

Stand Firm, Dear Friends*Christ-centered Friendship*

Philippians 4:10-23

The ancient Greco-Roman world gave focused and formal attention to the idea of friendship. Their philosophers carefully dissected what it meant to be a friend in all its various expressions and forms. Friendship was much more than an informal notion; it was more of an institution.

Greek philosophers like Aristotle, and Roman academics like Cicero and Seneca, wrote extensively about the different kinds and levels of friendship between people from deeply personal and affectionate friendships to those that were superficial and utilitarian. The one kind of friendship they gave the most attention to was what they considered a *true or genuine friend*. They identified certain core ideals that emerged in a genuine friendship, including virtue, fidelity, loyalty, affection, and especially *social reciprocity* or the “*giving and receiving of benefits*,” usually in the form of goods and services.

Understanding the ancient Greco-Roman concept of genuine friendship is important in understanding the form and content of Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Paul writes Philippians in the form of an ancient *friendship letter*. However, as was Paul’s custom, he takes their cultural idea of friendship and redeems it. He takes friendship to another level entirely in the Church, as those who are “*in Christ*.”

A Letter to Friends in Christ

- **1:1-19** Paul expresses his deep appreciation for the Philippians and the friendship/partnership they share together in the gospel. Later in the letter (**1:29-30; 2:17**), we learn that this partnership in the gospel now included mutual suffering. The Philippians were being treated like Paul was being treated—like criminals.
- Their friendship is not merely based on common convictions and values. There are several expressions of deep affection.
 - **1:7-8** – Paul’s affection for them is with *the affection of Christ* himself (**4:1** – He calls them his *dear friends*)
 - Their affection is expressed in a mutual concern for one another’s wellbeing. We see this in their prayers for one another—Paul’s prayer for them (**1:9**) and their prayers for Paul (**1:19**).
- **1:25-26** Paul shares his sincere desire to survive the imprisonment and remain alive in this, just so he could continue with them and help them *to progress in their faith*.
- **2:19-3:17** Epaphroditus and Timothy join Paul as examples of Christian friendship, examples the Philippians are called to emulate.
- And one of the most telling expressions of friendship in this letter is the fact that Paul never uses his position of authority as an apostle of Christ to command them to behave in a manner consistent with their relationship with Christ, as he so often does in other New Testament books, where his authority as an Apostle was being questioned by some. Instead of posturing himself as their superior, he chooses rather to call himself, and his companions, *their servants* (**1:1**).
- The most striking friendship-ideal expressed in Paul’s letter to the Philippians was around this matter of reciprocity: Paul and the Philippians had, for some time now, enjoyed a giving-and-receiving relationship as true, genuine friends

Friends of Another Kind

- The friendship Paul and the Philippians enjoyed together was not simply a horizontal reciprocity.
- There was a third Friend in the picture that made their friendship supernatural—a reciprocity that goes far beyond anything the world could ever experience. (2:1-11).
- Christ's friendship was the ultimate example to model their lives after in the matter of giving and receiving.

The concept of reciprocity among genuine friends is the backdrop to Paul's admonition in **1:27** for us to *live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ*, and in **2:1-4** *If you have received from you friend Jesus any encouragement and comfort in his love, if you have received from your friend Jesus any tenderness and compassion in your fellowship with the Holy Spirit, then as those "in Christ" respond to his acts of kindness by giving the same selfless kindness to one another, as dear friends in Christ.*

The underlying point of the entire book of **Philippians** is this: ***With a friend like Jesus, how can we not be the most devoted of friends to him and to one another?***

With this framework in mind, we come to the final section of Paul's letter, and here is where his use of the friendship motif becomes most intense and endearing.

Philippians 4:10-13 *I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*

*I can do all things through Jesus, who **gives** me strength.* With a faithful friend like Jesus, who gives me all that I need in any situation, how can I be anything but content?

Biblical contentment is a learned quality.

C. S. Lewis Mere Christianity

After making this profound point, Paul returns to the Philippian's gift and why that gift brought him so much joy.

Philippians 4:14-20 *Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into **partnership with me in giving and receiving** except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. I have received **full payment** and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.*

General Observations:

- Paul expresses his genuine gratitude for their recent gift three times in three variations (**vv. 10, 14, 18**)
- These expressions of gratitude are set in the primary context of the Greco-Roman friendship ethic of reciprocity and mutuality, evidenced by "*giving and receiving*" (**v. 15**) and Paul saying he received "*full payment*" in that reciprocity—a matter that is somewhat strained because Paul is in prison and is now in no position to respond as a friend.

- Most importantly, this friendship they have shared together in the matter of giving and receiving is incorporated in the greater reality of the gospel and their mutual relationship with Christ, so Paul concludes with a doxology of praise to God *To our God and Father be glory forever and ever..*

Some Particulars:

- **4:10** Paul is moved to joy because the Philippians had *revived* their friendship in the reciprocity of *giving and receiving*. The word *revived* came from the world of botany in ancient times. It meant to “*blossom again*” like a perennial flower.
 - Paul assures them that he understands that the long hiatus in their friendship was due to the *lack of opportunity*, not a *lack of desire*.
 - Paul wants to make sure that, even though he appreciates their gift and what it affords him physically, he wants them to know that his personal contentment was not tied to that gift, and his joy in their gift as his friends ran much deeper than his need.
- **4:14-20.**
 - **v. 17** Paul rejoiced because their generous gift was an investment in their own future.
 - **v. 18** Paul rejoiced because *their generous gift was received by God as an act of worship*.
 - NOTE: Paul says that he has received *full payment* and beyond in the matter of *giving-and-receiving*. **Paul acknowledges that the Philippians have been faithful friends, and that puts him in a real bind, because now the obligation of friendship—the matter of giving and receiving—is back on his lap, and he can’t respond!**
 - HOWEVER: **Theirs is no mere horizontal friendship.** There’s a third party in the friendship—Jesus! So, the One who will reciprocate in this friendship to keep it whole, since Paul can’t, is God, himself!
 - **v. 19** *Their generous gift would be reciprocated by God, himself, with full provision for their every need - “My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus*

Application:

In Christ, we mutually share an intimate connection with Jesus in a triangle of friendships. So, when one receives in friendship giving and the recipient is unable to meet the *obligation of giving in return* in kind, when reciprocity is not possible in the exchange of goods and services, Jesus himself will make sure the giver fully receives in return. Jesus is a Friend who sticks closer than a brother.

When, out of response to receiving Jesus’ generosity, we give freely and generously to the poor, to widows, to orphans, to missionaries or to the ministry of a local church in the advancement of gospel and horizontal reciprocity is not possible, Jesus guarantees the integrity of that friendship *in him* is not jeopardized, because our mutual Friend—God—will make sure that all accounts are made whole. We simply cannot out-give God, even though we may out give one another!

Philippians 4:21-23 *Greet all God’s people in Christ Jesus. The brothers and sisters who are with me send greetings. **All God’s people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar’s household.** The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.*

No wonder Paul could say with Jesus, who after leading the Samaritan woman to faith said to the disciples, “*Thanks for lunch, but I have a source of contentment lunch can’t touch*,” Paul says, “Thanks for the gift while I’m in chains, but I’m quite content without it, because these same chains have afforded me the opportunity to share Christ with the Pretorian Guard and members of Caesar’s household and some have come to faith!