

The Joy of Partnership

Have you ever been part of a team, cast, or other group? Maybe you played football, were in the ensemble of a drama or musical, or faithfully attended youth group throughout your high school years. Prior to your participation you may have looked at those involved with conceit. You may have been fearful of whether you would be accepted or fit in. Maybe you were reluctant because you were afraid that you might not have what it takes to effectively contribute. However, once you mustered up the courage to join in, you found the teamwork and comradery to be rewarding. You were thankful you got involved. The commitment, effort, and investment were more rewarding and fulfilling than you could have ever imagined. As a result, a bond, even friendship, was formed among your peers. Does this seem familiar to you? It certainly was to the Apostle Paul and his Christian brothers and sisters at the church in Philippi.

Paul shares his thoughts with the believers at Philippi in Philippians 1:3-5. Ten years earlier he entered the city for the first time - a city with almost no Jewish population to speak of and no synagogue. A city filled with Roman citizens, patriots and war veterans. A city that revered and worshiped the emperor and opposed any other religious practices. Yet, led by a divine call, Paul and his missionary team determined to follow the Holy Spirit's leading and to "come over to ... help" (Acts 16:9). In turn, a "Jesus-gathering" was born, and ten years later, as Paul is imprisoned in Rome, his joy is uncontainable as he proclaims his gratitude to the Lord and celebrates their partnership:

"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."

The gratitude that gushes forth from Paul's words is a response to a deep-seated joy: the joy of partnering together. The reason for Paul's thankfulness for the Philippians is the genuine friendship he shares with them. The term that the author uses to describe this friendship is the Greek word *koinonia*. It is a rich word that is generally understood as "fellowship". However, while we often use its English counterpart to speak of donuts and coffee or potlucks and hanging out, true fellowship has a much broader scope and expressive meaning. It is based on something deep, something that a group of people intrinsically have in common. It therefore transcends gender, age, race, interests, preferences, and so on. Similar to joy, it supersedes circumstances. Let's consider what shapes Christian fellowship.

First, **fellowship communicates spiritual communion**. Paul and the Philippian believers shared a commitment to Jesus as they were partners “in the gospel” (Phil 1:5). Their friendship aimed to magnify Jesus at every opportunity. Second, **fellowship communicates contribution**. Paul and the Philippian church sacrificed through joint gift-giving. Their friendship demonstrated mutual investment and celebrated individual successes. Third, **fellowship communicates partnership**. Paul and his Philippian brothers and sisters were involved in cooperative participation. Their friendship was provoked through joint suffering for the Gospel. Consider this: shared suffering leads to mutual memories and joint joy. Hardships galvanize believers under the banner of the cross! Lastly, **fellowship communicates community**. Paul and the Philippian church had a common family relationship. Their friendship functioned like a loving family providing tender care in the ebb and flow of life. Clearly, fellowship is a powerful agent in the unity and joy of the church and its absence expresses itself in a lack of joy.

In his commentary on Philippians, John MacArthur makes the following astute observation:

Lack of joy reveals itself in three ways: in negative thoughts and talk about others, in a lack of concern for their welfare, and in the failure to intercede on their behalf. Joyless believers are self-centered, selfish, proud, and often vengeful, and their self-centeredness inevitably manifests itself in prayerlessness.

What we discover in the relationship Paul and his Philippian friends share is an insurmountable joy that is anchored in their partnership for the Good News. Nothing keeps them from the church’s mission (Matt 28:18-20). Their love for Jesus, contribution to gospel-work, shared suffering, and mutual care demonstrates their fellowship with the Father and with the Son. May we walk similarly in our friendship with one another so the world might see our relationship with God.

1 John 1:1-7 (ESV) - *“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us - that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, **so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.** And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. **If we say we have***

fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."