**Introduction** (p. ) This morning I want to talk to you about partnership. Do you know the story of two teenage boys who met in the seventh grade in Merrick, NY? Young Mr. Cohen met young Mr. Greenfield in gym class in 1963. “Fourteen years later (1977), the pals (who had by then moved to Vermont) paid $5 for a correspondence course in ice cream making. The following year, the pair plowed a $12,000 ($4,000 borrowed) investment and opened their first Homemade shop in a renovated gas station.

By 1983, they were franchising stores, while pints of Cherry Garcia and Chunky Monkey were sold by independent distributors. In 1984, the company reported sales topping $4 million, and in 2000, Unilever bought the company for $326 million. I am talking about New England’s favorite partnership in ice cream: **Ben & Jerry** **(Pic)**

Now, that was a great partnership, not only for the financial gain, but for the wonderful ice cream we all get to enjoy. Can I get an amen?

Paul is going to talk to us about partnership today in his letter to the Philippians. This is a partnership that is more rewarding and fulfilling than any partnership found under the sun.

The word “partnership” is sometimes translated in the Bible with the word “fellowship.” Fellowship is a common word in church circles that we often use to describe quality time together or “warm-friendship with other believers.” But the idea here goes deeper than that.

In the first century, the word “partnership” had “commercial overtones.” When two or more people entered into a business venture together with a common vision and purpose, they were in partnership. This understanding leads D.A. Carson to define partnership or fellowship in this way: **"The heart of true fellowship is self-sacrificing conformity to a shared vision. . . . *Christian* fellowship, then, is self-sacrificing conformity to the gospel. There may be overtones of warmth and intimacy, but the heart of the matter is this shared vision of what is of transcendent importance, a vision that calls forth our commitment.”**

Beyond his faith in God, which was his first motive to prayer, the second great motivation to prayer was his partnership with the people of Philippi. Partnership moved him to prayer, and it is our partnership in the gospel that should move us to pray for one another.

In Paul’s opening words to the Philippians we find his . . .

**“A Prayer for the Church”**

**Philippians 1:1-11**

*Read 1:1-11*…

In these opening verses, Paul, writes from a Roman prison back to a church he had started and that loved him immensely. From these words, we gain great insight into how we should pray.

In light of Paul’s words, I want to encourage each of you to . . .

**The Point: Express gratitude to God for the partnership you share with other believers.**

Trans: I have three truths I want to share with you this am. The verse one through six verses we see that we should . . .

**I. Thank God for the partnership you share in the gospel (1:1-6).**

There are three truths that standout in these opening verses. #1

**True partnership is found only in Christ (1-3).**

* Paul tells us in verse one that he is writing “to all the saints.” In other words, he is writing to all of those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ. In biblical terms, saints do not refer to some elite group of Super Christians but to all Christians.
* Christians are people who are the ongoing recipients of God’s “Grace” – or his undeserved favor; and Peace – the result of God’s grace, which leads to a life of flourishing and rest**.**
* All of this comes “in Christ,” a phrase Paul uses over 80 times in his 13 letters.
* True and deep fellowship, (whether we’re talking friendship, family marriage, whatever) is ultimately found in Christ alone.
* When two people share Christ in common at a the most basic, fundamental level, they have all things in common.
* It is the shared vision of the transcendent power of Christ in the gospel that binds us together.
* Was Paul a Philippian? No! Was Paul a Jew? Yes. They were separated by ethnicity and geography. Most of them would not have enjoyed the same academic training as Paul. Did any of those things separate them? No! Because Jesus trumps all of that and brings us together as one IN HIM!
* App: No matter what you make of the events in Ferguson over the past few months, and especially the past week, surely each of us have looked within our own hearts to see where we may be prone to judging a book by its cover.
* What is the antidote to racism or even simple favoritism? It’s the gospel. Christ brings us together in a way that nothing else can.
* Look at the diversity in this room. God is in the business of uniting people who may have once been divided.
* Our gratitude to God for one another begins because of what God has done for us in Christ.
* How often do you thank God for and pray for your brothers & sisters, your partners in the gospel?

We should not only consider the frequency of our prayers, we should also consider the quality of our prayers.

