

Partakers of Grace

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This week I had a last minute cancellation in my counseling schedule and what I often do in a situation like that is to use the unexpected time to check in and pray with some of the members of our church who are going through especially difficult times. That's one of the many delightful privileges of being a pastor, just listening to the way God is sustaining his people in the midst of trial and uncertainty and then being able to cry out to him together for additional grace and strength. It's so encouraging. It's so meaningful.

If you had been with us on some of those calls this week, one of the repetitive phrases you would have heard would have been things like this, "Oh well, my deacon has already been organizing meals for our family." Or, "Our ABF is just all over caring for us right now." Or, "My small group or some other friend from the church has really been serving us through this time." It was just a series of examples of the Lord demonstrating his love and his concern for his people through the lives of the brothers and sisters in Christ in the church. Though I'm sure we fall from time to time, we don't always get it done, there are dozens and dozens of examples week in and week out of the power and the effectiveness of the body of Christ caring for one another.

You know, the Scripture has many different descriptions and metaphors to describe the church. One I just alluded to, the issue of us being the body of Christ, taught in places like 1 Corinthians 12:12, "For even as the body," and on the front end of this text it's talking about the physical body. "For even as the body is one and yet has many members," many parts, "and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body," they all go with you together, "so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks," it doesn't matter, "whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." What I was hearing Monday night was living testimony to the effectiveness of Christ's body and it gave me reason to rejoice.

Another description is this marvelous one in 1 Timothy 3:15, "I write so that you," Paul said, "will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God." You see, the body of Christ and the household or the household of God, "which is the church of the living God, the pillar and the support of the truth." So if anybody wonders what the church is and why it's so valuable and important, words like that really help, huh? We're

the body of Christ. We're the household of the family of God. We're the church of the living God. We are the pillar and the support of the truth.

Now, here's another phrase I would encourage you to consider: it's also that we're partakers of grace. Partakers of grace. When you stop and think about it, especially in light of our annual theme, that's one of the most precious phrases that could possibly be used of a group of people. Who are we? We are partakers of grace. That too explains what I was hearing on the phone the other night.

With that in mind, please open your Bible this morning to Philippians 1. The book of Philippians 1. That's on page 154 of the back section of the Bible under the chair in front of you.

As I alluded to a moment ago, our annual theme this year is "Finding Grace." That's what we're all about, based on great verses like this one in Hebrews 4:16, "Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace," that's what Jesus sits on, a throne of grace. Why? "So that we may receive mercy and," here it is, "find grace to help in time of need." So that's what we've been trying to do in all sorts of ways all year long so we started by having a theology of grace the first couple of months of the year. Then we traced that theme through the life of Christ. Then we thought about grace for the family. Most recently we've been in the book of Genesis studying grace in the lives of the patriarchs from Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph. Well, this morning, we're going to begin a brand new study in the book of Philippians. It's part of our fall kick-off and we plan to go through this great book verse-by-verse in the next couple of months thinking about what it means for us to be partakers of grace. Partakers of grace.

Now, I recognize that there is a broad diversity among the people in our congregation when it comes to the matter of Bible knowledge, Bible background, I personally believe that's a sign of health. We need people around here who are older, who have been studying and applying Scripture for a long, long time, right? But if that group is doing our job properly, there will always be folks around here who have just come to Christ and are just at the beginning stages of their journey of learning God's word. Well, think about that, either side of the paradigm that you're on, if you're a person who studied this book before, aren't you glad the Bible is eternally fresh? It really is alive and it doesn't matter how many times you've studied it, there's always something to be gained from going through it again.

Now, if you're on the newer side of the equation, this is an excellent book just to help you get started at studying Scripture and here's my challenge to all of us, wherever you are: I would encourage you to make it your goal in the next couple of months to take significant steps forward in having this book down pat. You're going to own Philippians. In other words, by the end of the study you'll know who wrote it; you'll know when it was written; why; the key questions; the key themes. And not just from the perspective of knowing the content, although that is where the process starts, but not just there, also having become more skilled at applying its message to your heart and life and even being in a better position to helping somebody else apply it to their lives as well.

