

# Co-Debtors in the Gospel

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at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Paducah, Ky.  
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## Philippians 4:10-20

*But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity. 11 Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: 12 I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. 13 I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. 14 Nevertheless you have done well that you shared in my distress. 15 Now you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me concerning giving and receiving but you only. 16 For even in Thessalonica you sent aid once and again for my necessities. 17 Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that abounds to your account. 18 Indeed I have all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things sent from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God. 19 And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus. 20 Now to our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.*

This is a very special day for our church. The first missionaries to leave our church to go to the foreign field of God's direction will do so this Tuesday. While over the years there have been many short-term mission trips to different continents, this is the first long-term missionary venture of our history. Two weeks ago we ordained and commissioned Paul and Velda Rikel to the ministry as missionaries to Zambia, Africa. Today, we launch them into the voyage that will take them into God's amazing vision and awesome plan.

But they do not go alone; they must not go alone. If this is to be a Scriptural missionary endeavor, then they do not go alone; we go with them. Not bodily, at least not right now, but we join them in this endeavor. We are united with them in calling, uniform in purpose, and equal in debt. They go representing Oak Grove Baptist Church, if we do our part in supporting them with our prayers and finances, otherwise, their representation of us is reduced to a cliché. We must be a faithful partner in the debt owed to the Zambian people. It cannot be said that we left Paul and Velda owing the entire debt.

In our text the Apostle Paul acknowledges that none of the churches he planted supported him in his endeavor to take the Gospel to the nations. Not even the Antioch church that had sent

him and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. He says in verse 15, “Now you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me concerning giving and receiving but you only.” The church at Philippi was the only church partnering and supporting the Apostle Paul.

As you may remember, Philippi was the first European city to hear the Gospel, taken there by Paul and Silas. It was in Philippi that the earthquake occurred that set them free after they were arrested, beaten and put into the prison stocks. Now the Apostle Paul is in a Roman prison, but nonetheless still the missionary working in his confined space, sharing the Gospel with saint and sinner.

This letter is an extended thank you to the Philippian church, who had sent Paul help by the hand of Epaphroditus. I want us to look at his thank you today, particularly these ten verses, because I believe it provides us insight as we send Paul and Velda on their missionary journey to the African continent.

I want to do this basically by looking at two questions.

*I. Why Did the Philippian Church Support the Apostle Paul?*

*II. What Was the Apostle Paul’s Belief About the Philippians’ Support?*

## **I. WHY DID THE PHILIPPIAN CHURCH SUPPORT THE APOSTLE PAUL?**

### **A. The Love Factor.**

They truly loved Paul and loved him much. Other churches did too but there was something special in this relationship between Paul and the church at Philippi.

*Philippians 4:10 — “But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity.”*

In other words, Paul is saying, “You cared much for me. You cared and supported my ministry over the years but something happened.” He doesn’t tell us what, all he says is they lacked opportunity. Maybe they didn’t have a way to get the money to the Apostle Paul, maybe they didn’t

know where he was, but there was something that hindered them. Now that opportunity is once again afforded, the hindrances removed, and the support was renewed.

There was a love there. They saw in the very early days how the Apostle Paul cared for them. They saw how when he suffered much to bring them the Gospel. When the Romans discovered that Paul was a Roman and they had beaten him against the law, they knew what Paul had done to secure their safety after he left the city. He most likely agreed to leave the city, as the city fathers requested, only with certain guarantees of the church's protection.

But I think it's more than just the love factor.

## **B. The Shared Passion.**

They literally shared the same passion the Apostle Paul had to take the Gospel to the world.

*Philippians 4:14* —“Nevertheless you have done well that you shared in my distress.”

As you look into the word *shared* and you go back to the original Greek roots, it means to be a fellow partaker. They saw themselves as a fellow partaker, sharer in the very sufferings of the Apostle Paul so that no matter what he was enduring they felt somehow connected to it. What was the connection? Certainly love, but more than that as you shall see. There was a passion for the same missionary journey that he was on. It was their calling and they felt it too.

