

Growing by giving

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Date: 31 January 2018

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[0 : 0 0] Let's pray. Dear Lord God, I pray that as we gather here over the next few minutes, you would refresh and encourage our hearts.

That as so many of us are distracted and weary, you would remind us of the great truths of your gospel, of your good news, of your great love for us.

We would leave here encouraged and buoyed up. We pray particularly for those of us who aren't here today, those who are sick or ill or struggling because of the weather, and we pray that you will encourage them to keep them close to you and that they may know you and know you closely and well today.

But now as we look at your word, please teach us, feed us, and encourage us, we ask. In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, again, a warm welcome to you all, especially on such a nasty and unpleasant January day.

If you could turn with me to the book of Philemon. We're on page 1,000, 1,000 of our Bibles today, the book of Philemon.

[1 : 2 2] We're going to be reading from the start of that book. That's page 1,000, the book of Philemon, starting at verse 1.

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy, our brother, to Philemon, our beloved fellow worker, and Aphia, our sister, and Archippus, our fellow soldier, and the church in your house, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints.

And I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.

For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

[2 : 4 0] Now, I'm increasingly convinced, as life goes on, that the greatest challenge that many of us face to our Christian growth is the challenge of individualism, that we live in a culture which is entirely focused on me, myself, in which communities are more and more broken down, and so even when it comes to good things, like growing as a Christian, we are very individual in the way we pursue it, both in how we get there, we think of terms merely of things I do, and in what we want to get from it, we think in terms of what I will be, what I will feel.

Now, this church, as I've discovered over the last few months of being here, and many of the churches to which you go, are little bastions of community in a world that is increasingly individualist.

But nonetheless, because we are in an individualistic world, we are all partly damaged, unable often to imagine, let alone to put into practice, what the Bible actually calls us to in terms of Christian life and growth.

And passages like this, I think, are medicine for that. They remind us of a reality that we forget, or perhaps haven't even seen. They teach us how to grasp it again, and how to experience it again.

So for the last three weeks, we've been looking at the book of Colossians, a letter of the Apostle Paul to people who, among other things, were tempted by an individualistic and selfish approach to Christian growth.

[4 : 28] Now, we're carrying on here in a different book of the Bible, the letter to Philemon. For some very good reasons, it was a letter sent by the same man at the same time, with the same themes, and sent to one of the Colossians, so one of the people to whom the other letter was written to.

This is a little, magnificent little letter, almost a postcard, one that's often famous because it has another important theme we won't get into, but which is often neglected because it's this little short letter at the end of the New Testament, and yet it has so much to say to us.

I want to make two very simple points today. Firstly, that our faith leads us to sharing together. Faith leads to sharing together. And secondly, that sharing leads to growth together.

So firstly, faith leads to sharing together. Paul's prayer, and you'll see that verses 4 to 7 are a report of his prayers, centers on this phrase, the sharing of your faith.

Now, we need to ask before we think about it, what does this mean? What is this phrase, sharing of your faith? We have a problem when we read this passage, I think many of us, if we have been around the church for a long time, because we tend to assume it means what we call evangelism.

[5 : 52] It means in Christian dialect, as it were, telling people about the faith we have in Jesus so that they can believe it too. Now, it's a good phrase. It's a good phrase for a good thing, but it is never used in the Bible that way.

And so we have to be very careful we don't read it in here. Now, just to state the obvious, I hope, I'm not downplaying that evangelism at all, not in the slightest.

We mentioned it last week in our sermon here. Please do it. You will grow through it. Please, you'll be blessed through it. But just putting it to one side, this passage centers on the idea of the sharing of faith in a different way.

And if we look through the passage, we'll see what it means. In verse 2, Paul says that he is writing to Philemon and the church that meets in your house.

We've got to remember this was before church buildings. Christians are a tiny, unpopular minority in a rather hostile world. And so churches are house churches, not necessarily tiny little groups like we imagine a Christian Bible study or a small group.

[7 : 01] But nonetheless, they meet in the bigger rooms of the richest members of their congregations. Philemon seems to be one of these people. He's a richer member of the church.

