

November 15, 2020

A CALL TO UNITY THROUGH HUMILITY

Philippians 2:1-11

(5 of 13 in a series through Philippians)

It's very tempting to think in life that some things just happen with the passing of time. Maybe we think of maturity that way. We can be tempted to think when looking at an immature child that he will simply grow into maturity with the passing of time. But that's not always the case, is it? Immature children may well go through all kinds of physical maturity with the passing of time but remain as immature as ever in so many other ways when they become adults. Rather, a growth in maturity requires effort.

The same thing can be said in regards to unity in a local church. We may think that it just happens with the passing of time. Put believers together in a local church, give them enough time, and they will be unified. But we know that simply isn't true. Numerous church splits throughout the ages prove otherwise. This is why when we come to Philippians 2:1-11 we can see that Paul spends a lot of time talking about walking in unity and laying out what that looks like. You see, the church at Philippi is made up of people like you and me. In chapter 4, Paul will mention two women—Euodia and Syntyche—asking them to agree in the Lord. This probably means that when Epaphroditus came to Paul with the care package from the Philippians and Paul asked him, "So, how are things with the church?" part of Epaphroditus's answer was, "You know, we've been struggling with a little division. Even Euodia and Syntyche have been struggling with each other because they disagree over this issue." I mean, isn't this the kind of report that you could imagine any member of any local church giving? As Solomon told us in Ecclesiastes, there's nothing new under the sun.

But as common as divisions in the church can be, we should never become content with them. We must be a people who walk in humble, loving unity with one another. We will never strive "side by side for the faith of the gospel" (1:27), as Paul noted in the text we looked at last week, unless we are a people unified in Christ and characterized by humility and love. But how do we do it? Well, that is the question that Paul answers in 2:1-11. And though there is much to tease out in these rich verses, I think we can group Paul's argument into three sections. The first is that you and I should consider all the benefits we have in the Lord.

Consider all the benefits that you have in the Lord

Now, this might seem a bit of an odd starting point in that we might anticipate Paul first pointing us to one another. After all, isn't our aim to walk in unity with one another? But Paul doesn't start there because he knows that what is going to hold us together is a relationship each of us has with the Lord. So here's what he writes in verse 1: "So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy." Now, yes, there will be a "then." That comes in verse 2. But we can't skip over where Paul begins.

He's wanting the Philippians—and us—to stop and consider all the benefits that we have in the Lord.

He's telling them to ask themselves if they can look at their relationship with Christ and see if it's been the source for any encouragement, any comfort in love, any blessing of fellowship through the work of the Holy Spirit, and a source of any affection and sympathy because Jesus is our high priest. And of course the answer is yes.

It's impossible to measure the encouragement simply of knowing that God is your Father and loves you and approves of you because of the work of Jesus Christ. It's impossible to quantify moving from a place of heading to eternal wrath in hell to being a child of God awaiting the day when we will be with Christ forever because of faith in him. Or think of the comfort you've felt in the Lord during struggles, simply knowing that he will never leave you nor forsake you. Think of the fellowship you've known with the Spirit as he's convicted you and comforted you and guided you. I mean, we could spend all day simply thinking about the benefits that we have from being in Christ.

The reality may be that we don't spend a lot of time actually thinking about this, but we need to. Spend time meditating and reflecting on the benefits and blessings that we have in the Lord. Think back to the moments of love and comfort you've known because of his presence. Think of how your life would be different if you didn't know Jesus. And then, at the point that you're overwhelmed, you will have gotten yourself in a position to be ready to obey this text. And I say that because this is just Paul's starting point. He says, "If you have received rich blessings in belonging to Christ." We can answer, "We absolutely have." And so he responds, "Then here's what I want you to do." That's what we see beginning in verse 2. But don't skip this step. Consider all the blessings that are yours in Christ. And then once you do recognize how blessed you are, Paul tells us to let this lead you to love others and walk in humble unity.

Let this lead you to love others and walk in humble unity

Paul writes in verse 2, "Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." In other words, after telling them that he is rejoicing because the gospel is advancing even through his imprisonment and is rejoicing because he trusts that Christ will be honored whether he is released from prison or executed, he does acknowledge that there is something else he desires for his joy to be absolutely full ("complete"). He wants them to have that same mind and love and unity toward one another that they've known from being in Christ. In other words, if you've received these blessings from the Lord, then turn toward one another and show those things to your brothers and sisters in Christ. Show them comfort, encouragement, fellowship, affection, and sympathy. Walk in love and humble unity is what Paul is saying. After all, we've been the recipients of it from Christ, so we know how much of a blessing it is. Why would we withhold that from each other?

