

The Sweet Aroma of Gospel Partnership

Philippians 4:14-23

This morning we conclude our series through the book of Philippians, what we've entitled "Gospel Mission, Gospel Community: Paul's Vision for the Church in Philippians." By the way, if you've missed part of this series and or want to refresh anything, you can listen to or read previous sermons on our website. Don't worry, there's not going to be a test. But one of my prayers throughout has been that this series would be particularly helpful for us as we think about living the vision God has called us to as a church, to be a gospel-centered community living each day on mission for Christ.

This book is all about partnership *in* the gospel and *for* the gospel. We've said that many times. And when Paul uses the word gospel he's talking about the good news of what the God of the universe has done to establish his kingdom over his creation and deal with our sinful rebellion against him through the life, death, and resurrection of his eternal Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus, who became human, lived a perfect life for us, died a rebel's death for our sin, and rose victoriously on the third day to conquer sin and death and give new life to all who believe. That's what Paul means by the gospel, and that's what he says should be the center of our personal lives, our relationships, and our purpose or mission. We share together in the gospel, depending on and delighting in God's grace and forgiveness, and we work together to share it with the world, to declare the message of Jesus that others might treasure Christ and find life and joy in him.

As we've mentioned before, this is note on which Paul opened the book, when he thanks God for the Philippians' "partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (1:5). And as we come to our passage this morning, ch. 4:14-23, this is now the note he closes on. Listen to v. 14: "Yet it was kind of you to *share* [or fellowship] my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into *partnership* [or fellowship] with me in giving and receiving, except you only" (4:14-15, ESV). Remember when Paul talks about fellowship here (which is the same word as "partnership"), he's not talking about coffee and cookies for thirty minutes after the service. He's talking about sharing life together in such an honest and humble way that we can deal with sin and cling desperately to grace we have in Jesus, both in our relationships with one another and in our interaction with those who do not yet know Christ. Think "Fellowship of the Ring"—that kind of partnership, "compatriots bound together in a great cause."¹

And as Paul brings this letter to a close, he wants us to understand that this partnership in the gospel, this call to work as team to help each other depend on and delight in Jesus so that

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 19.

together we can help still others know and treasure Jesus—this partnership is ultimately a matter of *worship*.

Partnership in the gospel is ultimately a matter of worship. But what do we mean by *worship*? If we think about how the word is used on the street or on television, it often has to do with how we treat celebrities or people we love. His fans *worship* him. He *worships* the ground she walks on. If you're a child of the 80's and 90's, you'll remember Wayne's World and their reaction to their heroes: "We're not worthy, we're not worthy." But where does all of that imagery come from? From the world of religion. You think of a pagan temple, with a large idol in the front, and crowds of people around it, on their knees, bowing before it in *worship*.

Now in the sophisticated West we've quite gotten rid of such "nonsense" and "superstition," but it doesn't mean we don't treat other things like a god. That's ultimately what worship is, treating something like God. You recognize its worthiness ("we're not worthy"). There's something special about it; it deserves your affection and allegiance. You cherish its presence. If you've been to a concert and your favorite singer gives you a high five in the crowd, what do you say? "I'm never going to wash that hand again." "He worships the ground she walks on"—because her feet stepped here, this place is now sacred, holy ground. You cherish its presence. You look to it for life and identity and hope. Your god is your savior—the answer to all your problems. And so you treat it how it deserves to be treated, with all your affection and attention and obedience.

Now, for Christians, the way we often use the word *worship* is to talk about church. It's what we do when we come to church—we come to a *worship* service. You have in your hands a *worship* folder or a bulletin. We sing *worship* music. Worship is what we do when we come to church. And then we go home, and do something quite different than worship (or at least that's how we use the word).

What does God have in mind for worship, and what does it have to do with what Paul's talking about in this closing passage?

I want you to notice the language of worship that Paul uses here. Look down at v. 18: "I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a *fragrant offering*, an *acceptable sacrifice*, *pleasing to God*." Think about that imagery: "a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God." If you're familiar with the Bible, what other parts does that remind you of? The Old Testament sacrifices that Israel was to offer to God as an act of worship (in places like Exodus and Leviticus). It was usually a spotless animal that was sacrificed and burned upon the altar at the temple in order to bear God's anger against Israel's sin, as 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).

So when Paul describes the Philippians gift to him for the advance of the gospel, he describes it with language of worship—a pleasing aroma, a sacrifice acceptable to God.

And look at v. 20 in Philippians 4: “To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.” As he’s thanking them for their partnership in the gospel, he concludes by saying that the whole thing is ultimately aimed at bringing glory to God. Again, that’s language of worship. To glorify someone is to celebrate their worthy reputation, to make much of them, to treat them like God. It is *worship*.