He's got a house big enough to host the church. He's hospitable to them. And because the culture of the time is much like older Scottish culture, you don't really invite people in without giving them something to eat and drink.

And the early church, it seems, did often eat and drink when they met together. So this is a man who's being hospitable to the whole church. In verse 5, Paul thanks Philemon because of his love and faith to all the saints.

His love particularly to the saints, his faith particularly to Christ. In other words, his faith leads to him showing love for other Christians. In verse 7, we see the result of this.

He says that through this sharing, Philemon has refreshed the hearts of the saints. In other words, he's not the kind of person who when they're generous makes sure you know they're being generous.

[8 : 08] You feel a little guilty about accepting it. Quite the opposite. He's someone who's generous, who's hospitable in a way that rests people, refreshes them, encourages them. He's looking after them.

He's really loving them. So back to verse 6, the sharing of your faith. This is real sharing, loving service, inspired and driven by the faith that this man has.

And Paul is giving thanks for that as a wonderful thing, a gift of God. It's useful to know perhaps that underlying this in Greek, the word translated sharing is *koinonia*, which we use and usually translate as fellowship.

It's the same word as you could translate it, fellowship, the fellowship of your faith. Fellowship not in the sense of just friendship, but fellowship in the sense of loving, sacrificial sharing with your community.

Partnership. Paul sees it and praises God for it. Now just to put this into slightly more concrete terms, I think of a young businessman I knew. He owned a coffee shop.

[9 : 13] He was very good at running a coffee shop. He loved good coffee. He loved his customers as well, actually. He was very good at chatting to them and very warm with them. He worked every hour there was and the few hours he didn't have, he spent smoking things he shouldn't probably have smoked and watching films he probably shouldn't have watched.

He knew how to party, you know, a secret of life I have never grasped. But that was about it. Work and play. And his money went and parties and on fun.

But when he became a Christian, there was just an absolutely radical turnaround in the way he approached everything he possessed. He saw his coffee shop as a way to serve those customers he'd liked before in a much deeper way, really loving them and listening to them.

Often, perhaps sometimes, sharing the gospel with them as well. Not that that was the main point of what he was doing, but it was an opportunity to love and serve them. He shared his coffee shop in other ways.

The church could meet there. It could run events there. He shared his house. He still had his parties, but now they were parties that either bound together the church in fellowship as they met together or drew in a whole people from all across his networks, all the people he knew, so they could get to know Christians and hear the gospel.

[10 : 32] He shared, I'm sure, his money. Not that he told me that. He certainly shared his time. And there was a total reorientation from me focused to sharing with others. Now, that's exactly, I think, what had happened with Philemon.

Now, most of us do not have coffee shops. I certainly don't have many. But nonetheless, this should encourage us. We as a church in this country have always had a problem of exalting some gifts over others.

Now, I'm standing up here preaching, so I'm sure you understand that as I say this, preaching is a critical thing for the church. But there are so many other ministries which are so valuable and important.

You see, Paul is saying to Philemon, what you're doing is wonderful. What comes from your faith is critical to the church. He said, you're my fellow worker, verse one. But it wasn't for his preaching or his praying or his teaching because if Philemon did those things, it's not mentioned at all here.

No, Paul, and I think God, delighted in what Philemon did, out of sacrificial sharing and love. So if we have that attitude, that attitude of sacrificial sharing and love, God is pleased.

[11 : 52] And as we'll see in our next point, he will grow us through it too. Now, many of you contribute to your churches, this one or others, in wonderful ways, sacrificial ways.

Often, I suspect, without even really noticing what you're doing sometimes. That's often the way, isn't it, that we don't notice the good we do sometimes. Well, God is pleased with that.

God sees that. God will bless us. Whether it's by hospitality, like Philemon, whether it's welcoming and loving and feeding people, whether it's giving money, as Philemon was generous, whether it's by visiting the lonely and listening to those who need to talk, just by encouraging people, all the countless ways, practical and personal, in which we can serve our church and our people.

God loves those things and God blesses us through them. And they all come out of the sharing that is driven by our faith. Now, this kind of sharing, this kind of change in our lives, leads to growth together.

You see, Paul thanks God for what's happened in Philemon. It's a wonderful thing, but he also asks for something. He wants, verse 6, the sharing of your faith to become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.

