

Rethinking Your Relationships

A Study of Philippians 1:3-11

Characteristic of Completeness: Biblical Community

Big Idea: Be a partner.

Related Scriptures: Ruth 1:16-17; 1 Samuel 18:1 cf. 23:16; Job 6:14; Proverbs 17:17; 27:6, 9, 17; Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; Acts 2:42; Romans 16:3-15; 2 Corinthians 6:14; Hebrews 10:23-25; 3 John 4

Introduction:

- A. I'd like to ask you a question about ► the photo I'm going to show you on the screen. It's a photo of a person being rescued from a rooftop in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The person I'm talking about is ► the guy dressed in black being helped down off the roof.



Here's the question: What's this guy's story? How did he end up needing to be rescued from the rooftop?

We can't be sure, but there are all sorts of possibilities. Maybe he underestimated the hurricane, thinking he could just ride it out. Maybe he just unwisely and stubbornly refused to get out of there while the gettin' was good.

But one Duke University sociologist named ► Lynn Smith-Lovin gives a possible explanation that, frankly, hadn't even occurred to me. She ► says, "That image of people on roofs after Katrina resonates with me, because those people did not know someone with a car." The idea is that some were not only victimized by the hurricane, but also by social isolation.

Smith-Lovin's comment came in conversation with a reporter from the *Washington Post*,¹ covering a landmark research article that she just coauthored. The article is ►

¹ Shankar Vedantam, "Social Isolation Growing in U.S., Study Says," *The Washington Post*, 23 June 2006.

titled, “Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks over Two Decades;” it just appeared in the ► June 2006 issue of the *American Sociological Review*.² The article reports the results of research conducted first in 1985, then again in 2004, to evaluate changes in the social connectedness of Americans.

The results show that, over the last two decades, we Americans have grown far more socially isolated. Increasingly, we are facing our problems alone. “The number of people saying there is no one with whom they discuss important matters nearly tripled.”³ The average size of person’s social network shrunk by one third, and in particular, we relate to fewer and fewer neighbors.⁴ In 1985, American’s most commonly reported having three close confidants; today, American’s most commonly report having no confidants at all.⁵

The ► *Washington Post* reports, “The comprehensive new study paints a sobering picture of an increasingly fragmented America, where intimate social ties—once seen as an integral part of daily life and associated with a host of psychological and civic benefits—are shrinking or nonexistent. In bad times, far more people appear to suffer alone.”⁶

- B. As ► I thought about this I wondered, how can we be so isolated when, technologically, we have so many ways to keep in touch? Smith-Lovin ► explains, “We’re not saying people are completely isolated. They may have 600 friends on Facebook.com and e-mail 25 people a day, but they are not discussing matters that are personally important.”⁷
- C. Why is this growing isolation important and disturbing? Let me quote ► directly from the report.

*Social scientists know that contacts with other people are important . . . The closer and stronger our tie with someone, the broader the scope of their support for us and the greater the likelihood that they will provide major help in a crisis. ► These are important people in our lives. They influence us directly through their interactions with us and indirectly by shaping the kinds of people we become.*⁸

² Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and Matthew E. Brashears, “Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks over Two Decades,” *American Sociological Review* 71 (June 2006): 353-375; available from <http://www.asanet.org/galleries/default-file/June06ASRFeature.pdf>; Internet, accessed 24 August 2006.

³ Ibid, 353.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Vedantam.

⁷ Smith-Lovin, quoted by Vedantam.

⁸ McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears, 354.

Maybe you don't need all this research to be convinced, but maybe we all need to be reminded. Relationships are important, particularly in hard times.

- D. Just ► this last week, I spoke with a person in our own church family who is going through a very difficult time. I asked, "Who are you leaning on? Who are you able to pour out your heart to? Who is going through this with you?"

Sadly, the person said, "No one, really."

Many of you can relate to this. In a flood of adversity, maybe some of you feel like the person stranded on the rooftop, alone.

- E. May I ask you a very personal question? How many close friends do you have? How many confidants? With how many do you have a relationship so close that it would not be surprising at all to hear things like . . .

1. ► "I thank God for our relationship."
2. ► "You're always on my mind."
3. ► "I always pray for you."
4. ► "You bring me joy."
5. ► "You've been so faithful to me."
6. ► "I'm expecting great things from you."
7. ► "I hold you in my heart."
8. ► "I long to be with you."
9. ► "I want you to shine."

