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# PHILIPPIANS

## LESSONS IN PARTNERSHIP

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It was a miraculous demonstration of God’s sovereign grace. The Apostle Paul arrived in the city of Philippi and went to a place of prayer on the bank of a river, where he began to proclaim the gospel to a group of women gathered there. One of these was a businesswoman named Lydia, and we are told that she was a seller of purple goods—the equivalent of Armani or Gucci in that culture. As she heard the good news of the crucified and risen Savior, the Lord opened her heart to receive the gospel. Immediately following her conversion and baptism, she invited Paul and his traveling partners to stay at her house (Acts 16:1-15).

What we observe in this story is ground zero for the Philippian church plant.

As they met in Lydia’s home, the church began to grow even as Paul left to continue his expanding mission to the Gentiles. Though Paul was absent from this church personally, there remained an affectionate partnership which had been forged in the midst of church planting. Thankfully, we get a front row seat to this partnership because we have his letter to the Philippians given to us by God in holy Scripture.

We must understand that the word “partnership” in Philippians is not just a static connection; it speaks of active participation in relationship—participation for the good of the church of Christ, the advance of the gospel, and the glory of God. This letter is a gift because it contains a treasure trove of meaningful lessons in what healthy, biblical partnership in the gospel looks like both within the Philippian church and extra-locally.

### ***Partnership is Rooted in the Gospel***

Throughout this letter, Paul points them again and again to the fellowship that they share in Christ because of the grace of God. He greets them with a blessing that they would experience grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:2). He goes on to remind them that their partnership is rooted in the gospel as they are together partakers of the grace of God (1:5, 7) sharing fellowship in and through the Spirit of God (2:1). Gordon Fee writes: “What is unique to Paul’s relationship with the Philippians is that their ‘partnership’ with him was not so much ‘one on one,’ as it were, but a *three-way bond*—between him, them, and Christ (and the gospel).”<sup>1</sup>

We are reminded that our partnership together within our local church and in extra-local partnership in Sovereign Grace Churches is not a pragmatic strategy or a club for like-minded people. It is nothing less than fellowship and participation in Christ, because of his finished work, and is therefore a thing of wonder—not to be taken for granted. We share an unbreakable bond, created by God, that unites us together by his grace, and our partnership gives expression to this through our active participation in each other’s lives.

### ***Partnership is Marked by Gratitude, Joy, and Affection***

Paul overflows with joy-filled thanksgiving and love as he writes this letter. When he remembers their partnership, his heart fills with joy and gratitude (1:3-5). He rejoices when he considers their prayers for him, and he longs for them to experience a lifestyle of joy as well (1:25; 3:1; 4:4). Paul does not merely feel this way because of his friendship with them; he loves this church with an affection that is rooted in the glory and reality of Christ’s love for them (1:8). He clearly desires not only to express his love, but also to encourage their love as he points them to Christ and exhorts them toward humble unity (2:1-11; 4:2). It must have been a rich experience for the Philippians when they opened this letter and read it on a Sunday morning, hearing the grateful heart of love that Paul communicated to them.

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1. Gordon Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 444.

God-glorifying partnership shares in the heart exhibited by Paul. When we consider the fellow members of our churches and when we hear about and interact with others in our family of churches, we have much cause for gratitude, joy, and affection. God's grace is actively at work throughout our partnership, and we get to observe the gifts of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit. It is only right that we, like Paul, express our gratefulness, our joy, and our affection to others as a means to encourage them and give glory to God for his amazing and active grace.

### ***Partnership is Nurtured in Prayer***

At the outset of this letter, Paul wants the Philippians to know that he continually holds them up before the Lord in prayer. Every time he remembers this church, his heart moves toward God in thanksgiving (1:3-4), and he provides them with the content of his prayers for these people whom he loves (1:9-11). He's also aware that they are praying for him (1:19), and so we find a mutual concern and care for one another through shared intercession. In all of this, he exhorts them to continue in grateful, persistent prayer so that they will experience the peace of God in their lives and throughout their church (4:6-7).

