

Gospel Friendship | Paul's Letter to the Philippians

The Joy of Good News Partnership

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Philippians 1.1-11

Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ³ I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴ always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, ⁵ in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. ⁷ For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. ⁹ And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; ¹¹ having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

This is the first sermon in a new series that we plan to look at through the summer. The section of the Bible we intend to explore during these next weeks is St. Paul's **Letter** to the Church at Philippi.

About half of the New Testament is made up of letters or "epistles" (as they're often called). Historians and students of antiquities have paid a lot of attention to the art of ancient letter writing. And they've determined that virtually all educated people were schooled in this art and there were very definite rules and guidelines and protocols for writing appropriate letters for many different occasions.

The New Testament scholar Gordon Fee has termed **this** letter (to the Philippians) a "hortatory letter of friendship" but since I don't often use that word "hortatory", I'd rather call it a letter of "influential friendship". And what I have in mind when I use that phrase is a warm relationship that moves the parties in a good direction – a bond or an alliance that is truly mutually beneficial ("influential friendship").

Modern sociologists have observed a friendship CRISIS in our time and place. Robert Bellah and his team from UC Berkley wrote a seminal book *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985 and updated in 2007). Another more recent study is *Bowling Alone* by the Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam –

Americans are doing the same activities we've always done but more and more we're doing them ALONE... bowling alone. And **YOU** may KNOW something of the friendship crisis in your own life and this series may indeed be an opportunity for YOU to reassess the relationships in your own life – how are your friendships? How are you AS a friend and how might the Gospel, the basic message of Christianity, how might the gospel change your approach and experience of friendship?

Today we sort of introduce the theme: 1) The Draw and Dangers of Friendship 2) The Spiritual Dynamic of Good-News Friendship 3) Engaging in Gospel Friendship (how to take some practical steps).

The Apostle Paul was an intensely relational person and had friendships, deep, influential, mutually beneficial friendships all over the Roman Empire.

He's writing to friends in Philippi where he's been and where he helped to establish the first Christian Church in Europe. You can read about that congregations roots in the Book of Acts chapter 16.

We're all, like Paul, drawn to friendship. We are all really wired by God for relationship. One of the aspects of our being created in the image of God is this communal facet of our nature. "It is **not** good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2.18). And even if you consider yourself an introvert, still, you do sense at some level that you need other people and even want to relate to other people. The 2007 film directed by Sean Penn called *Into the Wild* tells the true story of a graduate of Emory University (Chris McCandless) who becomes convinced that to find his real self he has to totally withdraw from everyone and live in total isolation in the Alaska wilderness. And the conclusion of his experiment was written in his journal "Happiness only real when shared".

The beer commercials...and all the other commercials tell us what we already know. When they want to depict those, "It doesn't get any better than this"-moments, there are always a group of friends in the picture. So, I don't think I have to convince us of the desirability of friendship. I do, though, in this friendship-crisis environment, I do have to re-convince us ALL, that we will never become our "true selves" and never become all that God intends us to be without "influential friendships" – more on that in a moment.

There is another side of this though, and that is the danger in friendship. And here again, you hardly have to be convinced (if you're thoroughly modern) – we all know that there are pitfalls to friendship. Even as we try to believe that we can have our cake and

eat it too, we do know that friendship will always cost us. It costs time, effort, privacy, “me-time”, money. We have to learn certain skills like the art of conversation, the three most important parts are, of course, “listen, listen and listen” ...and listening (Simone Weil) is an act of great generosity.

But the main thing that friendship costs us and the thing we are all so very reluctant to give is our hearts. Maybe the greatest piece I’ve ever read on friendship is a chapter in C.S. Lewis’ book, *The Four Loves* (great summer reading for you), “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket — safe, dark, motionless, airless — it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside of Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and (distresses) of love is Hell.”

So, there it is, there’s the great dilemma (I certainly couldn’t say it better than that) we want friendship, but we don’t want to risk vulnerability because our hearts may break, but unless we risk that vulnerability, our hearts will stay safe and will become “unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable” and rotten. Do you feel that dilemma? Do you feel both the draw and the danger in this whole issue of friendship? If you don’t, your own heart may be deeper in that safe, dark, motionless, airless — casket than you realize.

Now back to St. Paul: there IS in his words, and between the lines, permeating this passage and the whole letter, there is a dynamic, an energy and approach to friendship that is really revolutionary. There’s a paradox at work in his relationships. He is an apostle, an authority figure but he describes himself as a slave, “Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus”.

He is extravagantly inclusive. You see it in the overuse of the word “all”, “To all the saints, including the elders and deacons (as if “yes, even these troublemakers are included!”)...all my remembrance...prayer for you all...I feel this way about you all... you are ALL partakers of grace with me... (and that’s not ALL, the “alls”!). The point is, Paul is “large and in-charge” but also quite clear that he is just like them “all”.

He is (as F.F. Bruce once called him), “Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free”. He is liberated from the illusion that he is a good person. He is free from that idea that chokes and destroys friendships, liberated from the impulse to defend himself, to protect and promote himself. He has achieved “low-self-esteem” and sees himself as a slave, a sinner, as just like them ALL: a partaker of grace.