Well, how do we get there? That's what you want to know now, don't you? You're saying, "I hope Pastor Viars tells us how to get there." Well, thanks for asking. Here's a series of steps I would encourage us all to take. 1. Read this book once a week for the duration of the series and it would be especially good if you could do that from time-to-time at one sitting. Don't fuss. It will probably take 15-20 minutes. Some of you spend more time on Goofbook than that and so, just reading through the...did I get that wrong? Sometimes I do. I would also encourage you to read it from various versions of the Bible. That will just help you have a working understanding of the content of the book.

Then, secondly, I want to encourage you right now, just decide you're going to attend church as frequently as your schedule allows this fall. You see, you can't be a partaker without partaking, huh? Isn't that insightful? I thought that one up myself. And we're going to see a lot of reasons why that is so valuable, why it is so important even in our study this morning but I just want to encourage you to decide right now in your heart. Make some decisions and one of them is I would encourage you to say, "We're going to make being in the Lord's house a priority this fall." And on those Sundays when you have to be away, consider downloading the message and staying up with the study because it is going to be sequential, verse-by-verse throughout this book.

Thirdly, I want to encourage you to write key verses out on index cards. I really believe this. And review them every day. For many of us, some of our favorite and most important verses from all the Bible are found right here in the book of Philippians.

Then, fourth, I want to encourage you to commit as many key verses to memory as possible. Memorizing verses from your Bible. Here's what the Psalmist said about that, "Your word I have treasured in my heart." Some of us learned this in the old King James. Do you remember? "Thy word have I," in fact, there's a song that goes along with it. It's hard for me not to just break out in song right now. "Your word have I hidde in my heart." Why? "So that I might not sin against you." You could make that a family project. We're going to learn a verse from the book of Philippians every week or every night or every meal, whatever you think is appropriate for your family but memorize verses from this book.

Also, fifth, look for as many practical ways to apply the principles from the book to everyday life situations as possible. Scripture really has a use-it-or-lose-it characteristic to it. Often the verses you remember the best are the ones you use the most and the good news is that there are very practical principles here that you will find applicable to relationships in your family, at your work, in your neighborhood, etc.

Then lastly I want to encourage you to ask the Lord for opportunities to sharpen your skills in helping others apply these principles to the challenges that they're facing as well.

Now, with that in mind, let me take my brand new, large print Bible. Yep, I'm going to start reading it accurately and read the first verses from Philippians 1.

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: 2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, 4 always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, 5 in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now.

Are you thinking about what this book would have sounded like to the church at Philippi knowing it's coming from one of their missionaries in prison?

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. 7 For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart,

Don't you love that?

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.

I wonder what that means?

8 For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. 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.

Now I realize especially if you're just getting new to studying the Bible you might say, "You know, I feel like I just landed in the middle of a discussion between two people I really don't know or understand." Okay, let's back up for a minute. Here's a few key introductory ideas about this book just to be sure that we're all on the same page together. One is the Apostle Paul had a marvelous relationship with this church. He had the opportunity to start it on the second missionary journey. You may recall this part of the book of Acts, Acts 16:14, "A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart," don't you love that? "The Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay.' And she prevailed upon us." You have to love the phrase "the Lord opened her heart."

Later in that same chapter, you read about Paul and Silas being beaten and imprisoned for their faith and that night they were, what? Praying and singing hymns and there was an earthquake so the very foundation of the prison was shaken and the doors were opened and the chain unfastened and the jailer came in fearing for his life if the prisoners escaped and Paul said, "Don't harm yourself. We're all here just praying. Just praying." Just

singing together. And the Scripture tells us, "and after he brought them out, he said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?'" You see, all that's what happened at the founding of the church at Philippi.

Now, we also know this historically that the Philippian church had made a generous contribution to help the needy Christians at Jerusalem. Now, think about that: between the verses I just read when the church was founded and when the book of Philippians is being written, this group of people had heard about some Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ who were facing a famine and they, as part of the churches of Macedonia, Philippi is there, they took up a love offering for their brothers and sisters in Christ who were Jewish. Who were Jewish. They also faithfully supported Paul in his ongoing church planting efforts. We're going to see a lot of references to their generosity throughout our study of this book.

Also, the church learned of Paul's first imprisonment and they were concerned for his health and well-being so they took a special offering for him and they sent it with a man from the church named Epaphroditus. While on that journey, Epaphroditus became gravely ill so they took up the love offering, they're in Macedonia which, by the way, is southeast of Albania, the country I've been to a couple of times this year. So southeast of there in Macedonia is where Philippi was. Paul is in Rome in jail so they heard about him and they of their own initiative took up a love offering to care for him. They sent it with this man named Epaphroditus who became ill along the way. During that time, Paul wrote four prison epistles. Some of our favorite books in the Bible, they weren't written from a hot tub, they were written from the jailhouse: Ephesians and Colossians. Nothing against hot tubs, by the way. Philippians and Philemon.

