

## Christ Makes Us Partners

June 22, 2008

1. Partners in God's grace.
2. Partners in the God's gospel.

**<sup>3</sup> I thank my God every time I remember you. <sup>4</sup> In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy <sup>5</sup> because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. <sup>8</sup> God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. <sup>9</sup> And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, <sup>10</sup> so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, <sup>11</sup> filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.**

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.*  
Ephesians 1:3

## Christ Makes Us Partners

Paul and Silas were a bloody mess. They'd been stripped and beaten and thrown into the inner cell of a Philippian jail, their feet fastened in the stocks. It was because of the work of the gospel that they were there. But they knew that God could work even this situation out for their good and the good of his kingdom. They were full of faith and a fire to share the gospel. Maybe you know what happened next. An earthquake shook all the bars and shackles loose from the cells and the prisoners. The owner of the jail, knowing he'd be required by law to serve out the sentences for every escaped prisoner, thought he was doomed. He decided to end his own life with a sword. But Paul called to the jailer, "*Don't harm yourself! We're all here!*" The jailer must've heard them praying and singing hymns about Christ earlier, because he came and asked what he must do to be saved. Paul and Silas shared with him that he need not do anything to be saved. The gift of believing in Jesus would make forgiveness his. Paul and Silas shared that sweet gospel message with the jailer and he believed. In the wee hours of the night, in the aftermath of an earthquake, God began his work of faith in the heart of that Philippian man. When the jailer learned about God's grace—God's love for him, he knew he didn't deserve it, but he believed it was still *grace for him*. That's the essence of faith right: believing that God's grace is *grace for me*? Instead of ending his own life that night, God began a new life of faith in him. But as the jailer also learned, *grace for me* is really *grace for all*. The jailer had Paul and Silas share the message of God's grace with the rest of his family. Each member of the family came to believe that message—*grace...for me*. What joy must've been theirs that night to see another family brought into the fellowship—the partnership of believers! Paul thanked God all the time for all those whom Christ made his partners—partners in grace and partners in the gospel.

**I thank my God every time I remember you. <sup>4</sup> In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy <sup>5</sup> because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now"** (1:3-5, emphasis added)

These are some of the first words Paul writes to the church in Philippi, where the jailer and his family lived. He was grateful that he had the privilege of watching God begin his good work of faith in that family. But he was thankful to God for *all* of the Philippians. Even though there were Christians in the Philippian church who were making bad choices and causing strife in the congregation, Paul thanked God for all of them. Why? Well, even though the faith of some was weak and misguided, he knew that was just the beginning. They had all come to believe the message of *grace for me*, but some weren't so good at applying grace to those around them yet. Paul knew that God was not through with them yet. He writes "[I am] 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 apostle knew he'd begin to see the fruits of God's work of faith in their lives even *more* than he already had.

You see, the Philippian church had a special place in Paul's heart. He even says it that way when he says in the next verse, **"It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. <sup>8</sup> God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus."** All that Paul knew was that since the first Sabbath he spent in Philippi, Christ had made them partners in God's grace with him.

It was on that first Saturday in Philippi, a city with no synagogue, that Paul, Silas and Luke found a place of prayer next to the Gangites River. And as Luke puts it, "God opened [the] heart" of a woman named Lydia to believe the gospel. She, and later her whole family, were brought to the saving belief of *grace for me*. That day they were all baptized—maybe even right there in the Gangites River. And so began that joy-filled partnership of grace that Paul had with the Philippians. Christ had made them partners.

But why did grace mean so much to Paul? Maybe it's obvious. It's not just the fact that through Paul, God was snatching souls from the eternal fires of hell. It was also because Paul, of all people, had radically experienced God's grace himself. Paul knew that he, like the rest of sinful mankind, in no way deserved the love of God that forgave sins through Christ. Paul writes to another church, **"For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. <sup>10</sup> But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect"** (1 Corinthians 15:9-10, emphasis added).

That's why grace meant so much to Paul. When he was steeped in his own sins, Jesus came to him and brought him to believe that grace was even *for him*. And also for Paul, it took little time before he saw that *grace for me* was really *grace for all*. That's one reason why the Philippians meant so much to Paul. Christ died for them and all sinners—sinners of whom Paul considered himself the worst. Christ made the Philippians partners of his grace—family members in God's household.

But it wasn't just the partnership of God's grace that gave Paul great joy and made him hold the Philippians dear to his heart. It was also because of their partnership in the gospel. **In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy <sup>5</sup> because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now"** (1:4-5, emphasis added).

