

The Principles of Financial Stewardship in Paul's Letter to the Philippians

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[This is the seventh in a series of stewardship studies presented to and discussed by the seminary faculty and published by faculty resolution. Published in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* in Spring 1989]

Paul's letter to the Philippians can be ranked as the second most important source for study of the biblical principles of financial stewardship. Only 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 provide a more extensive discussion of the topic. Although gospel motivation is the central feature of both of Paul's presentations, they are, nevertheless, quite different in tone.

In Corinthians Paul is trying to motivate a congregation whose wholehearted and generous participation in the offering has yet to be fully demonstrated. He is addressing a congregation which had a number of problems which might be expected to affect its financial stewardship. This explains the more urgent tone and the "evangelical pressure" which characterize Paul's appeal to the Corinthians.

In Philippians Paul is writing to a congregation whose wholehearted, generous stewardship is beyond question. He is not writing to urge more offerings but to acknowledge past generosity. He is writing to a congregation which seems to be a model congregation. This fact influences the tone and emphasis of his message.

All of the principles of stewardship which Paul sets forth in Corinthians and Philippians are applicable to every congregation. Nevertheless, we need to remember that the tone and emphasis of each message are adapted to fit the attitude and performance of each congregation. When we apply the scriptural principles of stewardship to a present-day congregation, we must consider whether the group we are addressing is more like the Corinthians or more like the Philippians in its situation, attitude and actions. This, of course, becomes more difficult as the group we are addressing becomes larger and more diverse. It becomes especially difficult when many congregations are involved.

When we deliver Paul's principles of stewardship to contemporary congregations, we have to shape the tone and emphasis of our message so that it is appropriate to the group we are addressing, just as Paul did in his dealing with different congregations. This responsibility to consider the spiritual condition of the recipients of our stewardship messages is simply one application of our general responsibility to deliver the blend of law and gospel which is appropriate to a specific audience. Since all our members are simultaneously saints and sinners, each of our stewardship presentations must have the proportion of law and gospel, of rebuke and praise, of admonition and thanksgiving which is appropriate to that group and situation.

In Philippians Paul's emphasis is on fellowship or partnership in the gospel. Already in chapter one, verse five, Paul had expressed his thankfulness and joy for the Philippians' "partnership in the gospel from the first day until now." The phrase which the NIV translates "partnership in the gospel" is *κοινωνία εἰς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον*. Other translations render this phrase "fellowship in the gospel" or "close relationship to the gospel," and "contribution in furtherance of the gospel" or "cooperation in the gospel." Any of these translations is lexically valid.

Κοινωνία is a close relationship or association which may involve having, receiving or giving a share of something. The context determines whether the emphasis is on closeness of fellowship, on giving a share or on receiving a share. In secular usage *κοινωνία* as a relationship may refer to friendship, marriage or a business partnership. In the New Testament *κοινωνία* as a relationship refers to the living bond by which the Christian is united with God and his fellow Christians. In connection with an offering *κοινωνία* may refer either to the fellowship which lies behind the offering (2 Cor 8:4, "the grace and fellowship of this service to the saints") or to the offering itself (Ro 15:26, "some contribution for the poor"). In 2 Corinthians 9:13 and Philippians 1:5 it is debatable which sense predominates.

In Philippians 1:5 the Philippians' "fellowship in the gospel" or "close relationship with the gospel" could refer to the faith in Christ which Paul and the Philippians shared. Such an interpretation would agree well with Paul's habit of beginning a letter with a celebration of the faith which joined him and the recipients. We, however, agree with the NIV interpretation that *κοινωνία* in Philippians 1:5 refers to the Philippians' "partnership in the gospel" or their "contribution in furtherance of the gospel." If this is true, the use of *κοινωνία* in Philippians 1:5 is parallel to that in Romans 15:26 and perhaps 2 Corinthians 9:13.

