Philippians: Partnership for the Gospel

Introduction

Welcome to our small group study on the New Testament letter to the Philippians! This writing is a treasure trove of Godly instruction, sound theology, and practical advice for the Christian life. The study is broken up into four sessions, with the video introduction done by the pastors at NorthRidge Church, and accompanying discussion questions.

Philippians is a letter written from the Apostle Paul to the church in the ancient city of Philippi (modern Greece). Paul most likely wrote the letter from Rome while in house-arrest for sharing the Gospel around 62 A.D. (you can read about this at the end of Acts 28). The story of Paul coming to Philippi and the beginning of the church in that city are recorded in Acts 16:11-40 (consider reading that account on your own or with your small group). Paul’s coming to Philippi and the founding of the church happened around the year 51 A.D. This means that he has maintained a close relationship with those in the church for over 10 years. The warmth of the relationship between the apostle and those in the church is evident throughout the letter. Paul wants to encourage the Philippians to live out the implications of the Gospel within their community, even in the midst of persecution, all the while maintaining their joy in the Lord.

It is suggested that for each lesson you begin by reading the Scriptural passage, then watch the accompanying video introduction. Next, discuss the study questions with your group. Finally, share prayer request and then close in prayer together.

It is our hope and prayer that this study is a catalyst for you and your group to go deeper in fellowship with God and with one another!
Week 1: Philippians 1 – Put the Gospel First

Introduction

In week one of our study, we are going to look at the first chapter of Philippians. The Apostle Paul is writing to the Philippian church (a gathering of Christ followers) to remind them how the Gospel works out in their every day life.

For our part, we are going to see how the first eighteen verses of Philippians show us that we are to put the reality of the Gospel at the center of our relationships with other believers (1:3-8). We are also to put the priorities of the Gospel at the center of our prayer lives (1:9-11), and aspire to see the Gospel advance through our lives (1:12-17). In addition, because of the Gospel, we should be willing to deny ourselves for the benefit of others (1:18-30).

Discussion Questions

1. Paul begins the letter by thanking God, with joy, for the Philippians, because they are his partners in the Gospel (v. 3-5). Do you believe that being involved in a church is necessary for living the Christian life? Why or why not? Share some about the impact and importance of Christian community in your own life.

2. In verse six, what is Paul confident of and what is the basis of his confidence? In the Christian life, is our growth and perseverance God’s work, our work, or both? Discuss what the bible has to say on this subject with your group (see John 6:37-40; 8:31; 17:6-17; Mark 4:1-20; Rom. 8:30; 2 Pet. 1:10; 2 Cor. 13:5; Col. 1:22-23; Heb. 3:14; 6:4-6; 1 John 2:19; 5:13).

3. What encourages a sense of partnership among Christians? How can you encourage, through your attitudes and practices, a sense of partnership in the church (v. 7-8)?
4. List some characteristics of a mature Christian life (v. 9-11).

5. List some factors and issues that keep Christians from standing together as one (v. 15-18). How could this be improved among those in the church in general, and your church in particular?

6. In life, what are things that you strive after (v. 27)? In your Christian life, what are goals you strive after (v. 19-26)? Discuss the importance of benchmarks and goals for growth in the Christian life.

7. Biblically speaking, what should the church be united around and striving for (v. 27)? Is this consistent with the purpose and mission of your church?

8. In verses 28-30, Paul tells the Philippian church that it has been granted to them, by God, to suffer. In your own life, what are the principles for which, or who are the people for whom, you would willingly die? Would you willingly suffer for Christ? Why is it that sometimes God calls Christians to suffer? How can your group become more aware and involved in the lives of those Christians around the world who are suffering today?
Week 2: Philippians 2 – Look to the Interests of Others

Introduction

In week two of our study, we are going to look at the second chapter of Philippians. The heart of this chapter is really the example of Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:5-11). It is one of the clearest examples in the New Testament of the divinity of Jesus (the fact that he is fully God). As God, he selflessly humbled himself by becoming man and ultimately dying on a cross. Paul says that selflessness of Jesus is to be our example in regularly looking to the interests of others.

For our part, we will see that we are not simply to enjoy the comforts of the Gospel, but also to work to pass them on to others in the church (2:1-4). We are called to look to the selflessness of Jesus for motivation to serve others selflessly (2:5-11). Finally, we are called to walk in faith and obedience as we work out the reality of our salvation through our lives (2:12-18).

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think the Apostle Paul makes unity such a big theme in his writings (v. 1)?

2. In Philippians 2:1-2, Paul calls that Philippians to reflect on the blessings of their common life in Christ. What are the effects on a community of believers when Philippians 2:2 is lived out relationally in the church? Can you share any examples that you have personally witnessed?

3. What does the humility that Paul urges in 2:3 look like in everyday life? Does this humility mean that we have to perceive ourselves as insignificant or worthless?
4. How did Jesus exemplify the teachings of Philippians 2:4 (look down at verses 7-8 for examples)?

5. Look back at 2:1. What encouragement in Christ, comfort from His love, etc., do you personally find in 2:6-11?

Philippians 2:12 is a notoriously controversial passage. I don’t think that Paul is saying that we have to work out our own salvation in the sense that we must earn it. That would contradict too many passages which clearly teach that salvation is a gift of God and not due to our own self-efforts (see Eph. 2:8-9; Col. 3:5, etc.). Remember, Paul is writing to the church at Philippi. With that in mind, I think he is reminding the church to work out their salvation (which literally means deliverance) from a hostile surrounding culture (see 1:21). How? By giving themselves to seeing that the church fellowship remains obedient to God’s will (v. 13) and concerned to advance the Gospel.