So Paul's purpose in writing was five-fold: 1. To express in writing his thanks for the Philippians' financial gift. So this is a missionary thank you letter in certain ways. And to explain why he is sending Epaphroditus back. The church assumed Epaphroditus would carry the gift and then stay and minister to Paul and they may have thought Epaphroditus failed by not doing that so Paul is explaining why. Also just to inform them, "Here's what's going on. Yeah, I'm in prison but don't worry about that because God's up to a great work," so he wanted them to understand that and then to exhort them to unity. You always have to do that in the church. In fact, we're going to get to chapter 4 eventually. There are a couple of ladies fussing in the church house. They're going to get called on by name before this. Imagine that being read in church. Then to warn them against false teachers as well. So it's a short book but it's packed with important and potentially life changing truth.

This morning we're going to focus on the first 11 verses which actually contain the title of our series, "Partakers of Grace." You probably noticed that and with the time we have remaining, let's think about four ways God's grace impacts the church of Jesus Christ. What is this to do to us? Well, first of all, grace levels the playing field. That's what happens. Grace levels the playing field. Think about some of the kinds of things that people in our culture are currently fighting about. We have a presidential contender who set off a firestorm with a series of demeaning comments he's made to and about women.

So we've got the men fighting the women. We have terrible racial unrest again in Ferguson, Missouri and other places around our country so there is all sorts of racial tension. People are fighting about economic disparity and educational philosophy and who is responsible for the I-65 bridge problem. Could I get an amen on that?

Well, contrast that to the church. The church is characterized by peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Well, how could that happen? It's because grace levels the playing field. So, you see, arguments and fights often happen by people trying to demonstrate their superiority. You see, grace levels the playing field. Well, how so? Well, because of our common stand in Christ. How does Paul address each and every member of this church in verse 1? He says, "I am writing to the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi." Now, I realize that might need some clarification. The word "saint" in the Bible simply means "saved one." The way the word is sometimes used in culture to refer to a so-called higher class of select Christians, that's different than the way it is ever used in the Bible. What that means is: every person in the church who has had a definite time in his or her life where they acknowledge their sin and then trusted Christ as Savior and Lord. Remember the question the Philippian jailer asked: what must I do to be saved? The answer is: admit your need and then run to the cross and place your faith in the finished work of Christ. Well, every person in the church who has done that is on equal footing regarding their stand before God. They each had to have their sin forgiven. They each were now clothed equally and fully in the righteousness of Christ.

Do you remember the third verse of this old hymn, "Rock of Ages"? "Nothing in my hand I bring," so I don't walk into the church house like I'm all that and a bag of chips. "Look how rich I am. Look how beautiful I am. Look how popular I am." Seriously? "Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to Thy cross I cling. Naked, come to Thee for dress." Forget anything that I would call righteousness on my own. "Naked, come to Thee for dress, Helpless, look to Thee for grace. Foul, I to the fountain fly, Wash me, Savior, or I die." You see, that's the only true entry point to the church of Jesus Christ. You have to admit your need for grace and you have to partake of it through the finished work of Christ and when you do that, you're a saint. Do you realize that? Every person in the church who has trusted Christ as Savior and Lord is a saint on equal footing. Husbands, you might want to try that with your honey this afternoon. "Babe, just for the sake of theological accuracy, I'd appreciate it if you'd start referring to me as Saint Dustin or Saint Fred or Saint Whatever. It's biblical, honey. It's biblical." You might want to do that. You might not want to do that but I'll just leave that to your wise discretion.

You see, because of our common stand in Christ, that levels the playing field also, because of the gracious relationship between genders. I think it's hard for many of us to understand how the way the church elevated and emphasized women was so contrary to the culture of the day. That was true of the life of Christ. It was true of the ministry of Paul. Who was the first convert in Philippi? Lydia, a godly woman. It's a very important aspect of the very founding of the Philippian church, so much so that Paul said this to the Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Greek." That's an incredible statement. "There is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female." Do you see the level playing field? "For you are all one in Christ Jesus." Now that doesn't mean we're complete

egalitarians if by that you mean there are no differences between men and women but the beauty of Christianity is it's possible to be different yet equal in value and equal in importance and that brings peace between the genders in the church because we are joint partakers of grace.

