, with a spirit and commitment to unity in that, all looking toward the greater proclamation of Christ and how that falls out to me is somewhat incidental in the process. So incidental to Paul he says, "I can wait going to heaven for the sake of this."

He finishes in chapter 2 pointing to Timothy and pointing to Epaphroditus, they are men the Philippians knew, who were human illustrations of this. Timothy was one, verse 20, who was genuinely concerned for their welfare. You see it there in Timothy. He said,

20 ... I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare.

But Timothy is. "Do you know what Timothy is?" Paul says to the Philippians, "Do you know what this man that you know is? He's an example of this kind of commitment, this kind of unity, this kind of gratitude. He's committed to you." And apparently even in Paul's day it was a pretty rare thing to find. He says, "I don't have anyone else like him." He says, "But you look at Timothy and see a human illustration of these things."

Verse 21, again you see how this just dominates his thought. Verse 21,

21 For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus.

He says, "They're all seeking after their own interests, that's why I don't have anyone else like him. But Timothy is different. Timothy, what distinguished him was he was genuinely concerned for your welfare." You know, the truth of the matter is, I think that if you go to most churches in America and if you made that the standard of people saying, "You know, if you're not concerned for the welfare of fellow Christians here, I would ask you to leave." I'm just speaking hypothetically. I'm not saying anything here within our local body, I'm just making a spiritual point that I think is incontestable. If that became the standard, churches would be emptied because the very nature of the philosophy of ministry that attracts them appeals to their selfish interests. Nothing could be more contrary to what the nature of the true church should be than that perverted motivation for coming together. "We've got stuff for you. You should see our coffee bar." No one comes to the truth through the coffee bar, do they? We don't have a coffee bar, for those of you that are never with us in person. Do you know what? I'll tell you the truth, that's by design for precisely this reason. I don't want anyone coming for the coffee. I don't want anyone coming for selfish reasons. We want to proclaim Christ. We want to do so in a spirit of unity. We want to do it in a spirit of genuine love and concern for each other, not asking first, "What's in it for me?"

Timothy had that spirit. Paul says, verse 22,

22 But you know of his proven worth, that he served with me in the furtherance of the gospel

You see it there again, don't you? How that's dominating his thought. "He served with me in the furtherance of the Gospel like a child serving his father. I hope I can send him back to you."

Verse 24,

24 and I trust in the Lord that I myself also will be coming shortly.

He said, "I can't wait to get back to you. Right now these Romans aren't letting me go but I hope I can come back because I'm committed to you."

Then he closes in verse 25, closes chapter 2, a chapter that didn't exist until after 1,200 years later. He says,

25 But I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger and minister to my need; 26 because he was longing for you all and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick. 27 For indeed he was sick to the point of death, but God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, so that I would not have sorrow upon sorrow.

Stay with me as I finish reading this. He says,

28 Therefore I have sent him all the more eagerly so that when you see him again you may rejoice and I may be less concerned about you.

"I'm so concerned. Do you know why I'm concerned? Because I'm committed to you. I'm concerned about your well-being," he says, "and so I'm sending Epaphroditus. I know if Epaphroditus gets there, things will be better for you."

Verse 29,

29 Receive him then in the Lord with all joy, and hold men like him in high regard;

Why? Why hold a man like Epaphroditus in high regard?

30 because he came close to death for the work of Christ

He nearly died for his commitment to the surpassing glory of Christ, because he's a true partner in the Gospel. That's why you hold him in high regard. He's a man like that. He said it wasn't just vertical, verse 30,

30 ... he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me.

He shares this commitment, this horizontal commitment in the body, this vertical commitment to Christ.

What does it mean to be partners in the Gospel? What are we looking to cultivate here at Truth Community Church? What more importantly, what does Scripture point us to? A Gospel partnership that recognizes the preeminence of Christ as the only priority that

ultimately matters. It's a partnership of gratitude, grateful for one another. I'm grateful for those of you that share in the work in the ministry, the love of Christ here within this local body. How could I be anything less grateful for your love, your kindness to Christ, to me, to my family, to each other? A partnership of commitment.

You know, in a few weeks we'll have another membership class. I need to talk more about membership commitment, I think, than perhaps haven't emphasized that quite enough. But a commitment, this is a commitment to one another. Not just passing through. We're here for each other, right? Right, Lenny?

We're here for each other. And a commitment in unity. When you're rooted in that desire for the exaltation of Christ, when you share in the Holy Spirit together, you share in that commitment of gratitude toward one another, unity should be the result and where it's not, it needs to be addressed and not allowed to fester and become a problem that would hinder the progress of the Gospel. Partners in the Gospel, gathered together around the proclamation of Christ from God's word. Beloved, it is going to be our joy together in the coming months to advance that here at Truth Community as we study Philippians together.

Let's bow together in prayer.

Dear God, thank you for the surpassing excellence of Christ. There is no one greater, there is no greater work, there is no greater person anywhere in the universe and, Lord Jesus, we bow before You and give our deepest heart allegiance to You. We love You. We praise You. We thank You for Your great self-sacrificing work on our behalf. We pray that we might become as a church the kind of partners for the Gospel that Paul was cultivating when he wrote this letter to the Philippians. Father, help us to grow in our gratitude for Christ and for each other, our commitment to Christ and to each other, our unity. We already have unity in Christ, unity in the Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, O God. Help us now to manifest it even more, even better in the days to come in our relationships with each other. Father, help us to be quick to put aside personal offenses, personal disappointments, personal agendas for the sake of a greater priority, the priority of Christ, the priority of the Gospel as we live and work in unity together for the sake of the proclamation of that great exalted name, the name of our Lord Jesus in whom we pray. Amen.

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