

A Model Church - Gospel Partnership and Growing Love

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[0 : 0 0] As Angus mentioned, we're starting a new series this week. From now until Easter, we're going to be working our way through the book of Philippians. Philippians is in the New Testament. That's the part of the Bible written after Jesus was born.

Just a quick recap, I suppose. The New Testament kind of divides into the Gospels. We've got Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These are books about the coming of Jesus. Jesus' life, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, returning to heaven.

The Gospels give us the history of that. Following that, there's the book of Acts. Really, Acts picks up where the Gospels finish. It records how after Jesus returned to heaven, God is still at work.

We see the early church growing and spreading and multiplying rapidly as more and more people come to trust in Jesus. More and more churches, communities of believers are formed in all sorts of different places.

That's the book of Acts. And then most of the rest of the New Testament is made up of letters, like this letter to the Philippians that we'll be looking at. Letters to different churches. Letters to different individuals.

[1 : 0 7] Letters encouraging them to keep on going. Letters dealing with any issues that might have arisen. Letters unpacking the significance and the depth of all that Jesus has achieved.

And what it means in light of that to live as God's people. So we're going to look at this letter to a church in a place called Philippi, written by the Apostle Paul.

A letter to help us see as well what the church is all about. A letter to help us think, you know, what is our calling as a church? What is the main thing to keep at the heart of our church?

And we'll see that throughout this letter. And we'll see a couple of these ideas introduced in the first 11 verses that we'll read together now. So let's do that. We're going to read Philippians chapter 1, verses 1 to 11.

If you've got one of the blue church Bibles, that will be on page 980. So page 980, a letter to the Philippians chapter 1.

[2 : 1 1] And we'll read the first 11 verses. 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.

Okay, worth flagging up as we begin this new series in this new letter, that what we're looking at here is a letter written to a really good, a really healthy church.

[3 : 49] As I mentioned earlier, there's a number of letters written to different churches in the New Testament, and it's fair to say some of them are like total basket cases, all sorts of crazy ideas or stupid stuff going on.

And Paul is having to write really sternly to say, you know, stop doing that, or, you know, what the heck is this going on over here? All sorts of things that he has to confront.

That is not the case here in this letter to the Philippians. I think even in these opening verses we've just read, you get an idea, don't we, of the fondness, the warmth of Paul's relationship with this church.

It says he prays for them with joy. He holds them in his heart. They have partnership together. He yearns for them with the affection of Christ Jesus. That's all in those few verses we've just read.

And so this is not a perfect church. No, it is. But it is a great church. And Paul is writing to encourage this church in Philippi to keep on going, to be all that it can be, to keep on in God's strength, carrying out the purpose that God has for it.

[4 : 56] And so as we think about looking at this letter over the next couple of months, it's a great letter for us to look at and to think, well, what does a good church look like? You know, what does a good church do?

What are a good church's priorities? And we'll get an introduction to that this morning as we see what Paul gives thanks for and what Paul prays for in these opening verses for this church in Philippi.

Before we dive straight into both of those things, two particular things we'll look at. One thing to look at first, something really significant to notice. It can be tempting to kind of skip over the opening couple of verses, the kind of introductions, as it were.

But actually, if we do that, we miss something which, although it might seem obvious, is really important in this letter. And that's this, that this letter is written to the whole church.

This is a letter to the whole church. Let me read again verse 1. Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi with the overseers and deacons.

[6 : 01] This is a letter to the whole church at Philippi. This isn't just what the leadership should be doing, although it includes them, the overseers and the deacons, that's what those roles are. But primarily, as it says here, it is to all the saints in Christ Jesus.

Now, whenever we see that word saints in the Bible, it's not speaking about a particular class of kind of super spiritual person, as we might sometimes use that word today. The Bible never uses the word saint like this.

In the Bible, always a saint is anyone who trusts in Jesus. The word literally means a holy one. It is one who has been made holy by trusting in Christ.

So to all the saints is the whole church, is all the believers. What Paul is going to encourage these guys in and spur them on toward is something that involves all of them.

And you see Paul stress that even more in our passage. He's praying for you all, verse 4. He feels this way about you all, verse 7. He yearns for you all, verse 8. Paul is engaging the whole of this church right from the start of this letter.

[7 : 15] And actually, this is a big theme, this idea of unity, of being united in purpose, of being partners together. It's a big theme, a key theme throughout this letter. We'll see more and more of that in the coming weeks.

But already in these verses, we need to grasp that what we're going to be looking at through this book is something for each one of us. It's something for all of us together. You know, we spoke about how the church in Philippi was a great church, a church Paul loved, a church for us to aspire to.

