

Side By Side: Gospel Partnership in Philippians

By [David Strain](#)

Now let me invite you to take your copies of God's Word in your hands and turn with me please to Paul's letter to the Philippians, Philippians chapter 1. If you are using one of the church Bibles you'll find that on page 980 - Philippians 1, page 980. Before we read let's turn to the Lord together in prayer and ask for His help. Let us pray.

Oh Lord our God, how we pray that You would pour out Your Spirit on the preaching of the Word and yield it with power and force and life-changing effect in all our hearts. Save sinners, restore backsliders, bind up the broken hearted, strengthen weak knees and feeble arms and enable us to run our race with perseverance. Slay sin and cause to come to fruition our graces. Make us like Jesus. Sanctify us by the Truth. Your Word is Truth. Do this now, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Philippians chapter 1 reading from verse 1. This is the Word of Almighty God:

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

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

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

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

Amen, and we praise God that He has spoken to us in His holy and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth on all our hearts.

Why Study Philippians?: Ancient Customs used for Gospel Ends

Well this morning we are beginning a new series working our way through the letter of Paul to the Philippians. And really all that we're doing this morning is introduction so we'll be looking at the first two verses. And as you begin to read, really any of Paul's letters but Philippians is our study today, when you begin to read Paul's letters you will be forgiven for feeling that you have entered an antique world of unfamiliar customs of epistolary etiquette, quite alien to our own. We don't write letters like this. There are no emoticons and "LOLs" here; no smiley faces or hashtags in Paul's letters. And yet understanding and attending to the way that Paul harnesses the ancient literary conventions of his own day and makes them serve Gospel ends is going to help us understand something of the relevance of this letter to an ancient church for the church in the day in which we live.

Look how the letter begins. "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Much as any letter in the ancient Greco-Roman world, Paul starts in the conventional manner. He identifies himself, the sender - "Paul and Timothy." Then he identifies the addressee, in this case "the church at Philippi." And then there's a word of greeting, "Grace to you and peace." That's how you did it back then. We don't write letters like that. Ours begin, "Dear Mr. Smith; Dear Mrs. So-and-So." That's how we write our letters; that's our convention; this is Paul's convention. Not just in the West but also in the ancient Near East, if you were to turn to Daniel 4 you would see a letter from King Nebuchadnezzar that follows exactly the same pattern. "King Nebuchadnezzar," that's how it begins, the sender, then the people addressed, "to all peoples, nations, languages that dwell in all the earth," and then the word of greeting, "Peace be multiplied to you." So in the ancient East and in the ancient West, this is the conventional way of writing a letter. Ours doesn't look quite like that but you get the picture; this is how you did it.

But it would be a mistake for us, just as it would have been a mistake for the Philippians, given the conventionality of Paul's letter writing style here to simply zip past and skim over these opening lines because actually, though he uses the conventions, Paul makes them bear the weight of profound truth. They carry rich, theological freight that helps us answer the question, "Why study Philippians at all?" "Why study Philippians?" partly is answered in these opening verses. And I want you to notice three things about the letter and then three things about the church. So three things about the letter to the Philippians and then three things about the Philippians' church.

Three Things about the Letter

The Identity the Letter Gives

First of all, three things about the letter. Number one - the identity the letter will give us. What will Philippians do to you if it penetrates to the roots of who you are? How will it change you if it sinks into your heart? Look how Paul begins, "Paul and Timothy" - here's how they identify themselves - "servants of Christ Jesus," verse 1. The word there, servant, is literally "duloy;" it means slaves. Our English versions are a little squeamish about that sort of thing and we clean it up, but actually the word is slaves. "Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus." Now think about who's speaking. Here is the mighty apostle Paul, this titan of the early church, the theologian, evangelist, and great missionary of the early church, and Timothy is his right-hand man, his lieutenant to whom he delegates apostolic authority, sends into churches like the church in Ephesus to set things in order. These men are huge towering figures of immense significance to the welfare of the early church that have shaped the whole fabric of our faith through Paul's letters, incredibly significant individuals. And yet Paul's preferred self-designation is "dulos - slave of Christ Jesus."