"From the first day until now" the Philippians had been zealous partners in the gospel and had contributed greatly to the furtherance of the gospel. Lydia had urged Paul to make her home his headquarters (Ac 16:15). The jailer associated himself with his former prisoner and aided him (Ac 16:33). The Philippians began their financial support of Paul's ministry immediately while he was still working in the neighboring towns of Macedonia (Php 4:15, 16). This support continued during later phases of Paul's journey (2 Cor 11:9), and it had recently been renewed on the occasion of Epaphroditus' trip to Rome (Php 2:25). The same generosity had been apparent in the Macedonians' support of the offering for the poor in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:1–5). The Philippians were a living demonstration of the truth that financial stewardship flourishes most when it is based on lasting principle, abiding commitment and regular participation, rather than on temporary pressure and fleeting impulse.

Our interpretation of Philippians 1:5 does not exclude the Philippians' fellowship in faith from a key role in the verse. The faith which they and Paul shared was the foundation of their partnership in the gospel. Nor was the Philippians' partnership in the gospel limited to paying the bills. Certainly their concern, their prayers and their emotional support for Paul and their own evangelism were just as important as their offerings. Although the concern of Philippians 1:5 is broader than the one offering which the Philippians had sent to Rome, we believe this verse is a prospective reference, which is pointing ahead to Paul's discussion of this offering which had provided the immediate impetus for the writing of this letter. Philippians 1:5 and the content and tone of the chapters which follow it provide the background and context which are crucial to understanding the more explicit discussion of financial stewardship in chapter four.

Financial stewardship can flourish only among people who realize that they share fellowship in the faith and partnership in the gospel. Certainly faith and love for Christ are the only essential prerequisites of God-pleasing giving, but a congregation's love and esteem for its pastor and spiritual leaders are also very important factors in joyful giving. Giving can hardly be a joy if Christians regard the leaders who are receiving their offerings as dictators, free-loaders or employees. When givers do not trust those who are receiving their offerings or when they are suspicious of the use being made of the offerings, it is very difficult to find joy in giving. It is hardly a coincidence that the Corinthian congregation which had so many problems, including some problems with their feelings toward Paul, also seems to have had problems with its giving for others. Nor is it surprising that the Philippians, who were strong in love and affection for their leaders, were also leaders in generous giving. When pastors and people regard each other as partners in the gospel, financial stewardship can be practiced in a setting of mutual esteem, shared love of the gospel and shared joy in the work of the gospel.

It is striking that Paul's discussion of financial stewardship comes quite close to the end of the letter. The discussion of the offering in 2 Corinthians has a similar placement. In both cases it appears that Paul felt a need to lay a foundation of fellowship and partnership before dealing with financial concerns. We have spent considerable time on this one phrase "partnership in the gospel" to emphasize the importance of dealing with financial matters, not in isolation, but in a context of fellowship and partnership. Now that we have looked at Paul's foundation, we can better study his discussion of financial stewardship in Philippians 4:10–20. In this study we will be especially concerned to answer the question: *What attitudes make giving and receiving a joy?*

Verse 10

10 Ἐχάρην δὲ ἐν κυρίῳ μεγάλως ὅτι ἤδη ποτὲ ἀνεθάλετε τὸ ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ φρονεῖν, ἐφ' ᾧ καὶ ἐφρονεῖτε ἡκαιεῖσθε δέ.

[Oh yes, I can't forget to mention that] I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that now at last you have caused your thoughtful concern for me to flourish again, about which [matter] you indeed were continually concerned, but you had no opportunity [to show that concern].

Paul had closed the preceding verse of this chapter with a benediction. This benediction would give readers the impression that his letter was at an end. The δέ in this verse says, “Oops, wait a minute. I have one more thing to say.” When δέ does not indicate a contrast with what precedes, it often indicates the resumption of a discussion which has been interrupted. In this case δέ indicates the taking up of a topic which had been implied in 1:5 and which was the immediate occasion of the letter, but which Paul had left to the very end as sort of an appendix. In the preceding section it was suggested that Paul did this because he had a certain reluctance to talk about money (especially money given to him) without first laying the foundation. By the benediction and the δέ Paul gives the impression that his discussion of the offering is a reluctant afterthought. For this reason I have rendered δέ with the paraphrase, “Oh yes, I can't forget to mention that.”

