

Philippians 2:1-11

The Christian's Ministry of Joy

Fulfill ye my joy... v. 2

Paul's aim in writing this epistle has been very clear in the first chapter. He wanted to encourage the Christians at Philippi. He especially wanted to alleviate whatever stress they were feeling over the circumstances that Paul was experiencing. Paul (and I keep saying this) Paul was in prison. It would have been easy to think that the light of the gospel would soon be extinguished. (It might be easy for us to feel that way these days).

But Paul gives them every assurance that this was not the case and that in fact the very opposite was true – the gospel was being furthered. *I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel* (v. 12).

Christ was still being preached even by those that were rivals to Paul and thought they could add to his affliction by their preaching the gospel. But so long as Christ was preached Paul would rejoice. *What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice* (v. 18). I think we could say that Paul's purpose in writing to the Philippians was to enable them to rejoice also. This is the epistle above all epistles that places such an emphasis on joy and rejoicing.

I think the same thing holds true for this epistle as would hold true for Paul visiting the Philippians again. He was confident, you recall, that he would come to them again and when he came to them it would be for a definite purpose. He expresses that confidence as well as his purpose in v. 25 *And having this confidence, I know that I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and joy of faith.*

He would come to them, he thought and hoped, for the furtherance and joy of their faith. He was writing to them on this occasion for the furtherance and joy of their faith. And he exemplifies that joy for them. Christ was being preached – that enabled Paul to rejoice. He couldn't lose – for to him to live was Christ and to die was gain – so that enabled him to rejoice. He was still giving out the gospel so much so that he could write in v. 13 *So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places.* So he had cause for joy telling others of Christ even in his restricted circumstances.

So Paul had every reason to joy and rejoice and his desire was for the Philippians to advance in the joy of their faith. So you could say, by way of analysis, that in chp. 1 Paul ministers to the Philippians with the aim of the advancing the joy of their faith but now as we come into chapter 2 it becomes apparent in these opening verses that Paul wants something from the Philippians.

Just as he sought to contribute to their joy he now calls on them to minister to his joy. *Fulfill ye my joy* he writes to them in v. 2. Just as I've endeavored to fulfill yours I need and desire you now to fulfill mine. Paul, you see, never regarded ministry as simply a one

way street. He regarded ministry as something that was to be mutual between Christians. We see a striking example of this in Romans 1. In v. 11 of Rom. 1 Paul explains why he wanted to come to Rome. *For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established.* But not content to leave the matter there he goes on to write in v. 12 *That is, that I may be comforted together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me.*

You see what I mean by mutual ministry – Paul would strengthen their faith in his ministry to them and he would also be strengthened in his faith by their ministry to him. That’s the way the Christian life is to be lived. This is one of the reasons we come to church not merely to be ministered to but to minister to others as well – to minister among ourselves that our faith may be strengthened and that the joy of our faith may be furthered.

So Paul would contribute to the joy of their faith and now in our text he’s calling on them to further the joy of his faith. This is what I want to focus on this morning – this mutual ministry of joy. The text indicates to us very clearly, doesn’t it, that this is something the Christian must take upon himself to do. *Fulfill ye my joy* he writes. They were the ones that had to do it. Paul is not looking to outsources for this he looking to them to accomplish such a ministry. He, of course, would be looking to God and to Christ and to the Holy Spirit for his joy to be advanced but he demonstrates to us something that he conveys to Christians again and again on various topics – that it is through the use of human instrumentality that Christ accomplishes his purposes.

We’re going to see this later today in our second service when we consider the use of human instrumentality in the realm of leading souls to Christ. But for this morning I want to draw your attention to God’s use of Christians to accomplish the purpose of furthering their joy of faith.

The Christian’s Ministry of Fulfilling Joy in Others

That’s our theme today and the approach I’ll take to expounding this theme will be to raise and answer the question – how does the Christian fulfill such a ministry?

