

February 14, 2021

ANOTHER PORTRAIT OF CHRISTIAN FRIENDSHIP

Philippians 4:10-23

(12 of 12 in a series through Philippians)

One of the things that has stood out in Paul's letter to the Philippians is the warm and loving relationship that the apostle had with this church. If you'll remember, after his typical greetings, the first thing he said was that he thanked God every time he remembered them (1:3), that he held them in his heart (1:7), and that he yearned for them "with the affection of Jesus Christ" (1:8). When he told exhorted them to "shine as lights in the world" (2:15) a chapter later, he referred to them as "my beloved" (2:12). And this final chapter began with Paul writing, "Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown . . . my beloved" (4:1), leaving no doubt as to the deep nature of their relationship. Therefore, when we arrive at the end of the letter, we could perhaps anticipate how it would end before even reading it. And in line with that anticipation, Paul returns to the nature and depth and beauty of the relationship he has with the Philippians. In 4:10-23, he lets them know how thankful he is for the gift they've sent him in prison through the hands of Epaphroditus, recognizes the grace that has come to him through them as they've been his constant supporters, focuses them on Christ by reminding them that he'll care for them, reminds them of how pleasing they are to the Lord, and then gives them final greetings and a blessing. It is a portion of this letter that is hard to read without feeling the beauty of the godly relationship Paul had with this church (and the relationship each of them had with the Lord).

But I don't think we have to read this text as mere spectators, admiring and appreciating the beauty of the relationship forged between the apostle and these believers. Rather, we can learn from this relationship, and the reason is because Paul exposes elements of their relationship in these closing verses that are worth imitating in our own relationship. In other words, we can apply in this text what Paul has stated previously. In 3:17, he had written, "Join in imitating me," and he followed that by writing in 4:9, "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things." Surely, then, Paul doesn't mean that we should imitate him or practice what we see in him except in this area of how he carries out his relationship with the Philippian believers. Therefore, what I want us to do as we look at this text is pull out the key elements of Paul's relationship with the Philippian church that he is showing us in these verses so that we might better imitate him and practice those things that we see in him. And the first element of Paul's relationship with the Philippians that I want to highlight is that it is a relationship filled with encouragement.

A relationship filled with encouragement

As Paul begins this final section of the letter, he starts by writing, "I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me" (v. 10). The Philippians had put together a gift for Paul that had been delivered to him by Epaphroditus. And this wasn't the first time they'd shown material support for Paul in his ministry. In verses 15-16 he noted, "And you

Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again” (vv. 15-16). In other words, supporting Paul was a long-standing characteristic of theirs toward the apostle. They supported him from the very point he brought the gospel to them, and have continued since.

But Paul doesn’t want to let this go without pointing out how much of a blessing it was. That’s why he writes in verse 10 as he does. He rejoiced, he says, in the Lord greatly. He wasn’t measured in his rejoicing, but his heart was overwhelmed. And he wants nothing to dampen the message of how grateful he is. Even when he noted that there’d been some time that he hadn’t received anything from them (i.e. “now at length you have revived your concern for me” – v. 10), he quickly followed up by writing, “You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity” (v. 10). And finally, he emphasizes in verse 14 the blessing of their gift, saying, “It was kind of you to share in my trouble.”

So, let’s think through this by asking some questions. Was what the Philippians did for Paul a good thing? Of course it was. Do you think that Paul’s words here—telling them that he rejoiced greatly in the Lord when he received their gift and telling them that they were kind to send it—led to an increase or a decrease in their desire to do such things as that in the future? Obviously the answer is that it increases their desire to do these things, doesn’t it? And doesn’t the Scripture command us to “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works”? Indeed it does, in Hebrews 10:24.

What is Paul doing then that would stir these Philippians up to continue doing this thing that was good, kind, and caused Paul to rejoice greatly in the Lord? He’s simply encouraging them, isn’t he? This is a picture of what encouragement looks like. It is simply recognizing (and voicing) the grace of God that we see present and working in another’s life. And I note that it is the grace of God because everything in us and done by us that is good is owing to God’s grace. But recognizing that doesn’t mean that we ignore God’s grace in others as if somehow that might detract from the Lord.

It is indeed true that Paul tells them that he rejoices “in the Lord” over what they’ve done, and I think that’s reflecting of his understanding that every good action in us is due to God’s grace. But don’t miss that Paul *tells the Philippians* that he rejoiced greatly in the Lord, and it is because he was encouraging *them*—voicing his recognition of God’s grace in their lives.

And if you and I make this commonplace in our relationships, it will make a world of difference. If we approach one another, looking for the grace of God working in and through one another, in hopes of pointing it out and thanking God for it, it will have the effect of: 1) leading us to praise God more for his grace, 2) strengthening our bonds with one another, and 3) and motivating us to increase all the more in allowing the grace of God to work in and through us for the good of others. I feel like it would be hard to overstate the effect it would have on us as a congregation if all of us took on the mindset of looking for evidence of the grace of God in one another and then pointing that out to each other and thanking God for it. This is what Paul is doing here.