Most of the grammatical questions debated by the commentators do not significantly affect the meaning of the verse. It matters little whether ἐχάρην is an epistolary aorist translated as a present in English or a historical aorist translated as a past in English. Paul's joy began when he received the gift, was present as he wrote the letter and remained with him after he sent the letter on its way.

Ἀναθάλλω is a botanical word indicating flourishing new growth. Commentators debate whether it is a transitive verb with the articularized infinitive as its direct object or an intransitive verb followed by an accusative of specification. I have adopted the first possibility, but the meaning is the same in either case.

The word ᾧ could refer back either to ἐμοῦ (about *whom* you were concerned) or to the whole infinitive construction (about *which* you were concerned). Again there is no great difference in meaning. Another possibility is that the phrase ἐφ' ᾧ here means “because.”

The two imperfects ἐφρονεῖτε and ἠκαιρεῖσθε indicate that both the Philippians' concern for Paul and their lack of opportunity to express that concern were situations that had continued to coexist for a long time until the recent opportunity had arisen to send an offering to Paul at Rome. Since the Philippians' concern for Paul had been present even when the opportunity to express that concern was absent, Paul was not disappointed by the interruption of their financial support. To the Philippians Paul had been “out of sight,” but he had never been “out of mind.” Because Paul was more concerned about the attitude of the heart than about the offering itself, the phrase “now at last” (ἤδη ποτέ) is an expression of joy at the renewal of opportunity, not a criticism of the interruption of offerings. The emphasis of verse 10 is joy that the opportunity to practice the fellowship and to express the love which had always been present has now been renewed.

In this section we see that the first attitude which makes giving and receiving a joy is concern for the work of the gospel and for those who do the work of the gospel. When the minds of the givers and receivers are focused on the work and on the workers rather than on the gift itself, financial matters will be kept in the right perspective.

Verses 11–13

11 οὐχ ὅτι καθ' ὑστέρησιν λέγω, ἐγὼ γὰρ ἔμαθον ἐν οἷς εἰμι αὐτάρκης εἶναι. 12 οἶδα καὶ ταπεινοῦσθαι, αἶδα καὶ περισσεύειν· ἐν παντὶ καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν μεμύημαι καὶ χορτάζεσθαι καὶ πεινᾶν, καὶ περισσεύειν καὶ ὑστερεῖσθαι. 13 πάντα ἰσχύω ἐν τῷ ἐνδυναμοῦντί με.

Not that I speak because of want, for I have learned to be content in whatever [circumstances] I am. I know both how to live in humble circumstances and I also know how to enjoy abundance. In each and every [situation] I have learned the secret both how to be full and how to endure hunger, how to have plenty and how to be in need. I am strong enough to deal with anything through my relationship with the one who empowers me.

In this section Paul is struggling to avoid the impression that he is fishing for more offerings. Even if he had received no offering, he would be happy and content. Paul was αὐτάρκης. Αὐτάρκεια is being able to

support one's self without aid of others, self-sufficiency and contentment. Christian ἀτάρκεια is not absolute independence. It is independence of the world through dependence on God. Christian ἀτάρκεια is based on faith, not pride. Christian contentment is not based on changing external circumstances, but on an unchanging relationship with the Lord. When a Christian has plenty, he can enjoy it as a gift of God. When a Christian has little, he can rejoice in the treasure he has in Christ and the treasure which is stored up for him in eternity. In all circumstances he can be content. When he endures hardship, he is following in the footsteps of his Master, who humbled himself and became obedient unto death. When he rejoices in the blessings of God, he is following the one who is seated at the right hand of majesty.

But such contentment is not a natural endowment. Paul twice stresses that he had learned how to be content in all circumstances. None of us was born content. Brief observation of any baby or small child demonstrates this truth all too well. God had taught Paul the secret of contentment through the teachings of his Word and through Paul's experience of God's grace. Μυέω is a technical term used by the mystery religions, which has connotations of secret knowledge learned through initiation into a mystery. Even if Paul is not consciously stressing this background of the word here, μυέω is a fitting word to refer to knowledge which is not learned through ordinary worldly channels, but which is taught by God. I have translated both the οἶδα sentence and the μυέω sentence in verse twelve as statements that Paul knew how to deal with all kinds of experience. Other commentators see a difference between οἶδα and μυέω and interpret the οἶδα sentence as a statement that Paul had experienced all kinds of conditions (I know what it is to ...) and the μυέω sentence as a statement that he knew how to deal with all these conditions (I know how to ...).