Also by drawing different ethnic groups together. I mentioned that love offering the Philippians had participated in several years before this book was written. It was sovereignly used of God to draw Jews and Gentiles together in the church. Philippi was in ancient Macedonia and Paul spoke about them in this offering when he said this to the Corinthians, he said, "Now, brethren," hear this, "we wish to make known to you the grace of God," there it is, "which has been given in the churches of Macedonia." Are you with me? That includes Philippi. "That in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints," in this case, Jewish persons, "and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God." That's the kind of sacrificial love you can have for people of different ethnicities if you've been a partaker of grace.

Also this: even between leaders and other members of the church. How did Paul describe himself and Timothy in this book? Paul and Timothy, what? Mr. Big Britches? No, bondservants of Christ Jesus. I'm saying that the playing field has been leveled by everyone's need of grace. They all had to, they all have to be partakers of grace resulting in peace and harmony and unity in the body. Grace to you and peace. By the way, exegetically the order of those words is crucial. It's not grace and peace to you, it's grace to you and peace. Here's what that means: friend, you can't have the peace without being a partaker of the grace. Can I just pause and ask you: has there been a definite time in your life where you admitted your sin and you cried out to God for grace through the shed blood of his Son? Has there? And there are hundreds and hundreds of reasons to do that but one of them is because we'd love to have you in the family. There is always room for another partaker of grace.

Now, secondly we see from this text that grace makes us thankful for one another. Is that true of you? Are you thankful for your brothers and sisters in Christ in your church or are you just sitting around grumping about them? God makes us thankful for one another. That's the way Paul begins this discussion, not by grumping about his circumstances. "Let me tell you how bad I've got it." Or by picking something out about them he doesn't like. "Let me tell you what honks me off about you." But, here you go, he has disciplined his mind to cultivate the habit of thanksgiving. Think about that mind of yours for just a minute. He has disciplined his mind to cultivate the habit of thanksgiving. That ought to be true of brothers and sisters in the church as we pray for one another with, what? With thanksgiving. "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you." Well, here's a question. You came here to be pastored a little bit today, huh? Didn't you? Here's a question: how much time did you spend last week in prayer thanking God for your brothers and sisters in Christ? And is it possible for us to take grace for granted and to take one another for granted? You might say, "How often am I supposed to do that?" Thanks for asking. Here

you go: always would be nice. That is the way verse 4 begins, "always." So think about it: what is Paul doing while he's chained to these Roman guards? He's praying and thanking God for his brothers and sisters in Christ. Can you imagine these guards? "How many more hours do I have on this shift? I've got to hear about this man thanking God for this person and that person and this person and that person." That's right. With joy. With joy. Do you see the mental...he's in prison. Do you see the mental discipline here? "Always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all." You see, grace does that. Being a partaker of grace does that. Would we all say that's a beautiful thing? That's a beautiful thing. You could also say this: one of the ways you can tell if you understand and appreciate being a partaker of God's grace is the thankful and joyful way you consistently think about and talk about and speak to and pray for your brothers and sisters in Christ, your fellow partakers.

Now, let's push the argument one step further, "in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now." So we're thankful, yeah, we're thankful for one another. Why? Well, because participating in the Gospel of Jesus Christ is our highest treasure. Then I would encourage you to join us next Saturday morning for the first Men of Faith of this fall season. We're going to be talking about what it means to find your joy in Christ, to cultivate a Gospel centered heart and life. It isn't trying to find one's joy in all the wrong places. You see, that's what was happening the other night as I made those ministry calls and heard report after report of our church members having their needs met by brothers and sisters in the body. So many opportunities for me just to step back and say, "Look at people participating in the Gospel." Grace did that in a way that generates relational depth. You see, this isn't some kind of a sterile annual report. It's not a perfunctory missionary letter that he has to crank out because another month has gone by. Paul says, "For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because," here it is, "I have you in my heart." Think about that: I have you in my heart. I'm joyfully and I'm thankfully praying for you while being chained to these guards because I have you in my heart.

"For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus." Think about all the time and energy wasted on endless arguments on Facebook and at the office and in all sorts of social settings, all the animosity and relational distance that creates often because of pride and selfishness. Well, what happens if you turn all that around having one another in our hearts? Longing for one another with the affection of Jesus Christ because that's what happens to partakers of grace.

