"Entering Ministry Partnerships"
Philippians 4:14-23
July 26, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

This morning we conclude our series in the Book of Philippians.

As we come to the end of Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, his focus is on the financial support the Philippians have provided for him, and the relationship he has with them.

With that said, let's turn to our text: Philippians 4:14-23.

Please do listen carefully. This is God's Word for us this morning.

Paul writes:

14 Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. 15 And you Philippians yourselves know that in
the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in
giving and receiving, except you only. 16 Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once
and again. 17 Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. 18 I have
received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts
you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. 19 And my God will
supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. 20 To our God and
Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.
21 Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. 22 All the saints
greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.
23 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

"All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever." [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let's pray …

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, you are our portion,
and so we commit ourselves to keep your word.
We ask you with all our hearts to show us your favor,
and be gracious with us according to your promise.
And as we hear your word now,
give us a sense of urgency to conform ourselves to it,
so that we act on it without delay.
Grant this we ask, for Jesus's sake. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:57-60]

Introduction

Our text this morning is about ministry partnerships – particularly ministry partnerships where one group of Christians is supporting someone in ministry, who is ministering to others, beyond themselves.

Now, we've had sermons from time to time on giving in general, and how it relates to the life and ministry of the local church, or the needs of other Christians, and all of that is important.

But the focus of our text this morning is on a specific kind of ministry partnership. The focus is on situations where Christians support someone so that they can go out and minister to other people beyond the walls of their local church.

That's what's in view here, and so that's the kind of relationship we're going to be considering this morning.[1]

As a church, and many of us as individuals – we support individual missionaries, who minister beyond the walls of our congregation. We pray for them. We give to them financially. We may seek to encourage them in various ways. And that's the kind of ministry partnership we're going to be thinking about together this morning.

Now, a couple clarifications.

First, to be clear, we're not talking about ministers like me. I'm provided for by those I minister to. Missionaries, or at least the kinds in view in this text, are not.

Second, I should clarify that I'm using the term "missionary" broadly – not just to refer to ministries that cross cultural or national boundaries, but any ministry where a Christian is called to minister to people as their vocation, and they're not getting their support from the people they minister to, but others are funding their work. So, in this context, it can refer to those sent to share the gospel in small villages in Peru, or it can refer to those sent to minister to college students through RUF. It can refer to those providing a theological education to pastors in Africa, or those church planting among the poor in an under-served American city. All such ministries are in view here, and I'm referring to all of them as "missionaries" at least in the context of our text this morning.

So, our text is about ministry partnerships with such missionaries. And what exactly is Paul telling us about such relationships?

Well, what we see here is that: As fellow members of the Body of Christ, each with different roles, and because all we have is a stewardship from God, we are called, with wise discernment, to enter into a partnership of giving and receiving with missionaries, for their material support, our spiritual good, the extension of the grace of the gospel to those in need, and God's good pleasure and glory.

Let me say that again: As fellow members of the Body of Christ, each with different roles, and because all we have is a stewardship from God, we are called, with wise discernment, to enter into

[1] It is interesting to note that Paul's relationship with the Philippians began as one where they supported him as he ministered to them [Acts 16:15; Fee, 444-445]. But that's not what it is by the time Paul is writing here. Paul has moved on. He is now ministering to others. But even so, the Christians in Philippi have continued to be in a ministry partnership with him, supporting him in various ways, as he ministers to those outside of their local congregation.

a partnership of giving and receiving with missionaries, for their material support, our spiritual good, the extension of the grace of the gospel to those in need, and God's good pleasure and glory.

Let's take that one piece at a time.

We Are Fellow Members of the Body of Christ, Each with Different Roles

First, we need to see that we are fellow members of the Body of Christ, each with different roles.

This is an idea that underlies this text. And Paul explains it in 1 Corinthians 12. There Paul writes:

> "Just as the body is one and has many members, […] so it is with Christ. […]
> "For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.
> The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, […] God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.
> Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

This is Paul's theology of the Church. And it underlies what he says here.

