

The Christian's Contentment

Encouragement to Spiritual Unity

Philippians 2:1-11

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Encouragement to Spiritual Unity

Scripture

We are in a series of sermons on Paul's letter to the Philippians that I am calling, "The Christian's Contentment."

After the opening greeting, Paul gave thanks to God for them, and prayed for them. As he began the body his letter, Paul wanted them to know that despite his imprisonment, the gospel was advancing. Then, he urged them to live for Christ. However, like every church in every age the Philippian church faced the danger and discord of disunity. So, Paul encouraged the Philippian church to strive for spiritual unity.

Let's read about Paul's encouragement to spiritual unity in Philippians 2:1-11:

¹So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ²complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every

knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:1-11)

Introduction

Kent Hughes tells the story that when a certain church in Dallas became divided, the rift was so bitter that each side instituted a lawsuit seeking to dispossess the other side from the church's property—this despite Scripture's warnings about taking such matters before public courts (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:1–8). The story, of course, hit the Dallas newspapers and garnered considerable interest from the readers. The judge wisely ruled that it was not the province of the court to decide such matters until the case had been heard before the denomination's church court. So the dispute was remanded to the ecclesiastical court where, eventually, the decision was made to award the real estate and property to one side.

The losers withdrew and formed another church nearby. That is church growth the American way! It was reported in the Dallas newspapers (no doubt with some delight) that the church court had traced the trouble to its source: the trouble began when, at a church dinner, an elder had been served a smaller slice of ham than a child seated next to him.

Lest you think that fights like this only take place in America, let me share a story with you from Wales. Leslie Flynn wrote a book with a fascinating title: *Great Church Fights*. He tells the story from a Welsh newspaper about a church that was looking for a new pastor. He writes:

Yesterday the two opposition groups both sent ministers to the pulpit. Both spoke simultaneously, each trying to

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shout above the other. Both called for hymns, and the congregation sang two—each side trying to drown out the other. Then the groups began shouting at each other. Bibles were raised in anger. The Sunday morning service turned into a bedlam. Through it all, the two preachers continued to out-shout each other with their sermons.

Eventually a deacon called a policeman. Two came in and began shouting for the congregation to be quiet. They advised the 40 persons in the church to return home. The rivals filed out, still arguing. Last night one of the group called a “let’s-be-friends” meeting. It broke up in argument.¹

The newspaper article was headlined, “Hallelujah! Two Jacks in One Pulpit.”²

These are two humorous—though serious and sad—examples of disunity in the church. We have probably all experienced disunity in the church to know what it looks like. Paul had heard of disunity in his beloved Philippian church, and so he wanted to encourage them to strive for spiritual unity.

Lesson

Philippians 2:1-11 teaches us the nature of spiritual unity.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. The Formula for Spiritual Unity (2:1-4)
2. The Model for Spiritual Unity (2:5-11)

I. The Formula for Spiritual Unity (2:1-4)

First, let’s look at the formula for spiritual unity.

¹ Leslie Flynn, *Great Church Fights* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1976), 53.

² R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 73–74.

At the end of chapter one of Paul's letter to the Philippians, he urged the Philippian Christians to live for Christ. Because they had received the gospel, they must therefore live in such a way that shows that they are not only united to Christ but also to one another. This spiritual unity includes three necessary elements: the motives, the marks, and the means.

A. The Motives for Spiritual Unity (2:1)

First, notice the motives for spiritual unity.

Paul 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....”**

Eugene Peterson paraphrases verse 1 as follows, “If you’ve gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care....”³

Paul lists four motives for spiritual unity in these verses.

The first motive for spiritual unity is “encouragement in Christ.” The Greek word for **encouragement** (*paraklesis*) has the root meaning of coming alongside to give assistance by offering comfort, counsel, or exhortation. There have been times in our lives as Christians—hopefully, many times—when we have sensed and experienced the comfort, counsel, or exhortation of Christ. This comes most clearly through the ministry of the Word and Spirit. But, it may also come through other believers whom God uses to bring the encouragement of Christ to us.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2005), Php 2:1.

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*The second motive for spiritual unity is “**comfort from love.**”* The Greek word for **comfort** (*paramuthion*) has the meaning of speaking closely with someone, with the added idea of giving comfort and solace. It is the word that is used when a mother picks up her crying child to hold the child and speak tender words of comfort and love. There have been times in our lives as Christians when God’s love has brought us incredible comfort and solace, particularly when we think of the punishment that we rightly deserved.

*The third motive for spiritual unity is “**participation in the Spirit.**”* The Greek word for **participation** (*koinonia*) describes partnership, sharing, or fellowship. It is a word that describes our relationship to the Trinity, and it also describes our relationship with fellow brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. As Christians we really are new creatures in Christ, and we have been adopted into the family of God so that all believers are now brothers and sisters in Christ. We delight in belonging to the fellowship of God’s forever family.

*And the fourth motive for spiritual unity is “**affection and sympathy.**”* The Greek word for **affection** (*splanchna*) refers literally to the bowels, because the Greeks considered the bowels as the seat of affections. And the Greek word for **sympathy** (*oiktirmos*) refers to a deep awareness of and sympathy for another’s suffering. As Christians we have been blessed by God and by others as we have received their love and compassionate sympathy.

D. A. Carson summarizes Paul’s motives as follows, “Paul asks us if there have been times in our lives when as believers we have sensed God close to us; we have been aware of his love in tremendous, scarcely describable ways; we have reveled in the sense of belonging to the fellowship of God’s people; and we have received wonderful encouragement as a ‘benefit’

of the fact that we are Christians.”⁴

These, then, are the motives for spiritual unity.

