

Reluctant To Receive.

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as I said, tonight we are coming to the last part of the short study that we've been doing on Paul's letter to the Philippians. We're going to look again at the last section in the letter from verse 10 to the end of chapter 4, but I'll read again at verse 15.

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. This whole section that we've read, in fact, the whole letter is written in the context of a gift that the Philippian church had sent to Paul. So in many ways, Philippians is a thank you letter, and that should always be in our minds whenever we are reading it.

Epaphroditus, a man who was in the Philippian church, had come to Paul with a gift from them. And while he was with Paul, he had become seriously ill, but now that he's recovered, Paul is sending him back to the Philippians with a letter of thanksgiving, and that's the letter that we've been studying for the past few weeks. Now, that context of a thank you letter, of a gift, is setting before us two key things that lie at the heart of how the Gospel should shape our lives and how it should influence us as we go through life together as a church. And the two things are mentioned explicitly in verse 15. They are giving and receiving. These are two massively important areas of life in the church, but they can also be areas that present us with challenges as Christians. It's the case that some Christians aren't good givers, and that's a really easy trap to fall into. You know, we live in a culture that's very possession focused, very wealth focused. How much we have is hugely important to the culture that we live in. And that's resulted in the fact that even though our standard of living today is higher than anything our ancestors ever experienced and probably ever even imagined, yet today, more than ever, we are obsessed with our possessions and we're desperate for all the things that we don't have. That's

I think a fair general description of the culture around us, and that can shape us as Christians and leave us as Christians reluctant to give, reluctant to tithe, reluctant to share the resources that we have, reluctant to share our time. In other words, we live in a very selfish culture, it's easy to become selfish ourselves as Christians. And that can be a huge problem in the Christian church, and it's one that we have to guard against.

But I can honestly say that I don't think that that's a big problem for any of you. I don't think that giving is a big problem for any of you. And that's partly because of our island culture. We live in a place that's very generous culturally, and people here love to give. That's why you've seen huge amounts of money raised for charity.

[3 : 3 6] I had to go to a Presbyty conference yesterday, and then at the lunch we went downstairs in the Myrtle Alec Hall in Stornoway to a cancer support fundraising lunch, and the place was mubbed, and there was a bucket full of money as funds were raised. And you've seen that yourselves hundreds of times. That's why we were able to raise the £50,000 that we needed for our renovation. It was all because you are all so incredibly generous. That's why last weekend at the buffet we had all this amazing food donated. And that's why if you go to somebody's house in Lewis and they ask you if you want a cup of tea and you say to them, yes, but I don't want anything to eat, they'll still come with a cake. Our culture will always give. And that willingness to give is an amazing part of our island's culture.

And it's such a wonderful part of our heritage. Everybody who is under 40, and I'm saying that because I've got about 10 days left of being under 40, we who are under 40, we must not be the generation that stops that. All the people who are older than us have been incredible in the example they've set in generosity. We must be the same as the next generation that are coming through. So although we always have to be on guard against selfishness, I don't think that giving is a huge problem in our community. The problem is the other one. The problem is receiving. Some Christians aren't good givers. Others, and whether you're a Christian or not yet sure if you're a Christian, others aren't good receivers. And that's what I want us to focus on because that's the area where I think we all have much more of a problem. And I think I can prove that by giving you an example of my own hypocrisy.

As you all know, I'm training Phil, Phil's with us for two and a half years, and that's part of his training for Ministers. It's absolutely fantastic to have Phil here. One of the key things that Phil has to do as part of his training is to preach, and so we want him to preach quite regularly. If it so happened that Phil was due to preach one Sunday and he was unwell and really not fit to preach, then I would say to him, Phil, you have got to tell me. You've got to tell me that you are unwell. You've got to let me step in for you. I will cover the service. Absolutely no problem. You've got to let me do it. Never, ever, ever, you know, feel you have to do it. You've got to tell me you've got to rest.

