

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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What God Has Done

Philippians 2:12-18

Eighteen years ago tomorrow, you and I began our partnership in the ministry of the gospel. On Sunday morning, April 1, 2001, I showed up here for the first time officially as your pastor. Yes, there had been an extended period of conversation, interviewing, trial preaching, and joining your Pastor Search Committee in discerning God's direction and will, along with your decision to call me, and my decision to accept. But on that April Fool's Day, we joined hands and hearts in a project that's certainly been no joke. On the contrary, I'm thankful for the fruitfulness of our life together, and grateful most of all for the faithfulness of God.

Today is a good opportunity for us to remember and reflect on our ongoing partnership in the gospel. Let's do that in light of Paul's words to the community of believers in Philippi. In today's text, Paul exhorts his brothers and sisters in Christ to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel. After placing Jesus Christ before them as a model to emulate (2:5-11), Paul admonishes the Philippians to remain faithful. Remember that he does this from a distance. At this point, Paul is imprisoned, and thus unable to be right there with the congregation. But the partnership between him and them is so strong that it doesn't rise or fall with whether he's physically there or not. Whether they're together or separated, Paul and the Philippians are joined in a long-term fellowship that flourishes under a range of circumstances.

This is evident in the way that Paul addresses them at the opening of today's text. "Therefore, my dear friends. . ." (v. 12). These aren't the words of a detached observer who sits at his computer and tells the Philippians, "Remember, I'm watching the livestream of your worship service, just to see how you're behaving. I also have cameras in the foyer and fellowship hall to monitor how you're treating one another." No, Paul's approach is much more relational. The word translated as "dear friends" is a term of endearment. It means "my beloved" or "my beloved ones." So before Paul says anything about the Philippians' conduct, he invokes the love that binds them and him together in God's saving purposes.

When it comes to our own partnership in the gospel, everything that we say and do needs to be grounded in our care for one another. God's reconciling love for us in Christ has bound us to him and to one another. That's the reality in which we live and move and operate here in our congregation. This loving, intimate connection between you and myself, and among ourselves, is the critical starting point, and ending point, for our life together in Christ.

Bill Donahue tells a story from his time as a part-time youth pastor while attending seminary. He was visiting a farm where two of his students lived, and their father decided to teach Bill a lesson. Donahue writes:

He asked if I could help call in the sheep. I enthusiastically agreed. Sheep-calling was like preaching. We stood at the pasture fence, watching 25 sheep graze.

"Go ahead," he dared me. "Call them in."

"What do you say?" I asked.

"I just say, 'Hey, sheep! C'mon in!'"

No sweat, I thought. A city kid with a bad back and hay fever could do this. I began in a normal speaking voice, but Tom interrupted. "You are 75 yards away, down wind, and they have their backs to you. Yell! Use your diaphragm, like they teach you in preaching class."

So I took a deep breath and put every inch of stomach muscle into a yell that revival preachers around the world would envy: "Hey, sheep! C'mon in!" The blessed creatures didn't move an inch. None even turned an ear.

Tom smiled sarcastically. "Do they teach you the Bible in that seminary? Have you ever read, 'My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me'?" Raising his voice only slightly, he said: "Hey, sheep! C'mon in!" All 25 sheep turned and ambled toward us. Tom seized this teachable moment.

"Now, don't you ever forget," he said. "You are the shepherd to my kids."¹

As your pastor, a large part of my job is to help you hear the voice of the good shepherd in your life. That requires my being a shepherd to you, which involves forming my connection to you and your connection to me.

That takes time and effort. Eighteen years worth in our case. But that's true of ministry in all times and places. It's true of salvation. Pauls says to the Philippians, "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, . ." (v. 12). Paul knows that salvation is a progressive experience, a process that begins with your confession that Jesus is Lord and culminates with the coming of the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Until Christ appears, you and I are to take the salvation that's in us and live it out, work it out. That doesn't mean trying to do enough good to earn a relationship with God or to merit a place in God's kingdom. But it does mean that the new life we have by God's grace and mercy has to be implemented and put into practice. As one commentator has put it, our "'outworking' of salvation is predicated upon and enabled by divine 'in-working.'"²

In fact, verses 12-16 in today's text are loaded with words for "work." Paul tells the Philippians to work out their salvation. He says that God is at work. And Paul himself labors. Three different words are used, but they can all be accurately translated as "work." We ourselves know that being the church involves a lot of work. Living as God's redeemed people, individually and together, doesn't just happen. You have to put in the time, the effort, the sweat, and the sacrifice that should characterize people who know what God has done for us through Jesus Christ.

True, as Paul says, "it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (v. 13). But God's work calls forth your work. God's action moves you into action. I've been pastoring for over 25 years. That's a lot of preaching, teaching, praying, caring, counseling, managing, organizing, serving, and all the other tasks that go into being a minister of the gospel. And each of you has your part in the ministry of the church. Though I've been here 18 years, many of you were here long before I arrived. You've been working, worshiping, witnessing, and in multiple others ways, participating in God's story of salvation in the fellowship called Grace Baptist Church. Remember that God didn't just wave a magic wand and make this congregation appear. It took the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the life-giving power of the Spirit, to call forth this fellowship of believers.

