

Partners & Friends, Part 2

Philippians 1:7-11

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We're continuing our series in Philippians. We're going to continue our look at Paul's introduction to his letter. This morning, we're looking at verses 7 through 11. Now, we're concluding this introduction. So I just have the very creative title of "Friends and Partners, Part 2," the sequel. What we're doing is a continuation of how Paul is writing this letter to people he knows very well, to a people and to a church that he has great affection for. And in this opening paragraph, these opening verses, we see themes of friendship and partnership in Christ and how Paul's affection for them moves him to pray. And so today as we finish this paragraph, we'll look at the content of Paul's prayer.

Now, for context, I'm going to start reading the previous verses, and then verses 7 and following will be on the slide as we focus our text today. This is God's word from the Book of Philippians. Paul writes,

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:

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

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Let us pray.

Father, add to the reading of your word. May your people be encouraged by this prayer prayed in many forms and many ways that's just captured and written down for your church through the ages. And we are grateful for how you have answered this prayer, how you continue to answer this prayer, and how you will remain faithful to do that until you come. We pray these things in Jesus's name. Amen.

Back in 2005, I was graduating college. Or I had graduated college, and I was transitioning to work with the college ministry that I would end up working for a couple years. And I had trucks growing up. Just simple pickup trucks, stick and automatic transmission. I loved my trucks, but my trucks died, both of them. And so I was in need of a new car. I'm leaving home. I've been raising support. I've been growing a team of partners that would support me in this work on this college campus, and I didn't have a car to get there or a car to use. And I began praying. And God answered that prayer in the form of a 1993 Buick LeSabre. I loved that car. It had leather seats, bench seats. I could fit eight college students in that car. It was fun. It drove smooth. It was comfortable. We called it the sword. And I put a cherry on

top by putting kind of an old man fedora in the back window that made me think of my grandpa. I loved that car.

I began to pray for that car out of need, but I prayed for it in secret. I never told anybody that I needed a car. I never told anybody that I was praying for it. And in God's timing, God provided. I had a friend who said, "Hey, my dad is buying a new car. He wants to give you his car." And I was floored. I was overwhelmed with joy. I was overwhelmed with gratitude. I couldn't believe it. And legally and technically, it cost me a dollar. And it was such a blessing to me and my ministry. People made fun of me, which made all the more fun and the affection for each other. I took great pride in that car, actually. It was sad for me to sell it. We called it the sword.

And I bring that up because there was a tangible need that I had, and it shaped my prayers. And that is good, and that is right. I am sure there are things that you have prayed for the things that you need. I mean, our Lord Jesus teaches us to pray for our daily bread. What do we need? And our heavenly Father wants to provide those very things that we need. Now, it may not be answered in the ways we want or would prefer. But still, our Lord provides what is good for what we need. But one thing that I'm very aware of when I think about that moment—because I think about it quite often. There are many answers of prayer that I've had throughout my lifetime, but that really is kind of this one prayer that really jumps out at me because I had never discussed it with anybody. So you can't kind of like say, oh, well the Lord answered it, but He answered it through this kind of prayer request that's kind of like, you know, networking. And that was good.

But when I come to prayers in scripture, I'm often reminded about how what I think I need and what God wants to give me don't always match. What I pray for with my eyes are not always being prayed through the eyes of scripture or what Christ has for us. And so as we look at the conclusion of this introduction to this letter, it is to kind of culminate on what Paul prays. Now, there are other examples of Paul praying for needs, both asking for prayer of his needs. But throughout the New Testament, we see these examples of what Jesus prays and what an apostle prays, and we have a form of it here in this passage.

So as we look at these verses, verses 7 through 11, we're going to keep in mind two main sections. So the first one is verses 7 and 8, where we're seeing how Paul talks about how the Philippians are partners in grace. And then verses 9 through 11, we're looking at how Paul has a prayer for growth.

So first look with me at verses 7 and 8. And we're understanding all of this through and through the whole letter, but certainly as Paul has already—out of the beginning words of his letter, all of what he is talking about is based upon the work of Christ. And because of that work of Christ, we are partners in grace. So that partnership, Paul speaks of it at verse 5 when he says, "The partnership in the gospel," and now in verse 7 where he talks about "Partakers with me of grace." And in these verses 7 and 8, Paul is continuing his own heart's affection for this particular church. He says, "I hold you in my heart. I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus." And this affection stems from being partners of grace with him. And this language of partnership is not merely sentimental. It's deeper. It stems from a place of shared vision for the gospel of Jesus. It's strengthened through the shared victories, through the shared sufferings as each directs one's life according to that vision.

