

There are two reasons to come to church. The first thing that probably comes to mind is that we are fed with the Word of God. We believe the Lord speaks to us from the Bible, that the forgiveness of sins the pastor proclaims is real, that the Lord's Supper is truly God meeting us in spirit and body. The second thing may not be so obvious. That is, we come to church to build our unity as one body in Christ. That's why we need more than TV preachers. They might feed us as individuals with God's Word, but they cannot unite the people of God in heart and mind. That's what we're going to talk about this morning, about how this unity impacts our walk with God and one another.

## OPENING PRAYER

### **PHILIPPIANS 2:1-4,12-13**

**Therefore if 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, <sup>2</sup> make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; <sup>4</sup> do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.**

**<sup>12</sup> So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; <sup>13</sup> for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure.**

Paul began this section of his letter with the word, "**Therefore.**" Whenever a passage of Scripture opens with the word "therefore" we ask the question, "What's the 'therefore' there for?" Here, it connects what Paul had just written about how the people must be a united front against the devil and the world if they were going to succeed as a church.

It might seem odd that he had to tell them this. After all, in any other human institution it's well understood that the people must work as a team in order for the organization to thrive. Maybe it's because the devil hides behind human

intellect and ambition—things we probably put too much emphasis on—that this teaching is necessary.

Paul continued. He wrote, **“THEREFORE if 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” (v.1).**

He was teaching the people what was needed in order to get along one with another in their struggle for the Gospel. The opposition was fierce; he himself had been a part of it at one time; he knew the dangers physically and spiritually. He knew that the devil prowls around like a lion looking for Christians to devour, indeed, that the Christian is in a mortal battle for his own soul every day, and he knew that the church is constantly under attack from outside and inside.

So he reminded the church of its blessing that it might survive and thrive, laying down 4-conditions, each one beginning with the word, “if.” He wrote, **“if there is any encouragement in Christ.”** How many times have we heard people complain that God was absent from their lives when they struggled or suffered? How many times have we ourselves felt abandoned by the Lord? But Paul wrote in his second letter to the church in Corinth,

**“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup>who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. <sup>5</sup>For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ” (2 Corinthians 1:3-5).**

This is a reminder that the Gospel does not take away our suffering. But it changes it. Indeed, we are promised that our suffering will increase because we are Christians! But God is with us; he comforts us in our sorrow, and he gives us the opportunity and the responsibility to minister to others in their sorrow, their suffering, because we understand in our hearts and in our bodies how to suffer with faith, with courage. This is an encouragement.

Paul wrote, **“if there is any consolation of love.”** There have been times in my life when I have experienced a sense of loss and emptiness which I thought would

undo me. But in the midst of the struggle I am always reminded of Jesus' promise: **"Come to me all you who are weary and heavy burdened and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28)**. I pray this promise, and the Lord always meets me in my heart, and he consoles me with his love.

Paul wrote, **"if there is any fellowship of the Spirit."** We have fellowship with the Holy Spirit in our own spirit. We know this is true because that is the promise connected to water baptism. So if we don't feel encouraged in Christ, if we don't feel his love, we cry out to our Father in Heaven, **"Abba, Father,"** and the Spirit echoes this prayer to the Father on our behalf (Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6).

Please close your eyes with me for a moment. Now envision the warmest memory you have of the church. Maybe it's this church. Perhaps it's another church. There may be a pastor or a member; a worship service, Bible class, retreat, or a service event. Perhaps you envision a relationship you had with a member who was an encouragement to you when you faced a difficult time. Maybe there's a person who challenged you to grow in your relationship with the Lord.

You may open your eyes. If you have such a memory, you remember this thing because of how it touched you emotionally. I think God gives us these kinds of memories to remind ourselves of the sweetness of his love in our fellowship, something we can come back to when we begin to wonder whether or not our faith is real. That's what Paul was talking about when he wrote, **"if [there is] any affection and compassion."** He was appealing to the feelings generated in the people of God by their experience in the spirit with one another and with the Lord.