We'll see kind of what we're aspiring to in just a minute. But we see first of all here that we can't have that as simply a collection of individuals. You know, we can't reach that through church leaders putting together a good plan or a vision statement, however useful those things might be, however good those things might be.

But we're only going to get to this destination as we recognize that all of us, that all the saints have our parts to play. So that means that for us here this morning, for each one of us, that our attitude toward church, our attitude toward service, that's a big theme in this letter.

See, Paul introduces himself and Timothy as servants. That's not his usual introduction. Our attitude towards one another. Most significantly of all, our attitude toward God.

[8 : 38] For each one of us, that is important and it shapes the church as a whole. Some of you might remember the song from High School Musical, We're All in This Together.

Hideous, awful, awful song. But actually, the title of that song, as a truth about the church, it is entirely true. You know, we're all in this together. If your kind of takeaway from this morning was to go away whistling that tune and you were still humming it as you came back next week, I'm sure that would be irritating.

But it wouldn't actually be a bad start or a bad foundation to this letter of Philippians. This is a letter to the whole church. Something for us all to engage with.

If we want to be this kind of church, then it takes everyone. And so then that naturally leads to the question, doesn't it? What is it that we are all in together? What is it that Paul highlights about this church in Philippi, which is so positive, so attractive, which is to be aspired to?

Well, we're going to see two things as Paul writes these opening verses. So we're going to look at these two things this morning. And the first thing is this. It is joyful thanks for gospel partnership.

[9 : 49] Paul gives joyful thanks for the gospel partnership this Philippian church has shown him. Verses three, four, and five. 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.

This is a church of people who are united together and united with Paul in the work of the gospel. It's worth noting here, who's Paul giving thanks to?

Because actually this is a prayer or a description of a prayer, isn't it? I thank my God in all my remembrance of you. This isn't primarily Paul saying, guys, thank you so much.

Thanks so much for all that you're doing. No, this is Paul saying that he is thanking God for them. Again, that's really important as it shows us right from the beginning, if we want to be like this Philippian church, it is God that's going to make this happen.

Yes, we all need to be involved. We're all in this together, as we've said. But first and foremost, we need God to be at work. And we'll talk more about that later again, but we'll see straight away, it is God who makes this gospel partnership happen.

[11 : 08] And this idea of partnership, again, that's going to run through the letter. It is something that is really significant. This word partnership is a really kind of committed word.

It's an energetic word. I'm sure a number of you enjoyed the rugby yesterday. I thought of this as an illustration, and I thought I would be smiling when I said it, and instead you lot are all smiling.

But, you know, think of the kind of your forward pack in a rugby match. Think of them as they are connected together and pushing together in a scrum. That is the idea that we want to have in our minds for this partnership.

It's not a passive thing. It's working hard together for a common goal. That's what this word means. And we see how that's been in action down in verse 7. For you are all partakers with me.

And that word partakers, it's actually the same word as partnership. Literally, you have the partnership with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

[12 : 11] Again, we see God is at the heart of this. It's a partnership grounded in his grace. It's God that's brought them together. And we see that it is a partnership, which is an energetic, which is a committed thing, because it has stuck with Paul through thick and thin.

Even when Paul has been in prison for the gospel, even when Paul has very much been kind of down and out, when Paul has been declared to be the wrong sort of person in a place where actually to be associated with him is a risky thing to do.

It would be easier just to kind of back off and do your own thing. But still, this Philippian church has remained in partnership with him. Paul gives joyful thanks, joyful thanks to God for gospel partnership, as it looks to defend and confirm the gospel, as it looks to share and communicate the gospel of Jesus.

This Philippian church is committed to that. So again, it's great for us to think, well, what are we to learn now? What's our kind of takeaway, as we said, if we can hold up this Philippian church as something of a model to aspire to?

Well, I think it's to say that to be a church that through God's strength and through God's grace, we would be seeking to meaningfully engage in gospel partnership.

[13 : 38] That we would be doing that together, as we've seen something that is for all of us to do. That we would be doing that kind of energetically, that we'd be doing that proactively, that we'd be doing that even when it's costly.

And what does that actually look like in reality? I think it's maybe helpful to think of this on a few different levels. Perhaps the first people that came to mind or come to mind when we think of this partnership is perhaps our partnership with the Patterson family.

For guys perhaps new to the church or visiting us this morning, that's Martin and Jennifer and their three young children, Sophia, who's six, Josh, who's three, Luke, who's one, who moved as missionaries halfway around the world to Vietnam.

Vietnam last September, we had the chance to kind of draw alongside them and get to know them and support them as a congregation before that. And we want to continue doing that now.