Because while we are all called to tell others about Jesus and his gospel, not all of us are called to full-time vocational ministry. And that's okay. That's nothing to feel bad about. Each member of the Body is different. The feet move, and the hands reach out, in ways that the intestines don't. But the feet can't move and the hands can't reach out without the nutrients which the intestines provide, and the cardiovascular system which delivers them.

In the same way, while some are called to reach out in vocational missionary work, like hands and feet, others are called, like the intestines or like the circulatory system, to acquire and distribute the resources that make the work of the hands and feet possible.

Each task has value in the world God has made. And each task has value in the work of the Kingdom. The intestines cannot say, "Because I am not a foot, I am not a part of the body." And the foot cannot say to the intestines, "I have no need of you." God has designed his Body, the Church, to have all these parts.

When it comes to vocational mission work, most of us are not the hands and feet going out into those settings full-time. And that's okay. Because we are all fellow members of the Body of Christ. We each have different roles. That's the first thing we need to recognize as we come to this text.

All We Have Is a Stewardship from God

Next, Paul reminds us here that all we have is a stewardship from God.

And we see this in verse 19.

Now, Paul's main point here is how God will provide for them after they have sent their gift to him. But the premise is that what they already have is also a gift from God. And they are called to be good stewards of it.

Paul writes there that it is God who supplies for our needs out of his riches.

Everything we have is given to us by God. As Paul says elsewhere: "What do you have that you did not receive?" [1 Corinthians 4:17]

Everything we have is a gift from God. Everything we have ultimately belongs to God. And while the things we receive are meant to be a blessing to us, they're also meant to be stewarded by us for the good of his Kingdom.

Now, that applies to all of the gifts he's given us: our strength, our talents, our skills, our time, our efforts … and also our money. Each of those areas is worthy of its own sermon. But it's finances that are in view in our text this morning. And so that will remain our focus as well.

I don't really like preaching about money. But that's the focus of our text, so that's what we need to consider. Just know that if you're uncomfortable, I am too.

But Paul reminds us here that as God provides for us, he calls us to use those gifts for ourselves, but also for his Kingdom – which includes the missional work of his Body, the Church.

When the intestines gather nutrients from food – which is itself a gift – they must use some of what they gather on themselves, to provide for their own needs as organs within the Body. But they're not supposed to use everything they gather for themselves. When the intestines receive more nutrients than they need to maintain themselves, they are to share – to distribute those nutrients to the rest of the body – including to the hands and feet which especially help the Body reach out to the world around them.

In the same way, because everything we receive is a gift from God, we are called to use what God gives us not just for ourselves, but for the work of God's Kingdom, and the missional work of his Body, the Church. Because it's not really ours. It's a gift. And it's given to us both for ourselves, and for other Kingdom purposes that God has in mind.

That's the second thing we see.

Using Discernment

So, we are members of the Body of Christ. We are to be good stewards of what we receive.

But here, maybe we need to switch away from the Body metaphor, because as stewards, we are also called to use wisdom and discernment to decide how we will distribute and share what we have towards the work of missions.

A steward is called to manage his Master's things. And he's called to do it with discernment. He's not supposed to use his Master's resources foolishly or naively, but shrewdly and carefully. That's part of the biblical metaphor.

And it's something the Philippians had to do too.

We're told elsewhere that the Philippians had limited funds. [1 Corinthians 8:1-5; on this being a reference to the church in Philippi see Fee, 426] We're also told elsewhere that there were a number of people who traveled around in the first century, presenting themselves as Christian missionaries. The Christians in Philippi couldn't give to everyone. They had to make choices. Every dollar given to one missionary is a dollar not given to a different missionary. [Or, in their case, every quadrans given to one missionary is a quadrans not given to a different missionary.] And for that reason, in giving their support, the Philippians had to be discerning. They had to use wisdom to decide who to support, and who to not support.

And it wasn't always obvious. They chose Paul – but Paul didn't have a little halo over his head so everyone knew he was an Apostle.

Often, other criteria had to be used.

