

Serving on the Same Team

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Date: 05 July 2020

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, I wonder if you tried to write down the name of every person that you knew, how many people would you have on that list?
- I guess there'd be ones that we get quickly, family and close friends and neighbours. Maybe ones that would take a little bit more time thinking back through all the years that the people that we've been close to.
- Maybe there would be some names we would have to stop and ask, well, do I really know that person anymore? The internet has made it far easier in some ways to stay connected and in touch.
- But I wonder how many of our friends on Facebook or followers on Twitter would we be able to name and say that we actually knew? How many people could you name in your church?
- Or maybe a little bit more tricky, how many people could you name in other faithful gospel churches in your area? Now, I'm not asking you to go away and do that to make those lists.
- [1 : 0 3] We've got far better things to do with our time. But it's fascinating to see how many names Paul drops in as he signs off this letter to the church in Colossae.
- The number of connections he has with this church is incredible. And it's even more special because Paul had never been to Colossae. These folks had never seen Paul face to face.
- And we have to remember that back then, that's the only way to see someone in person. They didn't know what Paul looked like. They didn't know what his voice sounded like.
- And yet just look how many people they have in common. You guys know Luke, don't you? Now, we might wonder why this is in the Bible at all.
- These people are long gone. This is ancient history. But these names are here for one important reason. And it's something we often overlook. These names speak to us about the importance of partnership.
- [2 : 1 1] Paul loved people. And he deliberately partnered with others in Christ for the gospel. It's incredible that a giant like Paul, who we see up in stained glass windows and his face carved in marble.
- His name has gone down in history. And yet, in reality, he wouldn't be without his friends and fellow workers in the gospel. He did not go solo for Christ.
- Verse 8 captures this really clearly. He writes, I've sent Titicus to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are. It's so simple, but so lovely at the same time.
- Paul wrote partly simply for them to know how he's getting on. Paul loved working personally with other Christians for Christ.
- And why is that? Well, Paul was written in this letter about a big God who has come in Christ. And he came with a big gospel for the whole world.

[3 : 15] So for Paul, big God and big gospel means big goals. We've seen that Paul's big goal was to make Christ known to the world.

But it's clear here that for that big goal, big partnership is needed. So what I want to encourage you this evening is this.

God has not changed. The gospel has not changed. The goal has not changed. And therefore, the great need for partnership has not changed.

Paul wants all God's people to know we are serving on the same team. So Paul outlines here five kinds of partnership that he calls us to conveniently, for me at least, and I hope for you too.

They all start with a P. So firstly, Paul calls us to partner in prayer. If you look at me at verse 2, he writes, So Paul encourages the church to press on in their prayers.

[4 : 25] But he implies that prayer is something that won't always come easily. Now that phrase, continue steadfastly, has the sense of persevere or keep going in prayer.

Paul knows that prayer is sometimes an effort. When we're tired and worn out, our minds are blank after a long day. We can't string words together into a sentence.

We're simply not sure maybe what to pray for in our circumstances. Prayer is tough. So it's fascinating that Paul's call to persevere in prayer, he says, stay watchful.

He defines it as being watchful. Be like one who stays up through the long hours of the night, waiting to see the dawn break finally over the horizon. That's the picture Paul gives us of keeping going in prayer.

And prayer is, of course, words, requests, needs, thanks, praise. But beneath our words, prayerfulness is a heart that is watching and waiting and longing for the coming of Christ.

[5 : 32] That is the beating heart of prayerfulness. But until that day when Christ does come again, Paul says, pray also for us to declare the mystery of Christ.

So even in their very practical down-to-earth daily prayers, the point of their prayers would be that Christ would be shown to and known by the world through the gospel.

Paul wants this church to partner with him in prayer for the gospel. And remember that Paul is in prison at this point. He says that right here.

But rather than ask for a door to open for himself to go out, in verse 3, he asks that God may open to us a door for the word.

More than he wants to get out of prison, he wants the word to go out into the prison, right where he is. Now I wonder, do we share Paul's prayer request?

[6 : 33] When we ask for prayer or even pray for others, of course we should ask for the basic things, for health and provision and relationships, needs. But it's important to remember that those circumstances of our lives serve only as the backdrop to a much greater drama that God is staging in our world.

So when we pray for brothers and sisters in our own church, or even in other parts of the world, is our gospel, is our partnership with them more than simply goodwill partnership?

In short, is it gospel partnership? Are we praying that in the very difficulties that God has placed his people in, he would open a door for the good news of Christ to go out?

