

## Giving as Partnership

Philippians 4:10-20

This morning we conclude our short series on gospel-fueled stewardship—what we've been calling "Treasure that Lasts." And because this is a short series, and a somewhat sensitive topic (money!), I've been starting each sermon with a number of provisos or caveats. Things like, 'No, we don't talk about money every Sunday; no, we're not doing a big fundraiser right now; no, we're not in financial crisis; no, I don't know what any of you give.' And while I hope setting that context has helped us lower our guard to be able to hear more clearly what Scripture is saying about this—what God is saying—I don't want to suggest that we should be embarrassed or hesitant to talk about money. As we've been discussing, how we handle our money is an essential part of Christian discipleship. Following Jesus impacts every part of our lives, including what we do with our money. And, just as a matter of reality, it's very hard to accomplish anything in this world that doesn't in some way involve money, commerce, trade.

It costs money to run a business (overhead, marketing, payroll). It costs money to run a household (rent, utilities, taxes, food). It costs money to run a hospital and help people. To run a charity and help people. And it costs money to run a church, or to be missionary. And we shouldn't be ashamed of that fact, or ignorant of it. It's the way the world works, regardless of what you're trying to accomplish.

The question is, Is it worth it? *Is the cause worthy?* Who's involved? *Do we know and can we trust those we're working with?* Is there a need? *Will my money make a difference?* And what's the ultimate impact? *Am I investing in something that will last?*

Those are the questions we want to explore this morning as we think about *giving as partnership*. Giving as partnership. So far we've talked about giving as *worship*: how the way we spend our money exposes the true master of our hearts (where our treasure is, there our heart will be also). And giving as *grace*—how our giving is motivated by grace, and ought to reflect that grace in the way we give; how we depend on God's grace to do it, and aim at the grace that wells up in thanksgiving to God.

And the way we're going to look at these verses is relative to those four questions I asked a minute ago: Is it worth it? *A worthy cause*. Who's involved? *Genuine fellowship*. Is there a need? *Strategic investment*. And what's the ultimate impact? *Treasure that lasts*. First . . .

### **A Worthy Cause: Advancing the Gospel**

When we look at the letter to the Philippians, we can identify several factors that motivated Paul to write it: he wanted to update them about his own ministry (1:12-26) and the ministries of

Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19-30). He wanted to speak into some of the conflict that had been reported to him (4:2-3) and warn them against some potential threats (3:2-3, 17-21). But one of the main reasons Paul writes this letter to the Philippian church is to say thank you for their generous financial support—for their “partnership” as he calls it in 1:5, a partnership of “giving and receiving,” 4:15.

So what is it that brings Paul and the Philippians together in this partnership, this relationship of giving and receiving? What is the common cause that unites them? It’s nothing less than the advancement of the gospel.

We always think of Philippians as being a book about joy. And it’s true that this book is full of joy—the word is used some 14 times. But the reason Philippians is so full of joy, is because it’s so full of Jesus. It’s *the gospel of Jesus* and *its advance* that forms the heartbeat of this book. That’s the worthy cause that brings Paul and the Philippians together. This is the note on which Paul opens in 1:3-5: “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 this is the note he closes on in our passage, 4:15: “And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of *the gospel*, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into *partnership* with me in giving and receiving, except you only.”

And in between Paul again and again talks about the worthy cause of the gospel. 1:12: “I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me [Paul’s imprisonment] has really served to advance the gospel.” 1:27: “Only let your manner of life be *worthy of the gospel of Christ*, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side *for the faith of the gospel*”—it’s advance.

Paul and the Philippians are partners *in* the gospel (in that Christ has changed their lives) and *for* the gospel (in the cause to make Christ known).

And it is a worthy cause. Because there is no greater treasure that this world affords than knowing Jesus Christ. There are many great causes in this world. Fighting poverty, improving literacy, protecting the environment, clean drinking water, racial reconciliation, safe working conditions, disaster relief, equal pay for men and women doing the same job. Those are all great, important causes—worthy causes. But there is no cause quite so worthy as the cause of Christ.