### **1. They saw themselves fellow-partakers of Paul's ministry.**

“All the same, you did a beautiful thing when you made yourselves fellow- partakers with my tribulation.”(Philippians 4:14 Wuest Commentary)

### **2. This was the same church Paul boasted about to the Corinthians.**

In 2 Corinthians 8:1-5 we see him mentioning them, not by name but by region. He talks about the churches of Macedonia and this was the leading church of that area. Listen to what he says as he tries to remind the Corinthians they too had made the same pledge the Philippians had. They had made a faith pledge to the Apostle Paul's mission to relieve the suffering Jewish brethren.

They had forgotten to make good on it, so he reminded them by giving them the example of the Philippian church.

*“Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: <sup>2</sup> that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. <sup>3</sup> For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, <sup>4</sup> imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. <sup>5</sup> And not only as we had hoped, but they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God.”*

You can't read these first five verses without recognizing these folks were very passionate about the Gospel and their sharing in its advancement.

Notice what he says to the Corinthians. *I told these folks they didn't have to give because they were so destitute themselves. But they would not hear of it. They urged me. 'In their deep poverty they implored with much urgency that we should receive their gifts.'* This was the kind of church where it didn't matter what kind of financial difficulty they were going through, they made their pledge to God the first priority.

It's so easy in a special kind of service where the emphasis is on giving to the kingdom, and your heart feels it so and the emotions began to rise, to make a faith pledge. But what happens when the difficulties come and your own finances are under attack. What do you do? For so many, it seems the first priority to be dropped is the commitment to God and His work. These Philipians would have dropped even their own sustenance, daily nourishment, to keep their commitment to God. Paul sees this is more than a love for him, but they had first given themselves to the Lord and then to the apostle. This church had caught the vision, they saw something in this apostle and it moved them. It was obvious they wanted to be involved in the advancement of the Gospel.

### **3. They had learned of this passion from Paul who saw himself a debtor.**

Remember the historical context here. Other churches in this second missionary journey had heard of Paul's sufferings and persecutions but it was the Philippian church that saw it. They witnessed his savage beating in the public square. They witnessed him being dragged to jail, along

with his partner Silas; they saw both of them shackled and stocked in the inner prison where the most desperate criminals were incarcerated. They saw what happened to the Apostle Paul and saw the Gospel lived out through the persecution and they took it to heart when Paul taught them that we are debtors in the Gospel.

What do I mean by using the word debt? Why did I say we are co-debtors with Paul and Velda? It is the same principle Paul shares with the Romans and why he wanted to go to Rome and preach the Gospel. Paul explains:

*Romans 1:13-15 — “Now I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that I often planned to come to you (but was hindered until now), that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles. <sup>14</sup> I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise. <sup>15</sup> So, as much as is in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also.”*

Did you hear what the apostle said?

### **C. A Shared Grace Produces a Shared Debt.**

If you participate in the grace of God, you must participate in the debt that grace creates. To be blessed by grace is indescribable. The blessings, the kindnesses, the mercies that God has given to each one of you that are saved this morning, they are more than amazing. It is “wow”. A holy, sanctified, “wow”.

Along with those blessings comes a huge debt that blessing creates. That’s what Paul is saying here. *I’ve got a debt to you Romans and I’ve got to come and pay it. I’m eager to come. I want to pay my debt to you.*

#### **1. Paul says the debt is owed to the Greek and barbarian, which means all Gentiles.**

This is not just an apostolic command. You cannot read this text and say that because Paul is an apostle and had a call to preach the Gospel and establish churches where there were no churches, he only had the debt. This is a debt of grace and it’s not just apostles who are graced. This is a debt of grace and therefore every recipient of grace now owes the debt of grace, not

just God-called preachers. What is it about becoming a Christian that also makes you a debtor?

It is the same principal that if you were starving and discovered a large cache of food. Would you not feel obligated to share that food with those whom you love who are also starving? Yes, of course you would. But why? Why would you feel obligated?

You answer *because of love*. Love no doubt is involved but something here is even deeper than love. It has to be deeper than love because love for your family members may make it difficult to share with anyone who is not family.

Paul is not talking about taking the Gospel to your family but to people who are not family members; he is discussing our debt to people who are not our own nationality or ethnicity. He is saying that because God has given you grace you have a debt to take the Gospel to other sinners, even those who are not like you.

Therefore, the basis of this obligation is grace. Not love, but grace.

