
Putting Others First

Philippians 1:27-2:11

Russ Kennedy

All of us struggle sometimes with conflict in relationships:

At work – you struggle with _____.

At home – you fight with _____.

At church – why are they _____?

The church who received the letter we are looking at today had some struggles with conflict. It had to be addressed unless personal relationships and ministry partnerships suffer.

One phrase will stand out of this text: *put others first*.

Admonition: Courageously Stand for the Gospel (1:27-30)

⁷ Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,²⁸ and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.²⁹ For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake,³⁰ engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Unify around the Gospel (v.27)

Paul wants them to unify around the gospel. Here is the first clear admonition to deal with the fragmentation that was taking place. They were partners in the gospel and partakers in grace so think and act like it. We are to seek a kind of unity that is worthy of the gospel of Christ. It will affect your whole manner of life, your whole lifestyle. Live your life around the gospel. Live your life worthy of the gospel. So, seek oneness in attitude and action.

Seek to be one with those who believe the gospel *as it is taught in the Bible*. Our standing and striving is for *the faith of the gospel*. This is not about the verb, *to believe*. This is about the noun, *doctrine*. We are then to be one with those who confess the true gospel so that we are partners and partakers in the grace of God.

Stand against the Enemies (v.28)

That becomes obvious from verse 28. There will be opponents. There will be those who will attempt to frighten us out of witnessing and preaching the gospel. They may use everything from scorn to intimidation to threats to persecution. After all, Paul is writing this from prison having been put there because of the gospel. So courage is called for even as we stand against enemies.

That unflinching courage then is a witness against them. It testifies to the fact of salvation. God's people will be willing to suffer for the salvation that God gives. It also testifies to their coming destruction. It has a condemning effect. History is full of the writings of people who, having attacked and condemned Christians, were filled with regret, guilt and fear. At the stoning of Stephen, even Paul, who stood by approvingly, seems to have been deeply affected by his courage.

Suffer in the Serving

(v.29)

²⁹ For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, ³⁰ engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Well, we like to unify and to stand – but suffer? Do you hear what God expects of His people? God has planned, not only that you believe, but also that you suffer. This is one of those verses that we simply don't resonate with. We do not know what it means to suffer. We are fragile people. What about real enemies? What about real opposition? What about real suffering? What about having to "present yourself to the police" as one of the church leaders we were training two weeks ago did.

I want to be totally clear about this. Some may be here this morning considering or inquiring about church, about God, about believing in the gospel. The Bible never hides the cost of believing and bowing to Christ. There is much to rejoice over in what God provides. But you had better understand that there will almost certainly be suffering along the way.

Now hear Paul's irony. Personal conflict is threatening their relationships. But gospel conflict is bringing the kind of suffering that God has ordained.

This call to stand together with one mind, in unity for gospel teaching of Christ comes because there is dissent, division and disunity. There is a problem with people. There are wrong motives in ministry. There are conflicts over ministry. This is the setting of this text. The solution Paul brings forward are principles and universals. They are important no matter where or in what situation you are in conflict. So listen in stereo – listen to the solutions to disunity and disharmony in ministry while applying to other areas of life.

Appeal: Sacrificially Put Others First (v.1-4)

The appeal to unity and harmony comes to us because of the problems they were facing that resulted in conflict. Here is how relationships will be sustained and strengthened.

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ² complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

So this dramatic appeal for harmony and unity rings out in the real world noise of conflict over personality, perspectives, styles, power and the pressure of misunderstanding and outright opposition. What the Spirit summons us to here is the authentic relationships arising from Biblical principles even in the fallenness and sinfulness of our homes, churches and world.

Its Biblical Grounds (v.1)

The "if" here has the "since" sense. Since these things are so, then do that. The appeal here is based on truth. They are specifically related to the affections and actions Paul is appealing for. Yet Paul's tone is a "There is ... isn't there?" Do we believe that these things are so for the practical, daily interaction in our relationships? ³

So if being a Christian means there is encouragement, spiritual fellowship and cooperation through shared oneness, a comforting love with deep affections and tender compassion, does it show in your relationships?

