

**Series:** The Church — A People with A Purpose

**Title:** “Church Works”

**Text:** Philippians 1:3-6

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### **Verse 3**

After providing a customary salutation to his letter to the Philippians, Paul moved to address the church in a more personal fashion. He said, “I give thanks to my God for every remembrance of you” (Philippians 1:3). The apostle’s words were genuine. They did not constitute a form of feigned flattery. Paul was genuinely thankful for the Philippians’ faith and support of his gospel ministry. In fact, one of his primary reasons in writing his letter was to express his gratitude for the church and their financial support of his mission work (Philippians 4:10-20).

The Greek word rendered “thanks” is one that was used for an expression of gratitude. In the original language of the text, Paul used it as a present tense verb. The verbiage depicted an iterative or ongoing activity. The apostle meant to convey the idea that he was stirred to gratitude on a regular basis because of his association with the church at Philippi. In fact, he was compelled to thanksgiving every time he thought about the church (“remembrance”).

Elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul expressed his gratitude for the body of Christ. When writing to the church at Rome, he told of his grateful spirit for two believers in particular: “Give my greetings to Prisca and Aquila, my coworkers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks for my life. Not only do I thank them, but so do all the Gentile churches” (Romans 16:3-4). In writing to the Ephesians, he said, “I never stop giving thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers” (Ephesians 1:16).

According to Scripture, all believers are to cultivate an attitude of gratitude similar to the one seen in Paul’s life. Colossians 3:17 says, “And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Growing in this grace may seem difficult to some. However, Paul’s experience teaches us that the church can be a great source of gratitude. Though we live in a dark and fallen world, the body of Christ serves as a heaven-sent instrument to spiritually equip (Ephesians 4:11-13), edify (1 Thessalonians 5:11) and encourage us (Hebrews 10:24). Sure, the church is not perfect, but there is still a lot to be gained from it. When we commit ourselves to it, we can experience blessings that prompt us to express the type of gratitude Paul had.

### **Verse 4**

Paul’s gratitude for the church led him to regularly pray for it. He told the Philippians that he was “always praying with joy” for them. Paul’s prayers undoubtedly contained expressions of thanks, praise, supplications, and requests. He was well aware of the relational (Philippians 2:1-3), doctrinal (Philippians 3:13), and financial needs (Philippians 4:19) in Philippi; as a result, he lifted such things up to the Heavenly Father in prayer.

Such prayer is a benefit and blessing of participation in a local church. In speaking of the place of worship, Jesus said, “My house will be called a house of

prayer for all nations...” (Mark 11:17). Paul often commended the practice of prayer amongst the gathering of God’s people (2 Thessalonians 3:1-2; 1 Timothy 2:1-4). Later in his letter to the Philippians, he requested that the church pray for him (Philippians 1:19). Intercessory prayers are one of the great blessings of the local church. Those who cut themselves off from the body of Christ rob themselves of the spiritual help that comes from supplications.

As Paul prayed for the Philippians, he did so with “joy.” The Greek word underlying English translations is one that spoke of contentment or gladness.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, Paul had a godly type of joy in mind, the type produced by the presence of God’s Spirit in one’s soul. At salvation, one’s soul is inhabited by the Third Person of the Trinity. With the abiding presence of God, one receives a capacity for supernatural joy. Paul made such things plain when he listed “joy” as one of the foremost fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). While the world may not find much joy in the things of God, Christians have an otherworldly source of contentment and gladness.

Paul wanted his readers to know of the joy he had through his relationship with Jesus and the church. He knew that the Philippians themselves had experienced such joy. When he wrote to the the Corinthians, he gave witness of such. He told of how the Philippians had given to his ministry despite their poverty, saying, “During a severe trial brought about by affliction, their *abundant joy* and their extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part” (2 Corinthians 8:2). Paul’s words reveal that Christian joy is not dependent on earthly circumstances. Things related to the gospel and grace of God can produce a supernatural joy even when life is hard.

This is why Paul had joy. His life was not an easy one. From the time of his conversion, he lived as a vagabond. On many occasions, his life was in peril. At the time of his writing to the Philippians, he was imprisoned on unjust charges. Despite such things, he still possessed a pervasive joy in his soul (Philippians 3:1; 4:4). Christ, the gospel, and the body of Christ gave him a joy the world could not afford.

The apostle wanted his readers to experience such happiness. They had experienced it in the past (2 Corinthians 8:2), but perhaps some of the doctrinal and interrelation problems in Philippi were threatening Christian contentment. Knowing such things, Paul was intentional to mention the theme of joy on multiple occasions in his letter (Philippians 1:25; 2:2, 29; 4:1). The church at Philippi would be unable to offer a radiant witness for Christ if it was compromised in this important matter.

Believers of all generation can spiritually benefit from Paul’s profession. Joy is the privileged possession of all who are in Christ. Jesus told His disciples, “Until now you have asked for nothing in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete” (John 16:24). Peter spoke of how believers have a joyful inheritance, using superlative terms — “Though you have not seen him, you love him; though not seeing him now, you believe in him, and you rejoice with inexpressible and glorious joy, because you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:8-9). When Christians live in light of Christ’s kingdom, staying actively engaged with their Lord and His church, they open themselves up to experience great joy from the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Zodhiates, 1467.

## Verse 5

Paul's gratitude and joy toward the Philippians was rooted in his gospel relationship with them. He explained, saying, "...because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (Philippians 1:5). The conjunction "because" linked Paul's words in verse 5 to his expressions of gratitude in verses 3 and 4. The word "partnership" depicted an association between two parties characterized by close a close relationship and mutual involvement in a task.<sup>2</sup> Such an association was marked by common beliefs and a shared work focus. Paul used a Greek word similar to the one in our verse later in Philippians 4:15. There he spoke of the way in which the Philippians shared their monetary resources with him for the sake of gospel ministry. By using the same language in Philippians 1:5, Paul indicated that the Philippians' financial support had constituted a sort of "partnership" between him and the church.