[13 : 20] He prays that Philemon's sharing with other people will bring Philemon himself to grow and specifically to a real, true grasp of what we have in Christ.

Paul's asking for full knowledge, not just a little intellectual understanding, but a concrete grasp, the kind of understanding that comes from experience, from knowing someone.

He wants that full knowledge of every good thing that is in us. He's saying to Philemon, I pray that your hospitality, that very everyday, but nonetheless wonderful generosity, will lead you and your church to a deep and wonderful grasp of the riches that you share as a church.

And let's notice one small but significant detail. To do it, we have to step back a moment. Philemon is very unusual. Nearly every book in the New Testament is a letter written to a group of people.

And so nearly every encouragement, every command, every you is to a group of people. So, when it says you, it means all of you.

[14 : 34] Or, if we were speaking American, you all. It's not true in this book because he's writing to Philemon alone. It's very unusual. He says, I am looking at you, Philemon, and saying this to you personally.

And so, he says, just going through that verse, I pray that the sharing of your faith, your faith, Philemon, personally, may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in, we might write, you, Paul writes, us.

This is really important. We have learned in Colossians, I think, that we have every good thing in Jesus Christ.

We possess everything we need to grow. We possess everything we need to grow and learn and get to heaven with Christ. Everything.

But if we replace the we in that statement with the word I, it changes totally. I don't have all I need. I don't have what it takes.

[15 : 41] Because the riches that Christ gives, he gives to the church. He gives to all of us together. I need what we have as a group. The riches of Christ are shared around in the church.

And the church is absolutely critical to our Christian growth. And so, when Paul prays for Philemon, he sees the wonderful thing that he personally is doing. But what he prays is that the riches that are spread all through the church will enrich him and bless him.

And that's true in our churches too, isn't it? when sacrificial love really binds us together, when we really give of ourselves, we discover in the other people we are serving the miracles that God is working on a day-to-day basis very quietly, very unassumingly, as he brings them closer to Christ.

We see what God is doing in transforming lives. We discover that Christ is at work in the people around us. And through that, we can see the extent and the beauty of his power and greatness.

And we begin to grasp those truths that he has allowed other people in our churches to grasp and to see more brightly than we can. So sharing leads to growth together.

[17 : 10] Have you noticed, perhaps, that the most dissatisfied members of any church are almost always those who give it nothing? Who sit on the fringes and say, this church isn't meeting my needs.

I'm not talking about people who are unable to contribute, but people who choose not to. And when they say, this church isn't meeting my needs, they are almost always entirely right.

Because the way it works, as Paul was praying for Philemon, is that as we give, we grow. As we share, we learn. That is how the Christian church and life works.

Those, in other words, who are the most joyful, thankful, and satisfied members of our churches are those with the deepest grasp deep in their hearts of the gospel. They are the people who spend most time in loving others to the utmost of their ability, who are focused on loving and sharing in every way they can.

In Jesus' words, it is better to give than to receive. You know, that's not just something hypothetical.

[18 : 20] He's not meaning once you get to heaven you'll be glad you did it. He's not saying counted in sort of God's heavenly account books you get more.

No, he's really saying those who give are those who receive the most in the kingdom of heaven and you will find this is true in this life. Now, back to what we were talking about.

Many of us cannot give in the practical ways that Philemon did, but all of us have the possibility of some giving and love of those around us. Whether it's very little things, those warm smiles and little encouragements, all the way through to things that the world sees as dramatic, all of them come from the sharing of faith, all of them come from the encouragement of our God.

And as we were seeing last week, prayer is one of the most critical of those, critical part of the work of the gospel. There isn't a single one of us who isn't able to contribute to our churches in this way.

And as we do, as we do, we come to grasp, to have full knowledge of every good thing that is in us, in all of us, for the sake of Christ.

[19 : 41] Let's pray. Lord God, you have enriched your church with incredible gifts and blessings.

You have done much for us each individually. But as we see your church, we see that it is much more than we could ever begin to imagine. I pray you will open our eyes to that.

Help us to give and love and serve. And in that, to have our eyes open to your kindness and goodness and greatness and grace.

Amen.