TRUE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

Philippians 1:3-8

By

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Philippians Lesson 4

**True Christian Fellowship**  
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A family went to the movies. On the way in, the young man of the family stopped at the refreshment stand to pick up some popcorn. By the time he got into the theater, the lights were already dim and he couldn't find his family. He paced up and down the aisles in near darkness, peering down each row. Finally, in desperation, he stopped and asked out loud, “Does anyone here recognize me?”

Even though it’s well-lit, there may be people who come into this church and feel like that young man--lost, isolated, disconnected from everyone. Deep down, they are silently crying out, “Does anyone here recognize me?” They’re longing for true Christian fellowship.

While the local church ought to be the place where you can find genuine fellowship in Christ, all too often it is lacking. On vacation a couple of years ago, our family visited a small church in Colorado. It should have been obvious to the regular attenders that we were new. And yet, even though we arrived before the service began and stood around for quite a while after it was over, no one came up to talk with us. That doesn’t incline you toward going back a second time.

The local church is not supposed to be like a theater, where you file in, find a seat next to folks that you don’t have any relationship with, watch the performance, and file out. Part of our problem is that we’ve come to think of the church as the building you go to for church services. That idea is foreign to the New Testament, which clearly presents the church as God’s people, a living body knit together by their union with Christ, the head. Coupled with the church as a building fallacy is the equally unbiblical notion that the pastor and perhaps a few committed volunteers run the church. The rest of the folks just come, sit, listen, and go home.

But the Bible is clear that every member is a minister of Christ, with a vital function to fulfill. If everyone here who knows Christ
as Savior viewed himself or herself as a minister, here to serve Christ by reaching out in love to others, no one could walk into our services and feel like no one recognized him.

As you read our text, it is obvious that Paul had a relationship of close fellowship with this church. It wasn’t what often goes by the label “fellowship” in American Christianity, the superficial chatting about sports or the weather over coffee and donuts. Even though they were miles apart, Paul’s heart was tied up with these people, and their hearts were with him. There was no natural explanation for this closeness between this Asian Jew who was now in prison in Rome and these European people who themselves were no homogeneous group. What knit them together was true Christian fellowship.

True Christian fellowship means sharing together in the things of God.

There are five strands of true fellowship in these verses:

1. True fellowship means praying for one another (1:3, 4).

Though Paul was confined and could not be with the Philippians, his chains could not prevent him from thinking about them and praying for them. His remembrance of them filled him with thanksgiving and joy, as he thought about how God was truly at work among them. And those thoughts turned into frequent prayers on their behalf.

Our remembrance of other believers should not stop with warm feelings. Our remembrance should be turned God-ward, into heartfelt prayers for one another. I personally struggle with going over prayer lists, because I always think, “Lord, You can read my list. You know these needs.” It always seems kind of mechanical and meaningless to me. The lists can be helpful, to bring to mind people I otherwise would forget. But I find it easier to pray for people as God brings them to my mind during the day. Turn your remembrances into prayer.

In Ephesians 6:18 we’re told to “pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints.” In 1 Thessalonians 5:17 we’re told to “pray without ceasing.” Romans 12:12 tells us to “be devoted to prayer.” These verses do not mean that we are to quit our jobs and spend
all day every day in prayer. The word translated “without ceasing” was used of a hacking cough. Someone with a hacking cough is always coming back to it after brief intervals. Thus, prayer is to be a frequent, common conversation between us and the Lord, and the subject of our prayers should often be other Christians and their walk with God (we’ll look next week at the content of Paul’s prayer in Phil. 1:9-11.)

Sometimes you may wonder, “Why do I need to pray? God already knows everything, and He’s going to accomplish His sovereign will anyway. So what’s the point of praying?” But the prayers of the saints are part of God’s method for accomplishing His sovereign will. And He uses prayer to change the heart of the one doing the praying, as well as to work in the hearts of others. As you bring your requests before God, your motives are exposed. You quickly realize that you can’t honestly bring certain requests before God, because your thoughts about a brother or sister aren’t pleasing to Him! If you’re inclined to pray the imprecatory psalms against someone, God will convict you and ask, “Is that really what you want Me to do to this brother or sister in Christ?”

If you’re having trouble with another believer, even if it’s your mate or a family member, pray often for that person. It’s hard to stay angry at someone you’re praying for daily! James Boice states, “I think that ninety percent of all the divisions between true believers in this world would disappear entirely if Christians would learn to pray specifically and constantly for one another” (Philippians, An Expositional Commentary [Zondervan], p. 49).

2. True fellowship means serving God together (1:5, 7).

We’ve already seen how, from day one, the Philippians joined Paul in the cause of the gospel. They were active in serving the Lord. The concept of being a church member who just attends a church service once a week would have been completely foreign to them, and rightly so. It should be foreign to us! Christ never saves anyone so that they can just add church attendance to their list of weekly things to do. Nor does He save anyone so that they can live happier lives that are just as self-centered as they were before. Every believer is saved to serve God.
Americans have adopted a change in focus, in which they view the church like consumers who are shopping for a place that will meet their needs. So they try out this church and that church, and finally settle on one that seems to offer the services they're interested in. But if they have an unpleasant experience or if they hear of another church that seems to offer better programs, they change to it, much like they change department stores if another one better suits their fancy.