And the ongoing work of the Spirit takes shape in you and me as we labor together for the sake of Christ.

If this is what it takes to form a church, no wonder Paul urges the Philippians to be vigilant about promoting peace and unity in the congregation. Though his letter indicates that Paul had a deep and abiding affection for the Philippians, and that they were a great source of joy to him, this doesn't mean that their fellowship was perfect. The church wasn't a harmonious whole. So Paul tells them to "do everything without complaining or arguing, . ." (v. 14). He may have in mind some behind-the-scenes grumbling and gossiping that's going on. He may be referring to disagreements between the Philippians and outsiders. Paul could even be noting issues that some in the congregation have with him, his style, and his expectations.

The story is told about an elderly woman who walked into the local country church. A friendly usher greeted her at the door and helped her up the flight of steps. "Where would you like to sit?" he asked. "The front row please," she answered. "You really don't want to do that," the usher said. "The pastor is really boring." "Do you happen to know who I am?" asked the woman. "No," said the usher. "I'm the pastor's mother," she replied indignantly. "Do you know who I am?" the usher asked. "No," she said. "Good."

I doubt that anyone in the church at Philippi ever accused Paul of being boring. His letters indicate that he could at times be combative and confrontational. There were plenty of occasions when he rubbed people the wrong way. But he also recognized that bickering and infighting can compromise fellowship and weaken a congregation's witness. So in our text, Paul pushes back against internal strife, both present and potential. He may even be recalling the biblical accounts of how the Israelites grumbled and complained during their journey through the wilderness. They themselves struggled with faith and criticized their leaders in the midst of what seemed like God's absence.

Where is God? Why are these things happening? Has God rejected us or abandoned us? Does God see us and care about us? Is God's word reliable? Will God really keep his promises? In our individual lives and in our life together as a congregation, we can go through experiences and circumstances that cause us to question the faithfulness of God. Especially when our church faces challenges and problems, or outward circumstances drain our confidence in the Lord, we may be tempted to wonder if God is really present and at work.

In such times and circumstances, we need to strengthen and encourage one another. Not simply so that we can just hang in and hold on. But rather, as Paul says, so that we can actually move forward and make progress in holiness. "So that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life" (v. 15). There's some ambiguity about how to translate the last segment of that statement. It could mean "hold fast/on to" the word of life, or "hold forth/out" the word of life. In either case, these aren't the words of someone who simply wants the church to play defense. No, we as God's people are always to be on offense, being light to one another, illuminating our community and our world with the hope that comes through speaking and living the gospel.

As we do so, we can count on God to finish what he has started. That's the kind of confidence we hear as Paul moves toward the end of today's text. Having reaffirmed his affection for the Philippians, and having exhorted them to live out their salvation, to strive for unity, and to stay faithful to the gospel, Paul expresses his hope that they'll persist in their partnership with him. "In order that," he says, "I may boast on the day of Christ that I

did not run or labor for nothing" (v. 16). This is one of several occasions in his letters where Paul expresses his concern that all his labor for Christ might be for naught. What if all the time, energy, effort, and sacrifice that he has poured into his churches is ultimately for nothing? But Paul keeps his focus on what God has promised in Christ, and that renews his confidence in what God is doing, and with that, what he and the Philippians are doing. It's not in vain. It's all gathered up and directed toward what God desires for us in Christ.

Paul closes our text by saying, "But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, . ." (v. 17). Remember that Paul is in prison, so his use of sacrificial imagery could be a way of talking about his possible execution. Or it could simply be a way of describing how he offers his life back to God and pours himself out for the Philippians. In either case, the ways that Paul gives himself to the Philippians, and the ways they give themselves to him, creates joy. Joy is essentially gladness in God/Christ, a gladness that's not contingent on circumstances. Gladness can't be reduced to happiness. It can't be destroyed by suffering or hardship. Gladness, or joy, is a hopeful frame of mind grounded in the knowledge of what God has done, is doing, and will do through Jesus Christ.

Today, as we share the joy of being in partnership as pastor and congregation, I want to share with you what one person has written about this relationship:

Those to whom you minister may not always perfectly understand what you say, but they will soon know whether you love them or not. The secret of many a successful Christian worker is not that he is skilled, knowledged, and has endowments which are superior to others, but that those to whom he ministers know that he really cares about them, not in some abstract way, or from a sense of duty, but wanting with all his heart the best that God wants for them.³

That's what I want for you. I want what God desires for you, individually and together, namely, that you be transformed into the likeness of Christ, in holiness and righteousness. So being your pastor means giving myself to you, so that you stay on the way of obedience to the gospel, as God moves you toward the goal of your faith.

I'll close with Paul's own words in the opening of his letter to the Philippians: "I thank my God every time I remember you. I all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (1:3-6).

¹ Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) 106-107.

² Todd D. Still, *Philippians & Philemon*. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2011) 75.

³ "Pulpit Helps." *Leadership*, Vol. 1, No. 4 <<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1995/november/1197.html>>.