

# Gospel Partnership

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[ 0 : 00 ] God. Well, now we turn to the preaching of God's Word. If you've been with us the last few weeks, we know that we've been going through a series on the book of Philemon.

And today we complete that series looking at the final few verses in Philemon. If you haven't been with us, or maybe you just haven't been paying attention, we'll do a little recap of what we've been learning these last couple weeks.

We recognize that Philemon is the smallest book in the New Testament that was written by Paul as a letter to a man named Philemon. And what we've learned these past couple weeks is that Philemon was a leader within the church in Colossae.

He was a wealthy Roman citizen, someone who was likely ministered to directly by Paul, and it was Paul that was responsible for his conversion. And so we see this close tie that Paul has with Philemon and the church in Colossae.

And we see here, though, that there's an issue that was going on within the church, particularly in the life of Philemon. Philemon, like many in the Roman world at that time, would have owned slaves.

[ 1 : 09 ] And he had a slave named Onesimus. And while we're not given all the details in this letter, we recognize that there was some level of controversy between Philemon and Onesimus.

Onesimus had wronged Philemon in some way and that he had run away. And so Onesimus, he then came to Paul. Paul writes this letter from prison. It was in prison that Onesimus likely came to him, possibly to ask to resolve this situation that he had with Philemon.

And when he came to Paul, it was actually then that he heard the gospel and was converted and became a follower of Jesus, a very faithful servant to Paul, someone who Paul developed this deep affection for but recognized that Onesimus needed to go and return to Philemon.

And so we see in this passage, as we've looked in this letter these last few weeks, these themes of love and forgiveness and reconciliation. And as we explore today, especially in these last few verses, this appeal that Paul makes to Philemon is based on a partnership that they share in the gospel.

And so that's going to be our focus today, thinking about what does gospel partnership entail? What does it look like? What does it mean to be connected with one another? What does it mean to be connected with Christ? And what does it mean when we partner with one another?

[ 2 : 26 ] What effect is that going to have on the outside world? And so let's turn then to our passage. Philemon will be reading the whole of chapter one again, starting in verse one.

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy, our brother, to Philemon, our dear friend and fellow worker. Also to Alpheia, our sister, and Acropas, our fellow soldier, and to the church that meets in your home.

Grace and peace to you from God, our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus.

I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul, an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus, that I appeal to you for my son, Anisimus, who became my son while I was in chains.

[ 3 : 48 ] Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and me. I am sending him, who is my very heart, back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel.

But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced, but would be voluntary. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that he might have him so that you may have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.

He is a dear brother to me, but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord. So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

If he has done you any wrong or owe you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this in my own hand. I will pay it back, not to mention that you owe me your very self.

I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ, confident of your obedience. I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

[ 5 : 00 ] And one thing more, prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greeting, and so do Mark and Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. This is the word of God. Pray with me again. God, your word says that your word is a lamp into our feet and a light into our path.

And so, Lord, we ask that your scriptures will shine into the darkness of our hearts, illuminate our need for you and a passion to love and follow after you. Lord, we pray that we may, that your word may serve as an instruction to righteousness, and that we may find great joy and purpose in hearing it and understanding it and obeying it today.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I want to start by sharing a little story. A story of a young woman who was brought to this nation against her will.

A young woman who was a slave, much like we see of Onesimus in the story. A young woman who, by God's providence, was brought to this church through our international ministry, who people befriended in this church, who cared for her well, and as her situation continued to deteriorate, people in this church were able to help remove her from that situation.

[ 6 : 34 ] And over the past two years, she experienced the love of Christ from this body of believers in a way that she never had before. Many of you within this church cared for her and loved her, invited her into your home, shared meals with her, celebrated parties with her, gave her opportunity for work and volunteering, took her on drives to explore this nation, cared for her like a true friend.

And it's these acts that each one of us played a part in, in her life, that ultimately brought her to Christ.

Not only did she hear the preaching of God's word every Sunday, but she also experienced it in the love from so many of you. She became not only a believer, but a member of this church and a very dear sister in Christ.

And so many of you know who I'm talking about. Talking about Nerissa, who I prayed for during her prayer, who left to return to the Philippines this past Monday. And so as I was preparing for this sermon and thinking about what it means to be in gospel partnership with one another, this is what kept coming to my mind over and over again.

