

The last thing kids want to face as they get back into things at school is a trip to the principal's office. Everyone knows to get sent there you have to do something really bad. That long walk to the principal's office means you're in trouble. Facing all the secretaries staring at you wondering what you did to get there, being inside the office getting heat from the principal. You don't want that scolding, or discipline, or expression of disappointment. But what if all the principal talked about was your excellent attendance and good grades. What if all the principal talked about was an award you were to receive. What if it wasn't you getting in trouble but getting praise for something you did right. What if those were the reasons for being in the principal's office?

As Paul opens this letter to the Philippians, he doesn't begin with his official title as apostle. Rather he describes himself as a servant of Christ Jesus. He doesn't need to put the Philippians on notice that they're about to get scolded. This isn't going to be a letter where he expresses huge disappointment. He's not bringing them to the principal's office. Instead he highlights the deep personal relationship he has with them. He's a servant of Christ to them. This is a letter of joy. Joy in the oneness he shares with them.

### **Oneness leads to thankfulness leads to prayer**

Most towns Paul went to on his missionary journeys had a synagogue where he started. He would speak to the Jews first. When and if they rejected he'd go and find some non-Jews he could speak to, maybe in someone's home. Philippi was a Roman colony. That meant there were a lot of non-Jews and only a few Jews. The very first time Paul came to Philippi he found nothing more than a few faithful gathered near the river. That's how Paul's ministry began here, speaking and meeting with people outside the city walls. But God and the gospel worked powerfully among the Philippians.

From that first meeting until writing this letter from a prison cell far from Philippi, the gospel of God had worked among those Philippians. The good news that Jesus was the Savior of the world had united their hearts in faith. Not just among themselves, but with Paul and all Christians too. **"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."** The gospel made them partners with Paul in proclaiming Christ. God worked this desire. Paul didn't have to wish it were true. He didn't have to wish they would help or serve or proclaim the gospel. God's power and abilities led them to do just those things. The gospel united the Philippians and Paul into a common fellowship, sharing common faith, sharing common promises of heaven, and sharing a oneness in Christ.

The American dream, being able to find your career, live in a house you own, build wealth, retire and travel, it's a dream based on individualism. You get to decide your career. You get to own your house. The wealth is yours. The retirement, the travel, all your decisions. And there's plenty of ways to protect what's yours from someone taking it. Life could be pretty isolated if you wanted. This rugged individualism is just what sin needs to thrive. Take care of yourself and don't worry about others. Make sure you're provided for and others will have to figure it out for themselves. You believe what you want and I'll believe what I want. We're united only by a desire to all remain individuals.

Whether it was years ago or just recently, God began a work in your heart. He sent one individual. One sacrifice to pay for everyone's sins. One death on the cross for all sin. One Savior who unites all sinners under one announcement of forgiveness. God's gift for all people, individualism overcome by an individual. And it's the same everywhere for everyone. Jesus Christ and the gospel bring you and me and all Christians together into a partnership in the gospel. Christ makes us co-heirs. We are no longer individuals with no connection to each other. We are brothers and sisters, believers, strengthened in our faith by the same God, same gospel. Brought to the same unity and fellowship. We are one in Christ.

Saved by the same gospel, sharing the same faith, forgiven in the same way in Christ, believers everywhere and especially here have a oneness that leads to thankfulness. A believer can't forget fellow believers. I can't walk away and forget you. You're in my heart. I love each one of you in Christ. When we're not together, I think about you and give thanks to God that he called me here to serve him and you. God's love for me and you unites me and you. Gathering here to listen to God's Word, getting to know you in your homes, coming wherever with Word and sacrament to serve you with the means of grace I am thankful God is growing our relationship and partnership in the gospel.

Wednesdays we have something called Faith & Fellowship Night. It's a great time to get together in a smaller group than Sunday morning. It's a little less formal. We dive into smaller portions and topics from the Bible. The format allows for questions, back and forth discussion, and investigation into God's Word. We become partners growing in faith as we go to the gospel. The questions and answers feed each other's faith. Learning happens from the expression of faith. The gospel also grows our fellowship, both before we start and after we finish. We're made stronger partners in our fellowship. Give thanks for this growth as partners in faith and fellowship. And give thanks it's not the only opportunity. Friends who get together for dinner, phone calls made when people get sick, meals prepared for families facing difficult circumstances, and many other faith and fellowship growing opportunities go unrecognized. All of them grow our love for each other. All of them grow our faith in Christ. We grow as partners in the same Savior, same God, same promises. Give thanks to God.

It's probably not surprising that Paul was a regular pray-er. Regularly he prayed for the Philippians because he loved them. He couldn't help but pray for them. They were in his heart and he prayed what was on his heart. **"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy...it is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart."** Since Paul was in prison this was the only way he interacted with them. He wouldn't be visiting their homes. He wouldn't be calling on them when they were sick or showing up at kids' activities. But even separate, being partners in the gospel led him to pray for them.

Part of what he prayed for was that they continue to grow. **"This is my prayer, that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ."** The Philippians were Paul's pride and joy. They heard the gospel and suffered for it. And they supported its proclamation. They took an active role sending money to Paul to help him spread the gospel. They lived the gospel every day. And still Paul wanted them to grow. Continue to hear the good news about Jesus. Continue to hear of God's love and learn to let that love shine in their lives. That's why he prayed.

People I don't care about don't make it into my prayers very often. I just don't actively pray for them. I don't pray against them, they just don't get into my regular prayers. Perhaps it's the same with you. But it can be worse. Prayers can get selfish. Prayers become all about what I want. Other people get forgotten completely. My prayers become weighed down with requests for me and my needs. I may even pray against someone else, convinced I should because of how they're against me. Enemies don't get prayed for. Sin cuts off oneness which cuts off thankfulness which cuts off prayer.

As Christ faced the upcoming suffering he knew was coming, he also knew intimately what would be expected of him. He knew what was riding on his life. The world needed what he would do in going to the cross, in suffering rejection, in dying. When our temptation would have been to turn inward and pray for ourselves, Jesus prayed for his followers. In what we heard in the gospel, Jesus prayed for us. He didn't forget you. He prayed for you. **"Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth."** In his last moments on earth Jesus was focused on your needs. Knowing the weight of sin around you pulling you to hell, Jesus addressed it in love. He mercifully let nothing stop him from laying down his life for you. Jesus cried out as your sins were punished in him. He rose triumphant declaring you completely forgiven. God's love in Christ makes you one with all those saved by grace. Being one we pray for each other.

This week the second LINC email went out to members only. Love in the Name of Christ. Members sharing with other members prayers they need, joys they want to share, and thanks they want to offer to God. These are specific requests that your brothers and sisters make of you. Do you pray through that list? What an awesome way to start a conversation with that person by letting them know you prayed for their needs or you thanked God and rejoiced with them. I know you were already praying. I pray for you and I know you pray for me. For specific situations in this congregation. For the community. For your leaders. In times of tragedy. It's right for you to pray this way because you are part of a fellowship of believers. That's what people do who have a partnership in the gospel. That's what people do when they feel joy being among other believers. Like Paul said, **"all of you share in God's grace with me."** God's grace brings about oneness in Christ which leads to prayers for each other.

Give thanks for our oneness as partners in the gospel. Give thanks that Christ lives and we live because of him. Let this thankfulness for Christ's work lead to prayers for each other. Pray that our fellowship grow. Pray our love for each other gets stronger. Oneness in the gospel leads to thankfulness which leads to prayer.