Sadly, a lot of churches cater to this mentality. Articles and books tell pastors how to market their churches to the “Baby Boomers.” They warn that if we don’t learn what the Baby Boomers want and re-design the church to give it to them, we’ll lose them. Nervous pastors see the people going down the street to the church that offers a full-service program, and they get busy trying to design new programs to help their church compete in the marketplace.

I intend some time to write an article on why we’re not a “full-service” church. The point of the church is decidedly not to meet the needs of folks who decide to give them their business! The church is a fellowship of those who serve Jesus because He bought them with His blood. That service sometimes includes being persecuted. Paul mentions how the Philippians were partners with him in his imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel (1:7). He tells them, “For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (1:29) [it’s a gift!]. Can you picture the Philippian church taking out an ad in the local paper to market the church: “Come, join our church! You’ll love suffering with us! We have the best persecution program in town!”

When I was in the Coast Guard, I never had to serve in combat. But you who did can identify with this aspect of true Christian fellowship. Even though you probably served with pagans, fighting together against the enemy in life or death situations knit you together with those men. If you have a reunion of your company, seeing those men brings back memories of how you risked your lives for one another and for the cause.

The Christian church is engaged in mortal combat for the souls of men and women. The truth of the gospel is under attack,
not only from outside the camp, but also from within. Thus it needs to be defended. There are many today who say that we should never be negative, that we should only emphasize loving one another. Those who dare to confront serious heresies get labeled as divisive and unloving. But Paul spent a good deal of time in his letters defending the gospel, often against false teachers in the church. So did John, Peter, and Jude. So must we, if we want to be faithful to Christ.

The gospel also needs to be confirmed. Defense focuses on the negative task of confronting error; confirmation focuses on the positive task of setting forth the truth of the gospel and its implications for how we should live. The gospel is confirmed through the church when our lives show the fruit of godliness (see 1 Cor. 1:6). Even though it is more positively focused, the confirmation of the gospel is also a battleground. The enemy hates it when God’s truth is set forth in a clear, practical manner, because Christians start dealing with their sin and living holy lives. And so it draws fire and creates controversy.

The point is, every Christian has a role to fulfill by serving in Christ’s army. The Lord saved you to serve, and serving Him isn’t always easy or free from strife and conflict. But it knits us together in fellowship when we join in serving Him. True fellowship means praying and serving Christ together.

3. True fellowship means trusting in God’s sovereign working in one another (1:6).

In our last study we saw from this verse how salvation is God’s doing from start to finish. But let’s look at verse 6 from the angle of fellowship. It means that I can trust God to work in the lives of my brothers and sisters. God began their salvation; He will finish the job. Fellowship often breaks down because I see that another Christian isn’t exactly where I’m at on some issue, whether it’s how to interpret some doctrine or how to live on some issue. I’m threatened by Christians who are different than I am, and so I take it on as my task to change that person so he will be like me. He senses my rejection of him or my attempts to change him, and draws back. Fellowship is hindered.
Verse 6 means that I'm not responsible to change others. I am responsible to minister God's love and truth to others in a sensitive manner. If a brother is clearly wrong about a major truth or in sin or immature in the way he's living, I am responsible to come alongside and do all I can to help him change and grow. If it's a serious heresy or sin that he's involved in, I may eventually need to separate from him. But at the same time, I can trust that it's God's job to change that brother. If God has truly saved him, God will finish the job. So I can relax, accept him where he's at with the Lord, encourage him in areas of weakness, but also learn from him in areas where I need to grow. But I'm not the Holy Spirit, and it only serves to break fellowship when I take that role on myself. This applies also to husbands and wives and to parents and teenagers! You can and must trust God to change your mate, your kids, or your parents.


Paul saw the Philippians as “partakers of grace” with him. Just as Paul, the persecutor of the church, had found God’s undeserved favor at the cross, so had the Philippians. So have we all who have met Christ. Every true member of the church is a partaker of God’s grace. The more I grow in Christ, the more I sense how much grace I needed to get saved and how much grace I need daily to go on with Christ. And the more I should view my fellow saints as fellow sinners who need not only grace from God, but also grace from me, as we labor together for Christ.

Viewing ourselves and other Christians as fellow-partakers of God’s grace humbles us and puts us all on the same level. Paul could have viewed himself as God’s greatest apostle to the Gentiles, and the Philippians as his converts. “Just think where you’d be at today if I hadn’t come and given the gospel to you. And don’t forget how much I suffered in the process!” It’s interesting to trace chronologically how Paul referred to himself in three of his letters. In 1 Corinthians 15:9 he said that he was the least of the apostles. Later, in Ephesians 3:8, he said that he was the least of all saints. Finally, in 1 Timothy 1:15 he called himself the chief of sinners.

