

Praise, Prayer and Partnership

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[0 : 00] Are we going to read Philippians chapter 1 verses 1 to 11?! Paul and Timothy.

Servants of Christ Jesus to all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and the deacons. Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about you because I have you in my heart.

And whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

[1 : 32] And this is my prayer. That your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight so that you may be able to discern what is best. And that you may 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. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Let's pray. Father, I pray now for myself and for all of us.

That you might move our hearts to faith. Our lips to praise. And our lives to obedience and praise. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen. Well, speaking about the modern life. One of my favorite theologians.

[2 : 41] A Dutch man by the name of Herman Bavinck. Said this. He said, The century in which we live is distinguished from all preceding centuries by its restless activity.

We are, he goes on to say, An insatiable people. Restless. And our lives are marked by a kind of frenzied accumulation.

Gathering to ourselves things, experiences, stuff. Clogging up our lives with things. But the remarkable thing about that quote is that it was written 100 years ago.

In the early 1900s. And as you and I both know, things haven't changed. In fact, things haven't gotten better.

In 2024, Netflix released a documentary entitled Buy Now. The Shopping Conspiracy. And in just an hour and a half, they quite expertly demonstrate, illustrate, how brands stoke our rampant desire to consume things.

[4 : 00] To own stuff. The Netflix documentary shows how marketing works at getting us to spend more than we can afford. To buy more than we need and to replace things more rapidly than anyone has done in history to date.

In a word, our age, our culture is perhaps best defined as consumeristic. Almost every space and place has become a market of sorts.

Competing for buyer interest. And the church and Christians are not any different. Church going for many today has become an experience.

You might even call it a product. Churches are evaluated then by what they offer. By what we can get out of them. About how we benefit from the transaction as a consumer.

We give our time on Sunday perhaps. And from it we get something in return. Churches are evaluated by their service. Not in the sense of a Sunday worship service.

[5 : 11] But again, as consumers for what they can give us. And consumerism then, I don't think, isn't only seen in wasteful spending. Like the Netflix documentary shows so well.

But in how we treat almost everything in our lives. And this includes church. It's why the phrase, and maybe you've heard this, the phrase church shopping is both very new and not criticized as it

should be.

See, the question then often asked in a variety of ways is what do I want from a church? What can I get out of this church?

And perhaps I can find something better down the road. If I just shop around.

The passage that was read for us, or that, sorry, I read for you, from Philippians, turns that attitude on its head.

[6 : 14] Because instead of the question being what do you want from the church? It's really what do you want for the church?

What is it that you desire for God's people? The question ultimately is not even determined by what I desire for myself when it comes to the church, the people of God.

But rather, what do I desire, pray for, long, and hope for them? For one another? For the people sitting around you?

Not what can I get from, but what can I give to them? What would you delight to see amongst these people?

This church is really the question Philippians 1 puts to us. And I'm going to suggest a very brief two points this morning that should inform the way that we see the church.

[7 : 17] Perhaps the way we approach this community. And they're very simple points, nothing exciting. Firstly, Paul speaks about gospel partnership.

And secondly, he speaks about prayer. Partnership and prayer, if you're there for the alliteration.

Firstly, Paul says that the church should be marked by partnership.

This is the thing we should long for in the church and the place we should take up as we belong to it. Look at verse 3. I thank my God every time I remember you.

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

As Paul prays for and writes to this church in Philippi in the first century, He's moved to praise God because of the partnership that they have shown towards him and one another.

[8 : 25] This verse 6, that verse 6, that verse that we know so well, is evidence, he says, of God's good work amongst them. The work that God has started is seen in their partnership with one another.

And a lot is made of this word partnership, for better or worse. But the word it's translated from really just means something like fellowship, actually.

Togetherness, community, participation, mutual concern, and goodwill for the collective. As opposed to simply only one's self.

One writer defines this word, and perhaps Philippians 1 as well, in this great little phrase. That Paul rejoices in the self-sacrificing conformity that he sees to a shared vision.

It's a bit of a loaded sentence, but a self-sacrificing conformity to a shared vision. Partnership.

Throughout the letter of Philippians, this is seen in a host of ways, and to it we could add many more.

[9 : 33] In chapter 1, he speaks about witnessing to the gospel, testifying to Christ. To praying for others and for ministries. To supporting and upholding one another's faith when it's grown weak.

In chapter 2, he talks about meeting the interests and needs of others. In chapter 4, working hard at relationships against breakdown and towards reconciliation.