It wasn't just the jailer; it wasn't just Paul. The Philippian church also had come to see that *grace for me* is really *grace for all*. They right away began to help Paul in the ministry of spreading the message of God's gospel. That first Sabbath, after God opened Lydia's heart, she opened her home to Paul and his companions. And her house became a headquarters of sorts for the Philippian congregation. And not long after that, while Paul was serving other congregations, the Philippians began sending him financial support for the work of the gospel. This, when no other churches were doing the same. And because of this partnership in the gospel—to support it and spread it, the Philippians began to suffer persecution in Philippi, just as Paul had. But to Paul, that became yet another facet of their close bond of fellowship. He writes, **"For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, <sup>30</sup> since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have"** (Php 1:29-30). So not only were they partners of God's grace, Christ made them partners in the joys and hardships of the work of the gospel. This sharing—this fellowship—this partnership, gave Paul great joy.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ—my partners in grace—partners in the gospel: this grace too, is *for us*. And this joy too, is for us. But it's easy for us to sometimes forget about these partnerships with one another—in God's grace and in the gospel. We lose sight of the joy that is ours from being inseparably connected to God and one another. Why do we sometime take for granted the relationship we have as brothers and sisters in Christ? Is it perhaps because we sometimes have taken for granted the relationship we have to our same Savior? Paul appreciated these things because Paul appreciated the depths out of which God had pulled him. He knew that nothing inside him caused God to have mercy on him. It was purely grace—purely undeserved love for a sinner. Paul had experienced the joy of his own salvation in Christ. And each time God brought someone to faith, he got to relive that joy of salvation.

Is that perhaps another reason why we take for granted our fellow Christians—those that share in God's grace with us? Because we take for granted the privilege and joy that comes from sharing the gospel with others. Now, I know that we don't all have a personality that makes sharing our faith easy and we may have

even had a bad experience with it. But all partners of grace and the gospel find it difficult at times and all can run into suffering and persecution, just like Paul and the Philippians. We must all admit that we have not always taken the opportunities God has placed before us to let our words or actions be witnesses for Christ. We have not always taken the opportunities God has placed before us to get to know and appreciate our fellow family members in faith. And what joy you and I have missed out on because of it!

But Trinity members aren't the only partners in God's grace and gospel that we take for granted. Christ has made us partners with Shoreland and Wisco, Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Christ has made us partners of God's grace and gospel work with an entire Synod of churches and schools and special ministries. Christ has made us partners in faith with the Christians in all our Synod's foreign missions. With all those Christians in our community, our country and around the world, we share a common faith in a common Savior and a common mission to do the work of the gospel.

But it's easy to forget that blessed relationship with other Christians. Maybe it happens because we don't always see the results of those relationships. We don't always see the results of the prayers we pray for them, the workers we send and the gifts we give. And so unfortunately, because we sometimes close our eyes to these blessed partnerships, we can begin to cut ourselves off from them. We don't care to acquaint ourselves with those who know very the same Savior as we do. We don't care to acquaint others with Christ the Savior they do not know. And for these failures, the guilt falls squarely on me and you and all our other partners in sin. For these failures, God should have left us to wallow in our guilt and shame. He should've left our relationship with him in its wretched and broken state.

But God did not neglect that relationship. He didn't forget about us. Though we were nothing to love, he longed for us with undeserved affection. He longed to be with us like he was when he first created us in the Garden. When our sins stood in the way of us knowing him, in his grace, he removed them from us and put them on his crucified Son. He restored that original relationship by restoring to us his Son's perfect image. That's called grace: when God looks at me and sees his Son. That's grace—*for me*. That's grace—*for you*—*grace for all*. Christ has made us partners! What joy there is for us all in being partners of God's grace and gospel!

Paul concludes the introduction to his letter: **“And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,<sup>10</sup> so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ,<sup>11</sup> filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God”** (1:9-11).

As our faith continues to grow in God's grace, so will our love for God and our love for each other as partners and our love for those outside of our partnership. With Paul's words here in mind, I have a challenge for you. It's two-fold. First, I am challenging you to take ownership of this partnership—this *fellowship* you have in God's grace with other believers, especially here at Trinity. And second, I am challenging you to take ownership of the partnership you have in God's gospel work, especially among your own circles of acquaintance. That's really my overall challenge to you, but maybe that's a bit too general. Perhaps it would help to narrow the focus. So let's make them a little more specific. Today I am challenging each and every Christian here to the following two things: (1) Today after the service, introduce yourself and get to know one person you don't know here. That person is a partner of God's grace with you—a family member in Christ. (2) Start praying for one person in your life who doesn't know Christ, whether a family member, a co-worker, a friend or neighbor. And begin to think about how you might have opportunities to share the gospel of Christ with them. After all, you are a partner in the work of the gospel. Christ has made you a partner. Two challenges, one person each.

Christ has made us partners. He has made us partners with him through his life, death and resurrection. He has made us partners with one another of the grace that made forgiven saints of us selfish sinners. He has made us partners with one another in the joy-filled work of the gospel. What joy there is for us in the blessed partnership! Amen.

*Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,  
since as members of one body you were called to peace.*  
Colossians 3:15