So this whole enterprise of partnering in the gospel and for the gospel, gospel community and gospel mission, is ultimately a matter of worshiping God. Of making him big. Of recognizing his worthiness, cherishing his presence, and responding appropriately. Which means if we’re not sharing life together to help each other depend on Christ and working to tell others about him, then we’re not treating God the way he deserves to be treated—we’re not worshiping him.

Now worship is different in the New Testament than in the Old. We are no longer under the Old Covenant laws about sacrifice because Jesus Christ was the ultimate and final sacrifice to God when he gave his life on the cross. Hebrews 10:14 says, for “by one sacrifice he [Jesus] has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.” No other sacrifice or offering is necessary to deal with God’s anger against our sin; Jesus’ blood was enough (Rom. 3:21-26; Col. 1:15-23). Yet through Jesus, God’s people are still called to worship him—not with the sacrifices of animals, but with the way we live our whole lives (Rom. 12:1-2; Ps. 15).

Part of that worship is what we are doing right now, gathering together under God’s Word, to make much of him and be changed by his Spirit, and to respond to him in song, in prayer, sometimes with the sacraments of baptism or the Lord’s Supper. But the ultimate response is an obedient life. And obedient life. And that’s nothing new. When Israel’s first king, Saul, offered sacrifices to God but disobeyed his Word, Samuel the prophet responded, saying, “Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams” (1 Sam. 15:22).

So gathering together is part of our worship. But treating God like God is much bigger than Sunday morning. It’s what we do to honor God with our whole lives, as a people who have been rescued by the blood of Christ. As Paul says elsewhere in Romans, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies [all of you] as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1, ESV). All of life is worship. And central to that worship is our partnership in the gospel of Jesus. There are two ways that this partnership is expressed in this passage.

Worship is expressed in genuine concern for one another (4:10)

First, worship is expressed in our genuine concern for one another. This one actually goes back to v. 10 from last week, where Paul started this final note of thanks to them. He said there, “I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it.” We mentioned last week that the word translated “concern” here is the same word translated elsewhere in the book as “mind,” or “thinking,” or “perspective.” We’ve talked quite a bit in previous sermons about the necessity of a gospel-shaped perspective, a right way of thinking that comes from treasuring Jesus above self. So we’ll not say much about it here, except to note that this genuine concern and affection for fellow partners in the gospel is ultimately an act of worship to God. It’s his reputation that’s at stake, and it’s his worthiness that motivates us. Like a child performing in a choir, who looks out

into the crowd to find his parents and wave to them—he works hard to pay attention to the director and to work together with the other children singing, but it’s ultimately because he wants to make mom and dad proud. So even our genuine love for each other is ultimately not about us, but God—recognizing his worthiness, cherishing his presence, and responding appropriately, by helping others to cherish him. And so worship is expressed in genuine concern for one another.

But the bigger emphasis in this passage is the worshipful nature of how the Philippians’ showed their concern for Paul—through their sacrificial giving. And so, second, worship is expressed in giving sacrificially to the cause of Christ.

Worship is expressed in giving sacrificially to the cause of Christ (4:14-20)

Now Paul had gone out of his way to make sure the Philippian church knew that his joy was not contingent on his needs being met. We saw that last week in vv. 11-13, the kind of joyful contentment that travels above our circumstances, because it’s anchored in Jesus, who remains the same when life doesn’t. But that’s not to say Paul doesn’t appreciate their gift, as he says in v. 14: “Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles.” Not only does he appreciate it, he commends them for their faithful partnership with him, even when no other church came along in support. As he says in vv. 15-16: “Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need.” This church was a model of sacrificial giving, and that giving was an act of worship. But what do we mean by *sacrificial giving*?

Listen to how Paul describes the generosity of the Macedonian churches, including the church in Philippi, as a model of sacrificial generosity. In writing to the church in Corinth, he says,

And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will. (2 Cor. 8:1-5)

Later he explains that the reason the Corinthian church didn’t have to give is because the church in Philippi was supplying his needs (11:9).

The Philippian church didn’t just give what it had leftover. Spend whatever they wanted and if there was something left at the end of the week, well, that we’ll give to God. They didn’t give when they were enjoying abundance, and then cut it off when times were tight. “We can’t afford it.” They didn’t give when things were going well but then circle the wagons when trials and affliction came. They gave despite their suffering. They gave out of their poverty. They gave not just according to their means, but *beyond* their means. They adjusted their lifestyle in order to be able to give more. It was a *sacrifice*, it cost them something. And they gave joyfully, begging Paul for the opportunity to give. Because they weren’t giving to Paul, they were giving to God. Their giving was an act of worship.