Its High Purpose (v.2)

Look at how this sentence is put together; "Since... then *make my joy full* (complete) by..." Do this because of the joy it brings to others. Now don't miss this. Joy is at the heart of holiness. Joy is at the heart of harmony. Joy in others, for ourselves and joy in God are Bible motivations for right relationships. Joylessness is a symptom of broken relationships. So, a pursuit of joy motivates us to pursue harmony and unity among others. This is how faith works by love.

Beloved, listen. There is a way to do our duty that is just doing the duty of it. It's like clearing the table or cleaning our room *just because we have been told to*. Then there is a doing of our duty when we have no delight in it ourselves but for the joy it will bring God or others (parents); "I don't like cleaning my room, but it will bring joy to Mom and Dad." Then there is a doing of our duty that takes joy in the joy of God and others (parents); "I don't like to clear the table, but I will because I can't wait to see Mom and Dad's joy." Finally, there is a joyful doing of our duty because we are habitually and seriously pursuing the joy of God and others; "I love to take out the trash because God is delighted with this kind of obedience and it brings so much joy to Mom and Dad." So parents, wouldn't it bring you joy to see your children doing their duty joyfully for the sake of joy in God and others? This is the large aim of Paul's appeal and, I believe, the large aim of life: to magnify and glorify God by pursuing my joy in Him and others through faith working by love.

There are God-honoring relationships that bring real joy to leadership and to mentors. These cannot be dictated or legislated, but emerge from a heart shaped by this text.

- Mind Thinking Biblically together. We have a same mindedness in our approach so that we think together and in harmony with the Word.
- Love Maintaining AFFECTIONS for others that yield ACTS of giving ourselves.
- Spirit Being one in our ATTITUDES towards serving God and others.
- Purpose Being highly focused and intently pursuing our AIMS together.

So, is this what your relationships look like? Because there is Christian encouragement, loving comfort, Spiritual fellowship, deep affections and compassion, you pursue your joy in a harmony of mind, love, attitude and purpose.

Its Sacrificial Motivations

(v.3-4)

What stands in the way of all this? SELF. The command is, "Do nothing selfishly."

First, in the way WE THINK ABOUT OURSELVES. Much of the sin I think and do comes because of the self I seek and serve. I esteem self in a high regard of myself and a looking out for me and my interests. The joy I ought to be pursuing in God and others is replaced and destroyed by seeking pleasure (instead of joy) for myself. This is where the modern self-esteem movement has destroyed our relationships. Both self-love and self-loathing are still focused on SELF. How much of our relational difficulty comes simply because we are self-centered to some degree and is pursuing or protecting our own interests? ⁴

Second, in the way WE THINK ABOUT OTHERS. Look at this. Do you think of other people as being more important than yourself? It is utterly critical to Christian relationships that we pursue joy in the esteeming and valuing and treasuring of others. We must humble ourselves by holding others up. This is affirmed by 1 Corinthians 10:24, "Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor" and Romans 12:10, "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor."

Notice that both of these are *the way we think*. This is why Paul says, "With humility of mind." Here is what I find to be true in my own sinful heart and I suspect is generally true. We have a way of thinking that constantly sees ourselves at the center of things. Our minds are self-focused so we jostle for every little advantage, park in the front parking even when we arrive early, look for the most comfortable seats, wish the heat were higher or lower (after all, when was the last time you thought to yourself, "boy, it is just right!") the music a little louder or quieter, our neighbor a little quieter, the pastor a little simpler or deeper, and so on. Do you see that when we go through life weighing all our experience moment by moment as it relates to us that we are just simply self-centered? I know that if I do not deny self and value others and be serious about my joy in God that the self-focus of my thinking grows ever larger until it dominates my life and destroys my relationships.

Well, however it happened; however our ministries and church families became divided and filled with disharmony, what is now needed is a solution. And the solution to sin is always to bring us to the cross. The solution to self is to bring us to Christ.

