

Unity in Humility

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When I'm under pressure, that's when I'm most likely to squabble with others. Do you experience that? When the workplace is a hot-mess full of too many things to do and not enough people to do them *or* when your kids have a trillion activities and you feel like you're more of a bus driver than a parent *or* when its finals week, aren't these the kinds of times you get into fights with those you love the very most? Isn't this when you find yourself most likely to be at odds with others?

If you can identify with this (*and I'll bet you can!*), then today's Bible passage is for you. The Lord is speaking to you thru Paul's words here. He wants to teach us about the relationship between unity and humility when we find ourselves in the fires of this life, when we find ourselves under attack.

Let's hear what our God has to say to us.

Philippians 1:27-2:4

²⁷ Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel ²⁸ without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. ²⁹ For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, ³⁰ since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

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.

I want us to pursue the answer to two questions in these eight important verses.
(1st) We need to ask ourselves—Why is unity in the local church important to God?
(2nd) We need to ask—What does humility have to do with unity?

1. Why is unity important to God (1:27-30)?

In this text, it's clear that unity is very important to our Lord because Paul—through the Holy Spirit's inspiration—stresses its importance over and over again. Just consider these statements from today's passage.

- ...stand firm in the one Spirit (1:27)
- ...striving together as one (1:27)
- ...being united with Christ (2:1)
- ...sharing in the Spirit (2:1)
- ...being like-minded (2:2)
- ...having the same love (2:2)
- ...being one in Spirit (2:2)
- ...being of one mind (2:2)

Honestly, when you really stop to think about it, unity's paramount in the text. This passage, however, is just the tip of the biblical iceberg when it comes to unity, and God's concern for unity among believers. Consider the Old Testament.

Think about creation. The Lord God creates man and woman to bear his image in the world, and the very first thing he does for them is to unite them in this calling. Isn't this what the first marriage was all about? Isn't this what Adam was celebrating in Eve and what the author of Genesis was highlighting in the creation account?

The man said, "This is now bone of my bones / and flesh of my flesh; / she shall be called 'woman,' / for she was taken out of man."

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh (Genesis 2:23-24).

Or, consider Psalms as an example of God's pleasure in and purpose for unity among his followers. There are shadows of something salvific in the unity of Israel, something which is wrapped up in the blessing of eternal life. Just listen to this song of celebration about unity among God's people.

How good and pleasant it is / when God's people live together in unity! / It is like precious oil poured on the head, / running down on the beard, / running down on Aaron's beard, / down on the collar of his robe. / It is as if the dew of Hermon / were falling on Mount Zion. / For there the Lord bestows his blessing, / even life forevermore (Psalm 133).

Unity is a blessing—even a life-giving, forevermore blessing from the Lord. Our Creator has always been about unity. And, we catch a glimpse of how important it is to him in the New Testament when Jesus prays on the night before he's crucified. Just listen to what Christ prays for all his followers.

I pray also for those who will believe in me through their [the disciples'] message [the gospel], that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:20-23).

Look, I know this is a bunch of running around the Bible looking at passages about unity but hang in there. Don't miss this! Why is unity so important to our God? Friends, it's important to him because it witnesses to him. Unity among his followers testifies to the truth of Jesus' person—that Jesus of Nazareth is the world's Savior, the very Son of God in the flesh.

Indeed, unity is a blessing that brings life—even life forevermore!

The church is such a weird institution. I mean really just think about church for a moment. Look around for a moment. Look at all the people who are sitting here with you this morning. Think about all of the diverse experiences represented here. Think about the differences in age here. Think about the differences around politics we represent. Think about all the diversity of personality.

Think about all that *should* and, in most of the rest of the world, *does* divide. Yet, in Christ Jesus, such divides can be and are being bridged...a strange gathering, like this one, is created. And, that testifies to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It witnesses, to all those who see it, that Jesus was sent by God the Father.

And, that's a powerful testimony—especially in our intensely divided world.

But, it's an even more powerful testimony when the world wants to divide us; and yet, nevertheless, we maintain unity. That was the challenge for the Philippians. Just look at what Paul tells them.

For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have (1:29-30).

This is a hard passage for us. We don't like to think of suffering as a privilege. But, when we suffer "on behalf of Christ" it is. The Bible tells us such suffering is what will produce perseverance in our faith (James 1:3, 4) and prove the genuineness of our faith (1Peter 1:6, 7). Thus, it *is* a privilege to be considered worthy of suffering for Christ (Acts 5:41).