And still in chapter 4, he speaks again then about financially supporting ministry. This list could be doubled or tripled in Philippians and the New Testament more broadly.

But it gives us a picture of what partnership might look like in the church. What we might pray and long for here. When Paul looks at the local church, he is overjoyed, we read at the end of chapter 1, by seeing that they are side by side and looking forward together.

The church then isn't an impersonal group of investors. Barely more than a bunch of strangers who happen to find each other Sunday by Sunday.

[10 : 40] Paul's joy is filled to overflowing because he sees a richly personal and relational people. And he sees partnership between them.

And it's that that moves him to praise God. To give thanks. It's this verse 6 that he sees and deems as the work of God amongst the Philippians.

That the people have partnered with him. And they've partnered with God. And this is maybe most apparent in the shared life of God's people.

Christian community or partnership then isn't a vague thing. And that word community gets thrown around a lot these days. But to reiterate some of those verses across Philippians, partnership means an active concern for one another.

Compassion and care for those in need. A commitment to unity, to peace, and to the building up of one another's faith. It means attention to others' worries.

[11 : 52] And rather than simply only our own. And this partnership Paul rejoices in, therefore involves significant personal investment.

And we might add to that it also turns on and depends on vulnerability. A willingness to live amongst others. To be known so that we might be cared for and can care for each other.

From 2013 to 2018, my family and I lived in Durban. We served full time on a church staff there.

And one of my favorite ministries during that time was a businessman's breakfast on Friday mornings before work. And it was at this ministry that I got to know a man called Chris.

Chris, an older, somewhat cantankerous man. He had been a part of this church, I think he used to say to me, since before I was born.

[12 : 52] And over the years we had many conversations. Some robust. Some light. Chris had opinions. And he wasn't afraid to air them.

One day Chris came to me, probably on a Friday morning. And he had a burning question.

Something had been happening in his life. He had seen something. His question to me, which knocked me off balance a bit, was, What are we doing as a church for those suffering with cancer?

It wasn't something any of us as a staff team had really considered, apart from personal visits and prayers with those who were affected. But Chris wanted to know, what was the church doing?

And by that, funnily enough, he would later admit, he meant, what was the church staff doing? But this conversation with Chris started a much longer conversation that went on for weeks.

And eventually led to the formation of a group that met together every two weeks to pray. A group headed up by Chris himself.

[14 : 04] When I left, or when we left that church in 2018 and came back down to Cape Town, this group had grown from just a small handful to 15 people meeting every other Friday, reading, praying together, discussing their fears.

Discussing death and loss. My part in this meeting was such a small one, but a privilege to be there to watch Chris partner in the gospel.

And I know all these years later, and even as I spoke to him, that what I saw was just a tip of the iceberg. These meetings that Chris ran every two weeks, I knew that he was following up blood tests with phone calls, treatments with visits, dire prognoses with prayer, and deaths with his own tears.

Whenever I remember Chris in my prayers, I do so with great joy. And I thank God for his partnership in the gospel.

A tangible, costly, affectionate, and comforting commitment to the needs of others. An attitude like Chris's, we read later on in Philippians, is none other than the attitude of Christ.

[15 : 28] It is, chapter 2, verse 5 says, to have the same mindset as our Lord. The one who said of himself that he came to serve rather than to be served.

He came to give rather than to take. Therefore, Paul says that following this Lord means, chapter 2, verse 3, that in humility we might value others above ourselves, not looking to our own interests alone, but each of us to the interests of others, whatever form or shape that may take.

It starts here with the local church. It starts with a commitment to the people next to you, behind you, in front of you, the people who aren't here today, perhaps. It starts with regular attendance, sure, but extends way beyond that, investing relationally in the formal way, city groups, Sunday seminars, as well as informally to coffees, to prayer, to being there for one another.

Either way, what Paul exhorts here cannot happen apart from community, and which has led some people to say that the Christian life itself cannot be lived in isolation.

The Christian faith cannot be expressed by one person alone, but only as that faith is worked out together with others in the local church.

[17 : 01] Central to the book of Philippians, as I've already alluded to, it can't happen. That is, there won't be any real gospel partnership without, and this will come as no surprise, without the gospel.

The grace and the work of God, which Paul roots everything in as he starts in verse three. It all comes from there at the very first. It's why he begins by praising God, and not the Philippians.

Though he rejoices in the partnership that he sees amongst them, he knows that what he sees amongst these people is nothing other than the work of God to graciously meet the needs of his people by his people.