**True partnership is characterized by joy (4).**

* When Paul remembers them in prayer, he prays with joy.
* Like children bending the ear of a loving Father, we should feel immense freedom and confidence and joy when we speak with God.
  + Do you pray with joy? Do you ever prayer with a smile on your face?
  + Yes, we should approach God with reverence. Yes, there are times when we should be earnest and serious, but we should also have glad hearts when we pray.
    - As we move into this Advent Season, we remember that when Christ was born, the angels spoke to the shepherds and said: “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” (Luke 2:10)
  + If our prayers are rarely characterized by joy, we may be praying prayerless prayers.
* This joy was comprehensive, not selective. Verse 4: “always in every prayer of mine *for you all*.
* Because of what Paul? Verse 5: “because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.”

**True partnership is focused on the gospel (5-6).**

* Paul could rejoice because of the transformative work God was producing in them “from the first day until now.”
* What first day?
  + Acts 16 (Paul’s 2nd missionary journey)
  + Lydia
  + Philippian jailer
* Until Now?
  + These people showed special concern for Paul. Supported him . . .
    - Epaphroditus – financial gift . . .
* He felt so strongly about these people because they shared a *“vision of what is of transcendent importance.”*
* This is what church is about. We are NOT a social club. We are NOT simply a group of people who treat others kindly. We are committed to Christ and glued together by his mission.

T: Now Paul was so confident because he understood . . .

*The gospel produces God’s work in his people*. And that delivers great CONFIDENCE.

*Verse 6*

* Paul had great confidence because of his confidence in the faithfulness of God (timeline: birth/rebirth >>> to the finish/day of Christ & EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN
* God is working to finish what he started!

T: In our prayers for one another, we should thank God for our partnership in the gospel. But what should move us to pray? Verses 7-8 tell us to . . .

**II. Let love be the driving force of your partnership (1:7-8).**

*Read vv. 7-8*.

**Our Affection Springs from the Heart**

* Paul says he held them in his heart.
* Now some of you are thinking, “Well, good for Paul, but people are usually on my nerves more than they are in my heart.”
* Ok, let’s work on that. Yes, we are going to get on each other’s nerves from time to time. Yes, we will have our differences.
* But, if Jesus shed his blood for your brother or sister, at what point can you justify restraining your love for them?
* If Sal is in Christ’s heart, he’s in my heart. If Walt’s in Christ’s heart (Somebody tell Walt Happy belated B-Day Walt), Walt is in my heart. If Lani is in Christ’s heart, *then you bettah know*, she is in my heart.
* That’s how Paul rolled, and that’s how we roll as his people.

*T*: But there’s more…

**Our Affection is built on consistent trust.**

* Paul “felt this way about them” because they had walked with him through thick and thin.
* No matter what the season: in Paul’s imprisonment, they were there. In the mission of defending and confirming the veracity of the gospel, they were there.
* Our shared experiences will enhance our prayers for one another and our joy in one another.
* Let me be straight up: We live in a culture where it is abnormal to commit to anything except our own desire. That’s why people hop around, from one church to another to another. My challenge to you this: Let’s stick this thing out for 3 4, 7, 30 years and watch your love for God and these people go through the roof!
* Who’s ready for that?
* If you’ll allow me to speak like a true pastor: “I’m down.”

*T*: This is all possible because . . .

**Our affection is defined by Christ**

* “For God is my witness” – Paul basically says, “God knows how much I love you!” I “yearn for you.” There is great force to my desire for you, and my desire for you is driven and defined by the love of Christ.
* Paul loved people with the love of Christ, just like Jesus commanded. In **John 15:12,** Jesus said: “**This is my commandment, that you love each other as I have loved you.”**
* How many of us can say we consistently love others with the love of Christ?
* This Christmas season, let’s be reminded what characterizes the love of Christ: humility, holiness, goodness, compassion. And we are to grow in that love!
* You say: well, how do I do that? Grow to love like Jesus by getting to know Jesus!
* One of the ways we are going to do that this Advent season is by reading a daily devotional on the coming of Christ together as a church. It’s called **“Good News of Great Joy.” (Pic)** This devotional was linked in our newsletter and there are a few hard copies on the welcome table if you don’t appreciate the wonders of technology. ☺ Let’s grow in our knowledge of Jesus and watch our love grow together.
* And here is some really good news: We don’t have to work this up. As God pours his love into us, we overflow that love to others!

T: The gospel forms the ground of our gratitude for one another. It sparks our love for one another, and it is the gospel that what takes us deeper and deeper into the life God desires for us. Verses 9-11 should compel us to . . .

