

BOND SERVANTS OF CHRIST

The Book of Philippians #2

The last time I spoke I began our study of Paul's letter to the Philippian church by looking at just the first two verses of chapter one:

PHILLIPIANS 1:1-2

"Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

After looking at just the first two verses I asked three questions:

1. What does it mean to be a bond-servant of Christ?
2. How does a church grow in the midst of persecution and without its founder?
3. Where do grace and peace come from?

We did not answer the first two but began to answer the last question by saying that grace and peace come from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ alone. They cannot be found anywhere else.

Over the course of the next several weeks, as we read further in the book of Philippians, Paul will provide the answers for the first two questions and expand on our knowledge of the third. So let's dig further into the book by looking at verses 3-8 today.

PHILIPPIANS 1:3-8

"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."

"For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me. For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus."

It is obvious from this initial greeting that Paul has great affection for the believers in Philippi. He says that he thanks God for them and always prays with joy in every prayer for them. He remembers how they participated in the gospel from the first day he preached in their town. You will remember that when he went down to the river seeking the place of prayer and took the opportunity to preach the gospel, Lydia responded to this message and became a believer. Not many days after that he was arrested for exorcising a demon out of a slave-girl. But through the use of an earthquake, God used Paul to lead the jailer and his family to Christ, baptizing them all. Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke left the next day, after being urged to do so by the town magistrates.

So Paul is certainly referring to these initial responses to the gospel. But he is also stating that their response has continued to the time of this writing. So what is this continuing response he is referring to and how does he have knowledge of it? Let's see if we can't figure that out.

Paul first went to Philippi on his second missionary journey in about AD 50 and he baptized the first few

believers there. I mentioned last week that Paul had been away from the city for 7 years before he returned a second time. I have since consulted other sources and looked closer at Acts 20. I now believe that Paul actually visited Philippi a total of four times. His second visit was about five years after his initial visit. Then he returned again for a third time while exhorting all of the churches in Macedonia. He returned once more on his return journey from Greece as he hurried to make his way to Jerusalem in time for Passover. This last visit would have occurred 7 years after his initial visit and just prior to his imprisonment at Caesarea.

So after four visits he would have known some members of the Philippian church quite well, especially his first converts - Lydia, the jailer, his family, and their whole household. If this letter to the Philippians was written about AD 61 while Paul was under house arrest in Rome, as most scholars suspect, then Paul would have known some of the people he was writing to for more than ten years. He would have been very aware of the perseverance of their faith and their firm commitment to the gospel of Christ over the past decade. So he could have easily known of their continued faithfulness. And it would have brought him great joy as it does to all who share in this experience.

When Wendy and I meet people we have not seen for several decades, some of whom attended that same church as we did years ago, we are very encouraged by the fact that they have remained faithful to God. And they too are happy to hear that Wendy and I have been doing ministry in one form or another for 44 years straight with no end in sight. During this time we have not wandered away from the gospel or denied its power in our lives. We have not always pleased the Lord in our thoughts and deeds, but we have stayed true to our call and have kept running the race. And we intend to endure to the end of the race – this upward call of God in Christ. When we see this same commitment in others our remembrance of them is always mixed with joy. And when we pray for them it is with hearts full of thanksgiving for their faithfulness.

So for Paul to know that those in Philippi to whom he preached the gospel were thriving was a blessing and a confirmation that his work was not in vain. With their ten years of faithfulness behind them he could confidently say, *“He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.”*

We will look at this verse a little deeper when Paul expands on it in a later chapter. But for now I think it is very important to understand that what Paul is saying here and why he can be so confident. It is God who began the good work in them and it is He alone who is able to perfect it. We have a part to play which Paul will explain later in chapter two. But we must understand from the beginning that it is not by our works that our perfection comes. It is only through resting in the work of Christ that we could ever have any part in God’s perfection. As long as we do so we, like Paul, can be confident that God will keep perfecting His work in us until the day of Christ Jesus.

When Paul speaks of “participation” in verse 5 he uses the Greek word KOINONIA which means partnership or fellowship. This is very similar to the word Paul uses in verse 7 when he calls the Philippians “partakers of grace with me”. Here he is saying they not only experienced the same grace he did, but they are also partners with him in sharing this grace with others.