And it's great to say, okay, well, what does gospel partnership with these guys look like? Because what is being described here has to be more than simply a kind of a direct debit from the church bank account to help support them financially, even though that is part of it.

[14 : 50] But how can we love them? How can we partner with them in a way that encourages them to say, as Paul said, we thank God in all our remembrance of you, making our prayer with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

How can we partner with them in a way they can truly give thanks for? And I actually spoke to Martin this week to kind of ask him that question, you know, what does this mean for you guys? And it was really helpful.

One of the things he said he and Jennifer had been chatting about was their real need for a long-term relationship. You know, not just being kind of forgotten about because they're now all that distance away.

Doesn't that fit? Isn't that a great illustration of what we're talking about here? That family that we long to support, they are not a project, you know, and now they're gone, we can kind of look around, what's next?

What are we going to do now? No, it is a partnership where we want to keep on working together, that we would keep on praying for them from the first day until now, as Paul writes, not just at the odd church prayer meeting, although we will do that, but remember that as we are all in this together, as we are all partnered with them, that it will be something that we all keep on doing.

[16:07] On that note, if anyone wants to kind of drop them a line at any point to say, you know, I've been praying for you, our family have been praying for you, our home has been praying for you, our small group has been praying for you, do let me know, they're very happy for me to give out their details, and you could get in touch.

But I think we are so blessed that in the Patersons, God has brought us into this, this gospel partnership on an international scale. I'm still thinking internationally, it's good to remember that the partnership we have with Trinity Park Church in North Carolina, they've been a huge encouragement to us in so many ways.

they've sent people over to visit, a few of our guys have been to the church there as well, actually, Corey and Olivia, the minister there, and his wife are going to come and visit us after Easter too, and we'll be here at church, which is great.

Again, a partnership that we are able to give thanks for. It's great to remember that we are united in Christ because it's that same gospel that we trust in that brings us together.

And the encouragement in this passage would be that we would strive to keep on living out that partnership. And we see that partnership not just internationally but more locally as well. As a church, we've been planted and supported by other congregations in Scotland.

[17:19] We wouldn't be here this morning if it wasn't for the gospel partnership of others, people who have supported us in a way that has been costly in terms of finances, costly in terms of effort, costly even in terms of people coming to join the church, but people who've been willing to be in that gospel partnership so that we would be here to spread the gospel in Haddington.

And again, that we're able to now show that to others. We've spoken about church plants in Winchborough and a new church plant in Gala Shields that we have kind of connections with. We want to pray that God would give us that real heart of saying, how can we, all of us, meaningfully partner with people in the gospel so that the good news of the gospel would spread across Scotland.

So we can think about this, I think internationally, we can think about it nationally, but it's also really important, incredibly important to remember that this gospel partnership is also something that happens within the church as well.

And that it's not simply us looking to partner with other people, but also us partnering with one another. That as Paul will say later in chapter one, that we would all be striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.

And that as we've said, we're all in this together. The first thing that we see here that we are in is this gospel partnership where together as a church, we would be engaged in that work of sharing the gospel.

[18:50] Because that again, remember, is one of the key reasons that we exist because we believe that the gospel is good news. because we believe that everyone needs to hear it and that we all have our part to play in sharing that.

And that we can all help and encourage one another and stick with one another as we look to work out that role, as we look to share that gospel. If you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, as always, we are so delighted that you're here.

And I'm very happy to kind of stand at the front without an ounce of embarrassment and say that we want to share the gospel with you. You know, that's not a secret thing that we're trying to do as a church.

That's not us trying to be sneaky in any way. We absolutely want to do that because we think it is the best news in the world. That in Jesus Christ there is forgiveness because he has suffered in our place.

That through that forgiveness we can be brought into a relationship with God, our creator. A relationship that we can enjoy now and for all eternity. We believe there is nothing better than that.

[19 : 57] And it is something for us all as a church that we long to share, that we long to partner together in sharing with the world around us.

Remember, this is a letter to a whole church. It's a prayer and our prayer is that more and more God would be making us a community of people brought together by him, united in his grace in the gospel and that we would have that commitment to one another, that purpose-filled, energetic, willing-to-pay-the-cost commitment to one another in this gospel partnership so that many, many, many more people would hear the gospel, would hear what Jesus has done for them and come to put their trust in him and be built up in their faith in him.

Together, as a local congregation, a congregation of very ordinary people that have been brought together by Christ or are united by his mercy, that we would be in this gospel partnership seeking to encourage and support one another as we share that gospel that is the very foundation, that the bedrock of our church.

And so that is the first thing Paul speaks about, joyful thanks for gospel partnership. We want to give thanks to God where we see that partnership where we see that partnership in action and pray that at every level it is something that we would be committed to and not lose sight of working together to see the good news of Jesus spread.