If you're like me, you hear the sound these words and perhaps you recognize that your heart is thirsty for relationships like this. Maybe we need to rethink our relationships.

- F. Last ► Sunday, we began a study of the Bible book of Philippians. We discovered that both the author, the Apostle Paul, and the original, first-century recipients, the believers in the city of Philippi, are facing adversity.

Paul is writing from a Roman prison, awaiting trial for his faith in Christ. And the Philippians are experiencing various hardships that have squeezed the joy right out of life.

The text we're studying this morning is Philippians 1:3-11. From this text, I want you to see two things. First, I want you to see that Paul and the Philippians have a very close relationship. Second, I want you to see how they got to be so close. We're going to rethink our own relationships by looking in on their's.

I. First I want to show you how good their relationship is.

A. In ► Verse 3, Paul writes to the Philippians,

^{NAU} **Philippians 1:3** I thank my God in all my remembrance of you,

That's Paul's way of ► saying, "I thank God for our relationship."

That's Paul's way of ► saying, "You're always on my mind."

B. In ► Verse 4, Paul writes,

^{NAU} **Philippians 1:4** always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all,

That's Paul's way of ► saying, "I always pray for you."

That's his way of ► saying, "You bring me joy."

C. In ► Verses 5 and 7, Paul writes,

^{NAU} **Philippians 1:5** in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. . . . ⁷ . . . both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me.

That's Paul's way of ► saying, "You've been so faithful to me. You've been there, participating with me ► 'from the first day until now.' You've been supportive of me in every circumstance, ► both in my imprisonment and on my missionary road."

D. Then in ► Verse 6, Paul writes,

^{NAU} **Philippians 1:6** *For I am* confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.

That's Paul's way of ► saying, "I'm expecting great things from you."

E. Then in ► Verse 7 he writes,

^{NAU} **Philippians 1:7** For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart . . .

That's Paul's way of ► saying, "I hold you in my heart."

F. Then in ► Verse 8, he writes,

^{NAU} **Philippians 1:8** For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

That's Paul's way of ► saying, "I long to be with you." The Greek word for ► "affection" is *SPLONK-non*. It literally means "entrails" or "bowels" or "guts."⁹ The Greeks viewed the entrails as the seat of strong emotions; similarly the Hebrews viewed them as the seat of tender affection and compassion.¹⁰ *SPLONK-non* is a word used to describe a longing so strong it makes your belly ache.

Paul so desperately wants his friends to be sure how he feels about them that he puts himself under ► oath: "God is my witness."

G. Finally, in ► Verses 9-11, Paul writes,

^{NAU} **Philippians 1:9** And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, ►¹⁰ so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; ►¹¹ having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which *comes* through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

That's Paul's way of ► saying, "I want you to shine. I want you to live up to your potential. I expect you to be somebody great."

H. Do you ► have anybody saying these kinds of things to you? Do you have any relationships where this is the currency exchanged?

Roger is a ► homeless man. He's been on the streets for some 20 years. I read about him in a brand new book by Tom Rath, titled *Vital Friends: The People You Can't Afford to Live Without*.¹¹

Rath approached Roger and asked him a question: "How did you end up on the streets?"

Roger scratched his head with hollow eyes and fingernails caked with dirt. After a few minutes, Roger unpacked his story.

⁹ Joseph Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v. "σπλάγχνον" (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Tom Rath, *Vital Friends: The People You Can't Afford to Live Without*, (New York: Gallup Press, 2006), 5-8.

Roger “had grown up in a wonderful home, was married right after graduating from college, found a job with a respectable mechanical engineering firm, bought a house and two cars, and had three children by the age of 30.”

For 8 years, Roger worked at the engineering firm under a hostile boss who berated employees. The only thing that kept Roger at his job was his best friend, Jimmy, who also worked at the firm. Roger and Jimmy were not just casual friends; they were vital friends. They were close. Their families were close.

But one day Jimmy got fired, and they lost touch, and work became unbearable for Roger without the support of his friend. To ease the pain of his situation, Roger began to drink. One or two nights a week at the bar after work turned into five or six nights of heavy drinking. Roger managed to push everyone away. By “the age of 32, Roger lost his job, his wife, and his children.” And “once the relationships were broken, little else mattered.” That’s Roger’s story. That’s how Roger ended up on the streets. Alone.

