

Joining God's Mission

Press On Series, September 19/20 | Philippians 1:3-11

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WHAT MAKES FOR A STRONG FRIENDSHIP?

The ancient world expected friendships to be transactional.

The old saying "It's not what you know. It's who you know" was certainly true of them.

But these ancient friendships were driven by what people did for each another.

Another old saying sums it up—"You scratch my back. I'll scratch yours."

The Romans used to say, "Quid pro quo." "This for that." It sounds more official.

The great Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote about friendship from an ancient perspective.

He thought that friendship incredibly important. He wrote, "For without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods..." - Aristotle, *Nicomachaen Ethics*, Book VIII.1

Aristotle thought that there were three basic kinds of friendships:

First was the friendship was based on usefulness. It's overtly "quid pro quo."

Second was the friendship based on pleasure. Two people enjoy the same things, have fun together, or make each other laugh.

Aristotle knew that both of these kinds of friendships were easy to make and easier to lose.

He thought his third category of friendship was the best. This was the friendship between two people who share values, convictions, and motivations.

Of course, even these kinds of friends would do good things for each other.

But their shared goodness and their shared convictions would keep them together.

However, he was sadly realistic about how difficult it would be to make these kinds of friendships. He wrote, "But it is natural that such friendships should be infrequent; for such men are rare." - Aristotle, *Nicomachaen Ethics*, Book VIII.3

Paul shared an unusually strong friendship with the Christians in Philippi.

Of course, they did things for one another.

Last week we saw that Paul led a good number of people to Jesus in Philippi.

They quickly began supporting his missionary work financially.

Immediately after Paul left Philippi, he went to nearby Thessalonica. In Philippians 4:15-16, we learn that even then, the people in Philippi began supporting Paul's work financially! In Philippians 4:15-16 Paul reminded them,

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.

Then in Acts chapter 20 we learn that on the outward leg of Paul's third missionary journey, he stopped in at Philippi. On the return leg of his journey, he also stopped in Philippi.

In between, Romans 15:25-26 indicates that the church in Philippi (among others) contributed to an offering Paul was collecting to help the poor in Jerusalem. Paul wrote,

At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.

We don't know how many other times they visited, wrote to, or helped each other.

However, we know that when the Philippians found out that Paul was in jail, they sent help.

Paul wrote to them at least one more time to express thanks. This was a strong relationship.

What made it so strong?

It was more than just the mutual benefit that Aristotle mentioned.

And it was more than just the fact that they made each other laugh.

Paul and the Philippians enjoyed a rare, deep friendship based on shared values and goals.

Their friendship was driven by God at the center.

What can we learn from this friendship? And how can this friendship become a guide for us as we seek to press on like the Apostle Paul wanted us to?

PAUL'S LETTER PRAISED HIS FRIENDS IN PHILIPPI.

In Philippians 1:3-5, Paul was practically falling over his words to express his friendship:

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.

Paul's enthusiasm gets somewhat lost in translation. He was so excited to declare his love for them that the articulate apostle was tongue-tied!

And in this passage, Paul confirmed something he had written earlier to the church in Thessalonica. In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 Paul advised them,

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Here in Philippians chapter 1, we find that Paul took his own words seriously.

He prayed frequently. He frequently prayed for the church in Philippi. And when he prayed for the church in Philippi, he did so with thanksgiving and joy.

Takeaway: Like Paul, we want to make prayer a way of life. And as we pray, we want to pray with thanksgiving, joy, and praise for our brothers and sisters.

Then in Philippians 1:6, Paul added his great hope for them:

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.

Looking back at the history of his relationship with the Christians in Philippi, Paul could see that God had done big things in their lives.

As he looked forward, Paul knew that God wasn't done with them.

The Holy Spirit was still sanctifying them.

Paul was praying that the Christians in Philippi would always be humble enough to know that they were not perfect, open enough to allow God to continue to work, and hopeful enough to expect that real change would happen. That's who he expected them to be.

Takeaway: We want God to keep on sanctifying us all our lives!

Next, as we see in Philippians 1:7-8, these are family ties:

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.

Paul talked about holding the Christians in Philippi in his heart. This would be the rational center of affection for Paul. In other words, his mind loved them.

Then Paul talked about yearning for them all with the "affection of Christ Jesus." In the ancient world, this kind of love came from the gut. This would be the emotional center of affection for Paul. In other words, he loved them emotionally just as he was sure Jesus did.

All of this was based on the tie that they shared of being "partakers with me of grace." In other words, they were brothers and sisters in Christ. They had a tie that was more like family than some friendships.

That family-level friendship went to the dark, difficult places. The Christians in Philippi were willing to stand with Paul while he went through imprisonment. That's real love!