One that comes up often in the New Testament is to make sure the missionary seeking support wasn't a false teacher. That can be pretty straightforward.

But other elements can be more subtle.

Paul tells us earlier in this letter that some had become teachers and missionaries out of self-serving motivations [e.g.: Philippians 1:15-17]. That can take different forms. Some may be more focused on self-promotion than humble service. Others may be drawn to a ministry setting where there will be little accountability for a less-than-ideal work ethic [a situation where 2 Thessalonians 3:10 may apply]. Sadly, people can get into ministry work for the wrong reasons. We are called to be discerning, and to put our limited funds towards missionaries, who are truly going to serve.

Of course, other criteria are important too. We need to consider the need they want to address, as well as whether their gifts and skills are right for that particular task. Here good missions organizations can be a real help in evaluating missionaries and their fit for the work they're seeking to do.

We are to give – and to give sacrificially to missionary work, entering into partnerships with missionaries. But we're not to give indiscriminately. We're not to give foolishly or naively.

Individually, when it comes to our own funds, we are called to that work of discernment. As a church, we are blessed now by the service of our Missions Committee, which does that difficult work on behalf of the church, and makes recommendations to the Session.

Key in this is that we don't use such evaluations as an excuse to give less to missions overall. Instead, we are to give generously to missions work overall, and then we use such evaluations to decide who to give to.

The Philippians, using their discernment and wisdom, chose to support Paul. And Paul proved, over and over again, that supporting him was a wise investment in the Kingdom of God [e.g.: Philippians 1, 4:22].

So, as fellow members of the Body of Christ, each with different roles, we are called to recognize that all we have is a stewardship from God and to use wise discernment in considering different missionary needs.

We Are to Enter into a Partnership of Giving and Receiving with Missionaries

All of that sets us up for Paul's main point here: that we are called to enter into a partnership of giving and receiving with missionaries.

This is what verse 15 tells us. Paul writes: "And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only."

Now, we're going to talk about the details of this, but to start let's consider the overall shape of the relationship Paul describes here.

It's a relationship of mutuality – not where one party lords it over the other. It's a relationship where both give, but also both receive. Like different parts of the body, they serve one another, and they need to acknowledge both what they need to give, and what blessings they receive in the process.

And this is important, because we can be tempted to something different.

One temptation is to act like if we give money to a missionary, now we are their boss. We lord it over them. It's not a relationship of mutuality, but domination. They need to dance to our tune now. But that's not how Paul describes his relationship with the Philippians. And, in fact, Paul went to great lengths to avoid that kind of relationship with the church in Corinth. Paul refused that kind of arrangement, and we must too. We must not think that our giving to a missionary allows us to lord it over them.

Of course, the other temptation is for a missionary to lord it over their supporters. In such cases, financial support is not requested or suggested by the missionary, but demanded, and presumed upon. In such cases, accountability is dismissed. In such cases, there's not a partnership of giving and receiving, but instead the missionary is put on a pedestal and demands unquestioning support. Such a dynamic, among pastors or missionaries, often precedes a scandal. But contrary to this, Paul calls for a partnership of mutual giving and receiving – with neither party lording it over the other.

Instead, Paul calls for a partnership, where both the missionary and the supporters are giving something, and both the missionary and the supporters are receiving something, where the grace of the gospel is extended to those in need, and where all of this is done for God's good pleasure and glory.

That's the big picture. Let's consider those dynamics in a little more detail.

The Material Support of Missionaries

First, we are to enter into these ministry partnerships in ways that lead to the material support of missionaries.

This is the dynamic where we give and they receive.

And we see this in several places here.

In verse 16 Paul describes how the Philippians gave financially in order to help him meet his physical needs. In verse 18 Paul says that because he has received their gift of financial support, he is now "well supplied." And in verse 14, Paul says that by giving this gift, the Philippians had shared in his troubles.