And so Paul praises God. He praises them, sure, for their obedience and their commitment to one another. But he knows that these Philippians, and us too, will only live this life, what's often called the cruciform life, will only live it if we know, as he'll go on to say in chapter two of Philippians, that Christ, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used or leveraged for his own advantage, but rather made himself a servant.

Being made in human likeness, we're told that Christ humbled himself by becoming obedient even to the point of death. The person who's looked then at the cross and seen the great work and love of God for his people is the person who then looks out on those same people and asks how they might too show that same love, that same humility, that same obedience, that same selfless concern.

[18 : 57] Christ did this for his people, for the church. He did this for you, he did this for me. He gave himself up becoming a servant in humility and so anyone who calls themselves a Christian knows this about God, knows this, this is the gospel.

And so, we ought to be those who then set about to pattern our lives after that same gospel, after that same Lord. coming back to the question that got us started this morning.

We don't only ask what it is that we receive, what it is that we can get, which in the gospel is incomparably wonderful. that as those who know that truth, we should turn outwards and ask what we can do for these people.

always in light. Always in light and always motivated, driven, undergirded, fueled by what God has done for us. Following on from that point, I have a much shorter one.

the second thing that we ought to desire for and enact amongst these people, amongst the local church, is prayer. Prayer that is selfless and prayer that is confident.

[20 : 27] Look at verse six. Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it to completion until the day of Jesus. Jesus, it is right for me to feel this way about you because I have you in my heart.

And whether I'm in chains or defending, confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. And God can testify.

God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. It's a remarkable few verses. Often overlooked because we all love verse six.

And there's a detail in these verses that we tend to overlook. See, we know that Paul finds great confidence in this being the work of God. He tells us as much in verse six.

He says, let God begin the work. God will finish the work. And Paul is in no doubt that this will happen. And yet, look at what he goes on to say. That the other reason for his assurance and his confidence is that he prays.

[21 : 35] It is right for me to feel this way, verse seven, for all of you. Why? Because I have you in my heart. Because I pray for you.

At the time of writing this, Paul is imprisoned, effectively sidelined, and so it would seem unable to contribute to the life and faith of other believers to the advance of the gospel.

Only Paul doesn't retire. He is instead resolute. Notice those words he uses when he speaks about prayer. Praying always. Always praying, remembering, with affection for the people of God.

Having them in his heart, he says, this is what he can do. And so he sets himself to praying for others, remembering them in his prayers.

And isn't it astonishing in verse eight that he says, God can testify to this. Always wonder how bold. Or perhaps simply just how genuine it is.

[22 : 44] See, Paul says, God knows. How dear you are to me and how does he know? Because he can testify to the fact that I am praying for you.

Paul then is convinced in the power of prayer. Writing some 1,500 years later, John Calvin said that when we pray, we invoke God's presence, we remind ourselves of his providence, but we also present ourselves before him and his power.

The power through which he sustains us, weak as we are, well nigh overcome, we find in him great power. And so we ought to pray with confidence.

Prayer is an exercise in trust, no doubt, and an admission that we believe God to be dependable, completely reliable. But don't take it from John Calvin, however brilliant he was, because Paul says this very thing in Philippians 4, another verse that will be familiar to many.

He says in chapter 4, verse 6, the Lord is near, do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

[24 : 05] And the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Prayer is, I think most Christians will admit, a difficult discipline to keep.

And this for many reasons. perhaps for some of us, it's that we have so few actual needs. And so feeling dependent is not something we really know.

Rather, independently, we go about our lives. We're capable. And so it's hard to see how prayer fits in to such a life. I mean, we look at Paul and you go, well yeah, he was in prison.

I mean, what could he really do? But you and I, right, we can do things. We can be active. This is how some of us think. This is how all of us think at times.

Perhaps others amongst us don't pray because actually we're not convinced. Our hope has waned. Prayer feels like spitting in the wind as it's said.

[25 : 23] I would say for all of us, we don't pray because we're distracted and we're busy and those are different things. God has something to say to us this morning as we close.

I think two much needed correctives as we think about praying as God's people for God's people.

The first is that this passage corrects a low view of prayer or an overinflated view of ourselves and secondly it corrects us from selfish praying to selfless praying.

Firstly, Paul's example these verses corrects a low view of prayer which if we're honest at the bottom is simply nothing other than a low view of God himself.

we see that word confident in verse 6. Paul goes on to say it's right confident and assured verse 7 because of his prayers. But what is he confident in?