According to the apostle, the church at Philippi had partnered with him "from the first day." His language surely referred to the genesis of the congregation. Acts 16:5-40 contains an account of how the church at Philippi was established. The first convert in the city was one named Lydia (Acts 16:13-14). She was a wealthy businesswoman. After her conversion, she ardently supported Paul's ministry by providing lodging (Acts 16:15, 40). By studying the New Testament, it seems reasonable to conclude that Lydia had a hand in ensuring that the church at Philippi continually supported Paul's ministry with financial resources (2 Corinthians 8:1-2).

The Philippians' participation in Paul's ministry demonstrated a core blessing found in the body of Christ. The church provides a platform for partnership in gospel ministry. Through the other members of the church, individual members receive help and support they need in ministry. Each believer is called to play a part in making Christ's message known (2 Corinthians 5:18). However, no believer can do the work of the Great Commission alone (Matthew 28:18-20). As Paul told the Corinthians, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' Or again, the head can't say to the feet, 'I don't need you!'" (1 Corinthians 12:21).

Christians who commit themselves to the body of Christ will discover the type of "partnership" Paul enjoyed. They will receive encouragement and edification that empowers them to be bright lights for Jesus in a dark world (Matthew 5:16). The apostle John made reference to these realities. In 1 John 1:7, he said, "If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." Interestingly, the Greek word translated "fellowship" is the same one translated "partnership" in Philippians 1:5. A commitment with a local church provides one with the camaraderie and support needed in order to be a witness for Jesus. Paul was accustomed to these realities. The Philippians had been a mighty source of help for his ministry.

## Verse 6

Paul continued his discourse in verse 6 by saying, "I am sure of this, that he who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). The apostles' words may seem unrelated to his surrounding discussion. Many quote them with little thought of the context of the verse. It is

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<sup>2</sup> Louw and Nida, [CD-Rom].

important to remember Paul's reference to "the first day" in Philippians 1:5. After having made mention of the genesis of the gospel in Philippi, he was compelled to speak of how the gospel would perform a complete and perfect work amongst the believers in that city.

Verse 6 provided a brief snapshot of the way God's grace works in Christian sanctification. For believers who were struggling with tainted doctrine (Philippians 3:2) and interpersonal quarrels (Philippians 4:2), a reminder concerning Christian growth and maturity was needful. Paul would mention the subject again later in Philippians 2:12. For now, it is important to note that Paul's words concerning sanctification were uttered in the context of a discussion concerning the benefits of the body of Christ. Paul saw the church collective as playing a part in the sanctification of individual members of the church. In addition, he saw the sanctification of individual members as contributing to the sanctification and holiness of the overall church.

Paul said, "I am sure of this...." His words expressed confidence in a reality. The apostle was firmly convinced that the Lord would continue and complete the "good work" that had begun in Philippi. The Greek underlying English translations was also used by Paul in Ephesians 2:8-10 to speak of the good works that result from Christian salvation. At the moment of conversion, the Holy Spirit inhabits the soul of the believer (John 3:3; Galatians 3:2). With the Spirit's indwelling, one receives the capacity to exhibit good works, the type of works that adorned the life of Jesus. Though good works do not earn salvation (Ephesians 2:9), they are the natural result of salvation (Ephesians 2:10).

The growth of good works in a believer's life takes place through a gradual process. Such is evidenced by Paul's language in Philippians 1:6. In reference to salvation and sanctification, he spoke of how the Lord is faithful to "carry it on." The language referenced a continual, progressive, or incremental work. Perfection from sin will not be fully realized until the culmination of all things (1 John 3:2-3). In the meantime, believers experience a gradual transformation into the image of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18).

In the sanctification process, there is an intended goal. Namely, the goal is to become sinless, fully like Christ. Paul referenced this through his use of a Greek word translated "completion." The language depicted something brought to an intended goal. One can think of Christian sanctification like mathematics. Just as a student works a problem to achieve a solution, Christ works in the lives of His children to achieve the desired result of sanctification. Paul also referenced these realities in his letter to the Romans:

We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; and those he called, he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified (Romans 8:28-30).

There are three stages in the Christian's experience of full redemption — salvation, sanctification, and glorification. The first occurs at the moment of regeneration and faith (John 3:3; Ephesians 2:8). The second involves the gradual and

continual growth that takes place throughout the Christian life (Ephesians 2:10; Philippians 1:5, 2:12; 2 Peter 3:18). The final phase deals with the moment at the end of time in which God's children will be fully and finally cleansed of sin and receive perfected bodies that will live forever in the New Heavens and New Earth (1 Corinthians 15:51-55; 1 John 3:1-2; Revelation 21:1-8).

Paul's words in Philippians 1:6 and Romans 8:28-30 indicate that the first phase of salvation guarantees the second and third phase. If one is "justified," he or she will certainly be "sanctified" and "glorified." The Lord's purifying work of sin is certain for all who have truly been born again. When one is converted, the Lord commits to keep convicting and changing that person until the end of his or her earthly life. At the culmination of all things, such a person will be fully transformed into the image of Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

Pertinent to our current verse is the fact that Paul's words were uttered within a discussion of his love for the church at Philippi. Our passage reveals that the church is a tool the Lord uses in the work of sanctification. Paul referenced these realities when writing to the church at Ephesus:

And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ's fullness (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Local church involvement is important because it has a way of encouraging the sanctification process. The fellowship, teaching, and ministry that goes on in the gathering of God's people does a lot to help "carry on" the work of Christian growth in the lives of believers.