First, because *Jesus is the only treasure that truly satisfies*. Clean water is a gift, but you will be thirsty again. Equal pay is important, but money will let you down. Because we were made in God’s image to know him and love him and enjoy him for eternity, there is, as it’s often said, a God-shaped hole in each of us that nothing on this earth can fill. Only Jesus can satisfy us in the deepest parts of our soul. As St. Augustine said in the opening prayer of his confessions, “You made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.”<sup>1</sup>

Second, not only does Jesus uniquely satisfy us, *he’s the only treasure that lasts*. Everything we enjoy, everything we depend on, everything we look to for identity in this world—all of it will eventually go the way of all the earth. I once had a favorite pair of jeans. I loved those jeans. Those jeans were made for me. They felt good, they looked good on me. But the more I love

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<sup>1</sup> As cited in Douglas O’Donnell, *The Beginning and End of Wisdom* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 77.

them, the more I wore them, the quicker they wore away. Until one day, we had to say goodbye. Earthly treasure doesn't last. Jesus does. And what also lasts is our souls—either in the presence of God, or away from him. And Jesus is the only one who can reconcile us to God. He's the only name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12). Because he loved us, and came down, and lived for us, and died for us, that we might be forgiven, reconciled, adopted, redeemed for all eternity, through faith in Jesus Christ. He's the only treasure that lasts.

But third, not only is Jesus uniquely satisfying and uniquely eternal, *he also supplies the motivation and meaning behind all other good causes on earth.* The reason we care about clean water is because people are made in God's image and worthy of love and care and basic necessities. The reason we care about equal pay is because Jesus cares about justice—doing what is right—and he will judge those who defraud their laborers of fair pay (cf. Jms. 5:4-5). Every truly good and meaningful cause on earth is but an echo of and signpost toward the greatest cause which is Jesus and his gospel. And it's through Jesus and his gospel that one day, every truly good and meaningful cause on earth will be fulfilled—when Christ returns to make all things new (cf. Rev. 21:1-5).

So is the cause worthy? That's the first question in giving as partnership. Is the gospel of Jesus a worthy cause? Paul found it worthy. So worthy he was willing to lose everything else for Jesus in order to have him, like the parables of the treasure in the field, or the pearl of great price (cf. Matt. 13:44-46). Paul says in Philippians 3, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (3:7-8; cf. Acts 20:24). Is the cause of Christ worthy, in knowing Jesus and making him known? That others might find forgiveness and wholeness and redemption and love that lasts in an eternity in the presence of God? That they might be saved from eternity separated from his presence in hell?

Is the cause of gospel worthy, and does my giving reflect that? There are all sorts of good causes to give to, and we should give to many of them. And there is no chapter and verse that tells us precisely for us how to allocate our giving. But based on the worthiness of the cause and the duration of the fruit it bears, it makes sense that Christians should prioritize giving to the cause of the gospel and those committed to it—to the local church and its greater mission.

So giving as partnership begins with the worthiness of the cause. Second, who's involved? Who are we partnering with? That brings us to . . .

### **Genuine Fellowship: Concern and Contentment**

The worthiness of the cause is essential. But so is knowing and trusting the people we're working with in that cause. It's not just about writing a check. There's a mutual relationship involved in the gospel's advance. And in Philippians Paul praises God not just for the gift, but for the people giving it and the fellowship he has with them in their common cause.

In fact, the word "partnership" in Philippians is the word we usually translate "fellowship"—*koinonia*. We often think of Christian fellowship in primarily social terms—time we spend together in community. And it's not less than that. But the biblical concept is more. This is the word often used in the ancient world to describe *business* partnerships, where, as one

commentator notes, “all those involved would share in doing the work on the one hand and in the financial responsibilities on the other.”<sup>2</sup> So it’s community with a purpose, a mission, a cause. Think of Tolkein’s *Fellowship of the Ring*—it’s that kind of fellowship or partnership in and for something—a genuine love and camaraderie bound by a common cause.

And we see that relational and missional aspect come together in how Paul thanks God for the Philippians partnership in ch. 1: “It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all *partakers* [or partners, fellowshippers] with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel” (1:7). And again in our passage, ch. 4:10: “I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity” to show it. And v. 14: “it was kind of you to share [or partner with or fellowship in] my trouble.”