Rath asked Roger one last question: “Who expects you to be somebody?”

After a long pause and a deep breath, Roger said, “I don’t think anyone does anymore.”

- I. The ► Apostle Paul expected the Philippians to be somebody. They had a close, vital friendship. When the floods of adversity came, they reached out to each other.
- II. How was such a vital friendship forged? How can we develop relationships like that?
 - A. Let’s quickly review the historical context and development of their friendship.

In ► AD 51 or 52¹², on his second missionary journey, Paul traveled ► from the city of Antioch to the city of Troas in Asia Minor.¹³ Paul traveled with his fellow missionaries, Silas, Timothy, and Luke. At Troas, Paul had a vision of a Macedonian man saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”¹⁴ The missionary team took it that God wanted them to go to Macedonia to preach the gospel.¹⁵ So they ► sailed to Europe and their first stop was the Macedonian city of Philippi.¹⁶

In Philippi, on the Sabbath, the missionaries began sharing the gospel. A woman named Lydia was the first to believe in Jesus for eternal life. Lydia, in turn, led her whole household to believe in Jesus, and thus, a church was born in Philippi.¹⁷

¹² D.A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 15; Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, 2ed. *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, eds. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1992, 2005), 2.

¹³ Acts 15:36-16:8.

¹⁴ Acts 16:9.

¹⁵ Acts 16:10.

¹⁶ Acts 16:11-12.

¹⁷ Acts 16:13-15.

But after many days, not everyone was happy with the influence of Christianity in the Philippian community. For one thing, the bottom dropped out of the fortune-telling business. So some of the big cigars down at the Philippi Chamber of Commerce got together and had Paul and Silas beaten and thrown in jail. But even in jail, Paul and Silas began leading the jailers to believe in Jesus Christ for eternal life. So the big cigars urged Paul and Silas to leave town.¹⁸

And so Paul and his team resumed their missionary journey, leaving Luke behind in Philippi to lead the new church.¹⁹ On his journey, the Philippian believers repeatedly sent care packages to help Paul, even though they were themselves financially strapped.²⁰

Several years later, Paul visited Philippi again on a third missionary journey.²¹ Several years after that, some Jewish opponents managed to get Paul arrested on trumped up charges, and Paul was eventually transferred ► to Rome, where he was imprisoned.

The Philippians heard of Paul's imprisonment and dispatched a messenger, Epaphroditus, with yet another monetary gift to help Paul.

Along with the monetary gift, it seems that Epaphroditus also carried a request from the Philippians to Paul. They asked Paul to send them Timothy so he could help them find their way back to joy.²² You see, somewhere along the line, the joy had leaked out of life within the Philippian church and they needed help. So in sending Epaphroditus, there were at once sending help and asking for help. It's what vital friends do.

When Paul heard that his Philippian friends were struggling in this way, no doubt he wanted to come to their aid, but he was imprisoned. So, he writes them a letter, explaining that he plans to send Timothy soon, and he explains how they can deal with their struggle—how they can get back their joy. It's the letter known as Philippians in our Bibles. Paul wrote it around AD 61.²³

That's what Paul is looking back on as he writes the words in the text we're studying today.

- B. And ► Paul uses one word in particular that tells us a great deal about how extraordinary friendships are forged. In the text, I find one word that characterizes their relationship—one word that helps us get a handle on the nature of vital friendship—one word that captures the essence of it. The word is ► *koi-no-NEE-ah*.

¹⁸ Acts 16:16:16-40.

¹⁹ Silva, 2.

²⁰ Silva, 2; Acts 17:1-18:22; 2 Corinthians 11:7-9; Philippians 4:15-16.

²¹ Acts 20:1-2.

²² Silva, 4.

²³ Carson, 15.

1. I'm afraid that if you've been around churches for very long you may have heard of this word. I'm afraid that you know it is often translated, "fellowship." I'm afraid because I've often heard the term used as if it just describes Christian chit-chat. It's the idea that if you go out to eat with an atheist, you're just having dinner, but if you go out to eat with a Christian, you are somehow, by definition, having "fellowship." That is a neutered and domesticated form of what the Greek word really means.