Takeaway: Get your family of faith! Find those followers of Jesus who get that they are family to you and will stand by you! You need them if you're going to press on!

Finally, in Philippians 1:9-11 Paul's thanksgiving ends with a prayer for their wisdom:

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.

The first thing we probably notice in these verses is the filling. Their love is abounding. They get the fruit of righteousness. God gives them good stuff.

Underneath there is a whole lot of shaping going on. They were getting knowledge, discernment, and the ability to approve what is excellent.

Paul reminded them that they had and needed godly wisdom for a reason: He expects them to use it. We'll see that later in his letter.

Takeaway: We want God to shape our judgment and make us wise. And we want to do something with that wisdom! We want to make good decisions and do good things too!

But let's take one more look at all of these verses, because on the surface they are all about the relationship that Paul had with the Christians in Philippi, but underneath they show that the friendship they shared had an engine driving it.

SHARED MISSION STRENGTHENED THIS FRIENDSHIP.

As we look again at Philippians 1:3-5, we find that they had a "partnership" in the Gospel.

Paul was celebrating this "partnership."

The Greek word here is “koinonia.” It means a little bit more than “partnership.” It means “fellowship” or “sharing” or “participation.”

It means that their relationship was tight and based on working together for the gospel.

It means that they had one of those relationships that Aristotle would call the strongest of relationships. Shared values and shared tasks or mission brought them together.

And the shared values and tasks of the gospel cemented them into a relationship that was stronger than any other kind of relationship.

Then in Philippians 1:6 Paul talked about Jesus’ good work coming to “completion.”

The word that he uses here points to the “end.”

Their lives are going somewhere.

Their friendship is going somewhere.

Their partnership in the gospel is going somewhere.

The Holy Spirit and the mission of God were a driving force in their friendship.

Next, in Philippians 1:7-8, Paul adopted the language of the courtroom.

In verses 7-8 we start to see the task at the heart of their shared values and mission.

They were defending the gospel, which means to prove in court that something is good, right, necessary, just, or reasonable.

They were also confirming the gospel, which meant to be a second party who says that something is indeed true. That could even involve something that looked like posting bail to attest to the truthfulness of the testimony.

Paul and the church in Philippi stood together in court.

This is a working relationship with God himself as a witness in the case.

Finally, in Philippians 1:9-11, we discover that Paul and his friends were all tested in the trenches.

Paul said that he wanted everyone’s godly love to abound more and more.

But the layers that he put on top were all informed by experience.

He prayed for knowledge, discernment, and the ability to approve, be pure, and be blameless.

These words all share in common the idea that they have been tested.

Paul was saying that these followers of Jesus in Philippi had seen their faith shaped and proven by experience.

Oddly enough, this kind of friendship reminds me of the kinds of relationships meerkats share.

Stay with me. Meerkats are amazing creatures.

They live in the Kalahari Desert in Africa.

They’re cute—kind of. They’ve got a “prairie-dog-meets-rat” quality about them.

Meerkats have an amazingly diverse society. They each have jobs. There are meerkats that stand guard, ones that hunt and forage, and ones that even raise the babies.

I watched a movie about meerkats several years ago.

It featured a scene where a cobra snuck up and surprised baby meerkats and their baby-sitter. The snake chased them into their burrow and was ready to strike.

At the last moment, the adult meerkats raced in. They chased the cobra back outside the den, crouched down, puffed up their tails, and started attacking this cobra.

They formed a wall around the cobra and took turns biting and scratching the cobra.

The cobra's venom is so poisonous that one strike would kill the meerkat.

But they stood together as a unit and fought.

I'm not going to tell you how the fight turned out, because that's not the point.

But at the end of the day, everyone went back to the burrow and snuggled up in one big pile to keep warm for the night.

Don't get me wrong. I don't want to cuddle with you guys. But doesn't that sound like something we long for ourselves? To be part of a group where we all matter and where we are protected and cared for?

That's what Paul had with the church in Philippi.

Their shared mission made for a rock-solid relationship.

God is inviting us to share his mission with him.

And he's calling us to share that kind of relationship with him and each other as well!

Can you imagine the impact sharing God's mission with him and with each other would make in our lives? But how would we go about doing that?

FOUR STEPS TO JOINING GOD'S MISSION:

Step 1: Find a ministry.

There are so many possible ways to joining God's mission that the options seem daunting.

How do you sort through all the options?

Finding a ministry means looking for a cause you believe in, a team that you trust, or a target for ministry that you connect with.

The cause, team, or target has to align with our beliefs.

The cause, team, or target you choose should also be something you feel passionate about.

I love seeing this in our Celebrate Recovery team.

These folks are passionate about people with habits, hurts, and hang-ups.