Paul had trouble – he was in need. And the Philippians were willing to put themselves in financial need, in order to ease the burdens of his financial needs. In this way, they really did share with him in the troubles he faced – they took a portion of those troubles onto themselves. And we know this was true because elsewhere, in a different situation, Paul notes how the Philippians would give beyond their means, even when they lacked resources themselves. [2 Corinthians 8:1-5; on this being a reference to the church in Philippi see Fee, 426]

The Philippians gave sacrificially, so that Paul could receive the material support he needed. And we are called to the same thing.

The goal is the material, financial, physical support of the missionary in view. And there's nothing unspiritual about that. God made the body and the spirit, and he wants both to be supported. And as Paul says elsewhere, one who labors vocationally for the spiritual life of others should receive in return what is needed to maintain their physical life. [1 Corinthians 9:11] But often with missionaries, it cannot be those they serve who support them physically, and so that falls to us. And those needs are part of God's economy. We should not make missionaries ashamed for having physical needs.

Rather, we should see it as our calling to enter into a partnership with them in which we give material support, and they receive it. That is what the Philippians did here. And we should note a couple things about that.

First, the Philippians gave to Paul's missions work to an extent that it hurt. There were things they might have wanted to do that they couldn't do, because they were supporting Paul. That seems to be the implication of verse 14 – that's what it means to share in his trouble.

Are there things in your life, or your family's life, that you want, or you want to do, but you can't, because you've chosen instead to share in the trouble of missionaries who are serving the kingdom beyond the walls of our church? Are you giving sacrificially? Because as others have noted, if you have enough money, it's possible to give generously, without giving sacrificially. What's exemplified here is sacrificial giving to missions work. And that's a challenge for the more wealthy among us.

But there's also a challenge here for the less wealthy. Because those with less can be tempted to assume that missions support is for other people – it's for others who have more than you do. But again, the Philippians prove otherwise. Of the towns Paul went to in the region, the Philippians were not the obvious choice for financial support. Look at verse 16. Even when he was in Thessalonica, Paul was being supported by the Philippians. Then, in verse 15, we learn that when he left the region, it was Philippi, not Thessalonica, that supported Paul. What makes this

significant is that Thessalonica was a much larger and more influential city than Philippi. [Fee, 445] The burden of missions support doesn't just fall to the richest or most powerful in the church or among churches. It may at times fall especially to those with less – as it did with the Philippians.

The Philippians gave until it was sacrificial for them, and until Paul could say that he was "well supplied" in verse 18.

In the same way, one key dynamic in this partnership is that we are to give, so that missionaries can receive material support.

Have you avoided supporting missions … and maybe it's time for you to reconsider that avoidance? You can start small. Choose a missionary you know, whose work you know is valuable, whom you trust, and begin to follow their newsletters, and pray for their work, and support them financially – even if it's just with a small amount to start.

Now … that can sound simple, but we often let it slip through the cracks. Email newsletters go unopened. Or they seem so long. And we lose track.

But we can help you out with that. Because each week, at our Wednesday night prayer meeting, if you will join us, we will hand you a packet with all the newsletters from our missionaries from the past week, which you can then look over. And if that's too long, we also give you a short summary of each newsletter. And then we spend a chunk of time together with nothing to do but pray for these missionaries, and for others. Coming to prayer meeting is a great way to learn about and begin praying for missionaries who are known to us. And from there, you can prayerfully consider financially supporting them.

So, one key dynamic that Paul describes here is that we are to give, so that missionaries can receive material support.

Extending Grace to Those in Need

Second, that giving of material support should lead to the grace of the gospel going out to those in need.

We don't give to missionaries as an end in itself, but to support the ministry work they do. This is why, as we said earlier, discernment is so important. Because we need to identify and support missionaries who really will extend the gospel to those in need.

What that looks like can vary so widely, depending on whether those missionaries are sharing the gospel with non-Christians, or ministering to Christians in particular need, along with a number of other factors. But a love for those in need, and the extension of gospel care to them, in love, is central to all of this. That's the underlying mission that should motivate both the missionary and their supporters.