This vivid example of how this church served in partnership to love and serve Nerissa so well. And so as we think about gospel partnership, it seems in many ways that I'm preaching to the choir today because y'all have served so faithfully and loved someone who was without love and given someone hope who was without hope and give grace and mercy to someone who is desperate for it.

[ 8 : 18 ] So as we think about gospel partnership today, it's my hope that we can build on this experience, that we can see what Paul has to say about partnership, how it applies to the gospel and how we can build on this experience that more and more and more people in our midst may experience the love of Christ that comes through true gospel partnership.

And so as we turn to our passage this morning, we see this language that Paul uses both in the beginning and the end of this letter regarding partnership. In verse 6 he writes, I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ.

And then again in verse 17 Paul says, so if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you welcome me. And so we see this word that Paul uses here in the Greek, it's the same root, maybe you've heard it before, *koinonia*.

It's often translated as fellowship, but it can mean partnership, it can mean participation, it can mean this contributory help. And what we see in verse 17 when he calls partner, again, it means a fellow worker, a companion, a sharer.

And so this partnership that Paul stresses is the basis for the appeal that he makes to Philemon. So it's proper to understand what gospel partnership looks like if we're going to be compelled in our Christ-like behavior.

[ 9 : 45 ] So really three things I want us to focus on this morning as we consider gospel partnership. One, I want us to consider how gospel partnership allows for our commitment to one another. Secondly, how it connects us to Christ.

And thirdly, how it gives us a concern for others. So our commitment to one another, our connection to Christ, and our concern for one another. Let's consider that first point, our commitment to one another.

This past month, as is common, these summer months, we have, being from the states, have a lot of visitors that come from the states. Many of you, a couple weeks ago, noticed and were able to speak with and minister with a group from the PCA Church from Atlanta that came through.

Last week, Rachel and I also had some of our very closest friends from Greenville who are neighbors of ours from a few doors down come and visit us. And it's interesting that when my family's been here for four years, we've adjusted to Scottish culture and custom.

But when you have outsiders come in and they see things afresh with American eyes in ways that I don't really recognize anymore. One thing that stuck out to them and others that have come to worship here, and this may be something that kind of goes totally over your head if this has been your church for your whole life.

[ 11 : 01 ] But after the service, when you receive the benediction, what does everyone do? You sit back down. That's just a normal thing for the church here, right? That's very strange for Americans. You receive the benediction, everyone stands and remains standing and can freely move about the church to mingle or to leave as they please.

So it's very strange that when people sit back down, it's always a question someone asks. But it's just a silly example to show, really recognize that when we move into a passage, there's really great value in being able to see the culture and the context in which it was written.

Right? A lot of times we come in with our Western mindset and we look at this passage and we think about partnership. It may not hit the same way that it would have to Paul and his audience in this day. It's important to understand what is Paul talking about when he's referring to partnership. How would that have been received in that day and age? And so I want us to dig in a little bit to understand what this idea of partnership was because it's not just a word that he kind of invents for the sake of the church.

It's actually a word that he adopts from Roman culture in order to give better understanding about what relationships should look like within the church. In the Roman world, there was a common form of contract that was known as a *societas*.

[ 12 : 17 ] And it's translated in the Greek as the same thing, *koinonia*, what Paul uses in this passage. It would be a legally binding, reciprocal partnership freely entered between two parties that shared a common goal or purpose.

And so in many cases, this would be for economic reasons, right? You join in partnership in order to make a profit, in order to make money, whether that's through shared land or labor, whatever it may be.

The goal, though, is what unifies these two parties together. That they share a common purpose with one another. And so it's important to understand in this context, this was a completely consensual relationship, this partnership that was formed.

And it didn't need to be written down. It didn't have to be, you didn't have to sign on the dotted line. There was no money that needed to be exchanged. There wasn't even witnesses that were required for this partnership to be formed.

*Societas* was simply an agreed upon terms. It could be a handshake agreement as we think about it today. And so in this partnership, there was something that was shared, right?

[ 13 : 22 ] There was, whether it's through property or labor or skill, each party was required to share both in the profits and also in the losses. You couldn't use this partnership for the advantage of one and the disadvantage of the other.

And so grounded in this idea of societus was these ideas of mutual trust and honesty and good faith. The good of all the partners was the object of this contract.