Here's a question: what step or steps would the Lord want you to take this fall to move in this direction in our church family? This is between you and the Lord ultimately but I hope you're thinking right now about what is your fall going to be like and as you hear about this kind of relational depth that Paul had with this church family, I assume you're letting the word of God help you evaluate yours. What step do you need to take to be more connected? For some, it's a matter of just jumping into this Intro to Faith class. It's four subsequent Wednesday nights, four consecutive Wednesday nights starting this Wednesday night. If you don't know Christ, it's a great opportunity to come and get your questions answered. If you have been coming for a period of time defined as five minutes

or longer, I would encourage you to jump into that class and get your questions answered about our church but maybe, seriously, maybe that's your next step into being a partaker of grace. Maybe that's your next step into relational authenticity, having your brothers and sisters in your heart. Maybe for you it's layering on an adult Bible fellowship or a small group. Maybe it's jumping into one of these Faith Community Institute classes. Maybe it's, "Do you know what? I'm going to start coming to that church family night once a month and just seeing what that's all about and being part of the family." We could do all sorts of things to try to facilitate that from our perspective. At some point, you have to partake. True that? At some point, you have to do what God wants you to do in order to be an active partaker of grace.

So what impact is grace intended to have on the church of Jesus Christ? Well, to level the playing field, we saw that. And where we're thankful for one another and developing genuine community relational depth. Then there's this: grace gives us a common and compelling purpose. Paul makes it clear we've been called to accomplish something together. Did you notice the argument of the text? Like in verse 5, "in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now." Then again, similarly in verse 7, "since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me." You see, these delightful authentic relationships free us up. We're not wasting our time fussing at each other. It frees us up to passionately live and proclaim the good news of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ together.

Now, here's a question, what's said in verse 7: in what sense were they partakers of grace in Paul's imprisonment? Well, here's one answer: a willingness to sacrifice and suffer together. In fact, look at the end of the chapter for just a minute. Let's peek ahead where Paul says this, "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing," now hear this, "the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me." What's that mean? And we can't be dogmatic about this but some writers believe that there were members of the church imprisoned for their faith in Philippi at the same time Paul was imprisoned for his faith in Rome and the point is all God's people love the Gospel so much that they're willing to pay whatever price is necessary for its proclamation. You see, being a partaker of grace doesn't make us some passive mutual admiration society.

We're on a mission together and we count it a great privilege to be part of the team. For example, when we come together on church family night and we hear these marvelous testimonies of men and women who have come to Christ, I hope one of our responses would be, "There's another win for the team. There's another win for the team." Of course, to the glory of God but what a great privilege it is to participate in the proclamation of the Gospel together.

There's also an ability to both proclaim and defend the Gospel. You saw that in the text, didn't you? In the defense and confirmation. Now, you might say, "And that's why we have pastors." Wrong. Wrong. This is written to church members. Where church members have been equipped so they are able to proclaim the Gospel in their sphere of influence. Church members are prepared to be able to defend the Gospel in their sphere

of influence and let's just think about this culturally. There is a growing animosity to the things of God in this culture. Is that a fact? Would that be hard to prove? There is a growing animus toward people who believe the word of God and now is not the time to slink down in our corporate seats and hope no one notices that we love God and his word and that may be another reason why you ought to jump into one of these classes on Wednesday nights. There are a number of them that are just intended to help you grow deeper in your theological understanding of the word. You see, our job as pastors is to equip you to do the work of the ministry. Your job is what? Is to want to be equipped. It's to want to be equipped and to make yourself available for equipping opportunities.

There's also this: there's a desire to participate financially. As we said at the beginning, this letter is in part a thank you note from a very appreciative missionary. We're going to see later in the book, he says things like, "You yourselves know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the Gospel after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone, for even in Thessalonika you sent a gift more than once for my needs." You see, even the way they handled their finances showed they wanted to be participants in the proclamation of the Gospel and I realize you might say, "Boy, Pastor Viars, even you mentioning finances, that is such a touchy place in my life. It's such a touchy place in my family. We're arguing and fussing and just constantly feeling behind." I would encourage you to run, not walk, to the registration table that talks about taking Financial Peace university. That is a great FCI class and it can really help you in that particular area of your life.