Like I would be adamant that Phil has to do that. But if I will, and I'm supposed to be preaching and I'm really not up to it, and Phil says to me, you need to let me take the service. I will say absolutely no way I'm doing it. And you're all the same. We're all the same. We're all like that. I'm pretty sure if I said to you, could you come and help me paint the mantis in the living room? You'd say, yes, absolutely. Would you let me come and help paint your living room? I don't know if you would. There might be some people that we have, people who are very close to us, people who are maybe in our families who we'd receive help from. But on the whole, I think it's true that we find it a lot easier to give than to receive. And at one level, that's a really good thing. And if you're only going to choose one giving or receiving, then it's far better to be a stubborn giver than it is to be a selfish receiver. But what I want us to see tonight is that this passage is teaching us that an unwillingness to receive is really not a good thing. And so our title is Reluctance to Receive. And I want us to discover tonight why that's not great. In this passage that we've read, what we find is an excellent example of good receiving.

Paul has been given a gift by these Philippians, and he's a model of godly receiving. Three things to notice briefly. First is in verse 10, we see that Paul rejoiced in the Lord greatly that the Philippians had revived their concern for him. Now, I think that's fascinating and important to notice that Paul responds to their concern with joy. The reason that's so important to notice is because we can very easily respond to concern with resentment.

[8 : 39] And so even though, you know, we might be finding things difficult, it's very easy to resent people's concerns because we don't want anybody interfering in our private lives.

So yes, we might be struggling, but we want people to keep their distance and keep their noses out. And that is compounded by the fact that one of the less positive aspects of our island culture is that gossip is rife. So yes, generosity is amazing, gossip is horrendous.

And so we don't want anybody coming into our business because we don't want everybody else to know. And we are all guilty of being desperate to know other people's business and desperate to make sure nobody ever knows our business. And that's a pattern we see in lots of people. So we can resent concern because we don't want people interfering, but we can also resent concern because we'll feel like it's too late. So even though we don't want people interfering in our lives, when they do show concern, we're like, well, what took you so long? And we get frustrated that they didn't ask sooner. And it's interesting that seems to be something that's happened here because Paul talks about reviving your concern for me. So there was obviously some kind of delay or something that meant that Paul hadn't heard from them, or that it had been a longer time until he actually received this gift from them. So he could easily have been offended with them interfering in his business, offended that it took them a while to do it. But Paul is neither of these things.

He rejoices that they're reviving their concern. He doesn't mind that it took them a while to reach him. He knew that they were concerned for him, even though the opportunity to show that concern took more time than they had maybe hoped. So we see Paul rejoicing in the Philippians concern. Second thing you see is in verses 13, 11 to 13. What you see in these verses is that joyful giving, joyful receiving doesn't mean that you're selfish or greedy. So Paul is a model of receiving and that willingness to receive doesn't mean that he's actually been greedy and selfish. He emphasizes that actually he's learned to be content. Doesn't matter if he's brought low or if he's abounding in any situation he knows that he can be content because God is with him. He can constantly rely on the strength that God gives him. But what that means is that he wasn't grumbling about his circumstances. He wasn't feeling hard done by, but it still meant that he received the gift with joy. And when he did, he wasn't motivated by greed or by selfishness. He was just delighted that the partnership with the Philippians was continuing. And he could do that because he was receiving the gift aware that this was just another aspect of God's gracious dealings with him. You see in the language that Paul uses, I think it's verse 10 there. Yes, he's delighted with their concern, but it's actually the Lord he's thanking.

And so the blessings that they give just sends Paul back to God in terms of recognizing where it all ultimately came from. Now, what that's teaching us, what Paul is showing us is that it's actually okay to be delighted to receive something. It's okay to be delighted when you receive something. Now, obviously, we can sin in terms of receiving if we're just motivated by greed, or if we're bitter about the stuff that we don't have. But it doesn't have to be like that. Here you've got Paul, he's perfectly content with a little, but he's able to delight in receiving a wonderful gift. And that's a great balance for us to maintain. Paul makes it clear that joyful giving doesn't mean that you're selfish or greedy. And then the last thing he does is that he commends them for their kindness. He says, it was kind of you to share in my trouble. He was in need, the Philippians helped him, and he rightly commends them for showing such kindness. All of this raises some very important lessons about receiving that I want us just to spend a wee bit of time thinking about. First of all, when it comes to giving, it challenges giving challenges, many of the sins of our hearts. That's easy to see that, you know, when the Bible speaks about giving generously, that challenges our greed, and our love for money, our prognosis to make possessions an idol where we find security. And it challenges our desire to just keep on having more and more and more.

