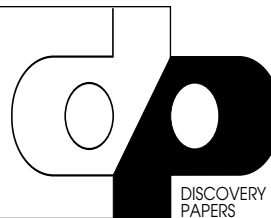


EXPERIENCING UNITY IN THE LORD

SERIES: JESUS, OUR JOY



Catalog No. 674
Philippians 1:27-2:11
Third Message
Gary Vanderet
December 20, 1987

I enjoy reading to my children. One reason I love Christmas so much is that I have the opportunity to read one of our favorite books, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, by Barbara Robinson. Every time we go through it, I laugh so hard I can hardly read. The book tells the story of a peculiar family which decides to participate in the town's annual Christmas pageant. Unpredictable yet wonderful things happen as a result. Listen to the description of the family:

The Herdmans were absolutely the worst kids in the history of the world. They lied and stole and smoked cigars (even the girls) and talked dirty and hit little kids and cussed their teachers and took the name of the Lord in vain...They were just so all around awful you could hardly believe they were real: Ralph, Imogene, Claude, Ollie, and Gladys—six skinny, stringy-haired kids all alike except for having different black and blue places where they clonked each other.

They lived over a garage at the bottom of Sproul Hill. Nobody used the garage anymore, but the Herdmans used to bang the door up and down just as fast as they could and try to squash one another—that was their idea of a game. Where other people had grass in their front yard, the Herdmans had rocks. Where other people had hydrangea bushes, the Herdmans had poison ivy.

There was also a sign in the yard that said "Beware Of The Cat." New kids always laughed about that till they got a look at the cat. It was the meanest looking animal I ever saw. It had one short leg and a broken tail and one missing eye, and the mailman wouldn't deliver anything to the Herdman's because of it...

The Herdmans moved from grade to grade through the Woodrow Wilson School like those South American fish that strip your bodies clean in three minutes flat...which is about what they did to one teacher after another.

But they never, never, got kept back in a grade. When it came time for Claude Herman to pass on to the second grade he didn't know his ABC's or his numbers or his colors or his shapes or his "Three Bears" or how to get along with anybody. But Mrs. Brandel passed him any way. For one thing, she knew she'd have Ollie Herdman the next year.

We figured they were headed straight for Hell, by way of the state penitentiary...until they got mixed up with the church, and my mother, and our Christmas pageant.

We all know some Herdmans. In fact, if we were honest, we would have to admit there is some Herdman blood in us as well. We were all headed for hell—until we got mixed up with the church, and ultimately the Lord Jesus Christ. This is why the Lord Jesus came—to transform us from the image of a Herdman to that of the Shepherd, Jesus Christ himself.

This is Paul's purpose as well in the book of Philippians.

He longed to proclaim this life-changing message. As we learned in Philippians 1:12-26, he saw the interests of the gospel as the key to his past, the furtherance of the gospel as preeminent in his present decisions, and the exalting of Christ as the focus of his future.

Remember Paul was writing from his Roman imprisonment. His assurance that he would be acquitted before Caesar fell short of absolute certainty. Therefore, he desired to prepare the church for the outcome, whether it be his death or his life. We can sum up his instructions in the exhortation found in verse 27: "Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ."

With this statement, Paul used an appealing exhortation for the Philippians. He literally said, "Exercise your citizenship worthy of the gospel of Christ." That is, he was calling them to behave as citizens. The Philippians would have understood this imagery for Philippi was a Roman "colony," a title coveted in the Roman Empire. Colonial status meant that the people were recognized as Roman citizens and that their names were on the rolls at Rome. Thus, the Philippians had the same legal position and privileges as Roman citizens. They were a homeland in miniature.

Paul's exhortation reminded them that this was also true spiritually. Grace had made them citizens of a heavenly city. They were a heavenly homeland in miniature. Heaven's laws were their laws, and heaven's privileges their privileges. Thus, he was exhorting them to live out the name of Jesus Christ in the world—to make the truth incarnate. They were to live as citizens of the kingdom of God in a pagan world which desperately need to see the truth embodied.

The philosopher Nietzsche once said, "Show me your redeemed life, and I will be inclined to believe in your Redeemer." This is Paul's word to us as well. Our friends, neighbors and co-workers are seeking a demonstration not an explanation of the gospel. Paul wants us to live out that life.