Now, push the pause button on this because I need to talk to you specifically about this for a moment and I just need to start this conversation. Lord willing, we'll talk a lot more specifically next Sunday but where are we as a church? You probably remember several months ago a study came out saying that fewer Americans than ever were identifying themselves as Christians. Do you remember that? And some of the cultural liberals pounced on that, writing articles like one young woman who chose the title, "Ding-dong, the Church is Dead," which illustrates the growing level of animus when a writer would compare God's people with the Wicked Witch of the West. But when you drill down into those stats, here's what you found: yes, fewer people in our country are identifying themselves as Christians and attendance is significantly less at many liberal churches and Catholic churches and I'm not beating on my breast about that. I'm just telling you that's what the stats indicated while interestingly enough, evangelical churches like ours, churches that believe the Bible, that proclaim the Gospel, are holding our own or if there's any reduction, it's relatively small. There are a lot of implications of that, many more than time allows me to discuss this morning but here's what we're seeing here: we've not been growing numerically at the same rate the past couple of years as we did in the past and there is at least a legitimate reason to question what the future is going to be like in this culture for any Bible believing church. It's a legitimate question: is the next generation going to be willing to accept the pressure that comes from being part of a church that believes and practices all of God's word so we at least need to put that on the table. Now, at the same time, simultaneously, we have received some very generous special gifts over the last 12 months and our overall giving is up 12% compared to the same period of time last year. Here's what that means. You say, "Okay, synthesize that."

Several of our ministry divisions have rather sizeable contingency funds right now. You put all that together and we would be talking millions of dollars.

So I went to our pastors and deacons in June and I said, "Here's the stats, guys. Here's what's going on culturally. Here's where we are financially. How should we interpret this? We just finished our senior living community which was an essential aspect of our five year ministry plan. We've got 3 ½ years left in this plan. What should we do now? Should we just hunker down and prepare ourselves for lean years in the future? Or should we carefully but aggressively invest a portion of our reserves in ministry development as if Jesus intends to continue to draw men and women to himself through the proclamation of the Gospel? Does he intend to build the church and if anything else, do we need to push harder on the gas pedal given the conditions in our world, not hunker down as if our job is done?" And your elected leaders to a person said, "We've to to get after it. More than ever before." We dare not ever act as if Jesus can't put his product on the market in this day and age.

So if you've been wondering, "What's the staff been doing this summer?" Well, we've been laying out how we believe we can accomplish eight more exciting major initiatives here and around the world over the final 3 ½ years of our current five year ministry plan along with all the supporting business and development plans to make that happen. So I would appreciate your prayers as we now come together as a group of pastors and deacons this Thursday night and finalize those decisions and I'm looking forward to spending some time next Sunday talking with you about those specific plans. But here's the main point, here's why I even raised that this morning in this text: there is absolutely no way we could have completed that senior living community and certainly there is no way we could contemplate the kind of initiatives we're looking at next were it not for the Philippian like faithful giving of the people of our church and I say very little about money around here but the statistics scream a message. The average person here is very serious about making whatever sacrifices necessary to participate in the proclamation of the Gospel here and around the world. Those are the kind of people you ought to have in your heart. Those are the kind of people you ought to faithfully, thankfully pray for. That too is evidence of God's grace.

Now, let me just conclude by also saying this: grace allows us to live with joyful anticipation that God will continue his work among us. Isn't that great news? "I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it," and our love can abound still more. Sure, we saw some great things this week in our Mercy Ministry. We're going to pray that our love would abound even more this fall and that our lives would be characterized by growing sincerity. Do you see that in the text? In order to be sincere. And on purpose I wanted us to conclude here. Here's why: that word means focused, unified, on task, on message. So what are we going to be about this fall? Partakers of grace have all sorts of things they don't spend their time on. They don't spend their energy on, they don't spend their words on, they don't spend their Facebook posts on, they don't spend their money on because it doesn't advance the Gospel. Like Jesus said, "Don't store for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven." Let's be

sure as we start this fall that we're all placing our treasure in being partakers and proclaimers of the Gospel.

Let's stand together for prayer, shall we?

Father in heaven, thank you for your grace. Thank you that you've made it possible that people like us could partake of it. And Lord, I pray that you would allow this passage to have the kind of valuative effect on each one of us that you intended and I pray that your Spirit would help us to continue to think about what specific steps would we need to walk out in the coming days in order to grow in this matter of being a partaker of grace. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.