And important for guarding this genuine fellowship in the gospel is Paul assuring the Philippians that the joy he’s expressing has nothing to do with his needs being met. That’s not why he’s happy about the money. He says in v. 11: “Not that I am speaking of being in need,” and again in v. 17, “Not that I seek the gift.” Paul’s not excited about their partnership because he really needs the money. As he says in vv. 11-12, “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.” And what’s Paul’s secret? He’s found a joyful contentment that travels above life’s circumstances—namely, through treasuring and trusting Jesus Christ. That’s the meaning behind the often misused v. 13: “I can do all things [be content in anything God calls me to] through him who strengthens me,” because Jesus is enough. And God is the ultimate provider, as he says in v. 19: “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”

Paul’s aim in their giving is not really about the money, but the bond of love and the joy of partnership and the spiritual benefit they’ll receiving by giving: “Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit” (4:17). And if that mutual trust isn’t there, that’s going to affect their partnership, right? If they get the sense that Paul isn’t really interested in them, or in the cause, but in their cash—that’s big red flag. And it should be.

And the same is true today for the kind of partnership in the gospel we have in the local church. That’s one of the reasons we’re a congregational church—we are a community on mission *together*. That’s why all members have a say in the budget. It’s *our* budget, not the deacons’ or the treasurer’s or the elders’ budget. That’s one of the reasons we have qualifications for deacons and elders—biblical qualifications for godly, upright, trustworthy character—“not loves of money” (1 Tim. 3:3) or “greedy for dishonest gain” (1 Tim. 3:8). Leaders who have a contentment that comes from Christ, not stuff. For the same reasons our missions board does a lot of work to keep us connected to the missionaries we support—missionaries we partner with. To know them, their work, their needs, their hardships, victories, and joys. It’s not just sending a check; it’s sharing life in the advancement of the gospel.

And if we ever get to the point where we’re more interested in raising money or paying bills, than seeing Christ treasured above all things here in the Metrowest and to the ends of the earth; if

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<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (Louisville: WJK, 2004), 85.

we ever find ourselves using people instead of loving people; if our genuine concern only goes as far as gaining capital, then we need to stop what we're doing and rethink our lives and our existence as a church. The cause of Christ is advanced through *genuine* fellowship, of which giving is a part.

The third question: is there a need? When it comes to giving as partnership, will my money make a difference? And so our third point . . .

### **Strategic Investment: Giving that Makes a Difference**

When you give to a cause, you want to know that your money is being well used, right? That's why we have groups like Charity Navigator today, who rate different charities on their trustworthiness, or the ECFA—Evangelical Council of Financial Accountability (not to be confused with our denomination, EFCA—Evangelical Free Churches of America). We want to know that our money is making a real difference—meeting important needs, not just lining the pockets of administrators or being squandered on inefficient or ineffective systems. In the same way, Paul wanted to encourage the Philippians that their financial support really did make a difference.

While he wasn't seeking the gift itself, that doesn't mean it wasn't useful or necessary for the work God called Paul to do. It made every difference in the world. It wasn't necessary for his joy or contentment, but it was helpful for getting the work done. Generous support from churches like the one in Philippi is what freed Paul up to focus on gospel ministry.

Early in his ministry, Paul was what we call today “bi-vocational.” That is, he had a day job by which he made his living—making tents—and spent his free time preaching the gospel of Jesus (cf. Acts 18:1-4). But when churches like Philippi sent him aid, it freed him to be “occupied with the Word” rather than paying bills (cf. Acts 18:5). He describes the impact that the Philippians' generosity had in vv. 14-18:

And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. <sup>16</sup> Even in Thessalonica *you sent me help for my needs once and again.* <sup>17</sup> Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. <sup>18</sup> *I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent . . .*

Their giving made a real difference. It was practically strategic. It bore tangible fruit for the cause of the gospel by supporting Paul and his friends in their work.