Are you mindful of these motives? Do you seek to foster and nurture them in your daily walk as a Christian?

B. The Marks of Spiritual Unity (2:2)

Second, let's look at the marks of spiritual unity.

“Complete my joy,” says Paul, **“by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind”** (2:2). Here Paul gives four essential marks of spiritual unity.

The first mark of spiritual unity is “being of the same mind.” This literally means “to think the same thing” or “to be like-minded.” Paul is not talking about right doctrine here. Of course, there can be no spiritual unity if doctrine is all over the place. Given the context, Paul is saying that spiritual unity is achieved when there is a common understanding and agreement. Too often Christians are not able to agree because they have not spoken to each other. I remember Dr. Carson telling us that he chaired a discussion group of theologians. They came from varying backgrounds and persuasions. He said that it was astonishing how much agreement they were able to achieve when they took plenty of time to talk through issues in person. **Being of the same mind** requires dialogue.

The second mark of spiritual unity is “having the same love.” This flows out of the first spiritual mark. It means to love others equally. Love for one another is what characterizes genuine Christians, as John said in 1 John 3:14, “We know that we have

⁴ D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 59.

passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.” A lack of love for brothers and sisters in Christ exposes a lack of salvation. Love for brothers and sisters in Christ is not merely emotional but is expressed in service.

The third mark of spiritual unity is “being in full accord.” Some translations say, “united in spirit.” John MacArthur notes, “To be [**in full accord**] is to live in selfless harmony with fellow believers. By definition, it excludes personal ambition, selfishness, hatred, envy, jealousy, and the countless other evils that are the fruit of self-love.”⁵

And the fourth mark of spiritual unity is “one mind.” This is virtually the same mark as the first mark. Some translations put the emphasis on being “intent on one purpose.” So, this mark has to do with being in agreement as to the end or goal.

John MacArthur summarizes as follows, “In this one verse the apostle presents a full circle of unity—from one mind, to one love, to one spirit, to one purpose, which, as just noted, basically refers again to the mind. These four principles are complementary, overlapping, and inseparable. The same basic idea is expressed in four ways, each with a somewhat different but important emphasis.”⁶

C. *The Means for Spiritual Unity (2:3-4)*

And third, let's observe the means for spiritual unity.

One may wonder how spiritual unity is achieved. Paul states it in verses 3-4, **“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant**

⁵ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Philippians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 2001), 108.

⁶ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Philippians*, 109.

than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” For the sake of time, I will not go into detail about each means. Let me simply state it in the words of D. A. Carson, who writes, “What is this if not a principled taking up of one’s cross, dying to self-interest for the sake of others?”⁷

Selfish ambition must go. Conceit must go. Humble service towards others must be our constant calling. Basically, Paul urges believers to live for others.

James Montgomery Boice recounts a story from Watchman Nee, the Chinese evangelist, who tells of a Christian he once knew in China. He was a poor rice farmer, and his fields lay high on a mountain. Every day he pumped water into the paddies of new rice, and every morning he returned to find that a neighbor who lived down the hill had opened the dikes surrounding the Christian’s field to let the water fill his own. For a while the Christian ignored the injustice, but at last he became desperate. He met and prayed with other Christians and came up with this solution. The next day the Christian farmer rose early in the morning and first filled his neighbor’s fields; then he attended to his own. Watchman Nee tells how the neighbor subsequently became a Christian, his unbelief overcome by a genuine demonstration of a Christian’s humility and Christlike character.⁸

II. The Model for Spiritual unity (2:5-11)

And second, let’s examine the model for spiritual unity. The model for spiritual unity is Christ Jesus.

⁷ D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians*, 60.

⁸ James Montgomery Boice, *Philippians: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 107.

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Let's briefly look at two aspects.

A. *Christ's Humiliation (2:5-8)*

First, there is Christ's humiliation.

Paul has just urged Christians in verses 3-4 to take up their cross by dying to self-interest for the sake of others. Verse 5 is a transition from exhortation to illustration. The perfect illustration of this is of course Christ Jesus.

Paul explained what was involved in Christ's humiliation in verses 5-8, **"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 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."** So much could—and should!—be said about these verses.

But, let me just say this. Christ gave himself for the sake of others. He lived so that others might be united to him, and also united to one another. It is this others-centered focus that produces spiritual unity. When Christians model Christ's others-centered focus they will discover a unity in the bonds of fellowship with the Lord and also with one another.

B. *Christ's Exaltation (2:9-11)*

And second, there is Christ's exaltation.

Paul wrote 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.” Three days after Jesus was placed in the tomb, God raised him back to life again. He ascended into heaven, and he now sits at the right hand of the Father.

These verses about Christ are astonishing verses in Philippians. And yet, we are called upon to believe them. Do you?

Moreover, Paul’s point in giving this illustration of Christ’s exaltation is to motivate the Philippians to “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” (2:3-4).

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the concept of spiritual unity in Philippians 2:1-11, we should strive to practice it.

Howard Hendricks tells about the time he was ministering in Fourth Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. It was an early-morning breakfast. There were many people from the military, quite a few people from various government offices, some craftsmen, and laborers of various kind—quite a mix.

After Dr. Hendricks had finished speaking, he noticed Senator Mark Hatfield, stacking chairs and picking up napkins that had fallen on the floor. Dr. Hendricks said, “Ladies and gentlemen, if you are impressed that you are a United States senator, you don’t stack chairs and pick up napkins.”⁹

But, if you are striving to practice spiritual unity in the body of Christ, you will serve others, as Christ in humility served you. Amen.

⁹ See <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1995/september/1113.html>.

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The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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