Paul here mentions two specific aspects of this partnership. First, his imprisonment. We learn in Acts 16 about the missionary journey of Paul and Silas and Timothy and others as they're going about encouraging the churches, seeing the works of God happening, and the unfolding declaration, and expanse of Christianity in the world at the time. And we see how the believers in Philippi were encouraged with the news of the gospel of salvation in Jesus. But they were also witnesses to the risk of suffering for the gospel, just as Paul and Silas were briefly imprisoned there in Philippi. And in verses 20

and 21 of chapter 16, we see this short description of the accusation against them. Luke writes this. "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice." Though Paul ended up being released from the jail in Philippi, we see how here in this letter, he's capturing what is very likely his final imprisonment in Rome.

And this imprisonment—they're at the beginning of their relationship before now, many years later. Imprisonment could be an obstacle to their relationship. What do I mean? Paul's imprisonment could have been reason for embarrassment. You know, asking questions like, "How does this look upon me that I'm friends with someone who's in jail? I wonder what people will think of me if they know that I'm associating with Paul or that I'm following Jesus? Are they going to think of me the same way that they're thinking of him?" "How can a leader in God's church such as Paul be put in jail? He must have done something wrong. Maybe what they say about him is true, and he's leading people astray."

Not only embarrassment, but Paul's imprisonment could have been a reason for fear. "If they think Paul is disturbing the Roman world, and if they put him in prison for it, what might they do to me if I follow the Christianity that Paul is preaching? I live in a Roman colony, Philippi. If people find out that I'm following the way of Jesus, what might they do to me?"

Not only embarrassment and fear, but either one of those or some combination of that could create another reason of disassociation for either that embarrassment, sense of shame being associated with Paul in the ministry of the gospel, whether that's the fear of what might come our way or a third option, which is, "Because Paul is in jail and I live in Philippi, I just no longer am interested in the truth. I'm just no longer interested in the truth of the message of the gospel because the messenger of the gospel is locked up. And so I want to distance myself." These are all reasons that could have hindered their relationship, and yet Paul is going on and on about their love for each other, their mutual affection.

And just as the Philippians were an encouragement to Paul at the beginning, as they were unfazed by that early imprisonment, we see that they show their continual support and encouragement through it all to the very end. And both in the imprisonment on the one hand, we see their partnership also in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. Now, taken together, these things are legal terms, and they very well could refer to the actual activity of Paul giving his formal defense in court. But I—it certainly could include that, but I know that it involves something bigger than that as well. So whether it is that formal presentation of his case or something more informal such as the day to day conversations about the claims of the gospel of Jesus, the Philippian church demonstrate again and again their support. And so they share in a partnership.

And these verses of care and encouragement and affection between these parties are an encouragement to us, Christ's church. They invite us to reflect upon how we go about ordering our lives, how we spend our money, how we cultivate our partnerships with fellow believers and gospel ministries, how we support one another when we might be tempted to be embarrassed or ashamed, how we might be tempted to be afraid, and how we might be tempted to disassociate. These are ways that we are actively engaging in partners of grace. Certainly, this is for the individual Christian to consider, but it is for us as a congregation, Columbia Presbyterian. This is important for how we enter into partnerships. It's how we evaluate partnerships. It's how we continue with that support, that we're cultivating the warm affection and the joy of sharing together.

May we grow in our vision of the gospel of Jesus for us personally. May we seek opportunities to align that vision and participate together with others sharing both in the ups and downs that come with that labor, the ups and downs of life, the highs and lows of living our whole lives in partnership in grace. May our very hands that are set to work to be set to the work of the gospel, may they also be sharing in the work together with others. And as we labor in the gospel together, may our hearts be set according to

that affection that we have in Christ. For Paul, the labor and the affection feeds on each other. For Paul, the partnership and his support that he receives from Philippi—he has a thanksgiving. He has an appreciation. Yes. But it's fuller. It's made complete because they are in union together with Christ. May we grow in such affection as we partner in the ministry of the gospel.