In this section of the text we see two more attitudes which make giving and receiving a joy. One such attitude is contentment. Contentment is necessary for the recipient, so that he will be happy with the level of support which he receives. Although Paul doesn't mention the attitude of the giver in these verses, we note that contentment is also necessary for the giver so that he feels free to share his material blessings with others.

Another attitude which makes giving and receiving a joy is ability to adjust to circumstances. This attitude is vital to the recipient so that he can freely enjoy abundance and even surplus, and so that he can also adjust to tight circumstances without grumbling and selfpity. This ability to adjust is vital also to the giver so that he can remain generous even when times are tough. If he can adjust his own lifestyle to hard times, he will not focus all his cutbacks on his giving to others.

Verse 14

14 πλὴν καλῶς ἐποιήσατε συγκοινωνήσαντές μου τῇ θλίψει.
Nevertheless, you did well when you shared in my tribulation.

In this section Paul is being careful to avoid giving the impression that he did not appreciate or enjoy the Philippians' gift. If he harped too long on the fact that he had no needs, the Philippians might feel that Paul would have been happier if they had sent him a hair shirt and a bed of nails instead of a bag of gold and silver. Although Paul could have been happy even without the Philippians' offering, their offering was good because it was an expression of the Philippians' love for God and their fellowship and partnership with Paul in his suffering for the sake of the gospel. By this action the Philippians were standing side by side with Paul in his tribulation. All those who toil for the gospel and all those who support them stand side by side as partners in God's work (He 10:33).

A feeling of partnership by both the giver and receiver makes giving and receiving a joy. It is a joy to the giver to share in the work of the gospel even if he cannot make it his own life's work. Such a feeling of partnership brings joy also to the receiver when he realizes that he does not stand alone, but God's people stand by his side with their support and prayers.

We know that God loves a cheerful giver, but I believe we also need to stress that God loves a cheerful receiver. Cheerful receivers make giving and receiving a joy. It is especially important that the called workers of the church learn to be gracious, cheerful receivers. This is not necessarily an easy task. The art of being a gracious, cheerful, thankful receiver may be even more difficult than being a cheerful giver. If we learn to

accept the compliments and the special personal gifts which we receive in a gracious, cheerful manner, we will help make giving and receiving a joy for ourselves and for our people.

Verse 15–18

15 Οἴδατε δὲ καὶ ὑμεῖς, φιλιππηῖοι, ὅτι ἐν ἀρχῇ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου, ὅτε ἐξῆλθον ἀπὸ Μακεδονίας, οὐδεμία μοι ἐκκλησία ἐκοινώνησεν εἰς λόγον δόσεως καὶ λήμψεως εἰ μὴ ὑμεῖς μόνοι· 16 ὅτι καὶ ἐν Θεσσαλονίκη καὶ ἅπαξ καὶ δις εἰς τὴν χρείαν μοι ἐπέμψατε. 17 οὐχ ὅτι ἐπιζητῶ τὸ δόμα, ἀλλὰ ἐπιζητῶ τὸν καρπὸν πλεονάζοντα εἰς λόγον ὑμῶν. 18 ἀπέχω δὲ πάντα καὶ περισσεύω· πεπλήρωμαι δεχάμενος παρὰ Ἐπαφροδίτου τὰ παρ' ὑμῶν, ὁσμὴν εὐωδίας, θυσίαν δεκτὴν, εὐάρεστον τῷ θεῷ.

Furthermore, you know, Philippians, that in the beginning of [the preaching of] the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in an account of giving and receiving except you alone, for even when [I was] in Thessalonica, you sent [to provide] for my need more than once. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit which is increasing to your account. I have been paid in full, and I have more than I need. I am fully supplied since I received from Epaphroditus the [gifts] from you, [which are] a pleasing odor, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.