Part of the Philippians' "*participation in the gospel*" that Paul refers to is their willingness to give money for the needs of the saints in other places. Paul is thankful for their partnership and fellowship with him in spreading the gospel of Christ through their monetary gifts. He speaks very highly of not only their participation but of the participation of all the churches in Macedonia. We read about this in:

2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-5

"Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God."

He goes on to say what this giving is for later on in:

2 CORINTHIANS 9:12-13.

"For the ministry of this service is not only fully supplying the needs of the saints, but it is also overflowing through many thanksgivings to God. Because of the proof of this ministry, they will glorify God for your obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ and for the liberality of your contribution to them and to all."

So Paul is thankful and joyful in his prayers for them because even out of their poverty they gave to support the needs of others. Paul says they went beyond their ability to give, giving of their own free will, even begging him to participate in this ministry. The key, Paul says, is that they first gave themselves to the Lord. I wonder how many of us, in our land of abundance, are begging to be given the opportunity to participate in giving beyond our ability?

In America, especially as Christians, we are bombarded with opportunities to give. We are a rich nation and so have many resources available to us that most of the world does not have.

But our ability and willingness to give has been consistently declining over the past 60 years. There was a time when America was the largest exporter and supporter of foreign missionaries. Now other countries are sending their missionaries to us as our willingness and ability to finance these endeavors keep declining.

The sad thing about America is that, even though Christians are documented as giving far more than non-believers, many churches can't reach outside of themselves because their limited resources fall short of providing their own basic needs of rent, salary, and utilities. Though we have seen the rise of mega-churches here in America, many smaller ones have had to close their doors due to lack of resources.

According to FamilyFacts.org, since the 1970s, the church has suffered a 26% decline in attendance from those who attend services weekly and a 29% decline in those who attend several times a year, while the percentage of those who never attend religious services or attend less than once a year increased by 53%.

The church has been in a decline since the 1980's and fewer people in America today find any need for religion, especially Christianity. Subsequently the fewer people in attendance, the fewer people there are from which to draw the finances necessary to keep the doors open.

Our church is no exception. Yet I am frequently amazed at how many members of our church tithe and tithe regularly. It is not my place to say the percentage of people in our congregation who tithe and I have no idea what people make to be able to comment on the percentage of their tithe verses their income. But I can say that I am pleased with the number of people who tithe to this church regularly and faithfully. And the reason is this: we are far above average. Let me tell you what has become the norm for tithing in modern-day America. Keep in mind this data is 7 years old, so the statistics today could be less than what I am quoting.

In 2007, research revealed that just 5% of adults tithed. According to this research, some population groups were more likely than others to have given away at least ten percent of their income. Among the most generous segments were evangelicals (24% of whom tithed); conservatives (12%); people who had prayed, read the Bible and attended a church service during the past week (12%); charismatic or Pentecostal Christians (11%); and registered Republicans (10%).

Among all born again adults, 9% contributed one-tenth or more of their income. The study also showed that Protestants were four times more likely to tithe as were Catholics (8% for Protestants versus 2% for Catholics).

But think about this in light of the Philippian church. In America, the richest nation on earth, only 5% of adults tithe. In contrast this Philippian church along with their fellow churches in Macedonia gave beyond their ability to give and begged Paul to be able to do so. Why do you think they were so willing to do this and we are so reluctant?

I don't really know the answer to that but I can take a stab at it from two different perspectives. The first is from the perspective of having little.

When Wendy took our children on mission trips to Mexico with our church she was astounded at how little these people had. Some only had cardboard houses. The more "affluent" had 3 rooms with clay walls and metal roofs, an outhouse and an outdoor kitchen. No one had plenty. All had little. But some were eager to share the little they had with these rich American kids who had come into their town (on a bus bought and paid for by the church members) and provided puppet shows and games and stories that all centered on the gospel message. It seemed the less they had the more willing they were to give it away.

I find the opposite here, even in myself. When we first moved across the street from our neighbor 30 years ago they frequently asked to borrow things - small things like eggs or milk or sugar. We complied with their request but we had so little that we often begrudged our own giving. We gave freely but our attitude was not in compliance with our action. Frankly we were afraid that the little we gave away might mean the difference between going hungry or paying the mortgage. Now I have to say that nothing of the sort ever happened. But my point is not whether or not it had repercussions. My point is that we who were

rich in much did not have the same attitude as those who had so much less than we did. We took a lesson from those missionary trips and changed our attitude to be more in line with God's desire for us, which brings me to my second point.

