

Kenneth H. Carter, Jr.

To all the saints in  
Christ Jesus who are in  
Philippi, with the  
Bishops and deacons,  
Grace to you and peace  
from God our Father and  
Jesus Christ.

# The Letter To The Philippians

*Preaching and Teaching Toward A More Faithful Stewardship*

According to Acts 16, the congregation at Philippi was the first church established by Paul and Timothy on their first missionary journey. The letters' tone reflects a warm and intimate relationship between Paul and the Philippians. The letter (or letters) was (or were) most likely written from prison, during Paul's two year captivity (see Acts 28). The occasion for the letter was the reception of a gift sent to Paul from the Philippians by way of Epaphroditus (see *Philippians 2: 25-30*). Most scholars date the letter at about 59-61 A.D. Philippians is a widely loved book for its devotional character and theological substance. Several ideas stand out as thematic: joy, conviction in the midst of adversity, the Christian life in contrast to both legalistic and libertine extremes, and the nature of Christ's Lordship. I want to argue that the letter also awaits recovery as a resource for teaching and preaching about steward-

ship in the local church.

The following is a simple outline that might assist the pastor as she attempts to speak biblically about a matter that is always in season—resources that help us to fulfill the mission of Jesus Christ. This outline can be used for a series of four sermons and /or Bible studies, and is based upon a simple movement: we experience Christian community (chapter one) and learn more Jesus Christ, our servant Lord (chapter two) and about his sacrifice for all people (chapter three), in order that we might live within gratitude and thanksgiving (chapter four).

## *Philippians One Partnership in the Gospel*

There is a sharing, a partnership, a *koinonia* between Paul and the Philippians. There is a common participation, interest and sharing in the Good News. Paul's mission as an apostle is to

extend the gospel into the world. This extension, this apostolic movement, is shared with God's people, the apostolic church. Our congregations are apostolic churches when we extend the grace of God into the world. And in this way we are partners with God.

**A Spiritual Exercise:** Read Philippians 1:6-11. Do you sense an accountability to God for your life, your talents and your time? What is the "good work" that God is doing through you? Through your congregation?

There is within the Scripture an emphasis upon the judgment of God. This judgment is not arbitrary, but rather is attentive to the truth that God will bring the divine purposes to completion and fulfillment. The Scriptures are also rich with images of growth and harvest (see especially the parables of Jesus in *Matthew 13 and Luke 13*.) Philippians speaks of God's attentiveness, patience, and timing and our connection to the

One who creates, nurtures and sustains. To “bear fruit,” in biblical terms, is to be a part of God’s miraculous work in the world.

What will the harvest be like in our congregation?(1:11)

Am I “bearing fruit” as a Christian? (John 15:16)

### ***Philippians Two The Form of a Servant***

Paul’s letter is filled with practical advice. He knows the congregation (and himself!) well, and he warns them against selfishness, conceit, and grumbling. He pleads with them to strive toward the fruits of the Christian life. At the end of chapter one, Paul encourages the Philippians to let their lives be “worthy of the gospel of Christ”; in addition, he appeals to them to “stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel”(27-28).

Into this appeal for unity Paul inserts a hymn, begun with the words “Have this mind among yourselves...” This hymn calls the Philippians not only to imitate Christ, it is also a recognition that the mind of Jesus is already among them. In meeting everyday problems of jealousy, greed and self-centeredness, the Philippians are shaped by a common life in Christ, whose spirit is present among them.

How is the mind and spirit of Jesus already present in our congregations? Three brief affirmations help us toward an answer:

- As a Christian community we are called to the imitation of Christ. Jesus is our role model, our example. The power of role models cannot be overemphasized. We comprehend something of the mystery of God in the simplicity of Jesus. To understand the mind of Christ is to encounter the One who “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.” To imitate Christ is to share in his servanthood.
- The Christian community, as it imitates Christ, discovers that it is on a journey of downward mobility. As Christ emptied himself, we also give ourselves for others on his behalf. This is the character of Christianity. Yet remember that

this is a letter of encouragement. Service can be transformed when our motive is to live in the image of Christ. The oft-quoted statement is true: We are not called to be successful. We are called to be faithful.

- As a Christian community, we are called to take the form of a servant, Jesus, who is our Lord. In the New Testament, the Lordship of Christ is always connected to his humility and servanthood. In the same way, our

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power as Christians comes from our service and self-emptying. Our lives are joyful not because good things are always happening to us, but because we are striving to be in God’s will and purpose. This is the source of Paul’s strength...and ours!

