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Bible Study -- Student's Guide

I Thank God For You: A Five-Part Study on Philippians and Partnership

by Jessica Crist

Session 1: Mail Call!

- "Sir, more than kisses, letters mingle Soules; For thus friends absent speak." **John Donne**
 - "A letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend." ² **Emily Dickinson**
 - Have one member of the group read Philippians aloud. The rest, listen.
 - Everybody loves letters. The thought of letters in the mailbox keeps college students going from day to day. We love letters from family, letters from friends. After a dry spell, we welcome even form letters, anything!
 - Letters are personal. And letters are participatory. Even if they are not written to us, letters fascinate us. Who does not turn to the letters to the editor, even if you do not read the rest of the paper or magazine? Why are write-in columns so popular, both "professional" and "people-to-people"?
 - Once letter writing was considered an art. Now it is a medium of popular culture, from the scribbled love note to the computerized rejection slip.
 - "Open letters" often address a current political subject, from the campus scene to the international arena. Novelists from the 18th (Samuel Richardson, *Pamela*) to the 20th century (Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*) use letters to tell their stories. Individuals and officials write letters to the future and enclose them in time capsules.
 - How many different kinds of letters do you think you have in your room?
 - Good letters are different from essays or activity logs. A letter implies a relationship. There is mutuality in a letter, responsiveness. A good letter leaves some breathing room, some time to listen and reflect. In reading a letter, we learn something about the sender and the receiver.
 - Take a look at Philippians. What do we learn about the sender of this letter? What do we learn about the receivers?
 - **The Relationship:**
 - Why are the Philippians special to Paul? Paul writes as a friend rather than as a stranger. He writes personally, as a family member might. Where do you find evidence of this? How crucial is this personal
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relationship for Paul? For the Philippians? How does knowing the closeness of Paul and the Philippians affect our hearing of Paul for us today? Do you have the feeling you are reading someone else's mail?

The Form:

Think about all the different kinds of letters you are familiar with today. List them quickly. How is Paul's letter like and unlike the various kinds? Christians believe that this letter is part of Holy Scriptures. How is it that we can interpret this very human communication as the Word of God? What does this tell us about scripture? What does this tell us about letters?

The Situation:

How is Paul affected by his status as prisoner? Do you think his being a prisoner makes any difference to the Philippians? Why or why not? Does it increase or decrease his credibility to them, to you? What would you think if your religious mentor were put in jail over a matter of conscience? Can you think of a situation in which that might happen?

To Think About:

Business meeting agendas often include "Old Business", "Correspondence", and "New Business". How is this a helpful or non-helpful way to look at the church's liturgical reading of scripture as Old Testament, Epistle and New Testament?

Write a letter sometime in the next week. How would you write differently if it were for one person or for a group, for private reading or reading in a public gathering?

To Pray About:

Give thanks for forms of communication such as letters. Pray for relationships to deepen.

¹ John Donne, "To Sir Henry Wotton," *Poetry And Prose*, (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 154.
² Emily Dickinson, "To T.W. Higginson," *Letters*, Vol. 2, (Cambridge: Belknap-Harvard, 1958), p. 460.

Session 2: ***Partnership and adversity***

Read chapter 1 aloud.

The world's first human partnership was a woman and a man. Today still, the church deals liturgically with partnership in context of the marriage service. Take a look at it sometime. How might we use the marriage service to affirm other kinds of partnerships? It makes clear the link between partnership and strength for adversity.

Partnership:

Paul calls the Philippians "partners in the gospel". What does he mean by this? How are they partners with him? Physically? Spiritually? Does this mean more than friendship?

What risks do partnership involve? What blessings?

How might we use the idea of partnership in our ministry today? With whom are we partners? Can we choose our partners? How is a partner like a neighbor? How is it different?

How is partnership like covenant? Can partnership grow? How does it develop?
How is partnership like marriage? What does each party get out of a partnership? What does each party put in? Is partnership conditional or unconditional? Who sets the terms?

How is prayer a part of partnership? Kathryn Koob wrote in her journal while held hostage in Iran:

"...I came to a real understanding of what the wife of the bishop of the Lutheran Church in Romania meant when she asked me to pray for the Lutheran Church in Romania. I had asked her in one

of our talks if there was anything our churches outside the (Communist) Bloc could do for them, and was surprised when she said, 'Our needs are well met, but ask everyone to pray for us.' I understood what she meant when I remembered I had written to Annie, 'Thank everyone for their prayers; it is the thing that supports us daily!'"¹

Adversity:

The little red hen who said, "I'll do it myself," each time her request for help was answered with, "Not I," understood that the test of partnership is adversity.

How are the Philippians and Paul partners in adversity? Have you ever been a partner in adversity? How can adversity strengthen partnership?

How did adversity strengthen Paul's partnership with the Philippians? How did adversity strengthen his partnership with the brothers and sisters (v. 14)? How can adversity strengthen our partnerships?

Adversity can also erode partnership (vs. 15-18). How does preaching Christ with wrong motives erode partnership? How does partisanship differ from partnership? How is Christ greater than the preachers?