## **2. *Cannot be a debt owed to God for then it would not be grace.***

This is not a debt to God. You cannot pay back God for grace. If you think that now that you've saved you owe God everything and you've got to serve Him because He's been so good to you, be careful. There is a difference in being grateful and being a debtor. If you try to repay God's goodness then you don't understand grace. Grace is undeserved, unearned, unmerited. You don't pay it back.

If you pay it back it's not a gift, it was a loan. There's no loan here. God did not call you to slavishly work for Him in order to pay back His kindnesses to you so then you could be given heaven when you leave this world. No. It's not a loan, it's a gift. The most precious gift you've ever received or will ever receive.

I'm not a debtor to God, I'm a debtor to the lost. That's to whom we owe this debt. "*I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise.*"

But how are we debtors to sinners to take them the Gospel?

**3. Grace obligates us to every man, woman and child because if we withhold the Gospel from them, then we are saying that somehow we are special, deserving, and entitled and they are not.**

If we thank God for our salvation and sing praises like we have today but without any sense of obligation to the Zambians and do not send Paul and Velda as our representatives to them, then what we have said is that we, here in the west, deserve God's favor and the Zambians don't. But if we sense an obligation to take them the Good News as it has been given to us freely, then we understand that we were as equally unworthy of this message as they are. God has been gracious to us not to be hoarders of this News but debtors to sinners, other fellow rebels.

By withholding the grace of giving the Gospel to the lost, we destroy the foundation of the Gospel message—a salvation by grace alone.

It is the same principle Jesus taught in Matthew 25 of the forgiven but unforgiving servant. He had a huge, enormous, incomprehensible amount of money. Jesus made it an unbelievable amount, the equivalent to saying zillions. The payment was due and the debtor goes to the man he owes and admits he doesn't have the money. He begs for more time, but to his amazement the king doesn't say he would grant him more time, he canceled the debt. "You're forgiven. You don't owe me anything."

Amazing. What's even more amazing is that he walked out of that king's palace and comes across a man who owes him a small amount of money and he demands payment. When the man said he needed more time he had him thrown in debtor's prison.

What was Jesus saying? Listen to His summation of the story. He tells you what He's saying. If you will not forgive others, neither will your heavenly Father forgive you. Is He saying that we earn forgiveness as we forgive others? You could read it that way so you've got to know your Bible to get through this parable. Of course Jesus wasn't saying that, but what was He saying?

Those who have truly experienced the grace of God have a debt to be gracious to those around them.

What does Jesus say the people of the kingdom of heaven are like? "Blessed are the merciful for

they shall obtain mercy.” When, when we get to heaven? Not just then, but now also. We have been given mercy; we have been blessed with undeserved kindness. I am merciful because I have been given great mercy. I have a debt to be merciful, not to God, because I can’t pay that. But I can be merciful to you.

Husbands and wives, this would really eliminate a lot of conflict if you would just remember this principle. Be merciful to your mate when they don’t deserve mercy because you are the recipient of undeserved kindness as well. You have a debt to him or her to show mercy. Not justice, mercy.

To want forgiveness and not give it to others is self-love. To receive God’s forgiveness and not give forgiveness to others is to say you deserve it and others don’t. To receive grace and not give it means you don’t understand grace.

Grace has no ties, no conditions upon it. It is an unmerited gift from God because He is gracious and good. Therefore, we are a debtor to the Zambians. We are co-debtors with the Rikels. They do not go to remove their debt to the Zambians, they go to remove theirs and ours. And not just to the Zambians do we go, but to the Romanians, to the Moldavians and wherever else God will open the door and grant us opportunity to go. That open door is the very direction of God giving us opportunity to pay our debt to them and we must not hesitate at that door. We must run through it joyfully. That’s why the Philippians were supporting Paul the Apostle. They saw themselves debtors with him.

## **II. WHAT WAS THE APOSTLE PAUL’S BELIEF ABOUT THE PHILIPPIANS’ SUPPORT?**

What did he theologically believe about it? There is a lot of theology here I don’t have time to unpack, but I want to mention a couple of things to help us understand.