Do we long for the gospel to be set loose, even when we feel stuck and trapped in our own circumstances? I find it incredible that Paul, the apostle, isn't embarrassed in verse 4 to ask this church to pray for him to make the gospel clear.

If Paul needed that prayer, certainly we do. We cannot be above asking that God would simply help us to share the gospel clearly where we are.

[7 : 52] Paul isn't denying that life is hard. He isn't even denying that prayer is hard. But when we have a big vision of what God is doing throughout all the world through the gospel in his son, such as Paul gives us in this letter, then our prayerful partnerships with other Christians and other churches is reshaped by this one overarching goal that Christ would be made known in the situation that he has placed us in.

This is something to bear in mind as you pray for those in your church family who are going on to new things and new places this summer. Of course, there will be important needs that we should be supporting one another in prayerfully.

But in and among those needs, do you pray that God would open doors for these brothers and sisters in their new places of work and life and ministry, that together we might share the good news of Christ clearly in the places where we live.

That brings us on to our second P, partner in purpose. It's important to see in verse five that Paul doesn't just want the church praying for his gospel opportunities, but he wants the whole church to be taking and creating gospel opportunities of their own.

He writes, walk in wisdom towards outsiders, making the best use of the time. Paul has spoken about wisdom a few times in this letter. He writes, in chapter one, verse nine, asking that God would fill the church with all spiritual wisdom.

[9 : 30] And chapter two, verse three, that all the treasures of wisdom are found in Christ. And his point has been that the so-called wisdom offered to them by the false teachers was really nothing more than the wisdom of the world.

The spirit of our age dressed up with rituals and rules. But here we see that the true gospel makes a big difference. Because whereas the true wisdom from God in Christ turns the church outwards towards outsiders, getting bogged down in religious rituals and rules, it only turns the church inwards, in on itself.

Catching one another out doing something wrong, or trying to get ahead of one another and getting it right. But not caring for those on the outside and the free offer of grace that God holds out to all in Jesus Christ.

That so-called wisdom is of zero value for reaching the lost. Because in the end, we only lose ourselves in chasing after our own status and building up our own egos.

But true wisdom leads to outward-facing, gospel-centered lifestyles. We live to display Christ to those that God has placed around us.

[10 : 49] Now this partnership in purpose goes far deeper than prayer letters or financial support. In a way, it's the very basis for those kinds of partnerships. Partnership in purpose is about being on the same page, about what the church on earth is for.

Paul's point is the same mission I am on over here in Rome is the same mission you guys are on in Colossae, to make Christ known. We in Leith and yourselves in Aberdeen, or wherever you are, share a purpose that goes beyond our personal connections.

Of course, that partnership is expressed in practical ways, such as this very thing this evening, that we're able to share. But if, in fact, the same lifeblood of the gospel flows through our churches, then that partnership of purpose already exists.

It's already there, even where there's no formal or practical connection. On the ground, what does that partnership look like? Well, it shows in a shared conviction and character between our churches, or you could say even a shared dialect.

For just as Paul longs in verse 4 that I would make the gospel clear, which is how I ought to speak. So he calls the Colossian church to learn to speak in a certain way in verse 6.

[12 : 15] Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer each person. We saw before from chapter 1, verse 28, that the content of gospel service is preaching, speaking, proclaiming Christ.

But this goes further than just content. The gospel isn't just a script or a formula that Paul wants the church to memorize or to read out. No, rather, he cares that the gospel is clear to each person, and that includes the way that we speak as much as what we say.

Now, I love salt. That may sound strange to you, but I'm pretty generous with it in my cooking. But it's not as if I can kind of keep some of the food in the pot not salty for other people who share the meal.

Once the salt goes in, it flavors the whole dish. And in the same way, Paul is saying, let all of our speech taste of grace, as if we've seasoned all our speaking with the gospel.

Unbelievably, some Christians do find a way to speak of Jesus ungraciously. Now, that just shouldn't happen. But equally, let us not save our kind or patient or gracious words for only when we're speaking about Christ.

[13 : 39] Rather, let the grace of Christ flavor our lives and words so that in any and every situation, relationship or interaction or conversation, we stay partnered in the same purpose, that the grace of God in Christ would be tasted in our spiritually starving world, and that that would taste the same, whether that is in Aberdeen or Edinburgh or wherever in the world it is found.

Paul wants our churches to be on the same page about what life is about, partnered in purpose for the gospel, which involves our third and fourth P's, partner in prayer, partner in purpose, which involves thirdly, partnering with people.

Paul drops in here 11 names into 11 verses and three churches, not including the one that he's writing to. So partnership for Paul is very personal.

