

The Book of Philippians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 1: Partnership in the Gospel

Philippians 1:1-11

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

What is doctrinally at stake in this opening passage is the nature of the church and the nature of salvation as a work that God begins, sustains, and completes in cooperation with a faithful people. Paul addresses saints, overseers, and deacons in a single breath (1:1), giving us a window into the simple, ordered life of a New Testament congregation. He grounds his confidence not in the strength of the Philippians but in God who began the good work (1:6). Be ready to hold two truths together for your class: God is the one who works, and yet the believer is genuinely called to continue, to abound, and to be found blameless. This is not faith only and it is not self-salvation. It is a living partnership.

At the same time, this passage is aimed squarely at the heart. Paul models a Christian who has learned to give thanks before he complains, to hold people in his heart, and to pray for the growth of love rather than merely the relief of his own circumstances. Many of your students carry quiet discouragement about their own progress, and verse 6 is medicine for that. Help them feel the relief of belonging to a God who finishes what he starts, while also pressing them not to mistake that promise for a guarantee that requires nothing of them.

So aim at both targets. Send students home clearer about what the church is and how salvation works, and also warmer, more grateful, and more willing to move from the bleachers onto the field as true partners in the gospel.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul calls himself and Timothy “servants of Christ Jesus” and addresses “all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons” (1:1). What does this opening tell us about how the New Testament church was organized and about the identity of every believer in it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul packs a great deal of theology into a single greeting. He does not call himself an apostle here, as he often does, but a servant, literally a bondservant of Christ Jesus. He places himself alongside Timothy and underneath the lordship of Christ. The tone of the whole letter is set by this lowliness, which will reach its height in the great hymn of chapter 2.

Notice the recipients. Paul writes to “all the saints,” a word that simply means those set apart, holy ones. Every faithful Christian at Philippi is a saint, not a spiritual elite but the ordinary baptized believer. This is worth pressing with your class, because many people imagine sainthood as a rare achievement rather than the shared identity of all who are in Christ.

Then Paul names two groups of servants within the congregation, “overseers and deacons.” This is one of the clearest glimpses in the New Testament of the simple pattern of local church organization. Overseers, also called elders or shepherds, lead and guard the flock. Deacons serve the practical needs of the body. There is no hierarchy above the local congregation here, no diocese, no clergy class set over the laity. There is Christ as head, his appointed shepherds, servants, and saints.

Help your students see how church-neutral and how biblical this picture is. Christ’s church is meant to be ordered according to this New Testament pattern, with qualified men serving as elders and deacons (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1), and with every member counted a saint and called to serve.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Every faithful Christian is a saint, set apart in Christ, not a spiritual elite
- The simple New Testament pattern of local church order: elders (overseers), deacons, and saints
- Christ as the head of the church, with no human hierarchy above the local congregation
- Leadership in the church as servanthood, modeled by Paul calling himself a bondservant
- Qualified men appointed as elders and deacons according to the apostolic pattern (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1)

Discussion Prompts

- Why does it matter that Paul calls himself a servant rather than leading with his authority?
- What does it change for you to be told that you are a saint right now, today?
- How does the simple pattern of elders, deacons, and saints protect a congregation?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul says, “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you” (1:3). When you think back over the people in your own life of faith, does gratitude come first, or does something else? What would it take for thanksgiving to become your first response to others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is a self-examining question, so the goal is honest reflection rather than a correct answer. Paul’s memory of the Philippians produces thanksgiving, and that is not automatic. When most

of us remember other people, we remember grievances, debts, and disappointments at least as readily as gifts. Paul has trained his memory toward gratitude.

Point out that thanksgiving here is directed to God, not merely to the people. Paul thanks God for them, recognizing that the good in these believers is finally God's work in them. This guards gratitude from becoming flattery and keeps it anchored in the giver of every good gift.

Invite your class to consider what shapes a memory toward gratitude. It is usually a settled habit of looking for grace, the discipline of naming specific people and specific kindnesses before God. Encourage them to be concrete. A vague resolve to be more thankful rarely sticks, while thanking God for one named person tonight begins to change us.