[13 : 34] So giving challenges, sins in our hearts. But I think that we also need to recognize that receiving also challenges some sins and idols in our hearts. Receiving challenges are pride.

We don't like admitting that we need help. We don't like acknowledging weakness. We don't like relying on others. Along similar lines, receiving challenges are privacy. We don't want people to know that we're in need. We want to maintain this front that everything in my life is fine. We don't want to expose ourselves. We don't want people to get too close. And when we are offered help, and we say, no thanks, I'm fine. It's not because we're fine. It's because we want them to go away. And receiving also challenges our power or our desire for power. We all want to be in control. We all want to keep everything together in our lives. And this is where giving is actually easier than receiving. Because when we give, we exercise our control. We exercise our power. It's something that we can do. But when we receive, we have to surrender a little bit of our power, of our power. And that's something that we can find very hard. And I think this is where it's important to say that, you know, sometimes we can think that that reluctance to receive is a sign of godliness. And it can be if it means that it's, you know, helping to suppress or greed and selfishness. But what I want us to think about is that a reluctance to receive can also be the fruit of sin. To go back to my absolute unwillingness to allow someone else to stand in for me to preach unless I am hospitalised. Is that because I'm so godly and dedicated?

I think it's more because of my pride. A reluctance to receive can be an indicator of a challenge to some of the sins in our hearts. But secondly, and even more importantly, and what Paul says before us here, is that a reluctance to receive stifles blessing in a church community.

A reluctance to receive stifles blessing in a church community. The thing that we have to recognise is that if the kindness of the Philippians is going to bear its full fruit, it means Paul has got to be ready to receive. And so if you think about it, they've prepared this gift, they've sent it with Epaphroditus. And for that to all reach its fullness, Paul has to willingly accept what they're offering. And that means that for kindness and joy and delight to increase, we have got to be ready to receive as well. And Paul says this himself, he says, I wasn't seeking the gift, what I really seek is that the fruit increases to your credit. His receiving means that the fruit of their giving increases. And the conversion of that, the reverse of that is true, that if he'd refused to receive it, it would not have brought more spiritual fruit. It would have stifled it. And Paul is such a wonderful example of allowing this to happen. And in doing so, he does the opposite of all the things I just described in terms of us not wanting people to challenge our pride, our privacy, or our control over things. If you just look through the passage, you can see a wonderful emphasis on how personal it all is. He says, you are concerned for me.

And he then goes down in verse 14, speaks about my trouble, verse 16, my needs once and again. Paul was willing to acknowledge that he was in need. And he willingly received their gift. And when he received that gift, it wasn't for his church, for his team, for his expenses, it was for his own personal needs. The Philippian church as a collective group gave to Paul in his personal need. And he was willing to receive that gift. Now, that of course meant admitting that he was in need. And I think it's really interesting to note with Paul that he didn't complain about being in need, but he didn't deny it either. The gift was a huge help to him. And together, in this giving and receiving, there's a collectively positive transaction in the life of the church. And this is where I want us to think a wee bit about what we could maybe call the economics of kindness. If you think about normal economics, like financial economics, one of the things that's really important in an economy is that giving and receiving has to keep happening. And when giving and receiving reduces, the impact is negative. And this happens on a kind of national level, but you can understand it more clearly if you think of it on a local level. So I want you to imagine a plumber. Think of a plumber in your mind. And with all the kind of economic downturn, the plumber is a bit concerned about his finances. So he decides that he's not going to go ahead with an extension that he was planning. So the plumber was thinking, yeah, I'll do an extension in the winter. Now prices are going up, everything's changing.