I’ve been around some Christians whose company, quite frankly, was difficult to enjoy. It’s easy to become judgmental and
impatient, where you think, “Why is this person so hard to be around?” And fellowship is strained. I had a secretary in my church in California who was that way. She tended to be abrasive and insensitive to people. One day I asked her to tell me how she met the Lord. She told me of a terrible childhood in which her father had abused and then abandoned her. Her succession of stepfathers had been equally abusive. She finally ran off with her boyfriend to escape this horrible home life, and only later had met Christ. Hearing her story changed my attitude toward her. I realized that she was a partaker of God’s grace with me.

Of course, grace doesn’t mean that we tolerate sin and shrug off sloppy living. We sometimes need to confront; we need to help one another face and overcome faults. But if we remember that we’re all partakers of God’s undeserved favor, we’ll give one another more room to grow. We’ll be more patient and forbearing with one another. True Christian fellowship is a sharing together in God’s abundant grace.

Thus true fellowship means praying and serving together; it means trusting in God’s faithfulness and grace.

5. **True fellowship means heartfelt affection for one another (1:8).**

Paul calls God as his witness of his longing and affection for the Philippian believers, not because they would be prone to doubt him, but because he felt it so deeply. “Affection” is the word for bowels or the inner vital organs. It emphasizes the emotional aspect of Paul’s love for these people who were so dear to him. There was a popular Bible teacher a few years ago who used to say that agape love is a “mental attitude,” not an emotion. I’m afraid that he and his followers often reflected his teaching, being some of the coldest people I ever care to meet. But the Apostle Paul was unashamedly emotional in his love for God’s people. He told the Thessalonians that he had cared for them as tenderly as a nursing mother. Then he said, “Having thus a fond affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us” (1 Thess. 2:8).
Sin divides us from those who are different from us racially, culturally, or in other ways. But the love of Christ unites us, not just intellectually, but with heartfelt love. Such love isn’t manipulative, trying to use the other person for our own advantage. It truly seeks God’s best for the other person, even at personal inconvenience or sacrifice.

Now, here’s the hard question (if you’re honest, you wrestle with it at times): How can I develop heartfelt love for a Christian whom I find it hard to be around? Well, let’s be honest, it’s not easy! All of the factors of fellowship I’ve mentioned go into the solution: Pray diligently for the person; work with him in the gospel; trust God to do His work of sanctification in him; ask him to share his testimony or background, and recognize that you both are partakers of God’s grace.

But there’s another factor mentioned in verse 8: Love him or her with the affection of Christ Jesus. J. B. Lightfoot paraphrases, “Did I speak of having you in my own heart? I should rather have said that in the heart of Christ Jesus I long for you.” Then Lightfoot comments, “A powerful metaphor describing perfect union. The believer has no yearnings apart from his Lord; his pulse beats with the pulse of Christ; his heart throbs with the heart of Christ” ([Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians](http://www.zondervan.com), p. 85). Jesus Christ loved that difficult brother or sister enough to go to the cross for him or her. He can love them through me. As I obey by judging my sinful thoughts toward the person and by acting in love, the feelings of love will almost invariably follow. But even if they don’t, I need to obey!

**Conclusion**

I read about a man named Mohammed who lives in a North African country that is almost totally Muslim. He sent away for some literature he heard about on a radio broadcast and received in the mail a Gospel of Matthew and a Gospel of John. Through studying them he came to faith in Christ.

But there are no churches in his country. Mohammed longed for a Christian brother to fellowship and pray with. He prayed diligently for four years, wondering if he would ever have the joy of meeting another Christian. Then one day he received a letter from
a British Christian he had never met, who was following up with those who had requested gospel literature. The man told Mohammed that he would be in his area and asked if they could meet. Mohammed was so excited that his prayer was finally going to be answered that he couldn’t sleep for three nights before the scheduled meeting. When they met, Mohammed’s first experience of Christian fellowship was more wonderful than he could have imagined. (Story in Operation Mobilization’s “Indeed,” April/May, 1994.)

Some of us take Christian fellowship for granted, don’t we? What a great privilege it is to be able to share together in the things of God! If you just attend church, but aren’t connected with other Christians during the week, you need to get plugged in with the fellowship! And we all need to see ourselves as servants of Christ with a responsibility to reach out in true Christian fellowship to our brothers and sisters and, especially, to new people, even to those who may be different than we are. We don’t want anyone to come here and ask, “Does anyone here recognize me?”

Discussion Questions

1. How can we do a better job of including and incorporating new people in our fellowship?

2. How has the consumer mentality affected the church? Should the church see itself as being in the business of “meeting needs?”

3. How does the concept that every Christian is a minister affect the fellowship of a local body?

4. How can you develop heartfelt affection for a brother or sister you just can’t stand being around?

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