Paul then moves into the second part of the passage, verses 9 through 11. And again, based upon the work of Christ, we engage in prayer for growth. Here, Paul gives a great picture of what it means to pray for your growth, to pray for another person's growth. Earlier in verse 4, Paul mentions that he prays with joy. And now here in verse 9, he begins writing his prayer for their growth. Another two main petitions in this prayer, and each carries additional descriptions that kind of further shape and form this prayer.

The first petition is in verse 9, that their love abounds more and more. The word here for "love" is a very common Greek word that you may have heard in Christian churches, but it's "agape." Agape love. It's the characteristic of a high esteem, of deep concern for another person. It has no limitations. And it expresses itself in very intimate ways in our intimate relationships. This love, this agape love can be for God. It can be for people. We see it being used to describe what God's love is for His people. Agape love is ordinarily—although there are examples. But ordinarily, it is very different than expressing romantic love, romantic attraction.

Just for examples of this agape love in scripture, we read them in the scripture reading. I specifically want to read John 15:9-10. "As the Father has loved me," agape, "so have I loved you," agape. "Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love." Another example of this agape love, you may have heard it at your own wedding or any other wedding that you may have attended. It tends to be a very famous passage for weddings. Actually, it is not talking about wedding at all in the context, but it is very apt for those moments to be sure. But Paul is describing love. He's describing agape love. If you flip over to 1 Corinthians 13, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but I have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains," to pray for Buick LaSabres, "but I have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned but have not love, I gain nothing." And this is what we might be very familiar with. "Love is patient and kind. Love does not envy or boast. It is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." Which is why Paul goes on to say, "Of the three strands, faith, hope, love, love is the greatest because it never ends. It endures."

This agape love is what Paul is talking about. He's praying that it may abound, overflow, have abundance. May it be this expanding presence in the very character of this church, the very character of the lives of these disciples of Jesus, that it would grow and form them and shape them and be marked as a people who know God's love and who know how to love.

And as Paul prays for this love to overflow, he qualifies it, "This love must possess knowledge and discernment." Knowledge implies a love that's rooted in knowing God. It's not just knowledge of blanket facts. It's assuming this knowledge has a direction. It's assuming that it has an object. And it's assuming that it's in a knowledgeable relationship of God. It certainly includes that point of personal knowing, that personal conversion to Christ. It involves a mental grasp of spiritual truth, but such knowledge necessarily expands to include the manner of our lives in which a Christian lives. This manner of our lives that is marked by the way of Christ is a way that we live out such knowledge of God. As John Calvin famously said, "To know God is to know self, and to know self is to know God." We cannot do one or the

other without the other because it is completed in the knowledge of God that we have because He has made Himself known.

Secondly, with knowledge is coupled with discernment. And discernment is the capacity to understand. It's the ability to perceive clearly. This discernment is an insight into the right application of that knowledge. So again, it's that knowledge not just for fact or intellectual exercise, but it's guided, it's directed, it's fulfilled with something. The whole point is to walk in that knowledge according to that knowledge. And knowing and understanding go hand in hand. Scripture never reduces knowledge to only the facts. It's not merely saying, "Oh, that's an interesting philosophical question. And let's explore that." It's not an intellectual ascent only. It certainly involves those things. But scripture always assumes that the knowledge of the gospel for salvation leads somewhere. The gospel for salvation leads to a lived ethic of the gospel for your daily life. And knowledge and discernment cannot be separated from the love of Christ lest it puff up with pride, lest that you rest upon your own mental abilities, or your own insights, or your own strengths. All of these things that we lay out and we say that "I'm good at this, and this is what I do," lest we do that of our own accord and have not love, we are not living out the gospel. It's about tuning our heart's affection toward the wisdom of God, not the wisdom of the world.

And for what reason? What reason must love abound more and more with such knowledge and discernment? He goes on to say it. "So that we may approve what is excellent." Other translations may say, "So that you might be able to discern or decide what's best." To approve what is excellent paints a picture of testing metals or testing money for their value. Another example that the word gets used is examining livestock to test, to prove their usefulness. As one writer put it, "Those things that really matter," the things that are vital, the things that are best, the things that are excellent, these are the things that we set our knowledge and discernment and love upon. So when our love overflows, it is being grounded with knowledge and discernment to evaluate what is surpassing value.

This first petition seeks the spiritual formation of the body of Christ in the present, in the here and the now. And it's intended for the ongoing continuation into the future. This is to be lived. There is a focus on what we are to embody as followers of Jesus, and that is love. And when he moves on to the second petition, he directs our attention to the future, to the future of what we are being made into, what we are being formed into. And there is a focus on why we are to pursue. The why is our holiness.