This is part of what made Paul so excited about their gift. Again, it’s not because his needs were finally being met. He repeats that in v. 17: “Not that I am looking for a gift.” Rather, he continues, “but I am looking for what may be credited to your account.” Paul knows that there’s

just as much benefit for the giver as there is for receiver. The Philippian church was blessed for parting with their money, because it meant being able to participate in what God was doing to spread his gospel. And because it was a tangible reminder that our true inheritance and reward is Jesus. There is a blessing that comes with generosity, with sacrificial giving as an act of worship.

Of course generosity is bigger than just our money. God calls us to be generous with our time, with our skills, with our service—all of life (Eph 5:15-16; 1 Pet. 4:10). Let's not forget that though the Philippian church was generous in sending money to Paul, they were also “engaged in the same conflict” as him—bearing witness to Jesus in their own city (1:30). Nevertheless, when we consider how dependent we are on our money, and how difficult it is to give it away, we need to ask, how is this kind of sacrificial giving for the cause of the gospel possible?

First, it's only possible if we treasure Jesus more than we treasure our stuff. This is a simple but profound truth. Just as the decision whether to purchase a vanilla latte over a caramel one all depends on which one I value drinking more, so the decision to give in such a way that it affects my lifestyle all depends on whether I value my lifestyle more than Jesus. *Do I recognize his worthiness?* And this is true for all of us here. Children, students, if I value completing my Star Wars Lego collection more than I value Jesus and the happiness of knowing him and helping others know him, then I will never understand why someone would give their money away instead of by more stuff. Now I love Legos. I love Nerf guns. The question is, do I treasure them more than Jesus? Is Jesus my satisfaction, my reward? Treasuring Christ costs us something; it means choosing *not* to treasure something else. But really, it's like exchanging dirt for gold—stuff can't compare to the reward we have in Jesus. So sacrificial giving is only possible if we treasure Jesus more than our stuff.

Second, sacrificial giving to the gospel's advance is only possible if we value the eternal destiny of lost souls more than we value the temporary security and pleasure of this life. Let me say it a different way: giving generously to churches and ministries that help people know Jesus is only possible if I care more about seeing someone escape the horrors of hell more than I value living a comfortable life. Do we believe that there is something more wonderful and more valuable than the richest treasures of this world, and something far more terrible than pain, poverty, and death? There is God—either in his presence forever, or away from it forever. I will not give sacrificially if I am not convinced that God's heavenly kingdom is a better investment, for myself and for others, than anything else in this world. This is what Jesus is talking about in Matthew 6 when he says “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt 6:19-21).

Third, sacrificial giving for the spread of the gospel is only possible if we trust God to supply our needs. This is what Paul reminds us in v. 19: “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (ESV). Giving generously to God is a statement that I recognize that I am not in control. I need him. It's similar to the idea of taking a Sabbath—a day of rest from your normal work. What sense does it make when you're trying to get ahead in the world, or just keep your head above water, to take a whole day off from work each week? That's 52 extra days of productivity in a year. It doesn't make sense, except as a reminder that I'm not the one in control of my livelihood; God is. It forces me to trust him to supply my needs.

In the same way, giving generously to God, according to my means, and even beyond them, puts me in a place where I have to trust God to be in control of my life and livelihood.

This is where it gets the hardest, at least for me. Do I really trust that if God is asking me to give so that it hurts, that he'll take care of our needs? Do I really believe that all this money and stuff belongs to God anyway—that he's the one who gave it, and I am a caretaker of it on his behalf? Do I believe that he is in control, and that he's *good*? Do I believe that he is more generous than I can imagine—that “he who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, [will] also with him graciously give us all things” (Rom. 8:32)? Now, recognize that some of those needs he blesses us with in advance; the rest of them wait for the new creation when Christ returns. Do I trust him to know which ones I need now, and which ones I should wait to enjoy until then?

That's hard stuff. Because, again, it's a statement that I am not in control; I'm trusting God—that he is wise and generous. If I don't trust him, I will not give sacrificially. But if I do, then I'm free to give my money to him with abandon, because I know he'll take care of me.

Finally, sacrificial giving to the gospel is only truly sacrificial if it's done as an act of worship to God. Some pervert the idea of giving, thinking that it is some sort of formula for earthly gain. They read a verse like v. 19 and think God to be a cosmic slot machine—put your money in, pull the handle, and the riches come out. Even worse are phony preachers who feed people these lines on television and radio, exploiting them for their own selfish gain.

But the ultimate motivation for giving in this passage, and throughout the Bible, is not what we get out of it, but what God gets out of it—our trust, our praise, his glory. It is about him; it is an act of worship, as we recognize his worthiness, cherish his presence, and respond appropriately, by counting everything in this world loss compared to knowing Christ and being found in him (3:8), and so partnering generously and sacrificially with others in the advance of the gospel.