Consider with me first of all that in order to fulfill this ministry of fulfilling joy in others:

I. We Must Overcome the Obstacles that Hinder Us

Notice what Paul says in v. 3 *Let nothing be done through strife or vain glory.* That which springs from strife or vain glory can never serve the purpose of fulfilling the joy in others unless those others are a party to such strife. The word *strife* has a timely definition for us this morning. One lexicon notes: *a desire to put one’s self forward, a partisan and fractious spirit. This word is found before NT times only in Aristotle where it denotes a self-seeking pursuit of political office by unfair means.* Another English version translates the word *rivalry*. *Do nothing from rivalry or conceit* it reads.

The history of our fallen world is a history of strife and rivalry – Nations endeavoring to assert themselves over other nations. But we need not make the application so broad as to view it only on a national level. Strife occurs at every level. You find it within the employees of a common workplace; you find it within homes between parents and children or between spouses. And unfortunately you also find it even in the church of Christ.

Perhaps the most well known example is the church at Corinth where you find the church divided into rival factions each faction having it's own favorite person. *I am of Paul, I of Apollos; I of Peter; I of Christ.* But factions within the church can be traced back even further – back to the days of John the Baptist whose disciples became concerned when they the disciples of Christ were baptizing more than the disciples of John.

And even in Old Testament times you find David's son, Absalom saying in 2Sam. 15:4 *Oh that I were made judge in the land, that every man who hath any suit or cause might come unto me, and I would do him justice.* It seems that strife has been around a long time doesn't it? What was the thing that made Moses' task so challenging when it came to leading the Israelites out of Egypt and into the promised land? It was strife between Moses and people and in one instance strife between Moses and Aaron along with his sister Miriam.

We can understand why strife would exist in the world. Men are lost and undone. Sinners only know to pursue their own interests. But how is it that strife can be so rampant among those that call themselves Christians? It certainly is a striking testimony to the strength of inbred sin. And the extent to which strife can manifest itself among the people of God is shown by Paul's words to the Galatians when he says to them in Gal. 5:15 *But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another.*

Isn't that a vivid description of how far strife can be manifested between the people of God? What kind of image does that bring to mind – biting and devouring one another? Doesn't it bring to mind the image of a pack of wild dogs fighting over a piece of raw meat? Can Christians really become like that? We know that they can and it's no mystery as to why they get that way.

Paul states the cause very bluntly to the saints at Corinth when he says to them in 1Cor. 3:3 *ye are yet carnal!* Listen to the entire verse 1Cor. 3:3 *For ye are yet carnal: for whereas [there is] among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?* And as the later chapters in 1Corinthians demonstrate even the use of spiritual gifts which are designed to contribute to the edification of other believers and the furtherance of joy in their faith – even in Christian ministry strife which springs from carnality can be found.

In close connection with strife Paul also mentions vain glory. *Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory.* *Conceit* another version reads. I think the NAS captures the idea even better when it translates the word by the phrase *empty conceit*. It's just another way of saying *pride*. The scenes that come most readily to mind by this term are the scenes

that Christ himself describes in the Sermon on the Mount. Men flaunting their piety before others in such a way that they might be seen of men. Giving in order to be seen of men – fasting and praying so as to be seen by others so that others might be impressed by your piety. And doesn't Christ's statement about such people fit the definition of *empty deceit* when he says of them that *they have their reward*. And what does their reward amount to but the empty and hollow gratification that comes when someone caters to your pride?

Even the disciples during their time with Christ could be found on numerous occasions arguing between themselves about who among them was the greatest? I think it's fair to conclude, then, that strife and pride are rampant and always have been even among Christians. Strife and pride fall into the broader category of the flesh and we know how the Spirit lusteth against the flesh and the flesh against the Spirit so that we cannot do the things that we would.

And yet Paul's word to the Philippians is to *let nothing be done through strife or vainglory*. And that means, then, doesn't it, that strife and vainglory have to be eliminated from our thoughts and our words and our actions and our demeanor. Strife and vainglory have to be overcome so that we may take to ourselves the ministry of fulfilling the joy of others.

So we see the hindrances that must be overcome. Would you think with me next about the other side of the coin, so to speak as we consider the thing that will enable us to take up the ministry of fulfilling joy in others. If we would take up that ministry:

II. We Must Obtain the Virtue of Humility

Note the second part of our text in Php 2:3 *Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves*.