Close by gently connecting gratitude to joy. Paul's joy in this letter is not detached from his thanksgiving. The grateful heart is the joyful heart. Students who struggle with discouragement may find that deliberate thanksgiving is one of the doors back into joy.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Thanksgiving directed to God as the source of the good he works in others
- The discipline of training memory toward gratitude rather than grievance
- The link between a thankful heart and a joyful heart
- Gratitude as a Christian practice, not merely a passing feeling

Discussion Prompts

- What makes it hard to remember people with gratitude rather than grievance?
- Who is one person you could thank God for by name this week?
- How might regular thanksgiving change the atmosphere of your home or congregation?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul rejoices because of their "partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (1:5). What does it mean to be a partner in the gospel rather than merely a member or an attender, and how does that change the way we see our place in the church?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The word translated partnership is *koinonia*, a rich term meaning fellowship, sharing, and common participation. It describes people who have thrown in their lot together for a shared purpose. The Philippians were not merely beneficiaries of Paul's ministry. They were co-workers in it, sharing the cost, the risk, and the reward.

This partnership was practical. The Philippians had supported Paul financially, prayed for him, and sent Epaphroditus to serve him (as chapters 2 and 4 will show). Partnership in the gospel is never abstract. It shows up in time, money, prayer, presence, and shared labor.

Press the contrast your students live with daily. It is possible to attend a congregation for years as a consumer, receiving without giving, present without participating. The New Testament knows nothing of such Christianity. Every saint is a partner, gifted and called to share in the work (1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12).

Note the phrase “from the first day until now.” This partnership had endured. It was not a burst of early enthusiasm but a sustained commitment. Help students see that faithful partnership is measured over years, in steadiness rather than in flashes.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Koinonia as shared participation in a common mission, not passive membership
- Partnership expressed concretely in giving, prayer, presence, and labor
- Every member gifted and called to share in the work of the body (1 Corinthians 12)
- Faithfulness measured in sustained partnership over time, not momentary enthusiasm
- The danger of consumer Christianity that receives without participating

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between attending a church and partnering in its mission?
- What does gospel partnership cost, and what does it gain?
- Where has your own partnership been steady, and where has it faded?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul speaks of a partnership that has continued “from the first day until now.” Where are you actually investing yourself in the work of the gospel right now, and where have you settled for watching instead of sharing in the labor?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the truth of partnership onto the student’s own life. The aim is specific honesty, not guilt. Most of us drift toward spectating, and the drift is quiet. We keep attending while slowly withdrawing our hands from the actual work.

Encourage students to take inventory of where their time, money, and energy are genuinely going. Partnership shows up on a calendar and in a budget before it shows up in a feeling. Ask them to name one real area of investment and one area of neglect.

Be ready to widen the picture of what gospel work includes. It is not only preaching or mission trips. It is teaching a class, visiting the sick, encouraging the discouraged, raising children in the Lord, supporting those who go, opening a home. Help students see the breadth of partnership so that no one excuses themselves as having nothing to offer.

End with invitation rather than accusation. The point is not to shame the watcher but to call the watcher onto the field. There is room in the work, the work is good, and the joy Paul describes belongs to those who share in it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The quiet drift from participation into spectating
- Partnership measured concretely in time, money, and energy
- The breadth of gospel work, from teaching to hospitality to raising children in the Lord
- The call to move from the bleachers onto the field

Discussion Prompts

- Where is your time and money actually going right now?
- What is one area of gospel work you have been watching rather than joining?
- What first step could move you from spectator to partner this month?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul is confident “that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (1:6). Who began this good work, and what does this verse teach us about God’s role and our own in the Christian life?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is one of the most comforting verses in the New Testament, and also one of the most misused, so handle it with care. God is plainly the one who began the good work and who will bring it to completion. Salvation is God’s initiative from start to finish. We did not invent it, earn it, or set it in motion. This guards us against any notion that we save ourselves.

At the same time, this verse is not a guarantee of automatic salvation regardless of how we live. Paul is expressing confident hope in a partnership that is ongoing, the same partnership he has just praised. The completion comes “at the day of Jesus Christ,” which means the journey is still underway and the finish line is still ahead. The whole letter will call these believers to stand firm, to work out their salvation, and to press on. God’s faithfulness does not cancel our responsibility to remain faithful.

Be especially careful here with the doctrine of “once saved, always saved.” Verse 6 expresses God’s reliability, not an unconditional promise that no believer can ever fall away. Scripture is

clear that Christians can abandon their faith and be lost (Hebrews 3:12–14; Galatians 5:4; 2 Peter 2:20–22). Paul’s confidence is the confidence of a partner who trusts both God’s faithfulness and the continuing faith of those who love the Lord, not a denial that perseverance is required.