I believe the basis for anyone's giving or lack of giving is where they place their trust. Where does their help come from? Who is their Helper? Who is their sustainer? Who do they feel is best equipped to handle their financial resources?

In MALACHI 3:8-11 God speaks through his prophet and says the following:

"Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, 'How have we robbed You? 'In tithes and offerings. "You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you! Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this," says the LORD of hosts, "if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows. Then I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of the ground; nor will your vine in the field cast its grapes," says the LORD of hosts."

Now I am well aware that some have said this is Old Testament, that Jesus never spoke about tithing in the New Testament, that we are not under Law but under grace and that tithing is no longer a requirement. I have even had people tell me that they do not believe providing support to a pastor is biblical.

I am not going to address these arguments today because I believe they are inaccurate, unbiblical, and are what Paul calls "fruitless arguments over the meaning of words". But I will say this. I believe giving is mentioned frequently in the New Testament by both Jesus and Paul so I am speaking from my position concerning tithes and giving as I see it from both the Old and New Testaments. But having strayed far enough let me come back to the point at hand.

When I first read this passage in Malachi I was not a tither. We made so little that we had nothing left over to give. We could not always feed our family on the little we made, nor could we always pay the bills so the thought of giving away any portion of what we had was inconceivable to me. There were simply too many bills left in the month and too many days before our next paycheck. Our expenses kept out spending our income.

But as I began to understand what God was saying in this passage I suddenly saw the connection between the curse of withholding my income from God and the blessings God promised if I would willingly give some of my income to Him. I saw that my problem was not a matter of income. It was a matter of trust.

I was looking in the wrong place for security. I was looking at my meager income and saying, "This is my security. I cannot allow any of this to go anywhere except to me and my family's needs." What God was saying was that by robbing Him of his tithes, I was robbing myself of His blessings. He told me to put him to the test to see if He would not open the windows of heaven and pour out for me a blessing until it overflows.

So I took that one small step and started tithing. Not the literal ten percent immediately but taking small steps and gradually increasing until I surpassed the legal definition of a “Tithe”. And I learned something else along the way. I learned to give to God first before I give to myself. And I gave before taxes, not after. All of these steps were taken as steps of faith – slowly moving my trust from my steadily increasing paycheck to the One who held it all. Acknowledging that God was my provider freed me up to give beyond what I felt able to do.

Now I am not a perfect example of someone who gives money to the Lord and His work. There are thousands of others even in this congregation who have given much more than I and in larger percentages. But I have built up a trust in the Lord through the giving of my resources to God and He has rewarded my faithfulness. So when the time came for my job at Bank of America to end I could truthfully say with David, *“I have been young and now I am old yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread”* (Psalm 37:25). I knew that God would provide even when my natural resource for this provision had ended. And as the money in our account dwindled over the two and a half years it took before landing another job, I felt the worry start to overcome my faith. But each time I gave that worry to the Lord, deciding anew to trust in Him as we continued to tithe on what little what we had. God has been faithful to supply our needs in the past and I am confident that He will continue to do so in the future. And that is why I freely give my tithes and offerings to the church with a cheerful and grateful heart.

Most of you here, like me, can say that when we give our tithes and offerings to God He is faithful in supplying our needs. Some of you can even say that you have made the choice to give more and larger amounts because God has proved trustworthy in His provision for you. He has indeed opened the windows of heaven for you. Others may be wondering, like I did, why in the world God would want you to take a portion of what little you have and give it to Him when doing so could mean not being able to eat or pay your bills. I understand this hesitation. I have been there. But I have also been on the other side. And I would encourage you, just as God Himself does, to test Him in this to see if he will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour out a blessing because you chose to trust in His provision.

The believers in Philippi caused Paul to rejoice each time he remembered them in his prayers because of their participation with him in living out the gospel of Christ. They gave liberally, beyond their ability. And they begged Paul to let them do so. If they who had so little would beg to be allowed to give out of their poverty, the least we can do is humble ourselves before the One who provides everything we have, and ask Him to allow us the same privilege of giving to His kingdom in order to see to the needs of the saints – not just those in our church, but also those around the world.