The partners were always considered equal. And even if this contract occurred between social classes, the fact that they entered in this contract together, they would be viewed as equals in the eyes of the law. And so it's Paul that gives this language and applies it to the church.

What would have been understood by those in society, they would have entered into this relationship themselves very likely. And says, let's see how this applies to the church.

We see how Paul first refers to this koinonia, this partnership in Galatians. In chapter 2, he's talking about this coming together with other apostles, with James and John and Peter and Barnabas.

[ 14 : 28 ] And they form this partnership of equals to proclaim the gospel to different audiences around the known world. And so in Galatians 2.9, Paul writes, James, Cephas, and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me.

They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. So this word, this phrase, the right hand of fellowship, this is the same Greek word, that koinonia. It's fellowship. It's partnership. It represents the beginning of this societus, this partnership for the sake of the gospel. Maybe the best example that we see in the New Testament of this koinonia, this partnership, is Paul's relationship with the church in Philippi.

If you read that letter, we recognize that he had this deep affection for the people of Philippi, where he spent his time, where he's invested his heart and his energy. And it's reciprocated to him. These people, this church, loved him well and cared for him and was concerned for him and provided for him financially.

And so Paul opens his letter to the Philippians saying, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel. And so now here in the letter to Philemon, we see this very same language that's used, not applied to the church, but applied to this individual, to Philemon.

[ 15 : 51 ] And so it's important as we consider this connection that partnership provides with those within the church. How did Paul consider himself in relation to Philemon?

Many of you know that I practiced law in the States for a number of years. And one of the most impactful things for me as an associate lawyer in my law firm was the fact that I had a senior lawyer who took me under his wings.

He was a wonderful Christian man. And as was typical in our firm, any new cases that we had, you usually had two attorneys on the case. So you had a partner and you had an associate.

So I had a lot of cases in common with this one partner. And it was something that always stuck out to me. Whenever we traveled for work, whether we went to trial or to a court hearing or to depositions or even in social settings, how he would refer to me.

He never called me an associate. He always introduced me as his law partner. He had no reason to do that. I was a lowly associate. Always referred to me as a law partner.

[ 16 : 51 ] Because in his mind, we were equals. We were working together toward a common goal of providing a best outcome possible for our client. And that's something that was so rare in the legal practice.

Something that really I still remember today. That I think we see in this passage. Because we see when Paul writes these letters in the New Testament, oftentimes he starts his letter by calling himself an apostle.

It's a title that would highlight his authority as a leader within the church. However, in this letter to Philemon, he doesn't refer to himself as an apostle. He just opens the letter and refers to himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

He's really highlighting his lowly status, almost putting himself on par with Onesimus, the slave of Philemon. In the same way how he refers to Philemon, he calls him a beloved fellow worker.

He's making the point here that they are equals with one another. He's not trying to lord his authority over Philemon and say, Hey, look, I'm the big important apostle, so what I'm about to say to you, you better obey it.

[ 17 : 55 ] No, he says just the opposite. If we look in verse 8, he says, Although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love.

And so just like this Roman societist model, in Christian partnership we are equals with one another in this common goal. But it's more than just that.

It's not just a business transaction or relationship that we should think of when we're in partnership with one another. There's this deep affection with which Paul talks about too. Paul mentions the heart three times in this letter, describing this deep emotional connection that he has in this gospel work.

Verse 7, Your love has given me great joy and encouragement because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people. Referring to Anisimus in verse 12, I am sending him, who is my very heart, back to you.

Again, addressing Philemon in verse 20, refresh my heart in Christ. And it's interesting, the word choice that Paul uses here, because he doesn't use the typical Greek word for heart.

[ 19 : 04 ] Instead, he uses a word that refers to your inward parts. So it addresses your heart, but also it could be your lungs, your liver, your bowels. It's the same Greek word that's used in Acts to describe the death of Judas after he betrays Jesus.

It says in the beginning of Acts that Judas bought a field, he fell headlong, his body burst open, and his intestines spilled out. That's the same word that Paul uses here.

And so for us, that kind of sounds weird or gross. But for Paul to refer to these inward parts, he's describing this deep emotion, this love that he feels for Philemon weighed down in his gut.

And so I wonder, do we often feel that same affection for one another? Are we often content as believers to just kind of show up on Sunday, maintain these superficial relationships, and go about our own ways during the week?