In the first century, the word, *koi-no-NEE-ah* commonly had commercial implications.²⁴ It would be used to describe two fishermen buying a boat together and starting a fishing business. It was also used in a legal sense to describe a binding partnership between two parties, including marriage.²⁵ When churches in Macedonia sent money to the poor believers in Jerusalem, Paul describes them as having entered into fellowship or *koi-no-NEE-ah* with them.²⁶ When Paul describes believers taking communion, he says we are identifying so closely with person and cause of Christ that we are entering into *koi-no-NEE-ah* with the body and blood of Christ.²⁷

So, at the heart of the biblical word, *koi-no-NEE-ah*, is the idea of close partnership. It's way more than Christian chit-chat or even warm friendship. Paul and the Philippians are not just pals; they're partners. One scholar describes it ► this way: "The heart of true fellowship is self-sacrificing conformity to a shared vision."²⁸

2. In our text, Paul uses the word, *koi-no-NEE-ah* twice—both times in explaining why he feels the way he does.

- a. In ► Verse 5, Paul explains that he feels the way he does . . .

Philippians 1:5 in view of [or because of] your participation
in the gospel from the first day until now.

The word, ► "participation" is a translation of the original Greek
word, *koi-no-NEE-ah*.

- b. Paul uses the word a second time in ► Verse 7, when he says,

²⁴ Carson, 16.

²⁵ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, vol. 3, s.v. "κοινωνία," by Hauck, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1965), 798.

²⁶ Romans 15:26.

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 10:16.

²⁸ Carson, 16.

Philippians 1:7 For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because . . . you all are partakers of grace with me.

The Greek word for ► “partakers” is built off the very same word.²⁹ Partakers are partners.

So, it is quite clear that Paul considers the Philippians to be his partners, and that’s why he feels so close to them. Extraordinary friendships come from the self-sacrificing commitment of partners who share a common vision. Extraordinary friendships are forged in foxholes, not chat rooms.

- C. Doesn’t ► life experience confirm this? Isn’t the potential for forging deeply supportive and satisfying relationships greater when you’re working hard together with others who are all sold out to a common cause that you all recognize is vitally important? In fact, the bigger the cause, the greater the potential for developing deep friendships. The more that’s at stake, the more our hearts can be drawn together in *koi-no-NEE-ah*.

Last Friday, Cathy and I watched a documentary about the heroic efforts of doctors and hospital staff to save patients stranded in a New Orleans hospital in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The stakes were high. The adversity was formidable. The cause was crucial. Great sacrifices were made and risks taken for the shared vision of saving lives. I imagine the bond among those who worked shoulder-to-shoulder through that ordeal together is vastly deeper than the bond among those in a homeowners’ association quibbling about how much the common-area grass ought to be watered. The bigger the cause, the greater the potential for developing deep friendships

- D. This raises an important question about Paul and the Philippians: What was their shared vision? What was their common cause? They were partners, but partners in what?

I think one of the reasons that Paul and the Philippians were able to enjoy such an extraordinary relationship is that they were partners in the most important cause on earth. Theirs was the biggest vision possible. It was not just a big idea they came up with on their own. It was an assignment, a mandate, a commission from God Himself.

1. In ► Verse 5, Paul explains that he’s talking about, “participation” or partnership or *koi-no-NEE-ah* ► in “the gospel.” The gospel is their shared vision. The gospel is their common cause. “Gospel” means good news.

²⁹ The Greek word here is συγκαινωνός. The prefixed preposition, “συγ,” means “together with.”

2. In ► Verse 7, Paul explains it another way, saying they are “partakers” or partners ► “of grace.” Paul uses the words, ► “gospel” and “grace” to refer to the same idea. In fact, elsewhere in the Bible he puts the two together in the phrase, “the gospel of grace.”³⁰ “Grace” means getting something really great you haven’t earned and don’t deserve.
3. What is this gospel of grace? What is this good news about getting something really great you haven’t earned and don’t deserve? It is the good news that, by His death and resurrection for our sins, Jesus Christ alone promises eternal life to all who will simply believe Him for it. We are saved from the penalty of our own sin by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

The shared vision of Paul and the Philippians was to reach another generation with this good news and to see more and more people becoming more and more like Christ.