But you don’t have to believe me. I am not the one asking you to trust my word on this issue. God is the one doing the asking. He is the One saying, “Test Me in this.” So if you have any concerns you must direct them to Him.

But I will remind you of this one thing. **It is not a matter of income. It is a matter of trust.**

In whose hands do you want your financial future? T. Row Price, Met Life, Merrill Lynch and others may tell you to put your trust in their ability to handle your finances. But as we all know from history, when the stock market collapses, when the insurance companies go bankrupt and the banks close their doors as they all did in the Great Depression there will be no blessing coming from those whose investments have destroyed your life's savings. Instead you will experience the curse that comes with placing your financial future in the hands of men. This is not to say that we should not invest our money wisely in any of these areas. The problem is not in the instrument of investment, but rather in placing our future security in that investment instead of the One who holds our future in His hands.

My father trusted in his intellect and self-determination to ensure he was financially secure. In this sense he gained the whole world, but was in danger of losing His very soul. It is my hope that as he confessed and was baptized by a Catholic priest at the very end of his life that he also forsook his pride and truly received the Lord. But words can sometimes be used as a "just-in-case" insurance policy with no real repentance behind the tears. So I will not know for sure until I get there myself. But what I do know is that the life he lived was one of denial of God's sovereignty over his life. His finances were his god. He lived to serve them and have them serve him. This god cannot save. This god cannot forgive.

Our God calls us to do better. He calls us to serve Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. This includes our finances. As Joshua asked the Israelites in the wilderness, "*Chose this day whom you will serve.*" We can either choose to serve God with our finances or choose to have our finances serve us. But we must make this choice. We cannot love both God and money because Jesus warned us that if we do we will end up loving one and hating the other. We must choose whom we will love more.

Our goal as believers in God's sovereignty is to love God more than the things of this world. Will we do what the Philippian and other Macedonian churches did and give above our ability? Or will we withhold our money for our own personal use? If we choose to serve the Lord through our giving we can know that what God has begun in us as we trust Him to supply our financial needs, he will continue to perfect until the day of His coming. We cannot out give God.

Let me give you a few illustrations from Scripture to help me wrap up these thoughts.

Jesus and His disciples once sat down across from the treasury in the temple and observed peoples giving habits. We read about this in:

MARK 12:41-43.

"(Jesus) sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the people were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent. Calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, 'Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on.'"

The Scriptures tell us that man looks at the outward appearance but God looks at the heart. Jesus was able to do this and discerned something greater than the outward appearance of a person's giving. He saw the true motivation behind it. When we give it must be from a heart of faith and trust.

Here is another illustration from:

LUKE 6:36-38

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

God alone knows what proportion of your wealth you are giving to Him. He will reward you accordingly. And He will reward you with the same measure which you are using to give to him.

Even so, God wants us to give willingly, not under compulsion. And He wants our giving to be done with a cheerful heart. For our giving is not just to supply the needs of others, but also to prove by the ministry of giving the truthfulness of our confession of faith. This will cause others to give thanks and glory to God. We are reminded of this in:

2 CORINTHIANS 9:6-15.

"Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed; as it is written, "HE SCATTERED ABROAD, HE GAVE TO THE POOR, HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS ENDURES FOREVER."

Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness; you will be enriched in everything for all liberality, which through us is producing thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only fully supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing through many thanksgivings to God.

Because of the proof given by this ministry, they will glorify God for your obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ and for the liberality of your contribution to them and to all, while they also, by prayer on your behalf, yearn for you because of the surpassing grace of God in you. Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!"

I started this sermon by asking three questions.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A BOND-SERVANT OF CHRIST?

HOW DOES A CHURCH GROW IN THE MIDST OF PERSECUTION AND WITHOUT ITS FOUNDER?

WHERE DO GRACE AND PEACE COME FROM?

Even in the few verses we looked at today we can begin to see the answers to these questions.

1-WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A BOND-SERVANT OF CHRIST?

Being a bond-servant of Christ means to give freely of your resources to the One who redeemed you; To serve Him by putting the financial needs of Gods church and His people above your own.

