

Sermon Summary #3

The Gospel as the Ground and Glue of Genuine Christian Fellowship Philippians 1:3-8

I have to confess that all week as I studied and reflected on this passage we've just read, I was *envious*. I don't think it was sinful envy, but envy it was. Hearing Paul talk about his relationship to the Philippians, how he felt about them and loved them and yearned to be with them, how he prayed for them and how he partnered with them in the gospel, I couldn't help but stand back from it all and say: "***This is what the church is supposed to be***. This is the body of Christ *stripped of artificial veneer and superficiality and obsession with image and all the meaningless clichés* that so often characterize our interactions, such as: 'How are you today? Oh, just fine. God is so good. How are you? Oh, just fine. Yes, he is good. I'll be praying for you. Oh, that's fine. I'll pray for you too. Wonderful. Have a nice day. You too.'"

That's not the feeling I get when I read Philippians. On the assumption that Paul *is* being sincere and not just smoozing the Christians in Philippi, this strikes me as Christianity in as pure a form as we're likely to see this side of heaven. And doggone it . . . I want it! I envy their relationship. I want it at Bridgeway. I want it with you.

So before we go any farther let's make sure we know what they had. ***What was it that characterized their relationship and made it so special?*** A lot of Christian terms have been overused and end up almost meaningless to us today. The term "fellowship" is one of them. So let's try to redeem it and define it and turn it for good once again.

What is Christian "fellowship"? The word behind the English terms "fellowship" and "partnership" is typically some form of the Greek *koinonia*, which means ***to share something in common***. In other words, for genuine fellowship or communion to occur there must be some reality, some truth, some experience that two or more people share. There must be a link that binds them.

In our world today, that might conceivably be any number of things. You and I might share in a passion or devotion to a particular university or football team or professional basketball team. We might have a common bond in that we were born on the same day or in the same city. It might be something even deeper, such as an equal partnership in a business venture where we each hold the same percentage of stock. Identical twins are linked by a common biological heritage. Perhaps we feel a special affection for one another because we are affiliated with the same political party or were members of the same fraternity or sorority back in college. I imagine you get the point by now.

You can't read these verses in Philippians 1 without sensing the ***deep, intimate, affectionate bond*** that exists between Paul and these believers in the church at Philippi. He refers to it as a "partnership" in v. 5 and uses the word "partakers" in v. 7. This was no superficial connection. This goes way beyond a surface link or merely passing similarity. Something very personal and profound unites them. This is the only way we can account for Paul's extravagant language and the obvious love he has for these people.

I'm going to be honest with you. As I said earlier, I envy Paul and the Philippians. I desperately long for this kind of relationship with other people. And I'm happy to say that I've experienced it on several occasions throughout my life and ministry, especially here at Bridgeway. Only the mentally deranged individual could possibly not rejoice in this kind of communion, this kind of fellowship and partnership. God never intended anyone to live like a monk. It is simply no part of God's design that a Christian should live devoid of this deep and abiding unity with other believers.

All you have to do is talk for a few minutes to someone who is having a hard time connecting in the church or someone who struggles to "fit in" or to find their place or someone who has experienced rejection by other Christians. The pain is almost unbearable. It runs counter to everything God fashioned us to experience. It is a fundamental violation of who we are as image bearers. God himself has lived eternally in fellowship. God is a

community of persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, whose bond of love and joy is infinitely glorious. And when he made us in his image he did so with the goal in mind that we too might experience this fellowship or communion not only with himself but with one another.

So, the question I want you to ask and then let Paul answer is this: What is the **ground** of his fellowship with the Philippians, or any other body of believers in the first century? What is it that unites Paul and the Philippians? What is that “thing” or “experience” or “truth” that serves to **glue** them spiritually and emotionally together?