And so it's important for us to be both transparent and strategic in how we spend the money God supplies us as a church through the gifts of everyone here. We want to be transparent, because accountability is essential. To know where the money is going, and that it's actually getting there. Again, that's why the whole congregation is invited to weigh in on how we budget our money as a church. That's what we do in our annual meeting each year when we review the budget in detail and where it has to be approved by a vote of the members.

And we need to be strategic in how we spend it. Our deacons literally spend hours each year, prayerfully weighing the needs and the opportunities—all within the scope of our mission to

glorify God as a family of believers who make disciples for Christ, and our vision to see Christ treasured above all things.

A large portion of that budget goes toward salaries; freeing up pastoral and support staff to devote focused time to the cause of the gospel (whether through ministering the Word or supporting that work). And a significant portion goes to several ministry initiatives, the largest of which is global missions.

One interesting way to look at our budget is to see it as it lines up with the eight core commitments of our vision. Of course not every line in our budget can be associated with a single core commitment (so we see some other responsibilities here), but this gives us an interesting snapshot. This is total spending, both missions and general budget together. There's some healthy categories, but we can also see some room for improvement, right? Right now only 2% of our budget is allocated to local outreach. If we're going to make an impact here, we're going to need to think more strategically about that. And of course that's part of what our Local Outreach Development Team has been working on. We know that church planting is downstream from outreach and discipleship, but that's another area where if we're serious about seeing Christ treasured through planting healthy, gospel-preaching churches, we're going to need to ask God what it looks like for us to strategically invest in that. And pray for our treasurer and the deacons as they begin their budgeting work for 2019.

When we give as partnership, we want to know: Is there a need? Is there a strategic investment? Does our giving make a difference? Does it bear fruit in gospel growth and gospel witness?

Finally, our last question: what's the ultimate impact? Am I investing in something that will last? And this brings us full circle in the series, as we consider our third point . . .

### **Treasure that Lasts: the Glory of God**

Look again at v. 18: "I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, *a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.*" Notice to whom the Philippians are ultimately giving. Not to Paul, but to God. Their giving is an act of worship. Paul uses the imagery of the Old Testament sacrifices Israel offered to God as their worship. Listen to the offering described in Leviticus 1:

If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish. He shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, that he may be *accepted* before the LORD. He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be *accepted* for him to make atonement for him. . . . And the priest shall burn all of it on the altar, as a burnt offering, a food offering with a *pleasing aroma* to the LORD (1:3-4, 9).

In a similar way, the Philippians' investment in the cause of the gospel in partnership with Paul is an act of worship to God. Not to atone for sin; that was completed by Christ on the cross. But to recognize and celebrate his worthy name: a pleasing aroma, a sacrifice acceptable to God. And look what he says in v. 20: "To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen." Again, that's language of worship. As he's thanking the Philippians for their partnership in the gospel, he concludes by saying that the whole thing is ultimately aimed at bringing glory to God.

So what's the ultimate impact of their giving? By investing in the cause of the gospel, they're magnifying the glory of God. They're recognizing his incomparable worthiness, surrendering themselves before his beauty, sacrificing themselves for his worthy renown. They are, in Jesus' words in Matthew 6, storing up their treasure in heaven. Investing in the one thing that this fallen earth cannot destroy—the eternal glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

And here's the thing: God is getting glory not only when the gospel Paul preaches results in a changed life—someone new coming to Christ. That brings glory to God. But God is getting glory in the very act of giving itself—because they, as people who have been changed by that same gospel, are trusting and treasuring Christ above all things, such that they're willfully, joyfully, and generously giving to him.

The true value of our giving is measured not by visible results on earth but by the worthiness of the one to whom we give. So even when we're not seeing the fruit we want to see, God is still worthy of the gift. The cause of the gospel is still a supremely worthy cause. We need to pray, we need to proclaim, we need to lay down our lives to love our neighbors, to think strategically about what we do, but the results are ultimately in his hands. And he will get the glory due his name. There will come a day, when as Paul says in ch. 2, “at the name of Jesus every knee [will] bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (2:10-11).

The aim of Christian giving is the advance of the gospel to the glory of God. In Jesus, we have a worthy cause, a genuine fellowship, a chance to make a strategic investment, all for the unending glory of God. That is a partnership worth investing in.