I came across an interesting paragraph in the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia on the topic of humility. Listen to what it says:

The word (humility) is not found in classical Greek (Lightfoot); in the New Testament (with the exception of 1Pe 5:5) it is Pauline. In Greek pre-Christian writers (humility) is, with a few exceptions in Plato and Platonic writers, used in a bad or inferior sense — as denoting something evil or unworthy. Let me pause here a moment to underscore this statement. Humility is viewed as weakness. We sometimes use the word *meekness* to describe humility although I think the word *meekness* pertains to a spirit of submission but the two ideas are very close. A submissive person can be a humble person. But in our culture meekness is deemed to be weakness. We are taught to assert ourselves if we want to get ahead. And in much of the world what that means is flaunting yourself while tearing the other guy down.

Continuing now from ISBE: The prominence humility gained in Christian thought indicates the new conception of man in relation to God, to himself, and to his fellows, which is due to Christianity. It by no means implies slavishness or servility; nor is it inconsistent with a right estimate of oneself, one's gifts and calling of God, or with proper

self-assertion when called for. But the habitual frame of mind of a child of God is that of one who feels not only that he owes all his natural gifts, etc., to God, but that he has been the object of undeserved redeeming love, and who regards himself as being not his own, but God's in Christ. He cannot exalt himself, for he knows that he has nothing of himself. The humble mind is thus at the root of all other graces and virtues. Self-exaltation spoils everything. There can be no real love without humility. "Love," said Paul, "vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up" (1Co 13:4). As Augustine said, humility is first, second and third in Christianity.

I really like this statement that says about the Christian that *He cannot exalt himself, for he knows that he has nothing of himself*. It's when we lose sight of the fact that we have nothing of ourselves that we lose the proper spirit of humility. And this pertains to everything. We know, of course, that it pertains to salvation. Salvation is all of grace. There is nothing that we inherently possess that enables us to commend ourselves to God.

But the application goes beyond salvation to include everything that a Christian has that pertains to his life and to his own service to Christ. There are some people (and you know this) that are more intelligent than others. How I respond to that obvious reality will show whether or not I'm governed by humility or governed by pride and covetousness. If I'm governed by pride and covetousness then I'm going to do my best to pretend that I know more than I really know. I resent the idea that others may be more intelligent than I am and so I refuse to acknowledge it.

If I'm governed by humility or lowliness of mind, on the other hand, I'm not going to resent the fact that there are people more intelligent than I am. Instead I'm going to recognize that God is the One that assigns our intelligence capacities to us and rather than be envious toward others that have what I don't have, instead I'm going to thank God for the way he's gifted other men. As a preacher I thank God for preachers that are more gifted than I am. I thank God for preachers that are also authors and are in some instances theologians. I thank God for them because there's a true sense in which they are serving me. I become the beneficiary of their gifts.

And the same thing applies to those that have other skills. In Exodus 31 we're told of two men Uri, the son of Hur and Oholiab, the son of Ahisamach. These were the craftsmen that were assigned the task of building the tabernacle. Listen to these words from Exod. 31:1-6: *And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, 2 See, I have called by name Bezaleel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah: 3 And I have filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship, 4 To devise cunning works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, 5 And in cutting of stones, to set them, and in carving of timber, to work in all manner of workmanship. 6 And I, behold, I have given with him Aholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan: and in the hearts of all that are wise hearted I have put wisdom, that they may make all that I have commanded thee;*

Now if I'm governed by pride and covetousness then I don't want to admit that anybody can do anything that I can't do. And when you get into the area of craftsmanship or mechanics or anything remotely connected to these skills, the most I'll ever attain is talking a good game. You actually hand me a plan and put a tool in my hand and tell me to build something and I'll very quickly be revealed as a talker but not a builder.

If, on the other hand, I'm governed by a spirit of humility, then I say thank God for those that are gifted by God to do things I could never do. I'm the beneficiary of their services. They serve Christ and they benefit me.

