PARTNERS IN THE GOSPEL

Philippians 1:1–11

Key Verse: 1:5

“…because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now…”

Welcome everyone. Today is a bittersweet day in which we in our Lincoln Park UBF chapter have to say goodbye to Dr. John and Deborah Lee. They have been missionaries in America since the 1970s and were pioneer supporters of Chicago UBF. Deborah Lee joined me in teaching the Bible to DePaul students in 1987. And in 1992 John and Deborah bought this house in order to use it for student ministry. Over the years they have served so many of our coworkers in the Chicago area and all around the world. Many have lived in their home. Now, though they still look young, they have reached their seventies, and the time has come for them to retire and be with their son and daughter-in-law who are so busy in ministry, and their five grandchildren. We’re so happy for them, and we know that they will never stop praying and serving our Lord Jesus until he calls them home.

As I prayed about what Bible passage would be appropriate for this occasion, Philippians 1:5 came to my mind. In this verse Paul remembers that the Philippians were partners in the gospel from the first day until now. Let’s think about what this means for just a few minutes.

Partners. This word can mean many things. In a law firm, becoming a partner is something people strive for, and it has great status and honor. There are also business partners. Sometimes it’s a good thing, but often it becomes really bad. Business partners can end up suing each other over money. But here Paul says he was in partnership with the Philippians “in the gospel.”

What does it mean to be partners in the gospel? The gospel is the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection (1Co15:3,4). This gospel is good news for all people (Lk2:10b). Paul says in this letter that partners in the gospel fight, contend, defend and strive for it (Php1:7,16; 4:3). Obviously, it’s a battle to spread this good news. Why? Because in every generation many live as enemies of the cross of Christ (3:18). People don’t want to hear the gospel because their minds are on earthly things (3:19). But gospel partners share the same intense commitment to tell people about Jesus. Gospel partners are like soldiers of the gospel.

But the partnership goes even deeper. In Greek the word is “koinonia.” This word is familiar to many of us, and it means “fellowship,” “participation,” or “sharing.” In this letter Paul talks about this kind of sharing frequently (1:5,7; 2:1; 3:10; 4:14,15). He says “all of you share in God’s grace with me” (1:7b). We all share the same experience that we are terrible sinners, yet Jesus poured out his grace of forgiveness of sins on us. We share in striving to live in a manner worthy of the gospel, so that those around us who don’t know Jesus may open their hearts to him (1:27a). We share in suffering for Christ, and like Paul, in living for Christ, whether by life or by death (1:21,29; 3:10). We share in being united with Christ, in being comforted by his love; Paul says our partnership, or fellowship, is “in the Spirit”; in the Spirit we share the same tenderness and compassion (2:1). We also share the same mindset of Christ, the same humility (2:5). We’re willing to make ourselves nothing and even to be obedient to death on a cross like our Lord Jesus was (2:7,8). We share the same spiritual joy in Christ (3:1a; 4:4). We share the same goal, pressing forward to our heavenly goal (3:12–14). We share the same eager hope to see our Lord Jesus someday (3:20). We share in the struggle to stand firm in the Lord (4:1). We share the same spirit of prayer in all of life’s situations (4:6,7). We share in the same deep concern for gospel workers (4:10). We financially support servants in need out of our own means (4:14–16). This is real partnership. It runs deeper than any other kind of human bond, even deeper than human family (Mk3:35).

Our Lincoln Park ministry has shared this partnership with John and Deborah over the past 30 years. We have laughed together and cried together, helped each other and sometimes fought each other. It was not always easy, but it has been such a great blessing and privilege to share this beautiful fellowship in Christ. Coworking can so easily be destroyed by selfish ambition or vain conceit (Php1:17; 2:3). But God has taught us how to love, how to love Christ and love one another more and more. God taught us how to really listen to each other. And through our coworking God has also raised many other partners in the gospel. Over the years John and Deborah brought their sheep and even their son to study the Bible with me, even though I am poor in many ways. They supported me through thick and thin. They loved my children and showed in so many ways their practical concern for me and my family. It was all for the sake of Christ. Deborah is known for being very bold, honest and a little scary. But she has such a tender, loving heart. Dr. John is known for being so generous and caring that he would give everything away for others, and Deborah has had to rein him in on so many occasions. Their love, their joy, their giving, their prayers, have been the backbone of this ministry and have blessed so many.

Today we want to thank and praise God for what he has done in and through John and Deborah Lee. We want to learn from their good example and grow even more as real partners in the gospel.