Those who stand united become an invincible force through whom God does His greatest work

In Philippians 1:27 through 2:11, Paul describes this worthy life. What does it look like? If a foreign citizen came upon these heavenly citizens, what qualities would he see? Out of all the things Paul could have picked, he focuses on one attribute and persuades us of its importance. The quality is unity. Paul develops his theme by revealing three important facts about our unity. It is my prayer that as a result of letting this word seep into our hearts and minds, we will have a greater understanding of the need to be one with each other.

The first fact is found in verses 27 through 30.

I. OUR STRENGTH AND EFFECTIVE WITNESS IS BASED ON OUR UNITY 27-30

Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ; so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; in no way alarmed by your opponents—which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that too, from God. For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me.

Paul uses language from warfare to express himself in this paragraph. In other words, he sees this worthy life being lived out in the midst of a hostile world. We are to be participants in a battle.

As we have already seen in this book, this worthy life is not to be lived in some holy huddle. God longs for this life to be lived out in the midst of a pagan world. We are to live insulated not isolated lives. The Christian life is meant to be exposed and vulnerable. Most of us know that only too well, for we carry around with us our battle scars. Paul’s desire is that the Philippians be steadfast under attack.

What I want you to notice in these verses is that our steadfastness is grounded in our unity. Though being steadfast under attack requires some individual strength, it is primarily a corporate matter. Notice the phrases Paul uses in describing this steadfastness: “...standing firm in one Spirit,...striving together for the faith of the gospel.” The Greek phrase “striving *together*” attaches a preposition to the verb in order to emphasize unity. This word carries the idea of marching in unison. Moffat translates it, “fighting side by side.” Being chained up to a Roman guard, Paul uses military metaphors freely. In fact, “striving together” possibly pictures the Greek or Roman military formation known as the Phalanx. In regard to this image, David Roper wrote:

It was this particular military formation (the Phalanx) which Alexander the Great used to bring Persia to its knees. The Roman army had adopted this formation in its own warfare. They took about 250 soldiers and formed them into a block with close files and deep ranks. The first five ranks extended their spears, which were fourteen feet long, and the others rested their spears on the shoulders of the men in front of them. The opposing array of weaponry moved in unison against the enemy, and it was overwhelming. It would take the heart out of anyone who saw the Phalanx coming.

Paul’s point is that we are to walk together as a unit in our proclamation of the gospel. We are to stand fast, for those who stand united become an invincible force through whom God does his greatest work. The secret is closed ranks and open relationships. Our unity is designed to bring strength in our lives.

Paul is faithful to remind us that this unity comes from the Spirit of God. We are to stand firm in one Spirit. “Spirit” in verse 27 should be capitalized. This is the same expression used in 4:1 where he tells us to “stand firm in the Lord.” We do not create this unity. It is already there, for we are Christ’s

possession. We do not have many spirits, we have one Spirit. We do not have many lords, we have one Lord. The seed of love for this unity was planted in our lives at the moment of salvation. Therefore, we now belong to the Spirit of God, and as that seed grows through our understanding and obedience to the truth we are drawn closer to one another.

But let me add that our unity is not uniformity. We are not called to think alike about all things, raise our children in the same manner, or read the same books. Unity is not loving the same things, but possessing the same love—the love that was planted in our hearts by the Lord Jesus Christ.

As we will see in a moment, the oneness of mind refers to the mindset of learning to humbly care for one another. The discovery of this truth came about in my own life when I developed a close friendship with some Christian brothers. Even today, I still live out my Christian life with them. There is no greater strength in all the world than the strength that comes from our unity in Christ.

Not only does our unity provide strength, but it is also the key to being an effective witness. Paul says a unified church is capable of taking a stand against even the most terrifying opposition. We are to be “in no way alarmed by our opponents,” says Paul. The word translated “alarmed” denotes “the uncontrollable stampede of startled horses.” In spite of strong opposition, there is incredible confidence. In fact, Paul uses a double negative for emphasis: “...in no way...not in anything.”