7. Have you ever personally experienced hostility as a Christ-follower? Share any experiences that you may have had in this area and the impact that it made on your faith.

8. How does God use circumstances like working through divisions and conflict in the church to make us more like Christ (v. 14-15)?

9. Consider how Paul describes the Christian’s mission in the world: shining as “stars” or “lights” and holding out the “word of life” (v. 15-16). How can we encourage and support one another as we live out our faith in Christ, holding fast to God’s word in our lives?
Philippians 2:19 – 3:21 – Emulate Worthy Christians

Introduction

In week three of our study, we are going to look at the end of chapter two and the whole of chapter three of Philippians. In the New Testament, there is a frequent emphasis on imitating other Godly Christians (1 Cor. 11:1; Titus 2:2-4). In this section, we are instructed to emulate those who are interested in the well-being of others (2:19-21), those who have proved themselves faithful through hardship (2:22-30), those whose confidence and boast is in Christ Jesus alone (3:1-9), those who are growing spiritually (3:10-16), and those who are concerned about the things of God (3:17-21).

Discussion Questions

1. The Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:1 “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” Do you have a model or mentor in the Christian life that is showing you what it looks like to follow Christ in everyday life? Talk about that with the group.

2. Timothy is concerned with the well-being of the Philippians (2:19-24). What are ways in which you show concern for others in the church? Is there a specific relationship in which you need to do a better job of looking out for the welfare of that person or persons?

3. Epaphroditus is characterized by deep empathy and compassion (2:25-30). What does it mean to have empathy and compassion? How do these characteristics build up community? Is it more difficult for you to be firm in relationships when you need to or more difficult to show grace in relationships when you need to? Why?

4. In 3:4-6, Paul explains what it means to “put confidence in the flesh.” According to those verses, what sorts of things could have made Paul feel worthy of God’s approval? What sorts of things in your life (family history, virtues, talents, etc.) are you tempted to put confidence in?
5. Paul had the perfect religious pedigree according to Jewish standards, and yet he regarded them as “loss.” He had been a believer in Christ for nearly thirty years when he wrote the letter, and he still expresses a deep passion to “know Him (Christ).” Are you ever fully mature as a follower of Christ in this life? How do you let go of your failures in the past and progressively stoke the fires of your affections for Christ?

6. Paul says that his secure standing with God comes “from God” and “through faith in Christ” (v. 9). How does the parable found in Luke 18:9-14, shed some light on the nature of the radical grace which Paul “glories in?”

7. Paul says that he has forgotten what lies behind and strains forward to what lies ahead. He is not spiritually stagnant, nor is he presumptuous thinking that he has already been “perfected” spiritually. How do you go about pursuing spiritual growth in your life? How do you overcome spiritual ruts? Is your spiritual growth evident to others who are closest to you and who have known you for some time? Also, take some time to share ways in which God has changed you (if you are really brave, have your spouse share).

8. In 3:17-21. Paul says that we are to emulate others who eagerly await Jesus’ return, not those whose mind is on earthly things. How are your values being shaped by knowing that this world is not all there is and that your true citizenship is in Heaven? How does that knowledge and those values impact the way in which you live life today?
**Philippians 4 – Perseverance in the Christian Life**

**Introduction**

In the fourth and final week of our study, we are going to look at the concluding chapter of Philippians. In the New Testament, believers in Jesus Christ are repeatedly urged to persevere in the faith (Matthew 10:22; Hebrews 12:1; James 1:2-4).

For our part, this chapter gives practical council on commitments which help us persevere in the faith, including: pursuing unity in truth and purpose with other believers (4:2-3), always rejoicing in the Lord (4:4), being known for gentleness (4:5), not being anxious about anything, but instead turning to prayer (4:6-7), thinking about God-honoring things (4:8-9), trusting God and possessing joy regardless of our circumstances (4:10-13), and growing in gratitude and courtesy (4:14-23).

**Discussion Questions**

1. Identify some things in the church that Christians must be united on (v. 2-3)?

2. How should Christians go about solving disagreements with others in the church? Can you think of any biblical passage(s) that speak to this question?

3. How is it possible to have joy and contentment in the midst of trials? At the core of your being, what is your joy in life tied to (v. 4)?

4. Are you known for gentleness? How does knowing that the Spirit of God is present with you at all times provide incentive for gentleness in your life (v. 5)?
5. It has been said that the way to be anxious about nothing is to be prayerful about everything. Anyone can offer thanks when things are going well, but what does it take to get to the place where you are able to offer thanks when things are not going well (v. 6)?

6. Even though Paul does not say that our problems will be instantly removed through prayer, he does assure us that in the process of prayerful dependence, God’s peace will guard our hearts and minds in the midst of difficulty (v. 6-7). Why do you think prayerful dependence upon God effects peace in the life of a Christian who is facing trying circumstances?

7. Growth in the Christian life involves the transformation of the mind (v. 8). How do you develop a God-honoring thought life? Why is transformation of the mind crucial for progress in spiritual growth? Share any areas where you feel you are failing to honor God in your thought life.

8. Paul says he rejoices in the Philippians’ concern, but he also wants them to know he’s content. Why don’t physical needs seem to worry Paul (v. 11-13)? How has Paul learned to be content (see 2 Cor. 1:8-10; 11:23-28; 12:8-10; 1 Tim. 6:6-8)?

9. Paul’s pattern is to thank God for the signs of spiritual vitality that he detects in others (v. 14-23). Are you active in recognizing God’s grace in other people’s lives? Take some time to identify God’s grace in the lives of your group members.