[19 : 37] Right, I'm not going to do that. So plumber thinks, right, I'm not going to do this extension. So that means that the joiner who lives next door to him doesn't get the job. And so the joiner is like, oh, I thought I would get that work. I'm not going to get it. Okay. Right.

I'm not going to change the car this year. I'll have to keep it for another couple of years. That means that the garage, a couple of doors down, doesn't get a sale. So that means that they think, okay, things have down turned right. We were thinking of upgrading the waiting room. We're not going to do that. Let's just leave it as it is. That means that the painter who lives across the road doesn't get the job painting the waiting room.

And so he was thinking of buying himself a new tweed jacket, but can't do it because he hasn't got the job painting the waiting room in the garage. So that means that the mill goes quiet. The weaver doesn't get a beam. And so he thinks all the other things are going quiet. And so I don't think I'll upgrade my bathroom. I'm just going to keep my old bathroom. And that means that the plumber doesn't get the job. And the whole thing goes round and round and round. And I know that I'm oversimplifying it, but that's what happens at a national level when economies go on a downturn.

Now sometimes economies have to do that. Sometimes they have to contract, especially if a lot of the economy is built on debt rather than on actual money and is probably arguable that our own country is in that situation at the moment, but we won't go down that road. The overall message is that the goal in economics is that giving and receiving continues. And the reason you want that to happen is because if giving and receiving stops, or if it slows down, everyone gets poorer.

Now there's a lot of factors that need to be taken into account when you're thinking about a local or a national economy. And it's all a lot more complicated than I've explained, but you get the general idea. On the whole, what I've said is true in economics, but the key point is that it's definitely true in a church economy. In regard to an economy of kindness in a church family, if giving and receiving stops, everyone gets poorer. And this is where we see that a willingness to receive is just as important as a willingness to give. We could all say we're all willing to give. We're all willing to give. And I know that you're all willing to give. Are we all willing to receive? Because if the receiving isn't with the giving, everyone's going to get poorer. And I think I can give an example to illustrate my point. In church settings, when people do things, and when somebody does something in a church setting, it can be quite common for somebody afterwards to say to them, you know, that was brilliant. That was really good. Thank you so much for doing that. I found that so helpful. Often it's said to a minister after a sermon, but it could also be said to a presenter. It could be said to a Sunday School teacher, to a musician, to a leader, to somebody who's even said a prayer at the prayer meeting. Afterwards, somebody could say, I found that so helpful. Thank you so much. It can happen in lots of ways. I've often heard that kind of comment, the comment that says thank you so much for that. I've heard that kind of comment responded to with the person saying something like, oh, don't thank me, thank God. Or don't praise me, praise God. Is that a good thing to say?

[23 : 35] What do you think? I don't know if you're going to agree with me, but I think it's a terrible thing to say. I don't think it's a good thing to say at all. That's because if you think about the economics of kindness, what happens overall when somebody says something like that? When somebody says, don't praise me, so they get a compliment, thank you, that was brilliant. They respond to it by saying, don't praise me, don't praise God. What happens overall? First of all, the person who said thank you in the first place, what do they feel? They feel guilty. They feel like they've done the wrong thing. They've been made to feel like they've done something wrong. Secondly, the person who said, don't praise me, praise God, kind of presents themselves as a sort of part of this elite group of Christians that doesn't need encouragement, that they're just above that and immune to that. Thirdly, they can actually even come across as a wee bit smug and a wee bit arrogant. The person who in the first place said that was good is going to go away thinking, well, I probably shouldn't ever do that again. I said the wrong thing. They'll never give that encouragement to the next person. The overall result is that in terms of kindness, everyone is poorer.

Everyone's poorer. And it's all because of a reluctance to receive. Whereas if the person who had been complimented responded by saying, thank you so much. I really appreciate you saying that. Then the person who complimented them enjoys the blessing of being an encouragement.

The person who gets encouragement can be grateful for it. Their relationship grows stronger and both of them are more likely to go on and show the same kindness to others in the future. In other words, if you receive kindness well, everybody becomes better off. There's a wonderful economic upturn in terms of kindness. As Paul emphasizes here, it's not really the gift he's bothered about, but he wants to see the fruit that increases to their credit.

