

## XV. Lesson 15 Partnership in the Gospel/Yours Sincerely, Paul – Phil. 4:14-23

April 18/19, 2007

**Aim:** To see how true spirituality affects our relationships with others.

### A. Partnership in the Gospel (Phil. 4:14-20)

Paul had become an increasingly contented and generous man. Discontented with himself he remained – he was not yet perfect! (3:12) – but he was increasingly contented with Christ. While he lacks nothing, being content in Christ, he also wants his Philippian friends to know that he deeply appreciates their gift, and that it has been a means of blessing to him. His explanation of why this is so is particularly interesting and dominates the closing verses of his letter.

He is aware of the fact that the love of the Philippians for him had been long-standing as well as outstanding. From the ‘beginning’ of the church’s existence they supported the apostolic mission ‘once and again’ (v. 14, 16). His gratitude for this was certainly genuine. Other congregations caused him on-going headaches; the Philippians, whatever their present problems, had been more of a support than a burden to him; they had helped him in his work rather than given him more work in trying to help them.

But Paul has a deeper gratitude. In a sense he says very little about the content or usefulness of the gift he has received; he is more concerned with the spiritual commitment it expresses, the spiritual bond it creates, and the spiritual blessing to which it will lead.

#### 1. Giving and Receiving (4:14-18a)

Our giving blesses others. Whenever a missionary receives a gift from a friend at home, he (or she) is blessed through it. A present from home assures him that his friends are supporting him in all his efforts to work for the Lord. The apostle was greatly blessed by the gifts which were sent by the Philippians and by the love which lay behind each of them.

The Philippians had been willing to enter into partnership with Paul. They were not merely supporters, far less financiers; they were yoked together with him, sharing as they were able in his sufferings and in the relief of them.

In v. 14, the verb ‘share’ (*synkoinonesantes*) defines and illustrates the closeness of this bond which brought and kept together the apostle and his friends. It means ‘had fellowship, *koinonia*, with me’, *i.e.* they had identified themselves with the apostle in partnership on behalf of the work of the gospel. Another form of this verb used in v. 15, ‘shared with’ (*ekoinonesen*), shows how the Philippians had demonstrated their partnership with the apostle in his ministry. The bond of Christian affection between them showed itself in the practical expression of their gifts.

‘My troubles’ (*thlipsis*) is a technical term for the affliction or tribulation to come on the earth at the end of the age (see Mark 13:19; 2 Th. 1:6). The Philippians, then, by their gifts, may have had a greater honor than just the offer of succor to their apostle; they would be sharing in the apostolic trials which precede, and prepare for the end.

This special relationship was one of ‘giving and receiving’ (*doseos kai lempseos*) (v. 15). This phrase refers to a double transaction. It was a partnership, each partner contributing something different to the other. Material gifts passed from the church to the apostle, and spiritual blessings flowed the other way. Thus viewed, the Philippians would never become jealous of Paul’s status

## Philippians – Lesson 15

or gifts, nor would Paul complain that he alone bore the burden of Christian ministry. We should learn from Paul's example that there is no such thing as a one-man ministry or missionary.

From the earliest days of their acquaintance with the gospel, they gave more than any other church to the support of Paul's work of spreading the good news (v. 15). Even when the apostle had moved on to Thessalonica (see Acts 17:1-9), some eighty miles to the west of Philippi, they continued to send their money for his support (v. 16). Now, about ten years later, they were still sending gifts—this time by the hand of Epaphroditus (v. 18).

One of the things that we can learn from this passage is that giving to mission must be organized. This is where a good church treasurer is a real 'treasure,' freeing up the elders for prayer and ministering to the spiritual needs of the people. Perhaps that great and gracious businesswoman Lydia was behind all of this systematic giving.

Our giving enriches us. Another reason why Paul was encouraged by their gifts was because he knew that the Christians at Philippi would be blessed through their generosity (v. 17, 19). We should never give a gift primarily in the hope of receiving a blessing as a result of doing so, that would be pure selfishness. Each of us should examine our motives for giving.

While Paul certainly admitted that he had benefited from their gift, he wanted his readers to know that there were other benefits as well. First, their gift would abound to their account (v. 17). Everything Christians do for the kingdom of God is an investment that repays rich dividends. Second, their gift brought pleasure to God, who looked upon them as fragrant offerings (v. 19).

Paul describes their giving in commercial accounting terms. He talks about 'the matter of giving and receiving' (v. 15). That suggests the credit and debit sides of an accounts ledger (see also 3:7). In v. 17, he talks about the benefits credited (*pelonazonta*) to their account (*logos*). *Karpos* means 'fruit' in the sense of 'interest' accruing to a financial account. A more commercial translation would be: 'the interest which is accruing to your credit.' What the Philippians gave as their 'gift' was like an investment which would repay rich dividends in the service of the kingdom, as accumulating interest (*karpos*) stands to the credit (*logos*) of the depositor.