How can we be partners with one another? What has Paul given up in partnership (v. 22)? What is he willing to give up? Can we always choose what we give up?

To Think About:

In business there are limited and general partnerships. In a limited partnership, the "limited" partners have an investment but no managerial authority. In a general partnership, each partner can act for the entire group.

What kind of partnership is a helpful model for the Christian community? Is either model helpful?

Business partnerships often have a way of dissolving when adversity comes. How is our partnership with Christ different? How should our partnership with each other be different?

To Pray About:

Give thanks for partnership. Pray for strength for all who face adversity.

¹ Kathryn Koob, *Guest Of The Revolution*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), pp.153-4.

Session 3:

Christ's Hymn, Christians' Response

Read chapter 2 aloud.

Hymns and poetry enrich communication, drawing on well-known, well-written verbal formulation. Paul quotes an ancient hymn to Christ (2:6-11) to express the faith they have in common and to express his own joy.

Next time you're struggling to put something difficult into your own words, stop and think if you've heard anyone say it well. Don't plagiarize, but by all means use what someone has gone to the trouble to think and write; remember to give credit. (Even Moses did not hesitate to break into a song, attributed to Miriam, at the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus 15.)

The Hymn (vs. 6-11)

What do you think it means to "grasp at equality with God"? Why did Christ not do it? Do you think Paul did it? Do we do it? Is partnership a proper alternative to grasping at equality?

Jesus emptied himself, taking human form. Have you ever felt emptied? Why would Christ prefer the form of servant to the form of God? Would you make that choice? What does Christ's choice tell us about power? About God?

Christ's self-humbling led to death; God's response was to exalt Christ. What was the point of it all? Why not simply go straight for the exaltation?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend Eberhard Bethge:

"Perhaps I already ought to be sending you my special wishes for Easter, as I don't know how long it takes for letters to reach you and I would very much like you to know that in the weeks before and after Easter I know that I'm one with you in many good memories. In looking through DAS NEUE LIED these days, I'm constantly reminded that it is mainly to you that I owe my enjoyment of the Easter hymns. It's a year now since I heard a hymn sung. But it's strange how if we really concentrate on it, what we hear physically. It has a greater purity, the dross falls away, and in a way the music acquires a "new body." There are only a few pieces I know well enough to be able to hear them inwardly, but I get on particularly well with the Easter hymns."¹

Do you think Paul heard this hymn inwardly? What songs or poems do you hear inwardly? What is the value of such "inward hearing?"

"Complete My Joy" (vs. 2-4):

Paul again reminds the Philippians not only of their accountability to God, but also of their accountability to him as a brother in the faith. What are the four experiences Paul appeals to in v. 1 (the fruits of the relationship thus far)? Could we use them as criteria for partnership? Have you ever experienced any of those?

Paul appeals for interdependence in v. 2. What are the characteristics of interdependence? Can we live this way, love this way?

"Work Out Your Salvation" (vs. 12-13):

Interdependence is not dependence on human resources. Nor is it independence. Paul asks his Philippian friends to grow up to God. Sometimes childhood is more comfortable than adulthood. Have you ever been asked to grow up? Paul notes it is not easy, but God works in them.

Paul cannot mediate between the Philippians and God. Are there times when you would rather have a mediator or mentor? Who is that person?

Obedience and Cheerfulness (14 ff.):

Faced with prison and possibly death, Paul is extraordinarily cheerful. He encourages his friends to be likewise. What is the basis for the good cheer? Can you imagine yourself in such a situation?

Paul reminds them that they shine as lights. Just as Paul is a guide for them, they may be a guide for others in the world. Have you ever thought about how, unbeknownst to you, you may be a light to someone else? Friendship and Christian love are not simply abstract. They are made concrete in people like Timothy and Epaphroditus.

To Think About:

We have telephones, televisions and sophisticated computers. Do we still need human messengers like Timothy and Epaphroditus? Like us?

To Pray About:

Give thanks for Christ's gift to us. Then pray for interdependence.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Letter to Eberhard Bethge," *Letters And Papers From Prison*, (New York: Mcmillan, 1974), p. 240.

Session 4: *Rejoice and Beware*

Read chapter 3 aloud.

Paul advises the Philippians to rejoice and to imitate him. He also warns them against imitating others who do not intend them good. Some may find it emotionally contradictory for Paul to be so joyous and so negative within the same letter. In fact, scholars believe that the "beware" section was a separate part, integrated later. Nevertheless, without considering Paul a manic depressive, we can imagine both joy and fear at the same time.

Talk to someone who has given birth. The process of labor and delivery may give you some sort of understanding of the joy and fear we see together in this chapter. What are other instances of joy and fear together?

"Beware" (vs. 2-6, 18-19):

Like any concerned friend or mentor, Paul does not simply exhort his Philippians about the good in life. He also warns them about negative influences. Christianity started as a Jewish movement, quickly spreading to non-Jews. People disagreed on whether one had to become a Jew before becoming a Christian. Paul said, "No," and criticized those who tried to make Jews out of gentile Christians.

Can you think of an equivalent situation for us today? Do we try to make others in our image rather than allowing them to be Christians as they are in God's image?