Now, admittedly, the global church of Paul's day wasn't the size of the 21st century church now. You might not recognize it, but today the church is actually bigger on earth than it's ever been before.

2.3 billion people in the world right now would call themselves Christians. To put that into perspective, when this letter was written, there were only a fraction of that number of people alive in the world.

[15 : 12] The first century church was measured then in thousands, not in billions. So in a sense, Paul's partnerships were more personal because the church was smaller.

His circle only extended as far as the people he knew. Even so, Paul makes a point here of mentioning the names of people that he and the Colossian church had in common, speaking warmly and personally about their lives and their work.

These are beloved brothers and faithful ministers and fellow servants with Paul for the gospel. Now, of course, mission agencies and parachurch organizations have a place in our big globalized world for the reach of the gospel, both here in Scotland and throughout the world.

But organizational partnership and support up here, it isn't the same as personal partnership on the ground between Christians.

It's the difference between a church that is held together by its fingertips and a church which is locked together by warm personal bonds of shared work and affection and a time of suffering.

[16 : 26] In chapter two, verse 19, Paul speaks about the church as a body nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments. The church is held together at this micro level by a thousand relationships and connections and partnerships between Christians.

Partnering with and supporting organizations is important, but it's not enough. If we follow Paul's pattern, we must seek out and foster personal connections and partnerships at the level of the heart, not only the office.

Now, we could say more about some of the folks that Paul partnered with here, who we know are from other parts of the Bible, but I just want to draw out one thing that Paul seems to stress to help us as we seek out those relationships today.

And it's diversity. Paul mentions three guys, Aristarchus, Mark, and Justice. And he points out in verse 11, these are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.

Now, I think his point here isn't that he just wanted a few Jewish co-workers, but that of all his co-workers, only a few of them were Jewish, and many of them came from Greek backgrounds.

[17 : 50] Now, bearing in mind that Paul himself was from a Jewish background, this is remarkable. A team and a family made up of Jews and Gentiles, Greeks, would have been unheard of at that time.

But Paul's commitment to partnering with a diverse range of people in the gospel within the church, it shows off the power of Christ to bring radically different people together through the gospel.

Now, this is something that we should be striving for. Churches in different areas, of course, will naturally have different kinds of diversity, whether that's of age or occupation or ethnicity or gifts.

But the question is, does the reach of our personal connections and relationships have limits that the gospel doesn't know? Or rather, does the range of people that we connect with for the gospel display a breadth of diversity that shows the world the richness and fullness of Christ?

Perhaps a more searching question is, do you have these kinds of personal partnerships? Relationships with Christians in which you can share needs, whom you disciple, whom you pray with, who you work with for the gospel, whom you can share prayer requests for non-Christian people, who you're sharing the gospel with.

[19 : 18] And perhaps you can partner with, to reach out to a certain group in your area or neighbors of yours. In other words, how well do you know the folk in your church?

Perhaps especially people who are not like you in some way. We serve a personal God. Therefore, we must strive where we can for personal partnerships.

And fourth P, we must form those partnerships across various places. Now, again, Paul in his lifetime, never left the Mediterranean. So when he says the gospel has been proclaimed in the whole creation under heaven, really, he's just talking about the world on his doorstep.

But the global church of today is truly global. So it's right for us to seek out and foster personal partnerships with gospel workers and churches the world over, to send people or to go yourself, perhaps visit on holiday, gospel workers and churches in other parts of the world, to connect with people who are serving Christ in India and Peru and Canada and Italy, wherever Christ is being preached.

But what's really striking here is that the two other places Paul mentions are the towns right next door to Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis.

[20 : 41] These three towns were in the same place. These three towns were in the same valley. Now, it's possible that Epaphras had personally planted these three churches. Paul applauds him for his hard work and his prayerfulness for all these people.

But even in the absence of Epaphras, Paul expects a close relationship between these churches. So much so that in verse 16, he says, once the Colossian church has read this letter, he wants them to trade letters with the church at Laodicea, so that both churches get to read both the letters that Paul sent to them.

So when I say partnership across places, it could be anywhere in the world, but perhaps the category we're most likely to overlook is the faithful gospel church next door.

How closely do you keep in contact with folks who are part of other faithful churches or gospel works in your area? Again, to be really clear, Paul isn't encouraging unwise partnerships with churches that deny parts of the gospel or even that differ from the model of true gospel service that we saw in chapter one.

That kind of partnership is hugely counterproductive for the kingdom of God. In those partnerships, the gospel is often confused and unclear towards outsiders.