Financial terminology continues in verse 18 when Paul declares that 'I have received (*apecho*) full payment.' The current sense was 'here, then, is my receipt,' used as a technical expression for the drawing up of a receipt in business (*cf.* Mt. 6:5; Mk. 14:41). This Greek word is found on ancient receipts in the same way ours are stamped 'paid in full.' 'And even more (*perisseuo*)' completes the sense with Paul's acknowledgement that their generosity has more than covered his need (*cp.* v. 16). 'I am amply supplied (*pepleromai*) continues the admission that all his material requirements have been met in the service the Philippians have rendered to him.

Paul was more interested in the blessing they would gain by giving than the relief he might experience by the gift. Here is an extraordinary fruit of grace; a gift-getter who is thankful chiefly for what the gift tells him about the gift-giver!

### 2. Sacrificial Giving (4:18b-20)

Our giving pleases God. The greatest motivation for all of us to give to others is the fact that it pleases God (v. 18). Paul tells us that our gifts for the Lord's work are like 'a fragrant offering' to God. This language used to describe their gift is taken from the Old Testament (Gen. 8:21; *cf.* Ex. 29:18; Lev. 1:9, 13; Ez. 20:41), and is a reminder to us that all sincere Christian service

## Philippians – Lesson 15

which entails sacrificial and self-denying cost not only promotes the cause of Christ and strengthens the hand of God's servants, but it is an act of worship in which the Lord takes pleasure. Not only have the Philippians exercised the priesthood of all believers in praying for Paul; their gifts have been like thank-offerings to the Lord, with which He has been pleased.

When we give anything at all to further God's work, that gift will be accepted by God as a fragrant offering. Our gifts, and the love behind them, ascend up to God like a fragrant offering, but one which is far more pleasing to God than the very best of flowers. God is well-pleased when we support His work by prayer, interest, and practical giving. Our love to God and to others is just like a fragrant offering to the Lord.

The words in verse 18 are reminiscent of the response of God to the sacrifice made by Noah after the flood (Gen. 8:20-21). The sacrifice was not the means of Noah's salvation, nor of earning favor with God; it was an expression of gratitude for the salvation God had given him and his family. It was a sacrifice of praise! Similarly, Jesus' death was a sacrifice of atonement, but it was also an expression of His loving obedience to His Father and therefore a fragrant offering to Him (Eph. 5:2).

To give sacrificially, as the Philippians did, means that we may be in danger of impoverishing ourselves (*cf.* 2 Cor. 11:8). Paul has some words of encouragement: their needs will be supplied, in turn, by the Lord, 'according to His riches in glory' (v. 19). Paul reassures them, God will not fail to meet their need as they have not been remiss in meeting his. He is reminding them of the principle, illustrated frequently throughout Scripture: whatever we yield up to Him we will regain again and again (Luke 18:28-30; *cp.* Mt. 6:33). Remember, these riches are 'glorious.' Paul was not just writing about material blessings. He was talking about the riches which are in glory

The exact force of 'glorious' (literally 'in glory') is open to different interpretations. It may be construed adverbially as qualifying 'meet' with the meaning: 'supply in a glorious manner'; or it may point forward to the glory reserved for believers in the future kingdom of God: 'in the glory.' The two words 'riches, glory' are more or less synonyms according to certain meanings of 'glory' (*kabod* in Hebrew) in the Old Testament.

Verse 19 has often been misunderstood. It does not tell us that God's people will never experience or feel a need. It rather tells us that God will supply the needs of His people. He sometimes does this by meeting the need and sometimes by giving His people the strength to face the need, as the apostle has already testified (v. 13; *cp.* Ps. 18:29).

What a great comfort this truth is to God's people! If we belong to Him, then we know that we shall never be forsaken. Just as Paul's needs had been met by his friends at Philippi, so the Philippians' needs would be met by Paul's God. And our needs too will be met out of the abundance of God's riches.

However, we must be careful here. Paul's God promises to supply our needs. He does not promise to supply our 'greeds.' Neither does He promise to supply all of our wants. Because God gave up His own dear Son to die for us on the cross, along with this gift of Himself, He will graciously give us all things (Rom. 8:32). A second thing we must be careful about is to remember that because the Lord promises to supply all of our needs, that does not mean that we can just sit back and wait for Him to give us all these blessings. Laziness is never encouraged in the Lord's servants (*cp.* 2 Th. 3:10).

## Philippians – Lesson 15

The richness of God's mercy and provision is made known 'in Christ Jesus.' In Him, God's full wealth of revelation and redemption (Col. 1:27; 2:3) is contained, so that we are 'rich' in Him (2 Cor. 8:9), *i.e.*, in union with Him by faith, and thereby linked to the source and supply of all true wealth.

