

Partners in the Gospel
Philippians 1:1-11
 January 6, 2013
 Pastor Dan Hoffman

One thing you might not know about me is that I'm an amazing basketball player. I'm really fast on the court. I have this great jump shot with almost unlimited range. As a matter of fact I can hit three-pointers so deep they should count as four pointers. I don't mean to brag but I don't really have any weaknesses in my game – I'm a defensive strategist and an offensive assassin. Dribbling between the legs, behind the back. I'm a menace on the court.

Have you ever heard someone talk themselves way up? After hearing this kind of "trash talk" you should probably ask me "so what team do you play for?" To which I would reply "Well, I'm not really into organized basketball. I've never played on a team. When I do play it's by myself or in somebody's backyard."

Isn't that a pathetic response? How could I possibly claim to be a superstar basketball player on par with Michael Jordan and not play on a team? That is ridiculous!

Similarly, Christianity can't be lived out by reading the Bible, listening to Christian music, and praying by yourself. Christianity isn't a solo sport like fishing or golf; it is a team sport like basketball, and the local church is the team. To be on the team requires active participation and partnership in the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹

This morning as we head into the New Year we will be starting a new book study through Paul's letter to the Philippians. If you have read this short letter it you know that Paul had fond *memories* of the church he addresses here and so his letter is one full of joy. But it is more than just happy thoughts that fill Paul as he writes – he has a rich appreciation for the Philippian church on several levels as well as a profound concern for their souls.

This morning we will be looking at the introduction to the book, the first 11 verses, examining the context, and setting a foundation for the next several weeks. So if you haven't done so already please open your Bibles to the book of Philippians chapter 1. You can find this on page 830 in the Bible in front of you if you didn't bring your own.

As we get started let's pray:

[pray]

¹ Adapted from Keith Krell http://bible.org/seriespage/howdy-partner-philippians-11-11#P95_41696

This morning the thesis that I want to prove to you is as follows: **Saints are people who partner in the Gospel, increasingly reflecting His image, because of who they are.**

As we start let me set the context for you. The author of Philippians is of course Paul, an educated man who after he came to faith in Christ dedicated his life to mission, planting churches and writing letters. We have thirteen of his letters in the New Testament. Seven of those were written while he was in prison for his evangelistic work and Philippians is among that list.

As he writes it is about 60AD. Thirty years have gone by since Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven. Nero is Cesar and Paul is under house arrest, probably chained to a guard, in Rome.

As you could imagine it is a pretty uncertain time in his life. His case has been presented before Cesar but he hasn't heard back what the verdict will be. Now in 60AD Christianity hasn't been outlawed by Nero yet, and as it will turn out Paul will be released, and allowed to take one more missionary journey before finding himself back in prison where tradition tells he will be beheaded for his faith. But here we are getting *ahead* of ourselves.

Paul planted the Philippian church in 52AD during his second missionary journey. He had originally set out from Antioch to visit the churches he had planted on his first missions trip but had a vision one night of a man pleading with him to come to the region of Macedonia which is in modern day Greece. Paul responded and went to Philippi...

Now when Paul arrived at a new city he would customarily go into the Jewish synagogue and begin to preach the Gospel. But when he arrived in Philippi he found a small, very Roman city with no synagogue so Acts tells us:

On the Sabbath we (that's Paul and Silas and anyone else who was in their party) went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. (Acts 16:13-15)

A little later Paul ended up spending a night in jail in Philippi after casting a demon out of a slave girl who was predicting the future for her master.

About midnight while chained, Paul and Silas were singing hymns and praising God when an earthquake shook the foundations of the city so hard that the jail doors swung open and the chains fell from the walls.

The jailer was about to kill himself thinking everyone had escaped when Paul stopped him telling him everyone was still there. Acts then tells us:

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:29-30)

And that was the start of the church in Philippi. It began as a woman’s Bible study, encountered the Spirit of God at work and grew to be an incredibly dedicated group of believers who threw themselves behind the Gospel supporting it any way they could.

Let’s now turn to our text starting with verses 1 and 2 and the first part of our thesis: “Saints”

[Read Philippians 1:1-2]

As was common in the first century, every letter Paul wrote to his churches started with him introducing himself and then outlining who his recipients were. And in seven of his letters he includes Timothy as someone who partnered with him in his ministry.

And Paul calls himself and Timothy “servants” of Christ Jesus. The word “servant” here actually means “bond servant” or “slave”. But Paul isn’t talking about the fact that he is in prison, rather this is his way of expressing that he is sold out for Jesus – he is a slave of Christ not Rome.

And in saying this Paul is setting himself up as an example of how to follow Christ. In another place he says:

Be imitators of me, just as I am an imitator of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:1)

Paul is a saint, but he isn’t bragging about himself for his own glory. In Philippians which has only 104 verses Jesus is mentioned 51 times – it is obvious who is central in Paul’s mind.