With these four things as a foundation, Paul continued, **"make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose" (v.2)**. As I've pointed out before, Paul was half Greco-Roman and half Hebrew. He was thinking like a Hebrew here; he did not separate the mind and feelings of a person as if he were multiple beings in a single body. But he wrote, have the **"same mind"** and the **"same love, united in spirit."** The Greeks and Romans said these were two different things, that the mind was good, and that one's feelings were bad, that they were a weakness that must be denied. But Paul said no, but let them be united, indeed, let your love

and your mind be united inside of you as an individual first, and then let them be united in you as a community.

Such a thing only makes sense to Christians. For no other religion or philosophy supposes that its members can achieve such a thing, that a group of people can be united in their thoughts and feelings.

But Christians get it; we believe that we are the Body of Christ, the manifest image of God himself; many members but one body, saved by grace through faith, and sent on a mission to share this saving grace with a dying world. That's the **"one purpose"** Paul wrote about.

Being of one mind as a church does not mean that we agree about everything all the time. For example, I know there are as many political opinions and ideas here this morning as there are people in the pews. But we do have one mind about how God loves us through his son, Jesus, who died for us and rose from the grave on the third day.

Someone once wrote that "love begins when someone else's needs are more important than my own" (Fee). When Paul wrote that we should have the **"same love"** he was saying that we should strive to connect the sacrificial love God poured down on us from the Cross with one another. This reminds me of **Ephesians 5:25: "Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church."** We can only obey such a command because the Spirit of God dwells in us.

Paul continued. He wrote, **"Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves;<sup>4</sup> do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (vv.3-4).** Now he's putting "shoe leather" on the preceding verse (Fee).

**"Selfishness"** is the very heart of our fallen nature, and **"conceit"** is how we think too highly of ourselves. Selfishness and conceit are the bane of the church from the beginning. We ourselves have seen how these two defects can ruin a church. Paul wrote that the answer is **"humility"** and holding up **"the interests of others."**

These values, just like the sense of oneness in the Body of Christ, are uniquely Christian. Again, Paul was thinking like a Hebrew, that is, we are mere creatures under the lordship of the Creator, and thus it is with a sense of humbleness before the Throne of God that we do our work.

And we also put other people's interests before our own. If you're married, you know what this looks like. If you've ever played sports on a team, you know what this looks like. If you've ever been to a church board meeting, you know what this looks like. Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is the Kingdom of God! As Pastor Cano has pointed out, in this life we are in training for the life to come, and if we don't want to be united in mind and heart one with another now, what will we do in heaven?

But these things are only possible because of the love the Lord first shared with you and me. We can only imagine what humility looks like because of the humility of our Lord Jesus on the Cross. We can only find inspiration for elevating others above ourselves when we meditate on how Jesus gave his life for ours.

Paul wrote, **“So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; <sup>13</sup>for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure” (vv.12-13).**

Do you remember the Old Testament story about Joseph, about how he was the kid brother of 10 older brothers who were jealous of him and sold him into slavery? He became the house servant of an important government official whose name was, Potiphar. Joseph was a handsome young man, and one day, Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him. Joseph resisted the temptation, saying, **“How could I do such an evil thing and sin against God?” (Genesis 39:9)**

Joseph found himself in prison for many years because of the anger and resentment of Potiphar's wife. But that was better than sinning against God. That was how Joseph worked out his salvation with fear and trembling. He resisted the fleeting pleasures of the flesh in order to elevate his relationship with God.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, God is at work in us just as he worked in the people to whom Paul originally wrote this letter. He wills for our transformation, and he

is working through us to bring forth fruit from the tree he has planted in our midst.

This week let us remember God's gracious work in our families and church that we would have a good word to share with others about our journey with the Lord for our mutual encouragement.

This week let us be united in our hearts and minds, our thoughts and feelings, in our own lives and as a church for the mission God has blessed us with.

And this week let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.