Now, before you answer that question, you need to remember all the many factors that might conspire to keep Christians separate and divided and at odds with one another in the first century:

- Jew vs. Gentile
- Greek vs. Roman
- Man vs. Woman
- Slave vs. Freeman
- Patrician or Aristocrat vs. the common man
- Educated vs. Uneducated
- Wealthy vs. Rich

Just think back for a moment to the establishment of the church in Philippi in Acts 16 that we looked at in our first message in this series. It’s nothing short of miraculous that the people there could have united in a common life together. After all, there was Lydia, a Gentile woman who ran a business, joining up with a male Roman jailer, together with a formerly demonized slave girl, all of whom were being instructed and led by two Jews, Paul and Silas!

The barriers today are just as imposing:

- There is the lingering geographical divide between North and South
- There is the horrid racial divide between black and white, between Hispanic and native American
- There is the angry political divide between republican and democrat
- There are divisions based on personality such as between introverts and extroverts
- In addition there are the same social, educational, and economic barriers that prevailed in the first century

O.K., so what could possibly be strong enough and important enough and true enough and permanent enough to hold together in such glorious love and unity people like them, or in the case of the 21st century, people like us?

The answer is right there in our passage: their partnership or fellowship or communion was “in the **gospel**” (v. 5). Again, in v. 7, the Philippians together with Paul are “all partakers” of God’s saving “grace” and are partners “in the defense and confirmation of the **gospel**.”

Times are increasingly difficult in our country. The so-called “fiscal cliff” looms large on the horizon. We differ greatly in social, economic, and educational achievements. There is the ever-lingering threat of nuclear conflict from North Korea and Iran. And we have a serious problem with insane acts of random violence in this land as seen just a few days ago in Connecticut. My suspicion is that things will get far worse before it’s all done. We are in for a rough ride. So, what will hold us together? Is it that we all believe the same thing about the Rapture or the identity of the Antichrist? Is it that we all voted for the same presidential candidate? Is it that we each have in our wallet or purse an Oklahoma driver’s license? Is it that we are all Americans? No.

What unites us at the most fundamental level and will sustain us through the worst and most damaging and disrupting social and economic upheaval is that ***we believe and trust in and are committed to the eternal truth of the same good news or gospel about who Jesus Christ is and what he has done to save sinners.***

D. A. Carson put it this way: “The heart of true fellowship is self-sacrificing conformity to a shared vision . . . of what is of transcendent importance” (16).

So let me pause momentarily to make sure we know what we're talking about when we mention the word "gospel" or more importantly what Paul meant when he used the word. By the way, he uses the word "gospel" six times in this one chapter.

The "gospel" is the good news of what God has graciously and lovingly done in and through the incarnation, sinless life, atoning death, and bodily resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ to satisfy his own wrath against sinners and to secure our forgiveness and in doing so to reconcile us to himself forever.

That single, *glorious, exhilarating, breathtaking truth* is what bound Paul and the Philippians together. The gospel is the only thing that accounts for their love one for another and their prayers for each other and their devotion to walk through the hardest of times side by side and their courage to endure persecution and in some cases death itself.

I assume you know that what I've just said isn't massively popular today. In fact, many, especially those in the media, would regard what Paul says in Philippians and what I'm saying to you today as narrow-minded bigotry; they view it as prejudice; it's arrogant exclusivism; at its heart it is unloving. But don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying we shouldn't love people who don't share our belief in the truth of the gospel. I'm not saying we shouldn't serve them or that we shouldn't join them in social and political causes that we think are important for the welfare of our society and our country.

But the kind of love and devotion and unity that Paul talks about here, the kind of spiritual bond and covenant commitment one to another that forms the backbone to our existence as a church, can only be grounded in or based upon our shared belief in and experience of the power and grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As strange and revolutionary as this may sound to some of you, your relationship to other Christians in this local church is deeper and more intimate and certainly more lasting than the relationship that you sustain to your blood relatives who *don't* know Jesus Christ. It is our common faith in Jesus that binds us, not the blood in our veins or our biological DNA. This is what Jesus had in mind when he said,

"Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37).

He doesn't mean that we aren't to love our earthly father and mother and son or daughter. He simply means we can't love them more than we love him. Listen again to what Jesus said:

"While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother'" (Matthew 12:46-50).