In the letter to the Philippians, Paul's target, the big idea of Philippians, is to show us how the Gospel of grace should change us and lead us and move us to deep, full partnership together in Christian service and Christian ministry. He wants the Philippians to be so impacted and gripped by the good news about Jesus that they are ready, verse 27 of chapter 1, "to stand side by side with him for the cause of Christ." That's the main target at which Paul takes aim here in Philippians. And so right out of the starting blocks in verse 1 he wants to set before them a model of the kind of attitude and disposition the Gospel of grace generates that will enable the kind of ministry partnership that he wants to see in their lives. Here in his own life is what Philippians will do to us if we allow it to sink in - it will generate profound humility. "Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus" - wholly surrendered to the lordship and mastery of Jesus Christ. Going where He goes; saying whatever He gives them to say. Those whom the Lord is most pleased to use invariably take the servant posture, obeying a pattern that was set first by the Lord Jesus back in John 13. The apostle Paul knows that if he's to be effective in Christian service he too must divest himself of his finery and take the posture of a menial slave and wash the disciples' feet. He's to be the servant of all. The only basis for usefulness and effectiveness in the service of Jesus is not heroic leadership; it is sacrificial, servant-hearted slavery of our lives to the utter mastery of Jesus Christ. The identity the letter aims to give us.

The Authority the Letter Carries

Secondly, notice the authority this letter carries. There may have been

something deeper in the background in Paul's use of this language of slavery than simply the desire to present a model of humility for us. The Old Testament prophets were called "the slaves of the Lord," particularly in the old Septuagint version, the Greek version of the Old Testament known to the apostles. So for example, in Amos 3:7, "The Lord does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants," literally there, "his duloy, his slaves, the prophets." Like the Old Testament prophets, the slaves of the Lord who were bound and constrained to deliver the very word of God to Israel, the apostle Paul here is saying, in his apostolic office, the mastery and lordship of Jesus over him extends even to his very words. He is the slave of the Lord, bound to deliver to God's people the very word of Christ. So we need Philipians not just because of what it will do to us but because of who speaks to us in it. This is the voice of Jesus speaking to you. Don't you ever find yourself wanting some encounter with Christ? What would it be like if He were physically here with us to hear the timbre and accents and the tone of His voice, to hear Him? Paul is saying, "You do hear Him. You hear the very words, the very voice of the Savior Himself as the Scriptures are opened to us." So we need Philipians just as we need the whole counsel of God in Scripture because in it, God is talking and it is not safe for us to neglect it.

The Blessings the Letter Offers

The identity the letter gives us, the authority the letter carries, then thirdly the blessings Philipians offers us. Verse 2, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Here is Paul subverting the typical Greek greeting, the Greek letter writing convention pronounced "*charein*." Greetings. Paul instead, under the authority and commission of Jesus, writes to the Philipian Christians not "*charein*" but "*charis*," grace. It's the great catchall term in the New Testament Scriptures for the sum total of the blessings of God that belong to believers in union with Jesus Christ. The word "peace" there probably echoes the Hebrew greeting, shalom - not just the absence of strife but the presence of peace with God and a restored relationship to Him and to His people through the Gospel of grace. Together those two great terms, grace and peace, provide in two words a comprehensive response to the bankruptcy and deepest needs of our hearts. Everything we most urgently need is right here - grace to bring us from the dead to resurrection life and peace to describe the life we now possess through faith in Jesus Christ. Grace and peace is no passing greeting, glibly tossed onto the page to satisfy convention; not at all. These are the twin spiritual realities that the Word of God in general and Philipians in particular offers us. Here's why we need Philipians - grace for our sin and peace for our troubled hearts; grace for our weaknesses, peace for our fears; grace for our spiritual bankruptcy and peace in the knowledge that in Christ we are rich indeed. Grace to bring us safe thus far and grace to bring us home and peace to silence an accusing conscience and guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Everything that we need is comprehended under those two words - grace and peace. That's what comes to us, what is offered to us in the Gospel of Jesus

Christ. That's what you get in Jesus, grace and peace - a comprehensive response to the thorough brokenness of your life under the curse of sin. That's why we need Philipians - the identity it creates, the authority that it brings, and the blessings it conveys.