When people outside of the church observe Christians living in this manner—standing for Christ in the midst of pain and suffering, remaining united in the midst of loss—they are forced to come face to face with their own spiritual state. Why? The normal human response to oppression and conflict is the disintegration of relationships. They may remain united for a brief period, but soon bitterness and resentment seep in and destroy the unity. Eventually, the group will splinter as those emotions which were directed toward the opposition begin to turn inward. Only Christians can avoid this downward spiral.

This is why Jesus prayed the night before he was crucified, not only for his disciples, but also for those who were yet to believe (including us). In John 17:21-23, he prayed for our unity:

...that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us; that the world may believe that you did send Me. And the glory which you have given me I have given to them; that they may be one just as We are one; I in them, and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, that the world may know that You did send Me, and did love them, even as you did love Me.

This is what Paul is saying to the Philippians. When a group of believers stands together and allows the Spirit of God to work out their unity, this shows the world that there is something supernatural working in their lives. When we are not united in the midst of suffering, non-Christians simply think, “That’s just what I thought! There is nothing to Christianity. They act just like me!”

Evangelism is not entrusted to individuals. It is a task given to the body of Christ. When the body operates in love and

unity, the world is forced to take notice. In fact, Paul says our unity is a clear sign to them of their ultimate destruction, for it is the visible demonstration of a living God in a fragmented world. When the world begins to see that which only God can produce—the uniting of people from different ethnic backgrounds, political viewpoints, and economic status, then it will believe in the existence of a living God. Apart from our united stand, the world will never know.

Maybe this is why your friends and neighbors struggle with the reality of Jesus Christ. How are your relationships? Is it possible that your closed, isolated Christian life is the reason you feel anemic in the battle? Maybe you need to open up and ask God to help you live out this unity in your family and in this body of believers. If the people around us do not see the oneness and love in our lives, they may never stay long enough to be introduced to the Savior.

How are we to express this kind of love? How can we live in this manner? Paul reveals the answer in verses 1 through 4 of chapter 2.

II. OUR UNITY IS EXPERIENCED THROUGH

OUR HUMILITY 2:1-4

If therefore there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Paul tells us that unity is not just a necessary tool used as protection against a hostile world and as a demonstration causing the world to believe. It is the very essence of the Christian life. This is how we display outwardly what the gospel means to us. Our unity is the display of a living God at work in individual lives, bringing humility to arrogant hearts.

Unity and humility are like Siamese twins; they are perpetually connected. We have all seen occasions when our pride has won out, even though we did not call it that, and how quickly harmony has faded. Paul gives us two insights into how to experience this unity through humility. His first point is brought out in verses 1 and 2. We must humble ourselves before God.

The conjunction “if” would be better translated “since.” Paul is saying, “If these things are true (and they are!), then...” The beginning point of our behavior is the recognition of all we have been given. This requires a humility toward God. Our treatment of others is always a measure of our sense of having been blessed by God.

Paul recalls four things that are true of our Christian life as a result of our salvation, and they form the fountain from which we draw as we seek to live out this humility toward each other. First, in Christ we have experienced true encouragement. We have known the loving concern of one who reached out to us when we were needy, encouraging us into a new life. Second, in the Father’s love, we have found true consolation, the gentle

voice speaking to our sorrows and the strong hand healing our hurts. Third, through the Holy Spirit we experience true fellowship for the first time. Finally, Paul even reminds us that our salvation has made us new creatures with new hearts and sensitivity. We have the capacity for inner affection and outer compassion. These four blessings encourage us to be to each other what God in Christ has been to us.

Jesus made the same appeal to Simon, the arrogant Pharisee who could not understand why he would allow a prostitute to minister to him. In Luke 7, he said, “He who is forgiven little loves little.” To the degree that we understand our own need and all that has been done for us in our salvation, we will be able to humble ourselves before one another.

Not only are we to humble ourselves before God, Paul says in verses 3 and 4 that our humility is to also flow in another direction. We are to humble ourselves before one another.

We have revealed in these two verses a clear definition of the problem: it is our pride. An incorrect attitude exists in the realm of our ambition. Paul calls it “selfishness” or self-seeking. In the realm of personal assessment, the incorrect attitude is called “empty conceit.” The correct attitude for our ambition is “looking out for the interests of others.” For personal assessment, it is “humility.” Paul puts the issue of our unity within our personal responsibility. Notice the word “each.” Steadfastness depends on unity, and unity depends on me.