Paul posited his "true circumcision" against the circumcision which was the mark of the Jew. What did Paul mean? What might the "true circumcision" mean for us today?

Are we tempted, too, to put our trust elsewhere? How do we have "confidence in the flesh" today?

Remember, Paul says to watch out for those who claim their credentials, not to emulate them. He doesn't attack them, but responds. Does that mean that we should not preach "the true circumcision" to the "dogs" of our time unless we're first attacked by them?

"Everything is Loss" (v. 8):

Paul's resume is complete. Yet he rejects it all, because he realizes it isn't going to do anything for him. Christ has made that unnecessary.

Have you ever been in a situation in which everything you'd worked for lost its meaning? How can we let go of the unimportant things we cling to? How can we let other people know that we value them and that God values them not for their accomplishments but for Christ's? How can we do this without insulting them?

Does Christianity involve a different value system? How does the "loss" that Paul speaks about here compare with the emptiness of Christ in ch. 2? What can we learn about loss and emptiness? Do we choose it? Does it choose us? Are there different kinds of emptiness?

Martin Luther King Jr. wrote to the Birmingham clergy during his imprisonment in the city jail:

"I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate.... I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously-structured dams that block the flow of social justice."¹

How had circumcision become a similarly "dangerously-structured dam" for Paul? What are the blocks for us in our religious communities today?

Partnership and Imitation:

Paul's righteousness depends on faith in Christ — not on his religious pedigree. He writes of knowing Christ and the resurrection's power. To know is to share. To know Christ is to share Christ's suffering. To know

Paul is to share Paul's sufferings. To know the Philippians is to share their sufferings. To know each other is to share each other's sufferings. How do we do this?

Paul calls the "mature" to do as he has done. What happens when an "immature" one attempts to imitate one like Paul? How do you know if you are mature enough or not?

To Think About:

Paul is aware of the dangers of the here and now, even as he lives in it. What dangers do we face here and now? How do we respond?

What do we have to rejoice about today? Of what must we beware?

To Pray About:

Give thanks for the gospel's freedom from pedigree. Pray for all who have the courage to live and speak the truth.

Session 5: Forbearance and Interdependence

Read chapter 4 aloud.

*"Why us always have family reunion on July 4th, say Henrietta, mouth poke out, full of complaint. It so hot. White people busy celebrating they independence from England, July 4th, say Harpo, so most black folks don't have to work. Us can spend the day celebrating each other."*¹

Interdependence and forbearance go hand in hand. Can you think of other examples?

Forbearance:

Paul tells the Philippians to let all people know their forbearance. How might we let all know ours? Is this a contradictory task, like boasting of humility?

Paul has written of conflicts outside the community. But conflict also arises within the community. How can partnership reconcile Euodia and Syntyche? What can they do for each other? What can the rest of the community do for them? How can we handle conflict within our communities?

Paul has learned to be flexible in prison (vs. 11-13). Yet his trust is not in his own flexibility, but in God. How are we not flexible? How can we become more so? Do we become preoccupied with our own physical circumstances? Are there perils in facing plenty as well as perils in facing want?

How is prayer a response to anxiety? Does prayer mask the anxiety or does it address the anxiety? Do you pray when you are anxious? Does your anxiety ever drown out your prayer? Do you pray about being anxious? Does prayer connect forbearance and interdependence?

Emily Dickinson wrote this letter:

Dear Untiring Little Sisters,

*What will I ever do for you, yet have done the most, for love is that one perfect labor nought can supersede. I suppose the pain is still there, for pain that is worthy does not go so soon. The small can crush the great, however only temporarily. In a few days we examine, muster our forces, and cast it away. Put it out of your hearts, children. Faith is too fair to taint it so. There are those in the morgue that bewitch us with sweetness, but that which is dead must go with the ground. There is a verse in the Bible that says there are those who shall not see death. I suppose them to be the faithful. Love will not expire. There was never the instant when it was lifeless in the world, though the quicker deceit dies, the better for the truth, who is indeed our dear friend.*²

What can we learn from this letter to friends in adversity? Can we reconcile it with Paul's advice?

• **Interdependence:**

• As Paul has called attention to the criteria of partnership in 2:1, he exhorts the Philippians in 4:8 with a list of virtues. What are they? What list would you come up with if you were in Paul's place? How is this list like a Scout oath or a marriage vow?

• Do you think it is helpful to think about these things, to strive towards them? How would you go about it? Is there anything particularly Christian about this list?

• Can we learn about civil behavior from other than Christians? Can you think of an example from your own experience?

• How have the Philippians helped Paul (v. 8 ff.)? How has he helped them?

• What can we learn about sharing from this letter, and what can we learn about giving and receiving? How can we keep from expecting to receive in return for our sharing?

• **To Think About:**

• What do you think the connection is between the peace of God and the God of peace? Is the peace of God any different from human peace?

• **To Pray About:**

• Give thanks for the witness of those outside the church. Pray for forbearance and flexibility.

• ¹ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982), p. 250.

• ² Emily Dickinson, "To Louise and Frances Norcross," *Letters*, Vol. 2, (Cambridge: Belknap-Harvard, 1958), P. 484.