So there's number one, joyful thanks for gospel partnership. Then the second aspect of this passage and we'll be a bit shorter here that the second thing that Paul writes about which again helps us to see what we're aspiring to as a church is this, his confident prayer for growing love.

[21 : 48] Confident prayer for growing love. Even though this is a good church, Paul doesn't want the Philippians just to be kind of standing still. He doesn't say that's it, you're just fine as you are, just stick like that.

But no, he wants them to be becoming ultimately more like Jesus. And so Paul is engaged in confident prayer for growing love for this church.

Why do I say confident? Well, we see that in verse six. And I am sure of this, he writes, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Paul is sure of this because again, just like the gospel partnership, this growing love is also God's work. And Paul is confident that God will complete his work.

This morning we as a church can have confidence that God will complete his work in us. At the start of the year, our heating broke, which was a bit of pain and very cold.

[22 : 49] And someone came out to try and fix it so that we would have heating again. By the time he went home, we still didn't have any heating and now we didn't have any hot water either, which was not ideal. And the guy basically said, well, that's about as much as I can do.

I won't be coming back. And we said, thank you very much. And off he went. So it wasn't ideal. Paul knows that God is not like that. That God will finish the job that he has started.

That God will not kind of disappear with a job half done and say, actually, I've got other places to be. I've got other stuff to do. God will finish the work that he's begun in his church.

Well, what is that work? What is this work that it says is to be fully completed at the day of Jesus Christ? That's the day when Jesus returns. What is Paul so confident that God is going to do in his people between now and then?

Well, we see the answer to that in verse 9 through to verse 11. It says, 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, fulfilled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.

[24 : 12] This work, this work that God will do is ultimately that the people's love would abound, would grow more and more, that they would have a growing love, a love for God and a love for one another, a love that is not kind of vague and mushy, but a love that comes with knowledge and discernment, as it says.

Above all, a knowledge and discernment of the gospel, that understanding of what Jesus has done for us, that's what shapes this love. And then we get here this kind of step, step, step logic that we find so often in Paul's letters.

This love with knowledge and discernment is so that they may approve what is excellent and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ with the ultimate goal, the final link in that chain, being to the glory and praise of God.

Now Paul is confident that God will do that work in his church ultimately for his glory. Now for us today here in Haddington, if God is at work in us as a congregation, if it's God who begun this work and we trust that it is, if it's God that is at work as demonstrated or verified by the fact that we are seeking in his strength to be in gospel partnership with one another and with other Christians, that our foundation is the gospel of Jesus Christ, well then we too can be confident that God will work in us this growing love, that it will abound more and more.

A love that affects what we do, it helps us approve what is excellent, as Paul says. A love that affects the choices that we make, a growing love for God and for one another that shapes how we spend our time, how we use our energy, where we put our priorities, how we engage with one another and the community around us, a love that shapes that.

[26 : 15] We often like to think that we simply kind of make decisions in our heads and then we just work them out in our lives, we put them into practice. the truth is that the reality is that there is a whole heart level that comes before that, that actually what we love shapes the decisions in our heads and then we work them out in our lives.

That is why we want to pray confidently that God will grow our love, that it might abound more and more, that God does that through working in us as we keep on coming back to him, keep on coming back to the gospel, keep on trusting his promise to finish the work he has begun in us.

Now we might often feel hopeless, we might feel like we're making very little progress, we might keep on making the same mistakes again and again, but God promises us that we are a work in progress and that he will finish his work and that through Christ working in us we will be pure and blameless before God on the day that Christ returns because of the work of Jesus, that's the praise and glory of God.

He will work in us in a way that we might love and live that ultimately brings him the glory he deserves. And again, a reminder, this is something for all of us, that constant reminder throughout this letter that we're all in this together.

This is not just about me or you or you becoming more like Jesus, although that's part of it, but it's more than that, it's us together becoming more and more a church marked by that love, that love that chooses what is good, what is excellent, what represents God well, what shares him and shows him to others and what brings him glory.

[28 : 08] We could dig a lot more into this in this passage, we don't have time to do all of that this morning but this introduction certainly raises points that we'll be coming back to so don't worry if there's kind of the outworkings of this or the details of this that you'd like to think more about.

We will get into all of that in subsequent weeks as we work our way through this great letter but I suppose we can take away really from this morning this, that we would aspire to be a church seeking after God's glory both in spreading the gospel in gospel partnership and also demonstrating the gospel through the way we live and that we would remember this all begins with God he unites us in the gospel he continues to work in us that our love may abound more and more as together we live for God and we live for his glory let's join together in prayer.