See the point here and the mistake that we can easily make is to hold up Paul and go this guy's amazing look at him. But that's not where Paul draws his confidence from. Again and again he says throughout Philippians that his joy his confidence his assurance and his great hope is always bound up in God.

[26 : 54] And so here when he prays and he says that he is confident it is because God is at work. Paul isn't the prayer warrior that we aspire to imitate.

Rather than that we should perhaps ask why did such a spiritual giant if we might call him that why did such a spiritual giant spend so much time praying?

Perhaps it was the prayer that got him there actually. See the answer given throughout Philippians throughout the Bible indeed is that the spiritual giant is never more than a needy child approaching the father with their requests with their needs with their worries in their weakness.

The prayer warrior the spiritual giant these things these ideas they're people who are convinced that apart from God they can do nothing.

The mark of Christian greatness maturity and growth then is nothing other than prayer. drawing near to him as Paul says in Philippians 4 entrusting our affairs and depending on him regardless of the circumstances.

[28 : 23] When we don't pray it's either because we have too low a view of him too high a view of ourselves and most probably a bit of both. It's a bundle deal that one.

Like Paul we must abandon our low view of God imagining that he is indifferent or impotent unconcerned. God is intensely concerned for his world and especially concerned for his people.

We said that this morning in the Westminster Confession of Faith. And so the Christian church should be a people committed to prayer drawing tremendous comfort and confidence from it and taking seriously the discipline in devoting time to it.

We could develop this point more but I want to finish by asking then how it affects us as we think about others and again where we started how we view the church these people.

See what do you want for them? that question could be answered simply in the question well what do you pray for them? What do you want God to do amongst these people?

[29 : 45] What do you pray? We ought to be committed to praying for others. John Cohen last time sorry he said this all prayers ought to be such as to look to the community that God has established himself and showing special affection to the household of faith.

Again Calvin is merely developing what we read in Philippians chapter 1 chapter 1 verses 3 and 4 I thank my God when I remember you in my prayers for you I always pray for you with joy. And if you're a little suspect of Paul you know maybe these are just high minded well wishes thinking of you you're on my mind.

Verse 8 God can testify about how I long for you with affection. God can testify that I hold you in my heart. Paul prays for the people with affection and with love and those things are wrapped up in prayer.

They don't exclude it. They are perhaps one of the greatest expressions of it to bring the needs of God's people to their God. This is what Paul does. God is my witness.

[31 : 06] If you're like me this morning then your prayers are probably both short and a little bit self centered.

You know you get that minute before like the squirrel scurries past you on the fence or maybe that's just me and you're out you know your prayers have been interrupted.

We're distracted. My prayers are focused on me and my problems and my anxieties. I have many. But this shouldn't be the case.

Prayers that are not concerned with the good of God's people are deficient prayers. I think this is what Philippians 1 is teaching amongst the other things.

one of my favorite writers pastor theologian Eugene Peterson he wrote this. He said what we do in secret determines the soundness of who we are in public.

[32 : 07] It's a great summary of verse 8. Prayer he says is maybe the most secret work. A work that develops a life that is thoroughly authentic and deeply human.

that secret work reveals our commitment to the people of God. Our confidence in the God we worship. But it ties back to our first point as well as we finish here.

Because how will I pray for the people of God if I don't know them? If I don't know their needs? If I'm not embedded in their lives?

If I haven't shared with them my own struggles? If we're not side by side as Philippians 1 goes on to say there are many things to look for in a church and don't hear me saying otherwise this morning.

There are good and better and there are worse things but let us not treat the church simply as consumers only ever asking what we get from it.

[33 : 17] Philippians 1 tells us that the Christian does at least two things when it comes to the people of God and their church. They commit to partnering with them and they commit to praying for them.

That's why Paul will write at the end of this letter, our God will meet our needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. Let's pray. Lord, we ask this morning for the tremendous comfort that comes with knowing the good news.

through that that comes through knowing you are Lord and God who is sovereign at work and who will not fail.

Lord, we ask that you might fix our eyes, hearts, minds this morning on Christ who gives himself up, who serves in humility, who saves us from sin and death.

And Lord, as we rejoice, as we rest in that, as we rely on him and him alone, I ask Lord that that faith and that confidence would be seen in all of life and especially here amongst the people of God.

[34 : 58] our people. So make us those who partner with them, who readily pray for them, and who rejoice to see you at work here.

We ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.