Three Things about the Philipians' Church

The Character of the Church

Then notice three things that Paul tells us here about the Philipian church to whom he is writing or to which he is writing. First of all, the character of their church. Notice the church at Philippi is called "an assembly of saints." Since the rise of medieval Catholicism we typically have come to use the word "saint" to refer to an unusually holy or devout or pious person. We might say of someone, maybe you say this of your mother, "She has the patience of a saint." Today of all days especially perhaps you say that. She has the patience of saint. She has to deal with you after all! She has the patience of a saint. That is not at all how the New Testament uses the word "saint." It helps to know that our English words for holy and holiness and sanctity and sanctification share the same root as the word for "saint." A saint literally is simply "a holy one." A holy one. Something has happened in the life of everyone that comes to know Jesus. A decisive breach has taken place in their lives. The old life of sin is no longer the characteristic fact about their lives. They have now been set apart unto God, inhabited by His Spirit, and are being changed. They are now holy ones. It is not that there is no longer any residual sin in their life; there is a process where sin is being mortified and new spiritual life being generated - we call that sanctification. But something fundamental and irreversible has taken place when they were converted. The dominion and power of sin has been decisively, once and for all, overthrown in their lives so that now they are saints, holy ones. You are saints, holy ones. You may not feel that way, but if you are a believer in Jesus that is the truth concerning you.

You remember the powerful scenes during the second Gulf War when the crowds were all gathered in the square and they're celebrating and their flags are flying and they tear down the statue of Saddam Hussein. Do you remember that scene? It's a powerful moment. The emblem of the old dictator's regime has been toppled; he no longer holds dominion in that country. His rule has ended; his power broken. And yet Saddam Hussein managed to survive for months after that on the run, a fugitive. They found him eventually, I think, hiding in a dark hole somewhere. That is what Paul is saying has happened in your heart if you're a Christian. The rule of the old dictator's sin has been decisively toppled and thrown down once and for all. He will never again have the absolute mastery of your life if you're a Christian. And yet the old tyrant lives on in some dark hole in your heart, doesn't he? Isn't that true? Rearing his ugly head from time to time, lying to you, trying to deceive you and making you think he's still in

charge, that he's really and truly the rightful ruler of your life, that you are powerless to stand against him? You can't help yourself but live under his rule. How we need to remember and preach to ourselves if we are Christians that his reign has been overthrown at Calvary, that Jesus' blood and resurrection, His atoning work and triumph over the grave has toppled his dominion. He is a liar; do not listen, believer in Jesus. However low you may sink in your daily combat with sin, never listen to the lies of that old tyrant who tells you that you cannot gain the victory. It is not true; you can. You now under the regime of grace.

The Spiritual Address of the Church

Notice secondly the spiritual address of a Gospel church. Look at verse 1 again. The Philippians are saints but they are saints "in Christ Jesus." We might ask Paul, "Where do they live, these saints? Where would I find them?" Paul has one answer, only one place they can be found. The only saints there are, are saints "in Christ," united to Christ. That's what makes them saints. They are holy ones because they are in the holy One. When someone becomes a Christian our customary form of speech is to say Jesus has come to live in their hearts; they've received Christ. That's true enough. It's not the primary way the New Testament speaks about that reality, however. The New Testament does not say Jesus comes to live in us so much as it says we come to live in Him. He becomes the new environment, the new universe within which we exist. The point is this. They are only saints who are saints in Christ. There are no self-made holy ones. There is no self-generated holiness and sanctification and change, not real change, not inside out change, not change from the roots of who you are. You cannot break with sin if you're not in Christ.

You know fish get oxygen from water through their gills; they have no lungs. They cannot breathe the free air; they can't exist on land; they need to live in the ocean, right? Human beings are just like that. Either Christ is your natural habitat or the world is. If the world remains your real home, then sin will always have the mastery in your life. But if you breathe the holy air of life in Christ then take heart, struggling Christian take heart, because sin can never have ultimate mastery over you. "Every spiritual blessing," Ephesians 1 and verse 3, "every blessing is yours in Christ." We may wrestle long and often be overcome by particular sins as they continue to plague our lives, but in the end, believer, you will have the victory because sin cannot breathe the air, the holy air, of life in Christ. It is a toxic environment to sin. You will have the victory. You are holy; you are a holy one because you are in the holy One, the Lord Jesus Christ. And because you're united to Him nothing will ever be the same again. You are in process. He is doing a renovation job on your heart. And so one day, you will look like the mirror image of the Master who saved you. It is certain; cling to the promise and do not give up in your combat with sin.