Are we truly invested in each other's lives? Do we desire to share meals together? Do we desire to disciple one another? Do we desire to come alongside one another to love and serve not only this church, but our community around us?

[ 20 : 22 ] You know, it's always an encouragement for me, the fact that how many people stick around for tea and coffee afterwards. That's really a joy, to be able to build relationship, to encourage one another. But I would say that's only a first step for us when we think about fellowship.

Fellowship does not begin and end on a Sunday morning. Fellowship for the church is something that continues throughout the week. Because I think really one of the most important things when we think of fellowship is recognizing caring for one another well.

I think one of the greatest ways to kind of gauge the health of a church is to see how much time do people within the church spend together throughout the week? Again, is it something where you kind of just show up on a Sunday that you have these casual relationships with people?

Are you truly invested in each other's lives? This is why we have community groups this week. We have opportunities for ministry that we may be invested not only to serve the outside world, but we do it together as a church, as a body of believers.

This really leads us to our second point. When we recognize the need and the value of partnership with one another, this should point us to Christ.

[ 21 : 38 ] Because this is what's necessary for partnership to thrive, is a connection with Christ. And so let's look again at this partnership that we see Paul and Philemon have here. They're the two parties for this partnership, for this contract, right?

We recognize what the purpose is. It's a shared goal in the spread of the gospel. But what do they share in order to accomplish that gospel? It's not their good efforts or their good will. It's Christ.

They share this mutual relationship with Christ that's the foundation for their partnership. And so we see throughout this letter what's one of Paul's favorite phrases for describing the identity of a believer that he uses in all of his letters, to be in Christ.

He uses that three times in this passage. And so when we recognize that when we are in Christ, that is going to be our partnership then, is an external outworking of this internal identity.

If our lives have been transformed by God through Jesus, it's going to transform the way that we live, the way that we act and relate to one another, and the values that we hold. And so this is what Paul really elaborates in that letter to the Philippians, where he expresses this love, this deep connection and partnership that he has with them.

[ 22 : 53 ] And in chapter 2, he gives this series of instructions, both positive and negative. He says, Be of the same mind, do nothing out of selfishness. In humility, count others better than yourselves.

Don't look to your own interests. These instructions that he gives are kind of like partnership rules. They're not grounded, though, in individuals' good effort.

It's grounded in what comes later in this chapter. He flows directly into this hymn of Christ, where he says, If you're going to be of one mind, it's only because of the work of Jesus, who, being in the very nature of God, did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but rather he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, and being found in the appearance of man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

And so while Paul gives this wonderful description of the work of Christ, and the significance of that that has to this church and their partnership with one another, when we turn to Philemon, he actually doesn't mention the work of Christ a single time.

He mentions Christ by name, but not his work. And it's not an omission on Paul's part. What he's doing here, instead of pointing to Christ directly, he is mirroring Christ in his own work.

[ 24 : 17 ] The work of Christ is evident in his own life. Look at verse 17 and 18. So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.

Paul is offering to pay Onesimus' debts. He is following the pattern of Christ's own redemption. This is what Paul talks about in Colossians chapter 2.

When we were dead in your sins, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us.

He has taken it away and nailing it to the cross. Christ paid our debt. Paul here is paying Onesimus' debt.

And not only that, Paul is serving as a mediator between Philemon and Onesimus, the same way Christ reconciles us to the Father through his work. In verse 17 he says, he's taking up the pen himself here.

[ 25 : 17 ] I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back. Is this not a picture of what Christ does for us? Signing away our debt with his own blood that we may be reconciled to the Father.

Again, we recognize that this partnership is not about trying harder or relying on our own efforts, our own good intentions. The only way that we can be in right relationship with one another is when we are in right relationship with Christ.

And so the only way for commitment and partnership and fellowship within the church to work is when we recognize that Christ must be central. Because what's going to happen otherwise?

We have partnership between two sinners. Someone's going to end up being offended. Someone's going to end up disappointed. We're going to let each other down. That's going to be inevitable. But when we remember all Christ has done for us, that he has pardoned our sin, that he suffered on the cross, that he paid the penalty for our sins, that he has won the victory over sin and death, when we remember those things, it's going to change the way that we treat one another.