And then in verses 3-4 he lays out practically what that looks like. He writes, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

You see, the thing that threatens to divide any church is when we begin to focus on ourselves and our desires above others. When we are full of ambition and rivalry, wanting to be recognized by others as great, praised for what we’ve done or who we are, and made much of, then relationships in the church are strained. If you’re the man or woman who is constantly attempting to turn the focus to yourself and want things done for you or want things adjusted to meet your desires, Paul wants you to know that you may be playing into the hands of the devil, working to create division in the church. Instead, Paul says, if that’s the surest way to create division, then don’t be that way. Don’t be driven by selfish ambition or a desire to be known and recognized and praised. Instead, be humble, counting others as more significant than you.

Now this takes a serious adjustment in our natural mindset. We are not necessarily programmed in our brains to think of others as more significant than us. In the filmstrip of life that plays in our heads, we are always the lead actor, aren’t we? The world centers on and revolves around us. And so it takes intentional, focused adjusting of our thinking, but being in Christ and united with a family of believers means that we are expected to think of others as more significant than we are.

Think about the power of that. If all of the sudden you and I begin thinking of others are being more significant than we are, then we’re going to begin to think about what is best for them, what might help them, and what might edify and encourage them. And this is exactly where Paul goes next, saying, “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” Paul doesn’t want just a few of the divisive people he’s identified to think this way. He wants “each” one of us—every one of us—to look out for others.

So, let’s imagine a group of five people who lived their lives interacting with one another faithfully, and each of those five people considered the other four as more significant than themselves. And each of those five people were constantly asking not simply, “What do I want?” but “What do they want?” It’s hard to imagine those five people ever becoming some divisive, bickering group, isn’t it? Now expand that to a local church full of people who have been on the receiving end of more blessing from Christ than they ever could bestow on anyone else deciding that they’ll attempt to “pay it forward,” if you will, and count everyone else more significant than them and look out for the interest of others. It’s hard to imagine what might happen among a group of people who thought and lived that way.

But Paul says something in verse 5 that is crucial for us to hear. He says, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.” Now, in many ways the command is simply a repetition of what we’ve been stating. Take the way that the Lord has been toward us and have that mindset toward others. But what he says that is crucial for us is that this mind *is ours* in Christ Jesus. In other words, Paul is not telling us to do something that is out of reach. Rather, when we were saved, we were united with the Lord Jesus Christ in such a way that he has given

us the ability and empowered us with the strength to do the very thing—through the Spirit—that Paul is commanding. What this means is that if you’re thinking, “I don’t think I can do this,” Paul’s answer is, “If you’re a Christian, you can. This mind is yours in Christ.” Just as Paul told the Roman believers that because they have the Spirit of God, they’re not enslaved to the flesh to obey its desires but are free and empowered to obey Jesus, so he is telling the Philippian believers the same thing now. He’s using different language, but he’s making the same point. You have in Christ what you need to do this. This is so utterly counter to how we naturally think and live but you and I have the Spirit of God and new hearts, and we can do this. So, consider the blessings you have in Christ, and let this lead you to love your brothers and sisters in Christ and walk in humble unity with them. And then finally Paul tells us to allow the example of Christ to be our guide.

Allow the example of Christ to be your guide

In verses 6-11 Paul gives us a glorious picture of what Jesus did for us as God the Son took on flesh, lived, died, was raised, and is exalted to the Father’s right hand. It’s one of the richest statements of the work of Christ in the New Testament, but interestingly Paul isn’t giving it to us in order to delve into the nature of the atoning work of Christ, how he paid our penalty, reconciled us to himself, defeated death and the devil, or the sort. He’s giving us this glorious theological picture of Christ’s work to show us how he demonstrated the very things that Paul is commanding us to do on a much greater level, showing us that we should keep the example of Christ in our minds as our guide.