Frame it this way for your class. God will never be the one who quits. He is utterly committed to finishing what he began in you, and he supplies everything you need. Our calling is to keep saying yes, to keep walking, to let him complete his work rather than walking away from it. That is the genuine assurance the gospel offers, a firm hope grounded in a faithful God, held by a faithful people.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Salvation as God’s initiative from beginning to end, never self-achieved
- God’s faithfulness as the ground of Christian assurance and hope
- The completion of salvation as future, “at the day of Jesus Christ,” with the journey still underway
- Against “once saved, always saved”: believers can fall away and must remain faithful (Hebrews 3:12–14; Galatians 5:4)
- Assurance held together with the call to perseverance and ongoing faith
- God supplies what we need; our part is to keep walking with him rather than abandoning the work

Discussion Prompts

- How does it comfort you that God, not you, began the good work?
- Why is verse 6 a promise about God’s faithfulness rather than a guarantee that requires nothing of us?
- What does it look like, practically, to let God finish his work in you instead of walking away from it?

Question 6

Student Question:

Think honestly about your own walk with Christ. Where do you feel stuck, half-finished, or discouraged about your progress? How does it change things to know that God himself is committed to completing what he started in you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Almost everyone in your class carries some version of this discouragement, the sense of being a half-finished work, the same sins resurfacing, the same lessons relearned. This question gives them permission to name it honestly before moving to hope.

Direct them back to the agent of the work. Their progress does not finally rest on the strength of their willpower but on the commitment of God. The same God who started will keep working. This is not an excuse for passivity but a reason for endurance. We do not give up on a project that God himself refuses to abandon.

Help them distinguish between feeling stuck and being abandoned. Feelings of stagnation are common even in genuine growth. Sanctification is slow and often invisible to the one walking through it. Encourage them to measure by faithfulness and direction rather than by feelings of arrival.

Close with a concrete encouragement. Invite each person to name one area where they have nearly given up, and then to reframe it as a place where God is still at work. The half-finished feeling is not a verdict. It is the middle of a story whose ending God has promised to write.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The normal experience of feeling like a half-finished work
- God's commitment as the ground of endurance, not an excuse for passivity
- The slow and often invisible nature of growth in Christ
- Measuring progress by faithfulness and direction rather than by feelings

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you feel most stuck in your walk right now?
- How does God's commitment change the way you face that area?
- What is one faithful next step rather than a leap to the finish line?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul prays that their "love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment" (1:9). Why does Paul tie love to knowledge and discernment rather than letting love stand alone? What happens to love when it has no knowledge to guide it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul's prayer is striking because we often treat love and knowledge as rivals. He does not. He prays for a love that grows precisely by growing in knowledge and discernment. Real love is not blind. It sees clearly, judges wisely, and acts in truth.

Knowledge here is not cold information but the deep knowing of God and his will revealed in Scripture. Discernment is the ability to test things and approve what is excellent, as the next verse says. Love without these can be sincere and still destructive, affirming what harms, excusing what is sinful, giving people what they want rather than what is good.

Help your students feel the balance. A church can drift toward knowledge without love and become cold and quarrelsome. It can also drift toward love without knowledge and become sentimental and undiscerning, unable to tell truth from error. Paul prays for both together, a love that abounds and a love that knows.

Connect this to the authority of Scripture. The knowledge that guides love is not invented by the culture or by our own feelings. It comes from God's revealed word, now complete in the New Testament. Mature love submits its instincts to that word and is shaped by it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love and knowledge as partners, not rivals, in the Christian life
- Discernment as the ability to test and approve what is excellent (1:10)
- The danger of sentimental love that affirms what harms
- The danger of cold knowledge that lacks love
- Scripture as the source of the knowledge that guides love

Discussion Prompts

- Why is love that lacks knowledge sometimes harmful?
- How can a congregation grow in both love and discernment at once?
- Where does your love need more knowledge to guide it well?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul prays for a love that grows. Name one relationship in your life where your love has grown cold or careless. How would it look this week for your love there to abound more and more, with real discernment?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the prayer of verse 9 into a specific relationship. Love that merely abounds in general can be safely vague. Love that must grow toward a particular person becomes costly and real.

Encourage students to choose someone concrete, a spouse, a wayward child, a difficult coworker, an estranged friend, a fellow member who irritates them. Cold love usually hides behind politeness, so naming it honestly is the first act of repentance.

Bring in the discernment Paul prays for. Growing love is not merely warmer feelings. Sometimes love that abounds with knowledge means a hard conversation, a boundary, a refusal to enable, as well as patience and kindness. Help students see that wise love and tender love are not opposites.