### ***Philippians Three Graced Sacrifice***

The apostle Paul is struggling to understand the meaning of Christian faith in terms of strength and weakness. It is fashionable to confess that we are weak before God, and that we receive strength and power through the Gospel. But we are less likely to reflect the opposite truth: that God invites us to journey from strength toward weakness. This is sacrifice. It is at the heart of our understanding of Jesus Christ, and the life we experience as we follow him.

The journey of sacrifice is the foundation of Christian stewardship. We work diligently in life to gather credentials, to acquire resources, to be self-sufficient. Such a movement, however, leads us away from dependence on God and oth-

ers; we are tempted to focus on our own achievements and not on God’s grace. Faithful Christian living, which is also faithful Christian stewardship, begins at the point of risk, when we are aware of gifts made possible through God’s grace.

The supreme example of grace is portrayed in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope. A life of grace is possible only through him. “I want to know Christ,” Paul writes, “and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings” (3:10). A life of faithful stewardship, a life of grace, is rooted and grounded in relationship. To know Jesus Christ, Paul insists, is to be formed and conformed to his suffering, death, and resurrection. To know Jesus Christ is to grow into his likeness. Paul’s words in Philippians 3 can be helpful to us—

As we wrestle with the meaning of sacrifice. If we are growing in the faith, growing in family relationships, growing in friendships, the offering of our time, our talents and our possessions will take on a sacrificial character. A congregation accomplishes its mission in the world through the sacrifices of individuals: those who teach, pray, sing, visit, give money, invite friends, take prophetic stances, lead worship, reach beyond their comfort zones, chaperone youth and children’s gatherings, offer hospitality—the mission of Jesus Christ in the world is always the result of sacrifice. If something is meaningful to us, important to us, we will make sacrifices. This is true in our families. This is true in our workplaces. And it is true with God.

**In recognizing that a sacrificial life flows from an experience of grace.** We are willing to sacrifice time, money and energy because of the grace that we receive from one another and from God. Saint Francis prayed it well: It is in giving that we receive. A vital church is always an adventure of sacrifice and grace, a journey into sacrifice, into weakness, that is also a pilgrimage into the grace of God, who strengthens us and calls us forward. As Paul confessed, “This one thing I do; forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (3. 13-14).

*Philippians Four*  
**Gratitude in All Things**

The Philippians are called to rejoice, for, in the words of Paul, “The Lord is near” (4:5). God’s nearness has several meanings: in the experience of Pentecost the Lord is near in the presence of the Spirit; and in Advent, we await the birth of Jesus Christ who comes into the world even now, full of grace and truth.

To rejoice in the Lord, to give thanks, is to live in the knowledge that the Lord is near. This conviction is the source of the abundant life promised by Jesus. For this reason, Paul knew, the believer could live in the midst of shifting circumstances with a constancy of faith and trust: “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known to God...I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty... my God will satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (4:6, 12, 19). Thanksgiving, as a Christian virtue, flows from the belief that God is with us; while external conditions of our lives fluctuate, we possess an internal contentment through relationship with Jesus Christ. This has a very concrete meaning: What happens to us is not as important as our response to what happens.

How can we nurture these virtues of thanksgiving and contentment? The 4th chapter of Philippians helps us to ask questions about our own stewardship.

**What are the gifts that God has placed in our congregations?** How has God empowered us for distinctive service in the community? Congregations (and individuals) often dwell on their limitations, failures and shortcomings. Paul calls us to rejoice. Can you name something that has happened in your own congregation recently that moves you to offer praise to God?


Does our planning for the future exhibit the belief that God is present with us? Or are we “functional atheists,” proceeding on the assumption that nothing will happen beyond our own human efforts? Can we say, with Paul, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”(4:13)?

**A Spiritual Exercise:** Can we begin to see that the primary gift, in personal and congregational terms, is the gift of the Gospel, the gift of Jesus Christ, who gives new life to individuals and congre-

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gations? Can we rejoice in the greatest of gifts, and begin to see that an abundant life flows from a gratitude in the presence of Jesus Christ who is with us in life and in death (Philippians 1:21), in abundance and scarcity (Philippians 4:12). As Christians, we live in thanksgiving and with fulfillment because we sense and believe that Jesus Christ is with us. □



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