[22 : 04] But if a church has the whole Christ as the content, the pattern and the goal of their ministry, then Paul calls us to seek out and foster meaningful local gospel partnerships in Christ or Christ.

That might mean at the level of churches working together or forming local gospel partnerships. But remember, Paul doesn't just want a church that's connected by its fingertips.

We want a church locked together in a thousand personal relationships and partnerships. Like, for example, fostering friendships with folk in other faithful churches in Aberdeen.

Or perhaps praying for a faithful minister in your city and sending him an email to let him know he's in your prayers. Perhaps keeping in touch with people who are moving to other gospel churches in other parts of the country or the world.

Perhaps connecting with Christians, perhaps connecting with people who live near to you, who are part of other churches or other gospel works, to speak about how you can reach out to your neighbors and to folk who live in your area.

[23 : 13] In short, seek out personal relationships with people who love Jesus, who are part of other gospel churches. We might think this is optional.

But brothers and sisters, a gospel this big doesn't fit within the walls of one church. The gospel of Christ doesn't grow into our inward looking communities.

We saw before how deadly it is for a church to turn inwards on its own small things. It's so deadly to the cause of the gospel spreading out with those walls.

Because the gospel, it naturally turns us outwards. And the true beauty of the gospel is only seen when our partnerships extend outside and beyond at the circle of our own church.

In the gospel, we are called to connect personally, both within our churches and beyond our churches in Christ and for Christ.

[24 : 13] So partner in prayer, partner in purpose, partner with people, partner across places. Fifthly and finally, partner with Paul.

In the final verse of this letter, Paul takes the pen from his secretary to sign off on this letter. And he leaves us with this thought.

Remember my chains. Remember my chains. Throughout this letter, Paul has stressed that real spiritual life doesn't come from things which are impressive in the eyes of the world.

God's power is not seen in outward displays of glory. No, God's glory, wisdom, power, peace are hidden in Christ. And if you take nothing else away from this letter, let it be this.

If you have Christ, you have the fullness of God for you, with you, and in you. God's glory, God's wisdom, God's peace, God's power are yours in Christ and nowhere else.

[25 : 23] If you have Christ this evening, you have everything God has to give, even God himself, now and forever. As it was in Colossae back then, so it is so often now that people will tell us otherwise.

Super spiritual upgrades and religious add-ons offer us a good outward show. Works take us in by our pride and our shame. Guilt overshadows us as we step out of the shadow of the cross.

But the point of this letter is to say that Christ is enough. Christ is enough for me and for you, for your church and my church and for all who have ever and do and will ever put their trust in him.

So why does Paul leave us with this memory of his chains? Because his chains say, Christ is enough. Christ was enough when Paul had nothing to show for himself and his faith and his work and service, but chains.

Christ was enough when Paul had nothing but Christ. Christ was still enough. He was still full. He was still free. Even in prison.

[26 : 42] Christ is enough not only in the good times, but when we even have nothing else. In a way, the message of Colossians is captured by the first verse of the 23rd Psalm.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. That is true for us right now. If we have partnered with Paul in entrusting ourselves to this whole, full and gracious Lord Jesus Christ.

If that is you today, I pray that you would know and grow in him more and more with each passing day. More satisfied in him than the day before.

As you come to him with your sins and needs and burdens and find your rest in him. Day after day. If you're not a Christian, I pray only this for you, that you would know Christ.

There is nothing more for God to give than he has given in his son. There is grace and fullness and freedom enough for you in him.

[27 : 49] He is here for you. So would you come and trust in him tonight? Let us partner with Paul in the gospel and rest in the fullness of God held out to us in Jesus Christ.

And may that one great partnership be seen in a thousand rich, faithful and fruitful partnerships in Christ for the gospel in his church.

Let's pray together. God, our Father, we praise you that you have drawn us together from all nations and peoples and languages under the cross of your son.

We thank you that there is nothing in us that convinced you to draw us near. But that your love, your grace are sufficient.

We thank you that Christ is enough in his person and in his work for each of us and for all of us together. And so we pray that out of that fullness and that freedom, Heavenly Father, that you would help us by your spirit to foster this partnership that Paul loved and longed for in the church.

[29 : 09] Please help us, Father, to stay outward looking to live lives that are gracious and seasoned with salt so that others may know this same Savior come to join the company of those who know him and love them.

Father, we pray for those who are on the outside this evening and that you would draw them in by your grace and your love. Lord, that you give them a glimpse of the fullness that there is for them in Christ.

That they too would know the freedom from sin that his cross has brought them. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this time, for this letter, for your gospel and pray, Lord, that you continue to be at work in us now by your spirit.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.