And as far as saintdom goes, Paul includes the Philippians here as well when he addresses his letter (verse 1) “To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers (or elders) and deacons.” These were the church leaders.

Paul says the whole church in Philippi is full of saints. Now that doesn’t mean these people were perfect. As we will see they still had issues with sin, even quarrelling among themselves, but Paul identifies them as saints.

And the reason he can do that is because a person doesn't become a saint by doing something great. In the Bible, "saint" is the word used to describe someone who is identified with Christ.

A Saint is not some dead guy who has their picture hanging in the back of a church somewhere; saints are people who partner in the Gospel, increasingly reflecting Christ's image, because of who they are. It is about their identity in Christ - but more on that in a bit.

Let's look next at the reason Paul is particularly thankful for the Philippian church and the second part of our thesis: Saints are people who partner with Jesus in the Gospel...

Look at verses 3-6

[Read Philippians 1:3-6]

Paul is obviously very impressed with the Philippians. Look at the kinds of words that he uses to describe his feelings in verse 3. He says "I thank my God **every time** I remember you. In **all** my prayers for **all** of you, I **always** pray with **joy** because of your partnership in the gospel **from the first day until now.**"

Nowhere else in any of his letters does Paul gush with enthusiasm for a church the way he does here. Where does all this pent up positive sentiment come from?

Look again at verse 3. It starts with the words "I thank my God at every remembrance of you." Just stop there. Actually the words that come after this from the second half of verse 3 to the bottom of verse 4 are a parenthesis that just expounds on his thankfulness. And so, in order to understand the reasons for Paul's thoughts we can temporarily take that section out.

So verse three would read like this "I thank my God every time I remember you" (then down to verse 5) "because of your partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now."

Paul is impressed with the Philippians because like no other Christians he has ever encountered they get the Gospel. They understand that to be a Christian means they have a part to play. For them Christianity isn't about sitting in a circle and waiting for Paul to speak, they have joined right in with him – they are playing a team sport.

The word "partnership" is the Greek word *koinonia* which means fellowship or communion and is a very positive word, but interestingly it isn't as emotional a word as we might think. Instead it is a business word.

In the first century the people who had koinonia with each other weren't buddies, they were business partners. For example if two people decided to buy a fishing boat and go into business there was koinonia between them. Koinonia then describes the relationship that exists between people who have personally invested in something with the desire to see a common vision become a reality.

And this is what the Philippians had done with Paul from the first day he met them until now.

So how did the Philippians partner with Paul? What did this look like for them? Well, there are at least three ways that this took place. They partnered with Paul in the Gospel in hospitality, courage and generosity.

Probably the first thing Paul had in mind as he talks about their partnership with him is hospitality. As we mentioned earlier, from the first day he met them Lydia, who owned an import business and was likely a wealthy widow, opened up her house to them. In fact, the verse in Acts goes on to say:

When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us. (Acts 16:15)

Lydia believed and immediately acted out her belief by opening her house to Paul and not taking "no" for an answer. Paul ended up staying there for at least several weeks if not several months and by the time he left the church was accustomed to meeting in her house.

Saints are people who partner in the Gospel... Ask yourself "Am I known for my hospitality?" "Am I open with my time and my house in a way that shows I follow Jesus?"

Now, sometimes in churches like ours there can be a real competition in hospitality that results in many people feeling like they don't measure up. Sure some people have what Paul calls "The gift of hospitality" and they go above and beyond, but the fact is you don't have to be rich like Lydia in order to be hospitable; nor do you need an immaculately clean house and the ability to put on a six course meal. Hospitality is simply the willingness to let people into your life.

And the Philippians were these kinds of people and used their abilities here to koinonia with Paul in the Gospel.

The second way the Philippians partnered with Paul was in courageous living. It wasn't easy to be a Christian in Philippi 2000 years ago. Philippi enjoyed a unique status in the Roman Empire. While it wasn't a large city it was laid out to look like a miniature Rome and as a result was full of the emperor worship that

was so widespread at the time. Christians found themselves being asked to worship Cesar as god – something they refused to do, which cost many of them their lives.

A little later in this letter Paul will mention that the Christians of Philippi were enduring some of the stuff he had gone through – suffering for their faith. But they had done so with courage and determination. In chapter 4 he commends a couple of women for “contending” (or fighting) at his side for the Gospel. These were people who understood the cost of being a Christian and were not afraid to pay it.

One thing I’ve noticed when it comes to prayer is that North Americans pray for “safety” more than anything else. Isn’t that the first word on our lips when we travel or do anything new? Safety wasn’t Paul’s or the Philippian’s concern, theirs was courage to partner in the Gospel.

Ask yourself “Am I someone who is courageously willing to pay the price for being a Christian?” In Canada nobody is being thrown in jail or killed for their faith, but that doesn’t mean that persecution doesn’t exist.

And perhaps we would experience more of it if we prayed for the courage to share our faith instead of praying for safety.