They know that people with habits, hurts, and hang-ups can stay where they are, but they can also choose to get help from people who will steer them away from God and give them band-aids that cover over wounds without healing them.

So they are passionate about seeing people with habits, hurts, and hang-ups get the only hope that can truly heal them and that's a relationship with Jesus Christ and a community of other, supporting followers of Jesus who can encourage them as they do the tough work.

What cause, team, or target do you feel passionate about? Find a ministry.

Step 2: Focus on outcomes.

We don't just do ministry to do ministry.

With God, we do ministry because we are on a mission and going somewhere.
So as we join God's mission and pick ministries, we want to stay focused on the outcomes.
I love that about M.A.D. Week at our Simsbury congregation.
M.A.D. stands for "Making a Difference."
For a week this summer they fielded teams across the area to do important work.
They helped out at Flamig Farm and worked in people's yards.
Now, don't just focus on people doing good things. That's focusing on the methods.
But focus on why they did what they did. They did what they did to show people the love of God in Christ Jesus and to build gospel-relationships.
Of course, they made Jesus look very good and got positive comments. That's important.
But they also had new people join them as they worked, and they've had new people join them since as a result of what they did. That's the outcome we wanted to see!
When we focus on the outcome, we know what to celebrate.
And when we focus on the outcome, we stay aligned with God and his mission.
At the same time, step 3 reminds us:

Step 3: Enjoy the process.

This past weekend our own Children's Ministry started back for the fall.
They found their target in children.
They focus on the outcomes of our kids and family following Jesus and new kids and families following Jesus. They know the outcomes to celebrate.
But the joy that the team had in coming back together this fall was really contagious.
I went inside last week to see the volunteers before they started working, and you could see their smiles even though they were wearing masks. Their smiles were so big that they showed in their eyes because they were having fun serving kids.
Enjoy the process when you join God's mission.

Step 4: Pour yourself in.

Don't hold back.
Joining God's mission is never going to feel safe.
Joining God's mission is never going to be convenient.
It's hard to join God's mission by poking your big toe in the water.
Instead, joining God's mission is like running, jumping, and doing a cannonball into the water.
You're going to get soaked, but it will be amazing.

WHY JOIN GOD'S MISSION LIKE THIS?

Going on offense is always more fun than just playing defense!

Earlier in my career I had the opportunity to do youth ministry for a decade.
I loved working with students.

Back in those days, we played big, outdoor games with the students.

One of the favorites was "Capture the Flag."

Capture the Flag pits two teams against each other.

Both teams hide flags.

Then each team tries to find and steal the other team's flag.

But if you cross onto the opposing team's side, they can tag you. If you get tagged, you have to go to jail until you're released by a teammate.

Some kids like to play defense when playing "Capture the Flag." And defense is important!

But I've watched two teams committed to defense stare across the boundary at each other.

Neither team wants to risk being captured. Neither team wants to lose.

Consequently, neither team can win.

At some point in "Capture the Flag," you've got to run across into enemy territory, scout for the flag, try to get it, and risk capture. It's also the only way the game is any fun.

That's generally true in life, and it's definitely true in ministry.

We can't spend our whole lives playing defense.

At some point we've got to join God's mission and go on the offense to do something that matters, something that makes us feel alive!

Joining God's mission makes us partners with God.

God chose Paul to be his partner to reach the people of Philippi and beyond.

God also chose the Christians in Philippi to help spread the Gospel in big ways and in small ones as well. They are truly heroes whose story can't be fully told or appreciated until heaven.

And as we say "yes" to God's mission today, we become partners with God as well.

Joining God's mission corrects our agenda.

Aristotle saw more deeply than he knew when he wrote about friendships.

We normally approach life asking, "What's in it for me? Where's the 'quid pro quo'?"

But while Aristotle wasn't a Christian, he was wise enough to see that looking at everything in life that way is going to feel pretty empty and make walking away all too easy.

We're followers of Jesus, so we know that kind of selfishness is sin.

Even though we know that it's sin, we slip easily into that frame of mind.

Asking "What's in it for me?" leads us to get and hold and protect and fear.

Joining God's mission corrects that agenda and focuses us outward.

It lifts our eyes up to see the bigger picture as God sees it.

Joining God's mission changes our agenda and brings out something good in us.

Plus, it leads to some of the strongest relationships we can ever make.

Joining God's mission helps us to press on.

When we join God's mission, we're going somewhere.

Our eyes are lifted up.

The wind of the Holy Spirit is at our backs propelling us forward.

We have our brothers and sisters at our side, pulling with us and for us.

We have a destination toward which we're moving.

Something significant is at stake, and that something motivates us.

We can't quit. We won't quit. Instead, we keep pressing on.

Would you find a concrete way to join God's mission? It will change your life.