And if this is how Paul spoke to the Philippians consistently—not holding back how he feels about them and noting how glorious the grace of God is in working through them—is it any wonder why they were willing to do what was necessary to keep investing in him, and is it any wonder why he felt such affection for them? Let’s make this an intentional part of our lives and relationships as well. Let us be characterized by seeing the grace of God in others and making that known to them. In other words, let’s be a people characterized by encouragement. But Paul doesn’t stop with encouragement. We also see that this was a relationship focused on Christ.

A relationship focused on Christ

As believers we may well have relationships wherein we encourage and are encouraged, but the picture of the relationship with Paul and the Philippian church doesn’t stop there. Paul makes clear that this is a relationship in which they are focused on Christ. I’ve already noted that when Paul opens this section by telling them that he rejoiced greatly, he actually declared that he “rejoiced *in the Lord* greatly.” That is, he is signaling to the Philippians his understanding that the good that is done in and through them is done by the grace of Christ. This fits with his declarations earlier in the letter where he tells them that “he who began a good work in [them] will bring it to completion” (1:6) and that it is “God who works in [them], both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (2:13). It’s also how Paul speaks of himself. After telling the Corinthians that he worked harder than any of the other apostles, he added, “Though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1 Cor 15:10). Therefore, they have a relationship in which there is a clear and stated recognition that they are what they are and do what they do by the grace of Christ.

But Paul continues to make this clear as he keeps writing. Right after telling them that he greatly rejoiced in the Lord over their gift, it seems he didn’t want them to think that he was saying this in order to get more out of them or suggest that he is needy at this moment. He writes, “Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstances, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (vv. 11-13).

Verse 13 has long been proclaimed by sports teams, weightlifters, and the like as a kind of proclamation that they can demonstrate enormous physical strength in accomplishing a task in front of them. But as you can tell from the context, Paul doesn’t seem to be talking about mustering up the strength to rip a phone book in half. Rather, this is the culminating verse in a paragraph about contentment. Paul tells the Philippians that he isn’t needy because he’s learned contentment. He can be content when brought low, facing hunger, and having need. And he can be content when abounding, facing plenty, and having abundance.

Now, someone might say that it shouldn’t take much learning to be content when having plenty, abounding, and having an abundance. But the reality is that getting much doesn’t necessarily

lead to contentment. Many can testify to getting a raise they once thought would be enormous only to start dwelling of more things that are just out of their reach. The reality is that we can be as discontent with plenty as we are when we are brought low and have great need. But Paul has learned the secret of contentment in either of these settings. And the secret he states is that he can do all things through him [i.e. Christ] who strengthens him.

In other words, in all settings, he has Christ and trusts that Christ will supply all he needs. Is he brought low, hungry, and in need? Well, in those times he has Christ, and he trusts that Christ will strengthen him to obey faithfully in whatever setting he's in. Is he abounding, with plenty, and having abundance? Even then, he sees himself as one who has Christ—worth more than all with which we could abound in this life—and he trusts Christ to strengthen him to obey faithfully. That is the secret. It is the gained assurance that Christ will always strengthen him—whatever situation he's in—to obey in faithfulness.

But note that Paul doesn't simply think this way himself. He pushes the Philippians to think toward Christ as well. He writes in verse 19, "And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." In other words, Paul knows that what God has done for him in Christ—giving him strength and provision in Christ to obey in all circumstances—he will do for the Philippians as well. Thus, this relationship not only recognizes the good in one another as the grace of Christ, but they each focus on Christ as sufficient for all their needs.

And this is what godly relationships do. We continually point one another to what we have in Christ—who lived, died, and was raised for us. Patrick beard tells one of my favorite stories on this topic. Patrick had been working overseas with the IMB for a while when because of the health of one of his children, he had to come home. However, after coming back to Jackson, they soon found themselves with some need. Patrick wasn't exactly sure how he'd provide for his family, they needed groceries, and so he decided to go meet with Nathan Young at the Care Center. Of course he and Nate had a good relationship, but Patrick will honestly tell you that he went to meet with Nathan not to be encouraged but so that Nathan would give him food. After all, the Care Center has a pretty good sized pantry full of food.

Sure enough, as Patrick went to the Care Center he found Nate and brought him up to date on the struggles they were facing, and that he'd now found himself in a time of need. But instead of Nathan quickly jumping on the opportunity to take him out to the pantry and load him up with food, he told Patrick, "Here's what you need to do. Go home and get together with your wife. Then, the two of you come up with a list of things you need. Think of every grocery item that you need, and write it down on a sheet of paper. Then, I want you to get another sheet of paper and just think of a particular dish you want—not that you need—but that you just want. And then write down all the ingredients to that dish on that second sheet of paper. And then the two of you get down on your knees and pray, asking God to meet your needs, and then ask him if he'll show his grace in even providing this extra meal you want."