The fact that what they've done is a positive thing for everyone. In fact, in the very next verse, Paul tells us that their gift is something that is an absolute delight to God. All of this raises two very important points that I want to just explore briefly before we finish.

The first is in relation to a key word that appears in this passage that is actually very hard to see in English. There's a very important word that appears twice in the verses on the screen, but you can't see it because English hides it a wee bit. The word for share here and the word for partnership here are both based on the same root word in Greek and it's the word, *koinonia*. Some of you will know that word. I think it's the word that means fellowship. Now this all raises a really important point in regard to how we understand fellowship. We know that fellowship is a crucial part of the life of the church. We need to spend time in fellowship together, but often we think of fellowship in terms of a fellowship, like a gathering at somebody's house, often at communion weekends. Those kind of gatherings are wonderful. They're a key aspect of fellowship, but what we discovered in these verses is that fellowship is actually more than that, much more than that. It's crucial we recognize this because if we have this kind of narrow understanding of fellowship, there's a danger that if we think that if house fellowships aren't happening, it means that fellowship isn't happening, but that's not the case because that's too narrow fellowship down into something smaller than what scripture presents to us. Here Paul is using the word fellowship to describe the gift that the Philippians have sent to him. Their willingness to help him in a time of need is an example of fellowship. You actually see the same thing in other parts of the New Testament, both talking about giving gifts to those who are in need. Here taking part in the relief of the saints, same word, *koinonia*, fellowship, sharing what you have with those who are in need, same word, *koinonia*, fellowship. That means that fellowship isn't just getting together to talk. Fellowship is also helping each other, sharing our resources, giving and receiving as Paul speaks about here. In other words, the key thing for us as a church family is that we share our whole lives together.

[29 : 14] That's what fellowship involves. That's what true fellowship involves. So if we get together in a home and talk around the fire in a traditional fellowship, yes, that's fellowship. But if we sit in a circle here in church and do the same thing, that's also fellowship. If we have dinner together, that's fellowship. If we give each other a hand on a Saturday, that's fellowship. If we raise money for the work of the gospel here or abroad or for those who are in need, that's fellowship. If we are warned about false teachers and about division and things like that, just as Paul warned the Philippians in his letter, that's fellowship. It's all an amazing reminder that God has brought us into a wonderful family where we share every part of our lives together because we've got so much in common. But the key point is that we will stifle all of that if we aren't good at receiving. Fellowship involves encouraging, sharing, thanking, warning, teaching, correcting, guiding. None of those things are possible if we're reluctant to receive. So if someone asks you for dinner and you say, no, are you cultivating fellowship or stifling it? If someone offers you help and you say, no, are you cultivating fellowship or stifling it? If someone invites you to church or to an event and you say, no, are you cultivating fellowship or stifling it? If somebody offers you encouragement and you kind of don't receive it very well, are you cultivating fellowship or stifling it? And what all of this brings us back to, and this is probably the thing

I want you to see more than anything else, is that your contribution to the life of the church, to the life of our church is so precious and so valuable. In other words, you have got so much to give, even just in terms of talking to each other, you've got so much to give. And if we go out the door immediately after a service, think of how much you are not giving. You've got so much to offer in terms of just being an encouragement and a blessing to one another. The more we enter into the fellowship of giving and receiving, the more the fruit of blessing will increase for us all. And that's the kind of gospel community that will be such a powerful witness to the community around us. And this, I seem to have gone into very controversial territory tonight, so forgive me for that. But this raises something else that I think is really important for us to think about, and it does need to be said. Through fellowship means sharing all of our lives together. That means sharing the good times and sharing the hard times. And in a healthy church, we will give to one another when others are in need, and we'll receive from one another when we are in need.

That giving and receiving just saturates every part of life. But there's something that is very common in our island churches that is not good at all. And I hope I don't offend anyone by saying this, but I think it's true, well, it notes through, and I think it needs to be said. When something hard happens in somebody's life, whether it's illness, bereavement, an awkward situation regarding their personal life or their family, a disappointment when something hasn't worked out well, or a fallout when people have had tensions with one another.