People everywhere today, even in perhaps the majority of our churches, argue that what unites us at the most fundamental level is that we are all *human beings*, or that we are all creatures shaped in *the image of God*, or that we all believe that there is only one God, or that we all regularly attend a religious service each week, or some such thing. For some, it's being in the same book club and enjoying the same genre of literature. For others it's the fact that our children play on the same soccer team or sing in the same choir. As enjoyable and legitimate as these things are, that's not what ought to be at the center of our relationship with other Christians. That's friendship, but it's not the "fellowship" or "partnership" that Paul has in mind. ***He's talking about our shared conviction, our common trust in, our singular experience of the saving work of Christ Jesus.***

So what exactly does this "gospel" of what God has done for us in Jesus accomplish in terms of our relationship one with another? How does it affect us daily? What does this "fellowship" or "partnership" in the gospel *do*? How does it manifest itself in our lives? What happens to us in terms of our feelings for one another and what we are willing to sacrifice for the sake of one another? That's what Paul outlines here in vv. 3-8 and it is quite glorious indeed. There are *four primary points of emphasis*. So let's look at them.

First, Paul is moved and motivated to intercede on behalf of the Philippians. Quite simply, he prays for them constantly.

I can't even begin to think of Paul as the sort of man who would pull the hypocritical stunt that you and I are so often guilty of perpetrating on one another. How many times have you said to another Christian, perhaps in passing in the Café or down the hall, "It was good to see you; I'll pray for you," all the while knowing you have absolutely no intention of doing any such thing?

May I be so bold as to challenge you today, even as I issue the same challenge to my own soul, that if you promise to pray for another believer you actually carry through with your pledge? And that you not do it as a perfunctory performance or because you feel morally obligated or because you made a promise and "by golly I'm going to keep my word whether I feel like it or not," but that you do it as Paul did, "*with joy.*"

"But Sam, life's hard, and time is short, and my schedule is crammed full of things I can no longer afford to ignore. I might be able to devote a few minutes each day to praying for the needs of people, but *how I am expected to do it with joy?*"

Let me remind you of something. *Paul isn't writing this letter from an air-conditioned three-bedroom, two-bath, two-car garage home in a safe neighborhood in OKC! He's writing this from a dark, damp, cramped prison cell most likely in either Rome or Caesarea.* His freedom has been taken from him. His food is barely adequate to keep him alive. He doesn't know if he will live or die. Yet he prays for them and does so joyfully! How?

The answer is again **the gospel!** When the human heart is gripped with the transcendent truth and unshakable reality of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, no amount of pain or discomfort or opposition can undermine the deep and abiding joy that it brings. All that Paul had to do in order to press through the pain and the disappointment of imprisonment was to think about what God had done to secure forgiveness and eternal salvation, not only for himself but for the Philippians as well. I know this because of what follows in v. 5. And this brings us to the second point of emphasis.

Second, *Paul is filled with gratitude and prays fervently and joyfully for the Philippians because they share with him a common faith in the gospel, a unified commitment to suffer for it and sacrifice for it and support the spread of it with their finances.* This is his point in v. 5.

He's delighted that they are a part of his life and that he is part of theirs. So when he prays for them, he is overcome with "joy" as he reflects on how they have joined with him in living for the gospel, giving for the gospel, defending the gospel, and in Paul's case, eventually dying for the gospel.

Notice again that Paul doesn't have in mind here some superficial friendship based on the sharing of a common hobby or because of the patriotic fervor they share that comes from knowing they are all Roman citizens. It is because they are united in their belief in the gospel! The grace of God in Jesus Christ is the ground and glue of their love one for another.

Third, *his joyful gratitude to God is also based on his confidence that the work God initiated in them he will bring to completion* (v. 6).

Paul had seen his fair share of people who loudly proclaimed their faith in Jesus only later to betray the fact that they never truly knew him as Lord and Savior. But he is confident beyond all doubt that what God had started in the lives of the Philippians he would in fact finish and bring to consummation. That isn't to say that these people wouldn't face obstacles to Christian growth. It isn't to say that Satan had given up trying to deceive them and derail their faith. It isn't to say that the Philippians had graduated into some super-spiritual condition that put them beyond the reach of temptation and sin.