He can greet them with those great words that summarize all God’s richest, ripest blessings from the NT and from the OT – “grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”. He is a spokesman for God on earth and he is a big sinner, just like them all.

He knows that he stands before God the same way these Philippian believers do – he and they ALL are failed, flawed people who have not measured up to God’s standards and are justly deserving His displeasure but God laid the sins of them “ALL” on the only truly good, righteous and perfectly obedient Man that ever lived. And what Paul has in common with these people (and in many ways they had nothing in common – should even have been enemies and opposites!) but he shares something with them that supersedes all the surface, cultural, racial, educational, social differences: God has started a work in them.

He sees, as Lewis said, Paul sees a “secret Master of Ceremonies” at work in their lives. God has stepped into history in Jesus Christ; He lived the life they failed to live and died the death they deserved to die. In Jesus Christ, the heart of God became totally vulnerable and became broken and pierced for us. In Jesus Christ, God became their shared Friend; He said to His 12 disciples (on behalf of ALL His future disciples), “No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me but I chose you...”

Paul sees that “He who began a good work in you will complete it” (6)... “That same God of grace has staked His claim on my life too – I am a fellow partaker of grace with you...and HE, HE has arranged that we are ALL in this together. We are His chosen band. We are friends because He has chosen us to BE ‘companions’ (literally – those who break bread together). I have you in my heart”, says Paul, “because I see our companionship as a work of God”.

That’s the dynamic that freed Paul to give his heart away. He functioned from this platform, this stance: simultaneously low-self-esteem (**a fellow sinner in need of grace**)

and also astoundingly high sense of privilege and security (I and we ALL who believe in this Good News – we are recipients of God’s own heart, of God’s grace and peace. The score is settled and because of Jesus Christ, we have nothing to prove, nothing to hide.) And He has chosen us to journey through life together – the secret Master of Ceremonies has begun a work in us and we are convinced – not so much in one another – but convinced that He who planted His flag in the dark continent of our hearts will claim us all in every part for Himself and for one another!

That’s the dynamic of Good News friendship that answers our dilemma and sets us free for real relationship with others.

Now, a few words on how to actually begin engaging this new and different kind of friendship: 1) Have you ever had a friend you thought loved you...but...also wanted to change you? Dorothy Boyd justified to her sister why she was in love with Jerry McGuire, “I love him for the man he almost is and for the man he wants to be” and the sister just sort of rolled her eyes. It doesn’t work. You can’t marry the woman because you just know you can change her... But, I have to admit: Missy has changed me! And I like it.

The point is: this good news friendship is delightfully influential to the degree that that we are committed to one another and even more so committed to the secret Master of Ceremonies who has brought us together. It’s not so much that I’m out to change you and I really don’t want you trying to change me...but as we are partakers of grace together, it just happens (as it does in a good marriage or family).

The dynamic **IS** that we continue to repent and believe, repent and believe, repent and believe. Each time we do, we get a little more grace enabling us to love a little more (often it’s slow like water dripping on a rock). Paul mentions it here – “I pray that your love abound still more and more in real knowledge and discernment so that you may know how to live... not simply following rules in a wooden, policy, kind of way but be actually engaged with people”

Paul says that this is the result or fruit of Jesus Christ righteous life – it’s His beauty seen in our relationships. And we **GET** it by repenting and believing, repenting and believing, repenting and believing. That’s how we **GET** grace (at the start and at every new turn!) and grace empowers us to love... not simply be nice but really to love. We get Jesus Christ’s energy to love by repenting and believing. And when we do it together, it changes us in a delightful organic (note the word “fruit” v.11) and God exalting way.

Secondly, to quote that great prophet and theologian, James Taylor, “shower the people you love with love”. Paul is effusive. There are four parts to this little section. He identifies the writers and recipients (that part is effusive with love – he calls them saints! – even though they didn’t often feel like saints!) and then a blessing (that part is effusive with affirmation! Grace and peace...) Then the big section, vv. 3-8, is how grateful Paul is for them! Then a prayer (vv.9-11) and even that is all about love.

So, shouldn’t we learn from that old stern, missionary and tough old doctrine-guy Paul that we should be a lot MORE AFFIRMING of one another? And not just because James Taylor says so, not just because it’s positive but because the results of Jesus Christ’s work, the fruit of His righteousness is amazing! It ought to be recognized and we ought to take note of it. “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (often repeated in the NT Letters for good reason!)

Affirm one another to the glory of God – affirm Mom today (but why only today?) – (And why only Mom?) why not affirm everyone else too and every day? Paul could hardly squeeze any more love and affirmation and support and encouragement in this passage. And we should follow suit – there’s an old saying, “Be Kind; everyone you meet is fighting a **Hard Battle.**”

Lastly, go for it! I mean, join the church (**what are you waiting for?**) Join a Home Group or a Bible Study or Sunday Class.

As you repent and believe, **it’s the fruit you should expect... it will happen.** Grace will flow in ***and love will flow out.*** The fruit of Jesus Christ’s work will be expressed in your life **in the form of Good News friendships to the glory and praise of God. (11)**