Paul isolates the virus which does more damage to the health of the body than any other: “looking out for your own interests.” This is the self-seeking spirit that insists on having its own way, its own rights. We catch this virus in our homes, at church and at work. When we deal with our pride and selfishness, the body of Christ will return to health.

The secret to living in harmony is not found in pursuing our own interests, but in looking out for the interests of others. Unity is only possible through humility, as we deal with our tendency to enthrone ourselves and to pursue our own selfish advantage. I am always amused by the story of one man’s attempt to live in harmony. After being married for over fifty years, he revealed the secret to his success: “Well, the wife and I had this agreement when we first got married. When she was bothered about somethin’, she jus’ tell me and git it off her chest. And if I was mad about somethin’, I was to take a long walk. I s’ppose you could attribute our happy marriage to the fact that I have largely led an outdoor life.” This man was committed to unity!

Jesus revealed to us that Self is something to be poured out

Paul introduces a third fact in exhorting us to experience this unity in the life of humility. He now makes the highest appeal possible.

III. HUMILITY IS UNDERSTOOD THROUGH

THE LIFE OF CHRIST 2:5-11

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to

be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This is profound section of Scripture. The message of the cross of Christ is found throughout the gospels, and its meaning is the predominant theme of all the epistles. But in these verses, we see the cross through the eyes of the one crucified. We are allowed into the mind of Christ and therefore are on holy ground.

I want you to remember as we seek to understand this passage that Paul is not composing a treatise on theology but rather illustrating what it means to be humble and unselfish. Alec Motyer writes: "We do well to remember that we are privileged to enter into the mind of Christ not for the satisfaction of our curiosity but for the reformation of our lives."

The revelation of the mind of Christ is presented here as the story of a great change. We begin with one who was in the form of God. That is, he possessed inwardly and displayed outwardly the very nature of God himself. Yet he changed so drastically that we find in verse 8 he became "obedient unto death." As Wesley says, "Tis mystery all! The Immortal dies!" How it could happen we do not know; that it did happen we are assured.

This great change is noted in two stages expressed in two parallel phrases: "He emptied Himself...He humbled Himself..." In the first stage, the eternal God became incarnate: "He emptied Himself." This is what we are celebrating this week-Christmas. The greatest mystery of all is contained in the Creator of life being created—God as a fetus. He who sustained the world with a word became dependent upon the nourishment of a young girl. Holiness sleeping in a womb, God...with us.

Paul says, "He did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped." Jesus did not cling to his rights to act independently as God. Rather, he chose to become dependent on the Father, just as you and I are dependent upon him. His

were the eternal glories, both by nature and by right, but he never used them as a platform for self-display or self-advancement. Jesus revealed to us that self is something to pour out.

Secondly, the incarnate God became a curse: "He humbled Himself." He chose to take upon himself death, the one thing which had no power against him without his consent. Furthermore, his obedience to the Father was to such an extent that he died on a cross. He could have died in bed surrounded by his family and friends. Instead, he died on a tree in the midst of his enemies. He who was in the form of God came down to earth, down to the cross, down to the curse. As Paul writes, "Christ redeemed us from the curse...having become a curse for us." E. H. Swinstead says:

Though he was rich, so rich,
Yet for our sakes, how poor he became!
Even his garments they parted
When he hung on the cross of shame.
All that he had he gave for me,
That I might be rich through eternity.

My friends, this is the mind of Christ. He denied himself so that he might give himself for us. To put on the mind of Christ, to have this attitude, is to abandon what is most desirable to us in the interests of a more cherished purpose. Humility is to give up our rights, for the Lord Jesus gave up the ultimate right. In his humility, he gave up his right as God for me and you. This is the message of Christmas.

I hope these thoughts will linger in your minds during this season. Humble yourself before God and let him exalt you. Verses 9 through 11 assure us that God will honor us as he did his own Son in making his name great. The world desperately needs to see Christians loving one another, to see unity in the midst of a fragmented world. This unity will only come as we humble ourselves before God and before one another.

I pray that your neighbors will see a more loving, united family as you begin to give up your rights to which you are clinging and allow God to meet your needs in his own way and in his own time.

Copyright 1987 All rights reserved.