Neither is it to say that they need not strive and maintain their spiritual diligence and pursue holiness in life. Rather it is to say that God is faithful to his work. It is to say that God will do whatever it takes to uphold the Philippians in their faith in Jesus, and you in your faith in Jesus. It is to say that God will persevere in his commitment to supply them (and you) with whatever it takes so that our confidence in Christ would not fail or falter and the work of grace he began would ultimately be brought to its proper goal when Jesus returns.

The assurance that fills Paul's heart and accounts in part for the joy that floods his prayers on their behalf is that ***God will do whatever it takes to guarantee that no born-again child of God will ever lapse into unbelief and apostasy.*** That isn't to say the people of God won't at times wander away and spiritually drift and even fall into a backslidden and bitter state of soul. It is to say that their loving heavenly Father will never let them fail so as to fall completely out of his loving arms.

Take this text right now and impress its truth on your heart. I'm thinking particularly of you who are struggling with doubts about where you stand with God. You're plagued by fear and anxiety that God has given up on you. He's quite simply had enough; he's had his fill of you and your pathetic efforts to remain true to him. Listen to me. No, listen to *God* speaking to you through Paul. ***Whatever God starts, he finishes. Whatever God starts, he finishes. Whatever God starts, he finishes.*** I pray this truth will echo repeatedly in your mind and spirit and you will be energized to get back in the race and resume the battle with the world, the flesh, and the Devil, renewed with the confident assurance that they can't win!

This is why I repeated over and over again throughout our series on eternal security ***that the reason why Christians persevere in their faith is because God preserves them in it.*** God will not give up on the elect, he will not abandon them with the job only half done, he will not permit any obstacle or opposition to stand in the way of bringing all his children into the full inheritance of what he has promised in Jesus.

Fourth, because the Philippians share with Paul a common faith in the gospel, he loves them with a passion that is heartfelt and unyielding (vv. 7-8). Let's note how this affection is felt and described.

Paul says, "I hold you in my heart" (v. 7). I carry you around not simply in my thoughts, but in the depths of my soul, in the very center of my being. You are always and ever dear to me! ***The basis for this abiding affection is again that these Philippian believers had partaken with Paul of the saving and sustaining grace of God.*** And how did he know this? On what basis does his confidence rest? Paul knew this to be true because when he was thrown in prison it would have so easy for them to run and hide and protect their own backsides. Instead they stood with him in defense of the gospel even when it threatened their own lives and freedom.

The depth of passion and affection of genuine Christian fellowship is stated yet again in even more intensely personal terms in v. 8.

It's not clear why Paul felt compelled to call God as his witness. Perhaps he felt inadequate to give expression to his true feelings and thus calls on God to help him. Or maybe the enormity of his love deserved more than his own testimony. Others think that some in the church at Philippi doubted his motives toward them and thus Paul is saying, "If my expression of affection for you isn't true, may God judge me now!"

In any case, he wants them to know how he "***yearns***" for them, a strong and emotionally charged term used to describe how desperate he is to see them again. But the important thing here isn't the intensity of his love but its quality: he loves them and yearns for them "***with all the affection of Christ Jesus***" (v. 8b).

I think what he means by this is that ***his love for them originates in Christ's love both for him and them.*** In other words, ***he is implicitly referring to the gospel yet again!*** We love only because Christ first loved us. But more than that, his love for them is of the same quality or kind as the love that Jesus actually has for us. Think about how much Jesus loves you. Reflect on the depths of a love that would lead him to the cross on your behalf. Meditate on how patient and kind and compassionate and forgiving he is toward us all. That, says Paul, is the same sort of love I have for you.

So, is it just me, or do you feel a touch of envy as well? Is there anyone here who doesn't long to experience with other Christians this kind of affection and fellowship and mutual delight?

If you want it, dig deeply into the gospel. Reflect long and hard on the gospel. Think and meditate and celebrate the truth of what God has done for a sinner such as you. From this endless well of the saving waters of God's grace you will find refreshment and strength to experience with one another what Paul had with the Philippians and they had with him.