All of what I've said is expressed very succinctly by Paul in 1Co 4:7 *For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?* Do you see the difference here between humility and pride? Pride says I inherently possess my abilities. Humility and truth says anything I have and anything anybody else has comes as a gift from God. James conveys the same truth in Jas 1:17 *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.*

Every gift – every spiritual benefit and every ability and every skill – it all comes from God. And if you're going to contribute to the joy of others then you'll need to obtain the virtue of humility. So we've seen what we must overcome as well as what we must obtain in order to fulfill joy in other Christians. It remains for us to consider finally that if we would fulfill the joy of others:

III. We Must Utilize the Means to Both

And by both I'm speaking now of overcoming strife and vainglory and obtaining humility. The way we'll accomplish both of these objectives is given to us in v. 1 *If [there be] therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies.*

The phrase *consolation in Christ* is translated in other versions by the word *encouragement* – if there be any encouragement in Christ. The Greek word behind the English is the term “paraklasis.” We sometimes hear another form of this word with reference to the Holy Spirit. He's referred to in the Greek as the “paraklatos” – the Comforter. Joh 14:26 *But the Comforter, [which is] the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.*

The AV translation may be a little better in this respect but the ideas are similar – consolation or encouragement in Christ. Is there any consolation or encouragement in Christ? You know that there is. It is the Holy Spirit's task to minister Christ to your heart and to encourage you in Christ.

And doesn't this bring us back to that philosophical statement that Paul made back in 1:21 *For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.* He's accepted me – he's forgiven me –

he's justified me – he's redeemed and reconciled me to God – he's brought me into the family of God and made me a joint heir with himself. And he's promised to be with me and never to forsake me and all of these blessings come in spite of what I deserve as a sinner against him. If there is any consolation or encouragement found in Christ then, you will overcome strife and vainglory and you will obtain humility and you will, therefore, be enabled to fulfill the joy in other believers.

One of the reasons, I suppose, that the translators of other English versions use the word *encouragement* is so that they might distinguish it from the word in the next phrase: *if there be any consolation in Christ; if there be any comfort of love*. I was taken back a little bit by the definition given for this word *comfort* which other versions translate *comfort* or *consolation*. This is a word that occurs nowhere else in the New Testament and it means literally according to one lexicon *a persuasive address*.

That seems a little strange, doesn't it? But on the other hand it lends itself to an appropriate application. You could say, based on this definition, that Paul is saying if there be any consolation in Christ – any persuasion of the love of Christ. If you are persuaded that Christ loves you then you will overcome strife and vainglory and you will obtain humility. And where does such persuasion come from? It comes from the sight of Christ dying in your place. It comes from beholding him nailed to a cross bearing shame and scoffing rude for you. This is the comfort of his love – this is what above every circumstance in life should persuade you of his love.

If there be, therefore, any comfort of love, then you will be equipped in your heart and mind for taking on the ministry of fulfilling the joy of others. The next phrase – *if there be any fellowship in the Spirit*. The word *fellowship* can be translated by the word *communion*. This is what lifts our religion out of the realm of theory and brings it into the realm of living. You could interpret it to mean *if there is spiritual vitality to your walk with Christ by the Spirit of God* then you will set aside strife and pride and in humbleness of mind you will walk with the Lord in the light of his word.

And then the phrase *bowels and mercies* means simply affection and sympathy or compassion. If there be any of these things. We know, of course, that these phrases are being used rhetorically. You could interpret them as meaning since there is consolation in Christ and since there is comfort of love and since there is fellowship in the Spirit and since there is affection and sympathy – since you have gained these things through salvation then you have all you need in order to overcome strife and vainglory and obtain humility and thus fulfill the joy of other Christians by contributing to the joy of their faith.

Let me close, then, this morning by simply setting the duty before you. *Fulfill ye my joy* Paul says. The task is committed to Christians. You do it – Paul is saying. He is not suggesting that the task be left to others. He's not even saying that the task should be committed to God in prayer. I have no doubt that prayer must accompany the task but Paul's point is that this a ministry that the Christian himself must engage in. *Fulfill ye my joy* he says.

If you would take up such a ministry then you must be equipped for it. There are obstacles to overcome and there is a virtue to be obtained but all that you need is at your disposal for rising to the task. Since you can draw encouragement from Christ by basking in his love through communion with him through his Spirit you are able to flood your heart with compassion and sympathy and that is what will equip you for the execution of your ministry.

Fulfill ye my joy Paul writes. He endeavored to further their joy in the faith and he looked to them to further his joy in the faith. May we aim to do the same in the power of the gospel.