First, in verses 6-8 he walks us through God the Son, prior to the incarnation, humbling himself by becoming a man and dying for us. Here’s what he writes, “Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

Now, as you examine this, you can see that Paul takes us from the exalted place of unfathomable glory and just goes lower and lower. He begins with the reality that prior to the incarnation the Son of God is indeed God. He is God the Son. And though it sounds odd, Paul tells us that instead of simply exploiting that or simply remaining in a place of infinite glory, he “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant and being born in the likeness of men.” That is to say, God the Son took on a fully human nature and became a man.

Here, though, we need to make sure we’re not making a theological misstep. When the text says he “emptied himself,” we might think that Paul is saying that when the Son became a man he somehow stopped being God or at least gave up some of the attributes of being God—like his omniscience or omnipresence or the like. But that isn’t what he is saying. Even though God the Son became a man, he still remained God—including all his attributes. He kept upholding the universe by his divine power through his divine nature. This is why we can worship in saying that as Mary held the infant Jesus in her lap after his birth, he—through his divine nature—was holding every cell in her body together. In his human nature he is dependent, and in his divine

nature he holds all things together (Col 1:17). It's glorious, and it's amazing. And I'd love to talk more about this because I don't think there's anything more captivating in all the world, but I do that in Sunday school in great depth once every four years, so I'll save it for that (and as a way to encourage you to come to Sunday school when we get back to that after this pandemic).

So if Jesus didn't give up anything in terms of being God, how did he "empty himself"? Well, he emptied himself, Paul says, *by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men*. In other words, he emptied by adding. By taking on a fully human nature and being born into this world as the God-man, God the Son was now allowing himself to be subject to all the things that we're subject to by living in this fallen world. He got hungry and thirsty, tired and worn, hurt and wounded, and even able to experience death. And he did that very thing. These are all things it's impossible for God to do as divine. God can't get tired or die. But by taking on a human nature, Jesus could experience these lowly things—even death—for us, and he did just that. And it wasn't just any death, it was death on a cross—one of the most painful and humiliating ways for any human to die. Do you see what an example of humbling oneself this is? Do you see how we can never think, "Well, I feel like I'm too good to consider my brother as more significant than me or consider her interests above my own"? If God the Son did that, who do we think we are that we can't live a life of humbling ourselves and exalting others?

But there's even a blessing here. Paul reminds us that Jesus did not remain dead in that tomb. Rather, Paul adds in verses 9-11, "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Now, again, this can be confusing. How can God the Son be exalted? God is always as infinitely glorious and exalted as can be. You can't exalt God more any more than you can make God more loving or just? He's the standard of love and justice and of being exalted. Well, the answer of course is that Jesus is exalted as the *God-man*. Just as in his humanity he could experience the humility of getting hungry, tired, and even dying, so in his humanity he can experience being exalted and given authority over all things (as he acknowledges in Matthew 28:18).

And the name that the Father bestows on him in his exalting is "Lord." That is, he is the one who in all authority is reigning over heaven and earth. We might think the name is Jesus, since right after mentioning giving him the name that is above every name, he mentions "so that at the name of Jesus," but the reality is that Jesus had been given the name "Jesus" at his birth. Moreover, others would have been named Jesus at that time in Israel. But one day, the text says, everyone will bow and confess that Jesus is Lord. He is the exalted one. He has always been God, but now that he took on flesh, lived, died, and was raised and exalted, he also reigns over all as man, and he is our Lord, reigning at God's right hand.

Just as God created Adam and put him in the garden, showing that his plan was to have a man reigning as king over all, so Jesus has fulfilled that. As the God-man, he has fulfilled this role and reigns as king of kings and Lord of lords.

And so by reminding us of this, it is hard for us to miss the glorious reminder that we will one day reign with him. He is the first to be given a resurrected body and raised no longer in his humanity to be subject to sickness, pain, and death, but one day we're going to be raised in glory as well. And if that's true that we'll follow the Lord in glory, then we should follow his example in humility. He humbled himself in a way that we can't come close to, and so the least we can do as those blessed by him coming and humbling himself in death for us is to have that same mind toward others and humble ourselves for them. Humble yourself now, and the Father will exalt you on the last day. How could we say no to that?

So let us be a people who work for unity. Consider what blessings are yours in Christ. Then, turn and have that same mindset toward others—love them and humble yourself toward them so that you might show them the same love and blessings you've received in Christ. And then, always keep the example of Christ in our minds as a guide for us. If we live that way we can only imagine the glorious testimony we can be as a church. May God grant us grace to this end. Amen.