And it's going to motivate us to work, to follow in Christ's steps. And so that naturally takes us into that third point then. Gospel partnership gives us a concern for others.

[ 26 : 45 ] Yes, we love and serve one another well, but are also focused in the hope that those who experience the blessing of partnership are those around us. In contract law, there's something known as privity.

It basically means that if you're not a party to the contract, you have no right to enforce the contract. Because the benefit of the contract is not for you.

Right? Think about why do people form contracts for this mutual benefit. Right? So that there be some blessing that comes out of this working together. And so think for an example, if you and I were to enter into contract, maybe I'm a builder, and we've agreed that I'm going to build you a house for 200 grand.

Right? This partnership is between you and I. When the contract is fully executed, I've finished building your house, I'd give you the house, you give me the 200 grand.

We've both received the blessing that comes from that contract. You've received the house, I've received the money. What we don't care about is what your neighbor thinks about our contract.

Because they're not a party to the contract.

[ 27 : 50 ] Right? But think about it in the gospel context. In the gospel context, it's quite different. Because the benefit is not simply between the two parties in this partnership, but it's shared with those around them.

And so we can think of Nerissa's situation again. It was each one of us joining in partnership with one another for the sake of the gospel.

And who reaped the benefit? Nerissa did. Our gospel partnership, we recognize we're committed to one another, we're connected to Christ, but it's for the benefit of those around us.

Gospel partnership, the reason we do church is not simply for our own comfort, it's not for making friends or having a nice social circle. We are the body of Christ, partnered with one another that we may see the kingdom of God expand.

But we recognize that when we do this, we enter into something that's very costly. Paul's not trying to disregard the fact that what he's asking and appealing Philemon to do is very difficult.

[ 29 : 00 ] It's important for us to understand this too. In that context, slave owners did not set slaves free like Paul's appeal is. We recognize that slave owners might have had this fear that slaves might revolt at some point in time.

And so there's always going to be some form of discipline or punishment if a slave ran away or is disobedient in some way. And even though, even if masters wanted to treat their slaves well, which many of them might have done in order to build up some sense of loyalty or encourage good work, there is no way, even in this situation, that a slave owner would overlook whatever offense Onesimus had done to his owner.

Especially what Paul is saying going above and beyond here. It's not just simply welcome him back, but to treat him as an equal, to treat him as a beloved brother.

That's not going to happen in that day and age. So what does that mean for Philemon if he follows this instruction? He may very well be ostracized by society. Other slave owners are going to be angry at him because he's upset the whole social structure of society.

What are other slaves going to do when they recognize what Philemon is doing to his? And so there's great cost that comes with making this commitment. Gospel partnership will necessarily involve some form of suffering with time.

[ 30 : 24 ] We see here Philemon is going to suffer social humiliation to some degree if he receives Onesimus back. Paul, likewise, he's agreed to bear this financial burden.

He too will suffer for the sake of Onesimus' debts. But even so, even though Paul recognizes this great burden that he places on himself and on Philemon, he still encourages and expects a sense of generosity.

Verse 21, confidence of your obedience I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask. And so is this, again, the mindset of our church?

Are we willing to join in partnership with one another, knowing that it could likely lead to discomfort, if not suffering? Are we willing to be united with one another, this singleness of purpose, united and equal with one another, that we may see the gospel go forth in this city?

Are we willing to go above and beyond to share of our time and our energy and our effort and our money for the sake of the gospel?

[ 31 : 37 ] If this is our mindset, it's going to radically change the way that we do church. It's going to radically change our relationship with one another. It's going to radically change the way that we are able to impact this neighborhood and this city for the sake of Christ.

But the thing that Paul recognizes here that we need to recognize, this is not something that we can demand of you. Me here behind this pulpit, I cannot demand that you enter into this kind of partnership. James, the other officers of the church, cannot make this demand and think it's going to go anywhere.

This is what Paul points out. That gospel partnership must grow out of a personal recognition of Christ's love for you. To recognize his divine calling on your life to follow after him.

And so don't hear this message as a demand. Recognize it as an invitation. An invitation to enter into partnership not only with one another but with our Savior Jesus.

Whether you have been in this church for a long time or this is your first time to hear the gospel message, this invitation is for you. That you let the love of Christ so saturate your body that it goes deep down into your guts and overflows from there into those around you.