In response to these thoughts, Paul breaks out in praise (v. 20). This outburst of doxology prolongs the theme of God's 'glory.' The thought now is one of praise rendered to God in acknowledgement of thankfulness for all His goodness and grace. God is worthy of honor because He is God. He is also worthy of honor because He is a Father. Such a God deserves our praise and worship both in this life and in the life to come.

Here is a catechism to assess our concern for the Lord, His servants, and the advance of His kingdom.

*Question 1:* Am I really concerned for the welfare of the Lord's servants?

*Question 2:* Do I regard my Christian stewardship, particularly although not exclusively of money, as a partnership? Or do I see it only as an investment with no return, a one-way-relationship (I give, they get)?

*Question 3:* Do I really believe that God will supply what I need if I give sacrificially? Or do I always give in such a way that sacrifice will be avoided?

*Question 4:* Do I really want to live and give, pray and share with others in such a way that glory will be seen to come to our God and Father by the way His people (i) love each other, (ii) support each other's ministries, and (iii) depend on the Lord's provision so that it becomes clear that the power and the glory are His and not ours?

### **B. Yours Sincerely, Paul (Phil. 4:21-23)**

Paul essentially says: 'Give my love to every member of the church. All the people here send their love to you.'

#### **1. Greetings from Paul (4:21a)**

As Paul ends this lovely letter, he comes full circle and emphasizes once again the oneness of God's people. He had addressed the letter 'to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi' (1:1). So he ends the letter in the same way: 'Greet (*aspasathe*) all the saints in Christ Jesus' (v. 21). He does not single out one leader or group of leaders. He just writes, 'Greet all the saints.'

The apostle wanted 'greetings' to be conveyed to all the Christians in Philippi. This command may be specifically addressed to the 'overseers and deacons' mentioned in 1:1. They are to make sure that everyone in the church hears the message. Remember that one of the great burdens of this letter was healing divisions in a fellowship. Paul wants 'all the saints,' however they have aligned themselves over the Euodia-Syntyche disagreement, to know that he loves, cares for, and prays for each one of them, without distinction. This catholic spirit is a beautiful grace. But it is not as common among Christians as it ought to be.

#### **2. Greetings via Paul (4:21b-22)**

He also sends greetings 'from all the saints' where he was at the time. Paul passed on 'greetings' from 'the brothers' who were with him. He is probably referring to his fellow prisoners and travelers, as opposed to those who lived permanently in Rome. These may well include some of

## Philippians – Lesson 15

the Christians he mentions towards the end of the Letter to the Colossians (Col. 4:7-14). There is something touching about the thought of Paul's supporters asking him to send their greetings to their fellow-Christians, whether they knew them personally or not. They had heard Paul's fervent and joyful prayers for the Philippians and therefore had some sense of how much they meant to the apostle (1:3-4); they must have felt that they knew that distant congregation already. Corporate prayer is the easiest, and the best place to get to know Christians we have never met. Paul's companions must have looked forward eagerly to the prospect of meeting his 'joy and crown' (4:1), either here or hereafter.

The second group of saints that the apostle singles out are 'those of Caesar's household.' These were probably slaves or freedmen who worked in the Roman civil service. It is thrilling to think that already the gospel had penetrated the machinery of government. These Christians belonged to the imperial civil service, which had members all over the world. There might have been a link of special interest between the Christian members of the imperial staff on government service at the place of Paul's imprisonment and the Christian citizens of Philippi which was a Roman colony. Paul was living proof that the children of God can be true and faithful even in difficult circumstances and hostile environments. Even a citadel of Satan can become a center for the gospel.

### 3. The Benediction (4:23)

'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit,' writes Paul, returning to the theme of his opening greetings. 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ' crowns the entire letter, and forms the apostle's final prayer for his 'joy and crown' (4:1).

### C. Application & Discussion Questions

- *Paul's 'spirituality is not of the inhuman variety' (p. 110). What does this mean? Is there a danger here to avoid? What indications do we have in Philippians (and also in Paul's other letters) that the work of the Spirit in sanctifying Paul made him more truly and fully human?*
- *What applications does Paul's relationship to the Philippians (in 'giving and receiving') have today?*
- *How can we practice the principle that 'there is no such thing as a one-man-ministry' (p. 111) without minimizing the importance of the ministry of the word of God?*
- *How are love and sacrifice related? Is it right ever to 'be in danger of impoverishing ourselves' (p. 112)?*
- *Study and discuss the four questions in the 'catechism' (p. 113).*
- *Contrast Paul's 'catholic' spirit – his love for all the Lord's people expressed in his final greetings – with the spirit of Diotrophes in 3 John vv. 9-10. What do you see to imitate and to avoid?*

For next time: Review of the entire book of Philippians