One of the beautiful yet sometimes frustrating things about the New Testament's teaching on giving is that it doesn't lay out numbers and percentages for what this looks like. We see God's people giving going to the local church, we see giving going beyond the church to missionaries like Paul, and to help people in need (cf. Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37; Rom. 16:25-29; 2 Cor. 8-9; 11:7-11). But we're never told you have to give this much money or this percentage of your income to be faithful to Christ. Under the Old Covenant for ancient Israel, they were called to give a *tithe* or tenth of their produce and livestock (Lev. 27:30-32). But under the New Covenant in Christ, the focus is exclusively on giving from the heart. Spiritual maturity has nothing to do with how much or how little we have; there are rich Christians in the Bible and poor ones, just as there are ungodly rich people and ungodly poor people. We give according to what we have, not according to what we don't have (2 Cor. 8:12). But we give sacrificially—so that it affects our lifestyle. We give generously, trusting God to supply our needs. We give from the heart, according to our ultimate treasure (Matt. 6:19-21). 2 Corinthians 9:7 summarizes well, “Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

Now I thank God that like the Philippian church, Westgate has a reputation of being a very generous church. Praise be to God! That means that many of us here have had a firsthand opportunity to experience the joy and blessing of what Paul is talking about. But don't let that

cause us not to hear this message. And you need to know that as a pastor, I don't know what anyone gives to this church. I don't need to know; we have deacons and treasurers who handle those things with wisdom and integrity. Moreover, I don't *want* to know. Because I want to be free, when we come to passages of Scripture that deal directly, if not uncomfortably with how we handle or hold fast to our money, I want to be free to preach boldly and faithfully what God is saying, without anyone thinking I'm secretly talking to them. I don't know the size of your pocket book nor the condition of your heart. What I do know is that giving sacrificially to the cause of the gospel is a direct reflection of our value for God. It is an act of worship—either of God in generosity and sacrifice, or of something else, in self-protection or selfish indulgence.

The call to partner together in the gospel and for the gospel—our calling to be a gospel-centered church living each day on mission for Christ—is ultimately a matter of worship, making much of God. And for that reason, it all depends on grace.

As Paul signs off his letter in vv. 21-23, he closes by extending personal greetings, even greetings from members of Caesar's own household who had come to faith. Think of the irony: "Paul may be in prison at Caesar's pleasure, but the gospel has penetrated Caesar's household."² But his final line is not just a customary conclusion (though it's common). It's a reminder of what makes this whole vision of partnership in the gospel possible: grace. It's all of grace.

Grace is when God gives to us something absolutely wonderful, even though we deserve something utterly terrible. We deserve death and hell for our sin; instead, because of what Christ has done on the cross for us, God offers forgiveness, new life, adoption into his family if we will believe. But if we've learned anything from this book, it's not just that grace saves us, but that it also sanctifies us. We don't just need the cross of Jesus to be rescued from our sin, we need it for our lives to be changed by God's Spirit. No one is worthy or capable of what Paul is calling us to in this book. No one is holy enough, strong enough. None of us, left to ourselves, are able to follow Jesus' model of laying our lives down. We think too much of ourselves and too little of God. None of us are selfless enough to actually part willingly and generously with our money to help others hear the message of Christ. We need grace. We need grace. This whole vision depends upon God's grace in Jesus.

May God be pleased to shed his grace on us as a congregation. May the time we've spent in this book, the time we've spent thinking and praying about what God's calling us to as a congregation—may it be more than just a Sunday morning experience or words on a piece of paper. May our worship of God not end when we leave this room. But may our hearts be captivated by Christ, satisfied in him, compelled by his vision, and may they overflow in relationships marked by grace and humility, and a passion to see the lost come to know and rejoice in Jesus Christ. May our gospel partnership and the whole of our lives be a sweet aroma to him. May God receive the glory due his name.

² D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 123.

Discussion Questions

1. What typically goes through your mind with the word “worship”? How does that compare to how the Bible describes worship in general, and how this passage describes our worship in particular (i.e. relative to gospel partnership)?
2. Reflect again on the portrait of the Macedonian churches’ sacrificial giving in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5. What do we learn about the heart of these churches here?
3. Discuss the statement that sacrificial giving is only possible if we treasure Jesus more than our stuff. Is it true? What is it that often gives us pause in giving to the cause of the gospel?
4. Discuss the statement that sacrificial giving is only possible if we value the eternal destiny of lost souls more than temporary security and pleasure in this life. Reactions?
5. Discuss the statement that sacrificial giving is only possible if we trust God to meet our needs. Why is this so hard? How is v. 19 sometimes abused?
6. Think about all that Paul has called the church to in this book. What excites you the most? What terrifies you the most? Why does all of it rest on his grace (v. 23)?