But here's where unity comes in again. When we're under this type of pressure as a church yet, nevertheless, stick-together in unity around the good news of Christ, the gospel is magnified tremendously. The truth sings-out evermore loudly!

This is my prayer for us. I long for us to be a united family—utterly different in so many ways but knit together in Jesus Christ. I have so much to learn from you, not in the ways you see things as I do but, precisely, in the ways which you don't. That will be a picture of true unity. That's real testimony.

We will have plenty of opportunities in this neighborhood as well as this city to be pushed on by the world around us. We'll surely experience the modern pressure to conform. We'll surely feel the heat of condemnation when we don't. I knew that when I accepted this position. You'll feel that when you confess that you love Jesus in our modern world.

But, friends, what a privilege it is for us to be united together in this church for Christ Jesus. What a blessing it is to get to testify about the power of the gospel alongside all of you at First Free.

And, because our God is sovereign, we know that our witness will bear fruit—both in our own lives and in the lives of those in this city.

Amen! Stand firm in the one Spirit with me—striving as one for Christ Jesus. This is our great privilege together.

Well, let's pursue our second question, a relational question.

2. What does humility have to do with unity (2:1-4)?

When I used to coach soccer, I'd gather my team together before a big game to make sure they knew what to expect. And, in those moments, you want to focus on the challenges ahead as well as the need to work together thru those challenges. Addressing the task in unity is one of the keys to success. You just can't have players who are doing their own thing and succeed.

And, nothing blows team unity up faster than cocky, egotistical athletes can. It doesn't matter how talented they are; a team will ultimately be better without them, that is—if they can't humbly play with and for the team.

This is similar to what we find in today's text. Paul is stressing the importance of unity in the church. He is preparing them for the challenges of persecution ahead. Therefore, now, Paul encourages them to protect their unity by practicing humility. Look again at what he tells them.

Therefore [because of these challenges] 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, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others (2:1-4).

Paul begins with a bunch of contingent statements—if you have this or that, then do this or that. But, the *if* is rhetorical. There's actually no real question whether or not they have the *if*. They have it and have it in abundance as followers of Jesus. The *if* statements are reminding the Philippians of the blessings they have in Christ. They are reminded that:

- *they have tremendous encouragement in unity with Christ;*

- *they have perfect comfort from his love;*
- *they share in common the precious gift of the Holy Spirit;*
- *and, they've experienced tenderness and compassion beyond measure through the work of their Savior and Lord—Jesus.*

Paul says—*Remember what you have been given in Christ. Look to the past and meditate upon the tremendous free gift you have experienced through the work of the Lord Jesus. Celebrate your new identity! You were rebels against your Creator and dead in your sins, but now you (by his grace!) are beloved sons and daughters as well as heirs in his kingdom.*

This is a message that reminds us of our glorious new identity in Christ Jesus. It's a reminder of our exalted, majestic new status. Hooray!

Part-and-parcel, however, with the reminder of our exaltation is the reminder of our former situation—as sinners and rebels, as a helpless and wayward people. That's a humbling reminder. It's a reminder we also need. It helps us see the world and ourselves clearly. It must shape our worldview as Christians.

It's only after we remember the gracious, free gift we've experienced in Christ that Paul urges humility—*Remember the gracious gifts you've received? Well then...*

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others (2:3-4).

Friends, true humility is remembering who we are before God—we're sinners and, simultaneously, saints; we're spiritual poppers while, at the same time, princes and princesses with Christ. Or, as theologian Charlese Hodge described our situation as believers before the cross—*We are humbled without being degraded and exalted without being inflated.*¹

Next week we will look at the model, source, and rule for practicing humility as believers. But, for now, allow me to close by urging us all, as brothers and sisters

¹ My paraphrase of Charles Hodge's quote on the doctrine of grace. Josiah Hotchkiss Gilbert, *Dictionary of Burning Words of Brilliant Writers*, 334.

in Christ, to protect the unity and the witness of the church through an earnest pursuit and practice of humility.

When you are feeling low, remind yourself of God's love for you in Christ—you are exalted! However, whenever you are tempted to think of yourself too highly, also remind yourself of God's love for you in Christ, remember what it cost our Lord to save you—and allow that realization to rightly humble you.