Sometimes we can’t see the forest for the trees. Do you ever feel like you’re missing the big picture? We see our gift going to the Rikels and we see no further. “We’re supporting Paul and Velda,” we say, and that’s the end of it. Oh no. The Apostle Paul wants the Philippians to know that they were not giving to him but to God. Jesus said if you give a cup of water in His name we do it unto Him. That’s the principle here. Our gifts of support are not for Paul and Velda. If that’s as far as your vision takes you, you aren’t giving correctly. That doesn’t mean to stop giving, that



means to change your view. You've got to get past the instruments. What we have given goes far past Paul and Velda straight to the Father as the Apostle Paul says in verse 18 of our text, "a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God." That's what your gift is—a sweet-smelling aroma to God.

First, Paul believed concerning the Philippians gift:

### **A. Paul Did Not Trust the Philippians, He Trusted Christ.**

When I say he didn't trust them I don't mean they were untrustworthy or somehow shady and trying to manipulate him. No. He didn't put his grounds of support and confidence in them but in Christ.

*Philippians 4:11-13 —“Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: <sup>12</sup> I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. <sup>13</sup> I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”*

Paul said he's not hoping in the Philippians. *Thank you for the gift, but that's not where my confidence is. That's not where my hope lies. My God has taught me that if I don't have anything to eat today I'm going to be all right because He's watching over me. And if I abound, well praise the Lord, He'll help to keep me humble so I don't become exalted in the gift. I can do all things! I can survive because God is my helper, my shield, my portion, my rock.*

So I say to you, Paul and Velda, it doesn't matter what happens to your support in the next couple of years, whether it wanes or rises, your confidence is not to be in the givers and supporters in the west, it is in the Lord God. Do not be afraid. Remember this day should that happen—God, not us, has been your support. He only is the true faithful one.

Second, Paul believed concerning the Philippians gift:

### **B. Payments to the Debt Are Investments Into the Kingdom.**

What an amazing concept.

I. It is an investment.

*Philippians 4:17 —“Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that abounds to your account.”*

Paul is thankful, but he sees their support of him through a theological telescope. Their gift is far larger than the Philippians making sure he has something to eat and something warm to wear for that day. He says he is thankful they gave, not for his physical provision, but because it will abound to their account.

Paul describes the Philippians' gift to him producing fruit or benefit to the Philippians. It was a profit to them. In fact, some translations translate the word *fruit* as “profit.” The words “may abound to your account” are terms used in the money markets of the day, namely, “interest which may accumulate to your account.”

Paul is just the instrument, watching, as a spectator, God do something in their lives and he sees that every gift they give is really interest accumulating. Every payment to the debt you owe to the lost is really profit accruing for you.

### **C. Our Investments Produce Immediate Interest.**

Any of these investments, in Zambia, Romania, Moldova or the neighbor across the street produces immediate interest.

So many of us have been taught that when you give to the kingdom you're storing up treasures in heaven and that is true, Jesus said that. But you've got to read the whole Bible. The Bible says you don't have to die to start collecting dividends. In fact, this text says that you begin to receive fruit now. This is fruit or profit is accumulating to your account presently.

*This means that we do not need to wait until heaven to receive dividends or profit.*

Why is this? And how do we begin to receive in this life?

***The great principle of Scripture is we give to get to give.***

As we give now, the Lord gives us more so we may be able to give more. We give to get to give. That's always been the way God works.

*Philippians 4:19 —“And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.”*

We often quote that verse, lifting it right out of its context and say, “It doesn't matter what your need is, my God will supply all you need according to His riches in glory.” I believe that's not an inappropriate application because we have other verses that say God will meet all our needs, but that's not what this verse is applying to. It's in the context of financial giving. When you give to the kingdom God has said “As you pay your debts to other sinners, I am going to ensure that you have everything you need, spiritually and physically. I will supply everything you need to be strong in Christ and to make sure you have everything you absolutely need to be able to give further to the debt.”

What we are giving away today to Zambia is not ours to keep. God did not send Paul and Velda to us for us to keep, but to give away. The money you and our church are giving them is not for ours to keep, but to give away. If we tried to keep them or the money, our supply would begin to dry up. As we give, we get to give again.