Push gently for one concrete action this week. A note, a visit, a confession, a renewed prayer for the person. Love that grows is love that moves. End by reminding them that the God they are praying to is himself the source of the love they lack.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love made concrete toward a specific person, not love in general
- Cold love often hiding behind politeness
- Discerning love that may include hard conversations and boundaries
- Love that grows is love that acts

Discussion Prompts

- Which relationship came to mind, and why has love grown cold there?
- What would discerning love, not just warmer feelings, require of you?
- What is one concrete act of love you could offer this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul prays that they may be “pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (1:10–11). What does this teach us about the goal of the Christian life, about the coming day of judgment, and about where the fruit of righteousness actually comes from?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal heart of the lesson, so give it room. Paul gathers up his whole prayer toward a goal, that these believers be “pure and blameless for the day of Christ.” The Christian life has a destination and a deadline. There is a real day of judgment coming, the day of Christ, when each of us will give account. Paul prays with that day in view, and so should we.

Notice that purity and blamelessness are not optional extras for advanced believers. They are the aim of the gospel for every Christian. This cuts against any version of faith that treats holiness as unnecessary, as though believing the right things were enough while life remains unchanged. Paul will say plainly in chapter 2 that we must work out our salvation. Here he prays that we be found blameless. Saving faith is a living, obedient faith that bears fruit.

Then comes the crucial guard against pride. The fruit of righteousness comes “through Jesus Christ,” and the whole thing is “to the glory and praise of God.” Our holiness is real, and it is required, yet it is never our own independent achievement. It is fruit, and fruit grows out of a living connection to Christ. We are genuinely active, bearing fruit, working, abounding, and yet the power and the credit belong to God. Hold these together for your class so they avoid both errors, the passivity that expects no fruit and the pride that takes the credit.

Address the relevant doctrinal boundaries plainly but warmly. This is not salvation by faith only, because Paul expects a transformed and fruitful life. It is not salvation by works either, because the fruit comes through Christ and redounds to God's glory. It is the obedient faith the whole New Testament describes, a faith that hears, believes, repents, confesses Christ, is baptized into him (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27), and then lives a fruitful life unto the day of Christ.

Let the aim land on the heart. The goal of your life is not comfort, success, or even personal happiness. It is to stand before Christ on that day pure, blameless, and full of fruit, all of it bringing glory and praise to God. That horizon reorders everything else.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The day of Christ as a real coming day of judgment that orients the whole Christian life
- Purity and blamelessness as the aim of the gospel for every believer, not an optional extra
- Saving faith as a living, obedient, fruit-bearing faith, never faith only
- The fruit of righteousness coming through Jesus Christ, guarding against works-righteousness and pride
- All of it directed to the glory and praise of God
- The obedient response to the gospel: hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, being baptized into Christ (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27)
- Genuine human participation in holiness held together with God's power and glory

Discussion Prompts

- How does living with the day of Christ in view reorder your priorities?
- Why is a faith that bears no fruit not the faith Paul prays for here?
- How does Paul guard us from pride even as he calls us to real holiness?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over this whole passage. Paul's joy, his thankfulness, his partnership, and his confidence all flow from being caught up in something bigger than himself. Name one specific way Jesus is using these verses to form you, to reshape how you pray, how you give thanks, or how you invest your life in his work.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question asks students to gather the whole passage into one personal response. Resist the urge to let them stay general. The aim is one specific way Christ is forming them, named out loud.

Offer a few angles to help them land. Some will be struck by Paul's gratitude and need to become more thankful. Others will hear the call to partnership and need to step off the sidelines. Others will rest in verse 6 and find courage to keep going. Others will be sobered by the day of Christ and reorder their priorities.

Encourage them to frame the answer in terms of formation, not merely information. The question is not what they learned but how they are being changed. Christian transformation happens when truth is received personally and acted upon.

Close the lesson by praying Paul's prayer back to God for your class, that their love would abound with knowledge and discernment, and that they would be found pure, blameless, and fruitful for the day of Christ. Let the students hear the goal of their lives spoken over them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moving from information to personal transformation
- Naming one specific area of formation rather than a general resolve
- The whole passage as an invitation to be caught up in God's larger work
- Christlikeness as the aim of every lesson

Discussion Prompts

- Which part of this passage pressed most directly on your heart?
- What is one specific way you sense Christ forming you through it?
- How will you act on that this week, not just think about it?