And that is why Paul's letter shares about the ways that the gospel is going forward. Even here, in verse 22, Paul includes the exciting news that there are followers of Jesus within Caeser's household at this point – whom Paul is presumably ministering to. This is the kind of work that motivates the Philippians' giving and Paul's serving.

Believers give sacrificially, to provide resources for missionaries, so that the gospel can be extended to those in need of it.

Our Spiritual Good

But then third, Paul also says that these ministry partnerships lead to our spiritual good as well.

This is the dynamic where missionaries give, and we receive.

We see this in verse 17.

Paul there uses a commercial metaphor to say that the Philippians' gift will lead to an increase in their "account" with God. [Fee, 447] Now, this was not at all to say that they were earning their salvation or earning God's favor by their deeds [Wright, 137]. Rather, it is to say that their giving towards this work would grow them spiritually, and that before God they would be viewed as having a part in this ministry work, and that for that, God would reward them [e.g.: Matthew 6:4].

By giving to the work of faithful missionaries, we really do take part in Kingdom work. And God sees that and rewards us. We cannot all go to the mission field. But we can all be a part of missions. And we can all be praised and rewarded by God for our part in missions.

This is part of the blessing that we receive in these ministry partnerships. And we receive these blessings because these missionaries give.

They give of their lives, and their time, and their labor, taking on sacrifice and suffering in their ministry work outside the walls of our church. And by choosing to give of themselves in those ways, they also give us an opportunity to participate in missions work, by creating Kingdom work that didn't exist before, which we can now participate in, because it exists by their efforts. And so, they give both to those they serve, and they give to us.

In all of this, we see how in the ministry partnerships Paul describes here, both the missionaries and the supporters are giving something, and both the missionaries and the supporters are receiving something, all to extend the grace of the gospel to those in need.

God's Good Pleasure and Glory

Finally, we see here that all of this leads to God's good pleasure and glory.

In verse 18 Paul says that the sacrificial giving he has talked about is like "a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God."

Then, in verse 20, Paul demonstrates how these ministry partnerships lead to God's glory, as he responds to it in words of worship, declaring: "to our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen."

Paul is saying that these ministry partnerships he's been describing should lead to God's good pleasure and glory.

And why is that? Why do these kinds of relationships glorify God? Why does he like them so much?

Well, because when we give sacrificially, and receive others in love, we are acting like him. We are showing forth his character. We are acting like his children – showing a family resemblance to him. Because that is how he has acted towards us.

God has acted towards us by giving sacrificially. We too had trouble – not trouble because we went out as missionaries, but trouble that came through our own fault – trouble that was a result of our own sin and rebellion. God gave us this world, and we broke it. We marred it. We acted in sin and selfishness against God and against one another. And with that, sin and death entered this world. We had trouble.

But God did not leave us alone in our trouble. He came. And he came to share in our trouble. In the person of Jesus Christ he came to bear our sin and take on our guilt – to receive the punishment we deserved, and to die the death we deserved to die. On the cross, he took our trouble onto himself.

And all he wanted to receive in return … was us. We are what he wants. What God wants in exchange for all he has given us is simply us: to make us his own – his children.

And now, when we give sacrificially for others, when we give sacrificially to ministry, or to missionaries, or to work among the hurting or the lost, we are, in some small way, following the example of our Lord and Savior … we are behaving like our Heavenly Father.

And that makes God happy. It glorifies him, and delights him.

And so, as we enter into these ministry partnerships, it's not only to meet the needs of missionaries, or to extend the gospel to those in need, or for our own spiritual good … but we do it also for God's glory and good pleasure.

Conclusion

Our God has given us so much. What better way can we thank him than to imitate him, through loving sacrifice?

And so, brothers and sisters, let us enter into ministry partnerships, providing for missionaries, and extending grace to those in need, for our spiritual good, and for the good pleasure and the glory of our amazing God, who has sacrificed so much for us.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Fee, Gordon D. *Paul's Letter to the Philippians.* NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.

Ferguson, Sinclair. *Let's Study Philippians.* Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997.

Wright, N.T. *Paul for Everyone: The Prison letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon.* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-

Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.