Although Paul uses a number of business terms in this section, he reemphasizes that Christian giving and receiving are not a business arrangement, but a mutual sharing of spiritual blessings and a fellowship of faith. Paul acknowledges the generosity of the Philippians and expresses his appreciation for their gift, but he nevertheless stresses that his main source of joy is not the gift, but the spiritual blessings which the Philippians are receiving through their partnership in the gospel.

The phrase *λόγος δόσεως καὶ λήμψεως* occurs in secular literature as a technical business term for a record of receipts and expenditures. Some commentators suggest that it occurs here merely as a stock phrase and that the whole sentence simply means, “no other congregation became my financial supporters except you.” Other commentators stress a distinction between the “giving” and “receiving” and interpret this passage as a parallel to Galatians 6:6 and 1 Corinthians 9:11. According to this view the Philippians are to give material blessings to Paul because they had received spiritual blessings through his preaching. Although their offering was not a payment of so much money for so much preaching, it was an exchange and mutual sharing of different blessings from God. Since Paul had shared his spiritual gifts with them, they were to share their material gifts with him.

This is a true, scriptural view of giving and receiving, but I don't believe that it is Paul's point here. The “receiving” on the part of the Philippians does not refer to the past blessings which they had received through Paul's preaching, but to the present and future blessings which they would receive through their giving. In God's kingdom every giver is really a receiver. It is more blessed to give than to receive, for the giver has more after he has given than before. Although he deserves nothing, the giver has the promise of God's blessing (Mt 10:42; Lk 16:9). He has the confidence that “profit” is being credited to his account. He has the joy of being a partner in God's work. Such confidence makes giving a joy.

Paul expressed his satisfaction with the Philippians' gift with the technical expression *ἀπέχω πάντα* which occurs in secular usage as an equivalent of our phrase “paid in full.” Paul's satisfaction and enjoyment were complete. But more important than Paul's response to their gifts was God's. Borrowing terminology from the Old Testament thank offerings, Paul assures the Philippians that their offering was a sacrifice of thanksgiving, pleasing to God. It was not that God needed their offering. The whole world is his. It was not that their offering had such great merit or intrinsic value. A believer's best efforts are still tainted by sin.

Their offering was pleasing to God because they were his children through faith in Christ Jesus (1 Pe 2:5; He 11:4). God valued their offering the way parents value the crude pictures drawn by their first grader or the dandelions picked by a little child. The pleasure is not in the intrinsic value of the gift, but in the love which

it expresses. Giving is a joy when we are confident that God is pleased with the offerings which we bring as his children in Christ. It is this attitude above all others that makes giving and receiving a joy.

One further lesson which we may draw from Paul's presentation is the importance of careful, balanced speaking when we are dealing with giving and receiving. Giving and receiving is still a touchy subject for many people. Feelings are easily hurt, and offense is easily taken in this matter. Paul is very careful to avoid giving the impression of covetousness on the one extreme or ingratitude on the other. We must exercise the same care and balance, if we are to help God's people find joy in their giving and receiving.

Verses 19, 20

19 ὁ δὲ θεός μου πληρώσει πᾶσαν χρείαν ὑμῶν κατὰ τὸ πλοῦτος αὐτοῦ ἐν δόξῃ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. 20 τῷ δὲ θεῷ καὶ πατρὶ ἡμῶν ἡ δόξα εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων· ἀμήν.

My God will fill your every need according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory to the ages of the ages. Amen.

Christian givers need not fear that they will be left empty if they are generous givers. We can never outgive God, the fountain of good and perfect gifts. He will supply our needs in proportion to the glorious riches we have in Christ. A few manuscripts read the optative rather than future indicative of πληρώω, making verse 19 a prayer rather than a promise, but the future seems preferable both on textual and contextual grounds. Although the future tense makes God's rich provision a promise rather than a wish, it may nevertheless include a feeling of prayer in this context. Likewise, biblical optatives may be blessings rather than mere wishes.

Christian giving and receiving are a joy because both of these privileges are gracious gifts of God. God creates in us the attitudes which make Christian giving and receiving a joy. This joy shines through Paul's closing doxology. To God be glory for making us willing givers. To God be glory for the privilege of partnership in the gospel. To God be glory for all eternity. Amen.