"No peace without grace," writes Matthew Henry, speaking about the greeting in verse 2 - "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus

Christ” - “No peace without grace, no grace and peace without God our Father, no grace and peace from God our Father but in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.” You need Jesus. If change is to be anything other than surface you need Jesus. If you’re not a Christian, if you’re not in Christ, certainly you can make moral changes here and there, you can overcome this or that vice, you can get a support group around you and begin to change the outward patterns of your life, but all you’re doing - let me say this in all seriousness, not glibly at all - all you’re doing is rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. The deck may look neater, but the ship is still sinking. If you’re not in Christ, surface change is not what matters most. What matters most is that you have been rescued by grace through Jesus and are being changed inside out.

The Geographic Address of the Church

The character of the Philippian church, the spiritual address of the Philippian church, then finally notice what we learn about the geographic address of the church. All true Christians, every true church, is holy, is in Christ, but it’s also in the world. Place matters. In this case, the saints in Christ are at Philippi. Philippi was a Roman colony, a modest sized town, about ten thousand people. Predominantly the elite classes at least would have been Roman speaking, Latin speakers. When Paul arrived there in Acts 16 he found there were not enough Jewish men to establish a synagogue and so he went outside the city to the river where there was a place of prayer. He found some God-fearers, he began to preach, and the Lord opened Lydia’s heart to believe the Gospel. And then as they made their way back through the streets they encounter a slave girl, a Greek slave girl, part of the Philippian underclass. She’s being economically exploited and used. She is demon possessed and is being used by her owners to tell fortunes and they deliver her. And of course the loss to their pocketbooks, her owners, seeing that she can no longer be leveraged to make a quick buck through a riot and Paul is imprisoned. And while in prison, he leads the Philippian jailor and his household to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and they’re baptized, he together with his household. What a wonderful picture of the Gospel crossing social and economic and ethnic barriers, uniting people who otherwise have absolutely nothing in common - a blue collar former centurion who in all likelihood now working as a jailor in the Philippian jail house, a Greek slave girl, and perhaps a single woman, a widow, Lydia, a merchant woman.

The Revolutionary Power of the Gospel and the Local Mission Field

The point is this. The church in Christ is the church in Philippi. A complete cross section of Philippian society are found there from the start. Here’s the core group of First Presbyterian Church Philippi - a slave girl, a jailor, and a single merchant lady. And all of that is only possible because two things collide in the church - Jesus Christ and Philippi. They collide and it is revolutionary when they meet one another. Things are changed as a result. What a powerful thing when Christ and culture collide in the church. We are the church of Jesus Christ, church in

Christ, at Jackson, Mississippi and our job is to bring Jesus and Jackson together as we seek out to live out our lives as saints, as holy ones. In our several vocations in this city, we are to be salt and light and bright shining lights proclaiming the unsearchable riches of Christ and as Christ and culture meet change begins to happen. The church is to be a catalyst for a supernatural chain reaction of change where people hear the Gospel and are turned inside out by His grace just as we have been.

When Paul ministered in Ephesus in Acts 19 he stayed there for three years. He planted a church; he had such an impact on Ephesus that people were stopping their worship of idols. People who made idols were going out of business and so there was a riot and the whole city was turned upside down because the Gospel had a profound effect. This is what happens when the people of God live in the grip of grace and peace, when they are holy ones having been changed and are being changed through their union with Jesus Christ, when they live out their lives in their city openly proclaiming the good news about Jesus, revolution is the result. A Gospel revolution. We are in Jackson. Place matters. This is our mission field. The Lord Jesus is calling us to live for Him where He has placed us and let's see what the Lord will do. Will you pray with me?

Our Father, we're so grateful to You for the Gospel, for the power of it, that it changes us; it doesn't leave us as we once were. It makes us new. Help us, O Lord, not to listen to the lies of the old tyrant of sin but to remember if we believe in Jesus that he has been toppled from his throne and then give us grace in the strength that news provides us, that truth provides us, to live for His glory with all our strength before the eyes of the watching world. For we ask this for the glory and praise of the name of Jesus, amen.

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