So the second petition, verse 10, the reason—the future pursuit that we are seeking to embody in the present of what we are becoming based upon the work of Christ is to be pure and blameless for the day of Christ. Pure takes on a sense of being sincere. No pretense. No hidden motives. Imagine holding up something in the light, and you're examining it with the sunlight for inspection. There is a quality in the Christian life, though not perfect is being sanctified and is experiencing His renewing grace. And coupled with that is this sense of blamelessness, which just in its very form of the word is to be free from blame. Paul's prayer is one for the nature of the Christian's character being formed in us. This is the gap in our reality. We're not blameless. We're not pure of our own. And yet as we look to Christ, He cleanses us and washes us. He forgives us of our sin and empowers us with His Holy Spirit that we might live to the newness of life, that we might experience the power—we'll come to this later in chapter 3. That we might experience the power of the resurrection. There is something for you, Christian, today in your daily grind, in your work, in your family, how you live according to the power of Christ in you.

So what is the means by which we benefit from this prayer for spiritual growth? How is such character formed in us? And he says—in verse 11, he shows us the very method by which this takes place. It's being "filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ." What he's talking about is sanctification. It's based upon the work of Christ, His death, His resurrection. As you look and trust by faith in Christ, it is Christ working in you through His Holy Spirit where we are being renewed

after the image of God, and we are enabled more and more to die unto our sin and more and more to live unto His righteousness. With this come great benefits to your daily walk with Him. The benefits that flow from the gospel, the very gospel that gives you salvation is the very gospel that gives you strength and endurance to experience God's assurance, to experience God's peace, to experience a peace of conscience, to experience joy, to experience an increase in His grace. It's not that we're adding to His grace as if we can get more of it, so to speak, but it's what Peter talks about, that we might grow in the knowledge and grace of our Lord, that we are becoming full of what is already overflowing in us through Him.

And likewise, the benefit of perseverance. We saw this, if you remember, from verse 6. What Paul is praying for love to abound is your very whole salvation in Christ to be lived out right now. And we see how Paul deeply cares for them. We see how his deep desires for them and his deep affections for them are for them, but it is through the lens of Christ in them.

And brothers and sisters, this is something that we can grow in. This is something that we can be shaped by. This is how we live in community. This is how we encourage each other to pursue Christ. To pursue purity and blamelessness not because we're performing something, but we're seeking to live in reality with what God has declared over us. We have to do this in daily dependence. This is our prayer. This is our worship. This is God forming us in our very character to reflect the character of God that love may about in us, between us. And this is how Jesus can say, "The world will know you are my disciples because of your love." This deep affection comes from trusted partnership, and this deep affection spurs Paul to pray. And it must spur us to pray as well.

As I started, you know, I'm very thankful for that Buick LaSabre. I'm very thankful for how God answers my prayers over the course of my lifetime. And I'm sure if we just had all the time in the world to just fellowship together and just to share testimony of God's faithfulness to you, we would be overwhelmed with joy of how He answers your prayers. But what God provides can only be beautiful, can only be powerful in the light of something like Paul's prayer here, that love may abound, that this is being based upon the work of Christ. And our joy is made full because of the fruit of His righteousness.

I want my prayers to take shape more and more like this prayer. I want my prayers to be shaped by the word of God. I want my prayers to be shaped on behalf of others and pray big prayers. This is a big prayer. I cannot do this. And if I try to do this in my own strength, I may be successful for a time, and then I pitter out. I get tired. I get distracted. I get overwhelmed with my sin, and I stop. I sit down. I want to rest. But I'm not resting when I'm resting off to the side. I'm resting when I'm walking with the freedom and the joy that I have in Christ.

And that is for you and I this day, brothers and sisters, to pray as Paul prayed because he is looking to Christ. And I pray that you might look to Christ today and abound in love. Let us pray.

We're grateful, holy God, that you make it possible for an unholy people to be in your presence, that our righteousness is not of our own, but it is of yours. And so I pray this prayer for us even today that your love may abound more and more in us, that your love may about more and more as a people here at Columbia Presbyterian Church for your glory, for your praise before a watching world to see and to experience the abundance of your mercy and grace. We pray these things, Lord, in Jesus's name. Amen.