And Patrick will tell you that as he left the Care Center, he was a bit annoyed, thinking to himself, "Just give me some stupid groceries out of the pantry, man." But nonetheless, he went home

and did as Nate instructed. After filling up that first page, he turned to his wife, and they soon agreed on a particular dish they really would love to eat. They wrote the ingredients to that dish down on that second sheet of paper, and prayed. Now, as Patrick tells the story, the first two ingredients of that special dish they wanted that they wrote on that second page were olive oil and basil leaves. That's an important detail. And so they prayed, and within minutes of that prayer there was a knock at the door, and some kids from Woodland Baptist Church had gotten together and decided that as a ministry project they were going to go buy groceries and surprise someone who could use them that night. And one of them had mentioned the Beard family. Amazingly, then, Patrick and Lana brought in the grocery bags and began thanking the Lord, and I can easily picture Patrick telling the story with tears rolling down his face, noting, "The first two grocery items we pulled from the bag were olive oil and basil leaves."

Now, I'm not saying that Nathan's approach that night is the approach we should always take. My brother has great discernment. And there have been many times he's taken me out to that same pantry and sent me home with a freezer full of food instead of instructions to pray. But Nathan knew that Patrick's long-term need was greater than making trips to the Care Center pantry. He needed to learn to look to Christ to strengthen him and enable him to obey and care for him as he obeyed. And I'll wager that if Nate had merely loaded him up with food that night, Patrick wouldn't be sharing that story years later as we had him share with our church one night about his life. He was sharing because he'd learned the secret to contentment—Christ is sufficient, and he'll give us all that we need to obey in whatever place we find ourselves. That night Christ showed that to Patrick, and he lavished his grace on him. Christian friendship should look beyond having someone to shoot the breeze with. It should be a relationship focused on Jesus, where we happily point one another to rest in Christ, delight in Christ, love him, and press on to know and experience his presence and power more. And as glorious as that element is, we can say more. We also see a relationship oriented toward eternity.

A relationship oriented toward God and eternity

After Paul notes their kindness in giving him the gift and reminds them that they had been helpers to him from the very beginning of their existence as a church, even helping him when he arrived in Thessalonica, Paul once more notes that he's not anxious to make sure he gets gifts from them. Again, he's does not minister for the sake of money. Thus, he writes in verses 17-18, "Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God."

Now note what he does here. He notes that his joy isn't simply in having more. Yes, their gift has been beneficial. Yes, it's helped provide for his needs. But what really gets him excited and what he's eager for is seeing them walk in gospel-rooted generosity that has eternal blessing.

When he says "fruit," he is referencing their gospel-rooted obedience. We are justified by placing our faith in Jesus, who lived, died, and was raised as sufficient for our salvation. And so we are not justified by good works. But, once justified, being firmly rooted in the gospel, our

lives soon begin to bear the fruit of obedience to the Lord. And for the Philippians, one of the first fruits that you could see in them was generosity. Again, Paul could hardly get out the door before they were sending him an offering to help make sure he could continue to do ministry (vv. 15-16). And Paul knows that such acts have eternal value. Jesus tells us not to store up treasure here—which is temporary—but to store up treasure in heaven—which is eternal. So, as Paul thinks of this account in heaven where they can store up treasure, he pictures their obedience as making credits in their account. And that's what excites him. And he continues to point them in a heavenly, eternal direction when he reminds them in verse 18 that their gift to him was a gift that pleased God.

In other words, Paul sees their gift as storing up eternal treasure and as an act of worship toward God. Do you see what he's doing? Instead of simply thinking of the two of them—Paul and the Philippians—and instead of thinking simply of a gift they've given him, he points them to eternal treasure and describes their act as worship to God. He's making sure they relate to one another continuing to orient their minds toward God and eternity.

This, too, is a crucial aspect of Christian relationships. We do not walk well together if we do not point one another to keep our minds on worshipping God and considering eternity. Jim Elliott famously said, "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Perhaps we might say, "He is no friend who encourages you to focus on what is temporary and only on people instead of God and eternity." May that be us.

And, finally (and briefly), we see a relationship that treasures other believers.

A relationship that treasures other believers

Paul ends with greetings. He tells the Philippians to greet every saint. He tells them that the brothers with him send their greetings. He tells them that all the saints greet them. And the reason he says all of that is because he knows he's talking to believers who treasure other believers. Paul and the Philippians love the church.

And if we put all of this together, you can imagine a relationship where we're happily pointing out the grace of God we see in and through one another, focusing one another on the glories of Christ, pointing each other to consider eternity, and lovingly speaking of our brothers and sisters whom we treasure. Relationships that do that will honor Jesus and build up the church as a whole. So as we imitate Paul, practicing what we've seen in him, let's imitate how he walks with the Philippians and practice the elements of his relationship with him that we see in this text. Amen.