It is our joy and privilege to also be counted as those who pursue a faithful practice of prayer for our partnership both locally and in Sovereign Grace Churches. Martyn Lloyd-Jones gives us wise counsel when he writes, "Always respond to every impulse to pray...never resist it, never postpone it, never push it aside because you are busy."<sup>2</sup> As we interact with each other and hear updates about our broader partnership, let us commit ourselves to pray for one another. In doing so, we will find that our partnership is nurtured and deepened.

### ***Partnership is Fueled by Sacrificial Generosity***

The Philippians demonstrated their active participation in this partnership through their generous financial support of Paul and the advance of the gospel through his ministry (2:25; 4:14-16). Paul's response to their generous giving

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2. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), 170-171.

was pouring out his life to strengthen their faith and joy in Christ (2:17). Gospel ministry is fueled by this kind of mutual giving and hearts that are eager to give sacrificially and generously.

This kind of generosity is the fruit and effect of the gospel, and it not only multiplies the ministry we share together, but it enriches us all with spiritual blessing (4:17). There is only gain through our sacrificial giving in partnership! We do well to imitate this faithful church as we give generously in our local context and as we also provide for needs across the globe in our family of churches. We can give sacrificially with the expectation that our faithful God “will supply every need of yours according to his riches in Christ Jesus” (4:19).

### ***Partnership is Strengthened by Encouragement***

Again and again, Paul encourages the church through commendation and exhortation. He reminds them of the promises of God and that God will complete the work he has begun in them (1:6). He exhorts them in their conduct, urging them to “let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (1:27). He encourages them to persevere in the faith as he points them to the glorious hope of the resurrection in the day of Christ (3:20-21). Paul gives a master clinic in encouragement.

We ought to reflect Paul’s heart of encouragement for the strengthening of our partnership. Sam Crabtree writes, “We should all desire to be people with a reputation for refreshing those around us.”<sup>3</sup> Encouraging one another with the promises of God and exhorting one another to live faithfully fortifies our souls, strengthens our bond of fellowship, and is vital for strong partnership.

### ***Partnership is Crucial for the Advance of the Gospel***

Beyond our mutual encouragement, healthy partnership is also a means of protecting gospel doctrine and sound theology. The Philippians’ support of Paul was not aimed at mere expansion, but also at doctrinal fidelity. They participated together in “the defense and confirmation of the gospel” (1:7), understanding that protecting and preserving the message of the gospel was

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3. Sam Crabtree, *Practicing Affirmation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 40.

crucial to its advance. Paul exhorted them to hold fast to the word of life and to emulate his example of doctrinal faithfulness because very real enemies of the cross of Christ exist (2:16; 3:17-18).

One of our seven Shared Values is that we are “United in Fellowship, Mission, and Governance.” This means that “our shared governance and mission protects our churches doctrinally and ethically, enabling our individual churches to do far more together than we could ever do separately.” As we together, both locally and extra-locally, treasure sound gospel doctrine, we advance the authentic good news of the risen Christ that is the power of God unto salvation.

### ***Our Message to the World***

Alec Motyer writes of our partnership in Christ:

“It is in him they find their present oneness, which they seek to implement by loving each other as he has loved them and by conforming their emotions to his. He is their message to the world, and their chief prize when this passing world is done.”<sup>4</sup>

Our partnership across the churches of Sovereign Grace is a gift from God, rooted in Christ. Let’s seek to implement this God-given union through loving each other, praying for each other, encouraging each other, and caring for each other as we work together to see the gospel advance throughout this world. We are all making our way to the return of Jesus Christ, when this world will pass away and we will dwell forever in a new heavens and new earth. Let’s make our way together, arm-in-arm, by the grace of God and for the glory of his name.

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4. J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Philippians*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2020), 23.