The Philippians eagerly koinonia(ed) with Paul in his desire to advance the Gospel and some courageously paid for it dearly...

The third way that the Philippians partnered with Paul in the Gospel was in generosity. Like no other church that Paul planted, the Philippians had financially contributed to him and to other Christians who were suffering. Actually it was thanking them for a recent gift that partially motivated Paul to write this letter.

Interestingly, while Lydia was quite wealthy, it is likely that in general the rest of the church was not. In spite of its special relation to Rome, Philippi was not a large trading city like Ephesus or Corinth and so its people would have really just eked out a living for themselves. And yet they were incredibly generous.

But then this is no surprise. Studies across the States and Canada often find that in spite of the lure of large tax breaks that would supposedly give richer people incentive to give, lower income people are substantially more generous when it comes to giving money to charity.²

When it all comes down to it, it isn’t how much you have, but how sensitive your heart is to the needs around you that motivates generosity. Ask yourself “Am I someone who eagerly looks for opportunities to be generous with what I have?”

² See for example: <http://www.examiner.com/article/study-finds-rich-people-give-much-less-to-charity-than-poor-people> (Accessed January 4th, 2013)

The Philippians were people who had allowed Christ to transform their hearts and the result was a great joy to help those less fortunate than themselves.

And because of factors like these three in verse 7 Paul says:

[Read Philippians 1:7]

He doesn't have to conjure up these deep feelings, they are right close to the surface as Paul brings his Philippian friends to mind.

And this brings us to the last two parts of our thesis: **Saints are people who partner in the Gospel, increasingly reflecting Christ's image, because of who they are.**

Paul finishes his introduction with a prayer of blessing for those in Philippi. Look with me at verses 9-11

[Read Philippians 1:9-11]

Paul starts here by praying that the Philippians may increasingly reflect Jesus' image. He prays that their love may abound more and more towards each other. And this reflects Jesus because He was constantly pointing out that it was love for God and each other that fulfills the entire Old Testament Law – this is what God wants from us.

Now the Philippians are already a loving group of people. Unlike all the other churches Paul started, who all receive strong rebukes from him in his letters, Paul has very little negative to say to the Philippians. They are a church that has maintained correct theology and is acting this theology out towards each other and the culture around them in a commendable way. They are a strong church.

But what he prays for is an overabundance or an overflowing of love. It's not that what they have been doing isn't good enough – don't hear this as a guilt trip – but rather that our transformation into the image of Christ is something that can always increase.

The picture Paul paints here is like when you open a new bottle of coke and pour too much into your glass and it keeps spilling over even after you've stopped pouring. This is what Jesus looked like. This is the kind of love that God desires for and from those who follow Him.

Now you might say "that's great that Paul prays they will increasingly reflect Jesus' image but how is this kind love possible for people?" In a finite world like the one we live in how can anything positive bubble out of us indefinitely?

And here is where we conclude today: Saints are people who partner with Jesus in the Gospel, increasingly reflecting His image, because of who they are.

Notice that this is a prayer not a command. Paul prays for the Philippians because it is God who will do this transformation in them, not something they must achieve in themselves.

As the Philippians partner with Paul and the Gospel they receive from Jesus the ability to live out the life Jesus has for them.

We glossed over verse 6 previously but here its meaning comes to its fullness. Verse 6 reads:

[Read Philippians 1:6]

The good work Jesus began in them is their partnership in the Gospel. That is their good work. From the very beginning it was God who chose them and began to work in them. Like Acts 16 told us about Lydia

The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. (Acts 16:14)

And He who began this good work in them will carry it on to completion. Sure the Philippians aren't perfect, they mess up, they argue and struggle with sin like the rest of us; but Jesus has called them to partner with Him in the Gospel, they've embraced this call, and He will carry His work on to completion.

It's because of who the Philippians are that makes them saints. They are children of God.

As we close today I want to describe four types of church people for you.

Some people who come to church are parasites. Their emphasis is on getting things from other people: attention, support, sympathy, money, whatever. If you are a parasite, you need to recognize that church isn't about you and focus on what you can give rather than what you can get.

Second, some people who come to church are patrons. They like a good show – preaching, programs, whatever – and if they get it then they'll pay for it by putting something in the offering. If you are a patron, you need to give sacrificially whether your needs are met or not. Church isn't a performance, its an opportunity to learn to serve like Christ.

Still others are social animals – palls – who just enjoy friendship. They attend church functions but it is always at a surface level. There is no true *koinonia*. If you're a pal, take your relationships to a deeper level and partner with the body in advancing the gospel.

Finally, partners are those who transform their culture by investing themselves and their resources in advancing the gospel.

Where are you at today? I pray, like Paul, that Jesus would increase our love towards Him and towards those around us more and more today. That we would invest ourselves as partners. Christianity isn't a solo sport; it only happens when we are together. Because **Saints are people who partner in the Gospel, increasingly reflecting Christ's image, because of who they are.**