

LIFE TOGETHER SERMON SERIES

Week 2: Community Is Where We are Transformed

Philippians 2:1-4 (NIV)

2 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Justin Martyr an early apologist and martyr had this to say about the early church community:

“We who valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions, now bring what we have into a common stock, and communicate to everyone in need; we who hated and destroyed one another, and on account of their different manners would not live with men of a different tribe, now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them, and pray for our enemies.”

The witness of the early church community was that they were a people profoundly touched, inspired and transformed by the power of the gospel. They loved each other in such an otherworldly way that the only probable explanation was that something out of this world had happened to them. In spite of racial diversity, socio-economic disparity and interpersonal conflict, they had learned to love each other well.

Paul in the text we just read was writing to a church in the midst of a conflict.

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I also ask you, true partner, to help these women who have contended for the gospel at my side, along with Clement and the rest of my coworkers whose names are in the book of life. – Philippians 4:2-3

Most scholars would believe that the disagreement we read about here pertained to certain secondary preferences surrounding church practices or minor theological differences.

A commentary writes:

“Whatever the disagreement was about, it must not have been a major doctrinal issue. It wasn’t something so serious that it compromised the gospel. What’s happened here is that the intensity of this disagreement is compromising the gospel—not the issue itself. There’s a difference.”

Through this passage we discover 3 calls that Paul gives to us to guard against division.

1. Recognise the force within us that makes unity difficult (Phil 2:3).

Paul's call to the church is to be a place of defiant unity in the face of conflict, selfish ambition and vain conceit.

This is relevant for us today as we see narcissism, contempt, and division on the rise in our current culture. This text calls us to be on guard against the poison of selfishness and using others and the church to satisfy our "glory deficit". While we have been made in the image of God, we have lost His glory because of sin, leaving a void that tells us we're not enough. The urge to fill this void pushes us towards a selfish ambition, that competes to dominate and gain recognition, and this self-serving agenda is a threat to the biblical community.

2. Remember the grace of God (Phil 2:1-2).

Selfish ambition forms out of trying to fill the 'glory void' left in us by sin, but Jesus came to fill that space. Philippians 2:1 tells us Jesus offers encouragement from being united with Him, comfort from His love, common sharing in His Spirit, and His tenderness and compassion.

When we suffer from spiritual forgetfulness we judge the goodness of God on the moment and not the long history of His faithfulness. Remembering who God is and what He has done is one of the most important parts of our discipleship, while one of the enemy's greatest schemes to destroy our faith is to have us forget.

The narrative of the gospel is that you and are at one time were at enmity with God. We were objects of God's wrath. Our sin not only grieves Him but angers Him.

Rather than being good people that Jesus would have chosen. The bible tells us we are enemies of God, dead in our sin, we hate God by our nature, we wouldn't be the people cheering Jesus on, we would have been the ones crucifying Him.

Ephesians 2:12 says *"remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world."*

God, instead of retaliating against us, treats us with kindness. He sends His son, lays down His life for us. Not just as an act of kindness but as a way to reconciliation. That we would be transformed from former enemies to friends and sons and daughters in the family of God. The gospel is all about turning enemies into friends. It is, at its core, about reconciliation.

3. Resist self-centredness by embracing the humility of Jesus (Phil 2:4).

In the Greco roman world, humility is never used in a positive light. It has more the idea of being humiliated. But when Christians reclaimed the term, that presupposed dignity. It meant voluntary submission out of security.

We think of that story where Jesus girded Himself with a towel and washed the feet of His disciples. Jesus knew who He was and where He was going to, and from that security He humbled Himself and served His disciples.

Bonhoeffer had a list of commitments he had in pursuit of cultivating humility:

- Hold your tongues, refusing to speak uncharitably about a Christian brother;
- Cultivate the humility that comes from understanding that you, like Paul, are the greatest of sinners and can only live in God's sight by his grace;
- Listen "long and patiently" so that they you understand your fellow Christian's need;
- Refuse to consider your time and calling so valuable that you cannot be interrupted to help with unexpected needs, no matter how small or menial;
- Bear the burden of your brothers and sisters in the Lord, both by preserving their freedom and by forgiving their sinful abuse of that freedom;
- Declare God's word to your fellow believers when they need to hear it;
- Understand that Christian authority is characterized by service and does not call attention to the person who performs the service.

Circling back to what was happening in the church of Philippi. We read earlier that the division within was not caused by heresy or apostasy but by differences over preferences and secondary theological positions. Notice, Paul, instead of bringing clarity on who was right or wrong, calls them instead to put aside their preferences and positions in favour of unity.

But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them. You may be sure that such people are warped and sinful; they are self-condemned. - Titus 3:9-11

The call here is to not let secondary preferences and minor issues dominate this primary community of love.

Because unity is precious to be protected in God's eyes, Paul exhorts the church to pursue unity so that we may "make my joy complete". There is no joy in the heart of God where there is disunity among his people.

Discussion Questions:

1. Paul calls us to do nothing out of selfish ambition and vain conceit. How do you see these traits as being incompatible and threatening to the biblical community?
2. How does remembering God's grace toward you impact the way you treat others?

3. What does it look like to embrace Christ's humility and value others above yourself in your day to day?

4. Read Bonhoeffer's list again. Is there any one that sticks out to you?

Reflection/Prayer:

1. Have there been instances where you have brought about disunity and division by gossiping, slandering, holding on to your preferences etc.?

2. How can you be a unifying force in the community?