It’s a lot like the Katrina hospital crisis, but with eternity at stake, not just physical life on earth.

- III. So ► how do we apply all this? Specifically, how can you put yourself in a position to develop and enjoy more deeply meaningful and satisfying relationships? I’ve boiled it down to three words. Here’s the big idea of my message: ► Be a partner. Find a worthy cause beyond yourself and buy into it. Be a partner. The potential for deep friendships with fellow partners is a byproduct of deep commitment to a shared cause.

And wouldn’t it make sense to buy into the biggest, most important cause you can find? Remember, the bigger the cause, the greater the potential for deep friendships.

What is the greatest cause? The greatest cause on earth is God-given. It’s the gospel of grace. And the gospel of grace is to be proclaimed and lived out in the context of a community of believers known as the Church. The Church is God’s team mobilized to change the world. That’s the way God designed it. I’m talking about genuine, biblical community. In fact, that’s our ► Characteristic of Completeness for the week: Biblical Community. Want to change the world? Be a partner in the Church. Want to develop vital friendships? Be a partner in the Church. The gospel of grace lived out in community has the power not only to reach the unbeliever, but also to feed the hungry, to clothe the poor, to heal the sick, and to aid the helpless.

- A. I can almost hear someone thinking, “Nice pep talk, Bob. But I don’t see the Church doing much to change the world. We look more like potatoes than partners. And I’ve been involved in the Church a long time and I still don’t have the kind of relationships you describe. Why is that?”

³⁰ Acts 20:24.

Good question. I think the Church is not living up to its potential in America because there aren't many *partners* in the Church. We've confused partnership with other things. We need to rethink our relationships.

1. Let's face it. Some come to church for the primary reason of getting things from other people. To be honest they don't really care all that much about the gospel of grace; they just come to draw what they can from other people—attention, support, sympathy, money, whatever. To be sure, we all need the support of others and the Church is the place to get support, but if my continual focus is on getting and not giving, I'm not really a partner; I'm a parasite.
2. One step up from the parasite is another kind of person. He's the guy who comes to church because it offers some nice things for which he is willing to pay: good teaching, uplifting music, good moral stuff for the kids, a wholesome refuge from the world. To be sure, these are good things, but if I'm only focused on paying for the things that benefit me, then I'm not really a partner; I'm a patron.
3. And then there is another kind of person. He's the guy who is as friendly as can be. He loves to socialize, and he's at almost every church meeting. To be sure, socializing is a good thing, but if I'm only focused on enjoying friendships, then I'm not really a partner; I'm a pal.
4. I find that the parasite, the patron, the pal, and the partner are all modes of operation that we can all drift in and out of. I can be all four in one day.

The point is this: What we really need is partners. We don't really need more parasites or patrons or pals, especially when the flood of adversity comes. Be a partner.

When I'm a partner, I find that people are far more likely to want to connect with me in a deep and meaningful way. I marvel at how God works this out. When I buy into His agenda for me, when I set aside my desperately selfish striving to grab what I need, when I become partner in the cause of Christ, God sees to it that my deepest needs are met. God says, "You do what I say; I'll provide what you need, including relationships. Trust me." When I become a partner, I end up getting what I never could as a parasite. Be a partner.

- B. May I suggest one way you can take a step toward becoming a partner? Check out a Life Group at Moon Valley. Life Groups are small groups that meet in homes to do life together. Life Groups are the heart of biblical community at Moon Valley. We're not perfect. We're still trying to figure some things out. In many ways, we're still growing

up. But I'm convinced that Life Groups are the best place to forge vital partnerships that can transform our lives and our neighborhoods.

Maybe you've tried a Life Group or something like it and you're not too keen on the idea. But let me ask you an important question: Have you tried a Life Group with the mindset of a partner? Not a parasite. Not a patron. Not a pal. But a partner. Recognizing that vital friendships are not forged overnight.

I'm not saying that, in order to check out a Life Group, you've got to be totally committed to it from the get go. There is no pressure like that. We're not selling timeshares. Nor am I saying the Life Groups are the only place you can be a partner. All I'm saying is that Life Groups are where most of the partnership action is around here. So if you're even interested in becoming a partner, that's where I'd look. It's your call.

I know one thing. When a flood of adversity comes, I won't be standing alone on a rooftop of social isolation. I've got partners in my Life Group.