I've thought a lot about this, especially as their departure has now begun, the hole that will be left in their absence. They might not recognize how they have been a tremendous blessing to us these past few years, but they have and it's going to be gone. It's going to be different. There's going to be a vacancy in this worship service or when we gather in our public gatherings. We will not have the gifts of the Spirit that reside in these two that operate through them just the way they are made. Some of you may have the same gifts but it's not the same. It's different because of the differences in personality. In their time here they've been faithful financial supporters and givers and I've thought about the hole that their absence will produce financially for us. But it's this verse that assures me, promises me that if we give them away joyfully today that we will not lack. God will give us more so that we can give again. That's God's principle.

When your finances get difficult and the promise you've made to Paul and Velda and to this church and its ministries get heavy and you are torn between paying a bill or fulfilling your commitment to the ministry. There is no question, my friend, this Book says God takes priority.

Why? Because the electric company cannot sustain you and meet all of your needs, but God can. The mortgage holder has not made you a promise that if you pay your mortgage on time that they will meet all of your needs but our God has. He can be trusted. In fact, He's testing you to see if you will trust Him.

This is the same lesson Paul taught the Corinthians from these Philippians and their liberal giving when he writes, "And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8).

There is a difference in what I'm sharing with you today and what these clowns on TV say. Do you know whom I'm referring to? These people who tell you they are God's messengers and God needs your money. Am I being a little rude? No, I want you to understand that you can't trust everybody out there. They try to manipulate you by promising you that if you give to their ministries you're going to get a hundred fold. And that's where they stop. If you stop there you are a charlatan and you're involved with a charlatan—you're trying to manipulate God for your own personal comfort and gain.

God gives you grace so you can give so you can get so you can give again. Not that you might give and enlarge your comfort and wealth. We are debtors! And as long as I'm in this world I have a debt to pay. It never gets paid. How can I build my own personal empire of wealth when I owe the world the Gospel? I can't and neither can you.

This is the best retirement program I know. Better than Social Security by far. Better than pensions, 401ks and stocks and bonds. This is Almighty God saying to you, "If you make My kingdom and the Gospel the priority of your life, you will not lack spiritually or physically."

Let me ask you something. Is your spiritual life dry right now? Does it seem like you're in a spiritual fog? One of the first things you ought to examine if that's the case is your giving to the kingdom. Because my God said He would supply all your needs, including your spiritual ones. How are your finances doing? Have they taken a hit? My question to you would be, how's your giving? God said you would not lack supply. He makes all grace sufficient to you at all times in all things so that you may abound to every good work.

*“You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God.” (2 Corinthians 9:11 ESV)*

God gives to you so you can get in order to give again. When you get and don't give again the supply will run dry.

A petulant young lady said to her aunt one day, “I have no interest in missions.”

“No, dear,” said her aunt wisely, “you don't. You can hardly expect to. It is just like getting interest at the bank; you have to put in a little something first.”

The more you put in to the kingdom of God—in time, or money, or prayer—the more the interest grows. It is something you must put in, or you will never have any interest. If you're not interested in the kingdom of God and the Gospel's advancement, let me tell you why. You have nothing invested. When you invest in God's kingdom, you'll start taking an interest. Especially when that investment is sacrificial. Anyone can drop a couple bucks in the offering plate but that's no investment. We're talking about investing cheerfully and generously. “He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.”

We are investing today and we have a huge interest. What do you personally have invested? Not just Zambia or RMF, what about the ministries of our local church? If your interest is small in what goes on in this body it's probably because you have little investment. I don't say that to chastise but to awaken you to remember one thing:

Remember, the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Remember what He has given you and what you have received. Remember you are a co-debtor. Remember the grace of Christ.

*2 Corinthians 8:9 —“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.”*

You are a blessed person today because of the poverty of Christ and the sacrifice He made of Himself to you. He has a great deal of interest in you and He beholds you with His eye. He doesn't take His eye off of you but watches you constantly. Why? Because He invested His life, His blood, His reputation for you. Will you not do the same for Him? Respond to the Gospel

today and say, "Yes! I am a co-debtor with the apostles, with this church, with Paul and Velda, with Florin. I am a co-debtor because God has graced me so that "my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." How can I be tightfisted and withhold these things from others when God has been so good to me? Look at the cross. See God's interest in you. See His investment. And may God direct you to invest in His kingdom. Amen.