When that happens to somebody, what's the first thing that people stop doing? The first thing that they stop doing is coming to church. Everything else continues, but church stops.

Church is the place that people want to avoid most. It's the first thing that they stop. It's the last thing that they go back to. Now, I think that's something that we really have to think about, because that means that there is either something far wrong with our church, or there's something far wrong with the way people think, or there's something far wrong with both. Our church family, our time together where we support one another, that should be the last thing that we want to stop. And if someone has a hard time in their lives, this should be the one place that they could come and think, I'm not going to be judged. I could come and just get a little bit of relief from all the suffering that has come into my life. So it's just such an important thing for us to think about, that fellowship that extends to every part of life where we give and receive to one another.

[35 : 04] Most of all, this whole issue of receiving brings us back to the theological truth that lies at the heart of the Gospel. The whole idea of receiving, it's bringing us back to grace. Grace is the truth that lies at the absolute heart of the Gospel, and it's what Paul is pointing us towards in these verses. We are being reminded that God is the supplier of all of our needs. If you want, you can think about your creation needs, our need for food, for water, for air, for shelter, for friendship, for light, for heat, for work, God supplies all of these things. But even more so, we think not just of our creation needs, we think of our redemption needs. Our need for a Savior who will not see equality with God as a thing that needs to be grasped. A Savior who will empty himself and take the form of a servant. A Savior who will be born in our likeness, who will take a path of obedience that will lead to death, even the death, even death on a cross. A Savior who will rise again, who will be exalted above all else with a name that's above every name. Weed a Savior who can do all of that, and God supplies it all. And in doing so, in supplying that

Savior, He hands over His beloved Son. And all you have to do is receive. All we have to do is receive. Older theologians used to use a beautiful phrase to describe this, that in becoming a Christian, we receive and rest on Christ. We receive and rest on Christ and His righteousness. Ultimately, the Christian gospel is all about receiving. We receive from the ultimate giver. We receive from His incredible mercy, His abundant grace, His overflowing love that He's shown towards us in Jesus. And that means that being reluctant to receive, it's actually to contradict what lies at the very heart of the gospel. The gospel is all about God's grace, His incredible willingness to give to us, to give for us, to do everything that's needed so that all you need to do is receive. And for anyone here who's maybe not yet a Christian, maybe this is the problem, maybe you're being held back because you're just reluctant to receive. And that might be because you don't feel anywhere near good enough to receive, or it might be because you don't feel anywhere near bad enough and you think, well, actually, I don't need the gospel, I'm actually perfectly okay by myself. Either way, a reluctance to receive is a way of telling God that you know better than Him. And that's not a cool thing to do, because it's actually a way of stealing His glory, because we're telling Him what He can and cannot do, what He should or shouldn't do. But Paul's telling us here, it's only God who should be getting glory, because He's the one who gives so freely and so abundantly.

Some Christian churches are plagued with poor givers, we are not at all. But I think we are at risk of being poor receivers. So we all need to be, we all need to stop being reluctant to receive. We need to repent of being reluctant to receive. And instead, we need to be ready to receive, ready to receive from each other. So encouragement, friendship, advice, help, wisdom, resources, comfort, we need to be ready to receive that from each other. And above all else, you need to be ready to receive from God. God is standing over you. Maybe this is a terrible illustration, but I think it's like, I like this illustration.

He's standing over you and it says, though His hands are just a dam holding back a massive lake of blessing, and all He wants to do is open His hands and for that to just pour upon you in abundance, to pour out on you His guidance, His blessing, His encouragement, His peace, His presence, His power, His joy, His smile. God wants to just smile at you every day this week and help you through everything that you've got to do. He wants to pour out upon you His joy, His goodness, His truth and more than anything else, He wants to pour into your heart His amazing, amazing love. That is what the gospel offers you. And oh, just by God's grace, may we all become big, open-handed, wide, ready, willing receivers from Him. Amen.