2-HOW DOES A CHURCH GROW IN THE MIDST OF PERSECUTION AND WITHOUT ITS FOUNDER?

It grows by putting the needs of others above their own, by understanding what persecution does to the financial situation of those being persecuted and by being willing to come to their aide.

3-WHERE DO GRACE AND PEACE COME FROM?

Grace comes from the Father through His Son Jesus. It is then transmitted from His people to those in need. Peace comes from doing the will of God and supplying the needs of those who call on the name of Jesus.

God frequently asks us to go beyond our comfort zone to confront our fears and insecurities and overcome them by our faith. We all have limited resources yet we are all asked to give. The question God is asking each one of us is, “Are you willing to move into the realm of the Philippian and Macedonian churches and give above your ability even to the point of begging someone to let you do so - to trust God beyond your current capacity?

How will you answer this question? Will you respond as a bond-servant of Christ? Will you show compassion by coming to the aide of those in need? Will you practice the grace of God by giving to others what you have so freely been given? But let’s move away from the hypothetical to the practical.

There are many opportunities today to help believers in need around the world. And it is easy to get overwhelmed. “World Vision” asks for funds to “adopt” a child in a third world country so they may have the basics – food, shelter, clothing, as well as the opportunity to hear the gospel message. “Feed the Children” asks for a small amount to feed the starving children around the world. “Samaritan’s Purse” asks for Christmas Shoebox gifts to supply school supplies for needy children and the “American Bible Society” asks for donations to provide bibles for Soldiers and others around the world.

There are many organizations like these which ask to help people here in the United States. Organizations like “Focus on the Family”, “Operation Blessing”, “New Life Today” as well as dozens of ministries coming out of churches led by the famous ministers of our day seeking help in spreading the gospel and helping the poor. And all of these organizations emphasize that where giving is concerned our primary obligation is to our local church. None of these organizations seek to divert funds away those who are directly meeting the spiritual needs of the saints. Nonetheless, we are called to give tithes and offerings and most, if not all, of these organizations deserve our support. But we can’t help them all. How are we to choose? That is a decision I cannot make for you but is one that should be decided between you and the Lord.

But as I conclude let me give you just one example of a need that is very similar to the one which the Philippian church responded – the need of persecuted believers around the world. This email comes from Eric, one of the leaders of RUN Ministries which is currently assisting the displaced believers in Iraq. In it he says the following:

Hebrews 13:3 instructs us, “Remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering” (NIV). So I'm asking you today to join me in praying for northern Iraq.

Over the past few months, thousands of Christians have been forced to flee into desert mountains and hide. If and when they're captured, an evil genocide of brutality, torture, rape, and death awaits -- all because they refuse to deny the Prince of Peace. As a news item, the extreme humanitarian crisis in northern Iraq has drifted off the front page, but it's at the center of God's heart.

RUN Ministries has a solid network of believers throughout the Middle East who are willing to risk life and limb to get relief through the ISIS lines of defense. The cost of getting the needed aid to them is \$8 per person per day. This includes tents, blankets, food, and water for the first 3 weeks.

Just \$32 will help provide relief to a family of four for one day; \$56 can help provide relief to one believer for a week. This is a practical way we can do something TODAY to help those facing genocide in Iraq!

This is our moment -- the challenge of our generation. We must not cower in silence or shrink back in fear. It's our turn to storm heaven with our prayers and ask God to be with our brothers and sisters; to feel their pain and suffering; and to work for their freedom. We can begin by praying today and then never stop until this evil is defeated. God demands nothing less.

Thank you for your faithful prayers and generous support. –Eric

How will we respond to this practical application of giving beyond our ability? Will we turn away in apathy or fear? Or will we respond with trust and compassion? The choice to give is an individual one. And each individual must decide with the Lord's help if and how they will respond. But I believe God is calling us to a greater trust in order to meet a greater need. And as we respond we must ask ourselves two questions:

“Am I willing to trust the Lord with my finances to the same degree as the Philippian church? And “Is the measure I am giving out the same measure that I want to receive back from God?”

By tackling these issues you will be well on your way to expanding not only your support of those in need, but also the growth of your faith and trust in Christ. May God grant each of us the courage to hear His voice in this area of finances and respond accordingly. Amen.

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