**III. Pray for a deep work of God in others (1:9-11)**

*Read 9-11*

Here is a great way to pray for those around you. Pray this prayer straight up or allow this to serve as a guide for your prayers. Paul starts by praying that their . . .

* Love would “abound more and more . . .” Not just a little love. Abounding love, and that abounding love would grow more and more and more.
* But it’s not just any love, love with knowledge and all discernment
  + Love without truth is sentimentality.
  + Paul wants them to have “depth of insight,” which refers to being able to wisely navigate through the array of life experiences.

T: And love is not an end in itself. Love will enable us to “approve what is excellent.”

* + Does this involve distinguishing right from wrong. Yes, but it is also distinguishing good from great; what is nice from what is best!
  + **“Paul’s thought is that there are countless decisions in life where it is not a question of making a straightforward decision between right and wrong. What you need is the extraordinary discernment that helps you perceive how things differ, and then make the best possible choice. That is what Paul means by choosing “what is best.”** **– D. A. Carson**
* We need this in EVERY area of our lives.
  + Wisdom in Prioritizing - - which involves knowing what to say no to…
  + How we invest in our friendships.
  + How we manage our money (giving, saving, spending – I was paying attention!).
  + How we divide our time.
  + What we read.
* You may say, well for so much of my life, I have not necessarily chosen what is excellent.
* And the temptation for you right now may be try to do better out of a guilty conscience. Oh man, I’ve blown it,. I haven’t honored God, I feel so guilty, and because of that guilty feeling, I’m going to do better. No!!
* What does Paul say will motivate this? Not guilt. Love!

Finally, why is this so important? Look back at verse 10

* Through approving what is excellent, we will “be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.”
  + 2nd reference to the end.
  + We should pray that we will live our lives with a view to the final day when Christ returns. That day is not something we should fearfully dread, but joyfully anticipate.
  + Knowing that we will one day dwell in the presence of God should motivate us to live like him in the present. . .
* “filled with the fruit of righteousness.”
  + “that comes though Jesus Christ.” It’s all from him!
  + But this does not negate our effort! Though God will produce this fruit in us, we have to “Work out” our salvation with fear and trembling (2:12). We, like Paul, should “presses on toward the goal . . . in Christ Jesus.”

And what is the result? Look at the end of verse 11.

* “to the glory and praise of God.”
* If you seek self-glory, you are an imposter. You are claiming something for yourself that cannot ultimately be ascribed to you.
* This is so hard for Bostonians to hear. We are some of the most intellectual and industrious people on the planet. If we are not among the intellectually elite, we are at least numbered among those who, by the sweat of our brow, work hard for what we have. And both kinds of people can possess a nasty, God-denying pride in our hearts.
* We should fall on our knees, in humble recognition that all that we have is from God and should result in praise to him.
* Is this the end of your prayers? Is this what you are after?
* *What if I told you that you were not the primary aim of my prayers for you? Would you be glad?*
* It’s ultimately about our tiny little lives resulting in maximum praise to God!

Would you consider for a moment, what would happen if we prayed like this for one another? Our lives are more fruitful. Our faith is stronger. Our love is more abundant. Our lives bring God more praise! And what is happening? We go deeper and deeper and deeper…

*Conclusion:*

* There is nothing surface level here! Don’t you want this for yourself? Don’t you want this for others? Abounding. More and more. FILLED! DEEP.
* There is no room for mediocrity in this prayer, because there is no room for mediocrity among followers of a Savior whose blood drenched a Roman cross so that we might have life.
* If you want pastors who will be content with something superficial in you, then please go find another church. But if you want to be a part of a church that is seeking to give God everything we’ve got, then we’ll see you next Sunday. ☺
* Why? Because this is who God is: ebullient, effusive, bountiful… He can’t help but overflow and when our lives are in his hands, consistently submitted to his will, he can’t help but take us DEEPER and DEEPER still!
* This is where I pray God takes us. This sermon. This prayer, in many respects, serves as a precursor to our Advent season *and* our 2015 Vision as a church.
* We want to go deeper, and God *wants* to take us deeper. Wherever you are today, know that God wants to take you deeper with him.
* Will you, empowered by his love and infused with his grace, pursue greater depth in your spiritual life this Advent season?

Let’s pray