Attitude: Humbly Develop Jesus' Mentality (v.5-11)

Sometimes we come to the cross for the work that was done there for us. Sometimes we come to the cross for the work that is being done in us. Sometimes we come to the cross for the work that is being shown to us there. And so here: Have Jesus' attitude; think like Him.

The Cross and its Humiliation (v.5-8)

⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Then what kind of mentality or attitude or way of thinking is shown us by Christ's cross kind of death? What is the prevailing attitude of Jesus? Humility. How can we have this kind of humility? By constantly reminding ourselves of these two God-delighting truths. For the joy of God and others:

I am a Servant (v.6-7a)

If I could summarize this amazing text it is simply this, Jesus gave up His rights and His recognition. His attitude was that even the public affirmation and acceptance and perception of equality with God was not something to be tightly held onto. He gave up His rights, His Divine prerogatives and privileges. This is what the condescension and incarnation of Christ means. It means that in a Sovereignly Supreme God there reigns a servant heart. It is just like Him to take on the nature of man and the servanthood that required, the author of Hebrews wrote (Hebrews 2:9-18).

Think how this would change your relationships. Stop grasping at your rights and prerogatives. Have a mentality that says, "I may have a right here in this thing, but I choose to give it up for the joy of others." How we need this attitude in a day where the world is fighting for human rights, women's rights, children's rights, even animal rights. Jesus clearly shows us how to think. Not that I do not have rights, but I value them for myself so little that I eagerly give them up. Often the pain in our relationships comes from the tight grip we have on our rights and our recognition.

Have this attitude of Jesus: I AM A SERVANT.

I am a Sacrifice (v.7b-9)

Look carefully at this sentence. Jesus' humiliation came about by obedience. It was obedience all the way to death, a criminal's kind of death, the cross. Now I want you to see this clearly. There is a kind of sacrifice that is *martyrdom*. It is a death imposed from the outside because of opposition on the part of others and faithfulness on our part. Yes, this kind of death is gloriously great when enabled by grace. And few of us are called on for this largely

because we have not the sacrificial attitude necessary to extract from us from our comfort and expel us into the danger of a people group dying and going to hell.

Then there is a kind of sacrifice that is *mortification*. It is a death to self and a death of self for the sake of others. When we come to the cross for the sake of ourselves, we will keep a hidden root of self alive to spring up later. But when we die to self *for the joy of God and the sake of others*, this is true death to self. Where do I get this? From the very nature of Jesus' death. Jesus did not die for Himself. Christ died for God and for His people. Why then do we find it so hard to die to self for the sake of our family at home and at church?

Further, this sacrifice involved submission. It involved obedience to the point of death. Do you get this? The harmony of our homes comes when we have the kind of humility that will fight with faith for obedience even if it means death. Now we know precious little about this. I know about myself that my own obedience to Christ and His Word is so little like this.

Have this attitude of Jesus: I AM A SACRIFICE.

The Crown and its Exaltation

(v.9-11)

What makes this kind of humble serving and sacrificing for joy in people worth it? What treasure can I put before children and teens and parents and singles to get your heart to say, "Yes. Yes, I will serve and sacrifice like that."

⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The Supreme Worth in His Exaltation

(v.9)

The supreme value of Jesus' glory and exalted name is a treasure worth selling for joy all we own and value. For this reason, Paul says. Because Jesus has humbled Himself as a servant and a sacrifice, God has exalted Him as supreme and sovereign. So, I will be a servant and a sacrifice for the glad joy of exalting Christ.

The Submissive Worship by His Creation

(v.10-11)

He was a servant and a sacrifice so that in the end all creation will serve and submit. This text just vibrates and pulses with what we need when serving and sacrificing is painful. Do you not think that just the simple humility that joyfully obeys and promotes others and pursues harmony will reach an amazing climax of gladness when Jesus is crowned and all around Him are perfected reflections of that multifaceted glory?

Reflect and Respond

BELIEVE THESE TRUTHS. Believe that there is truly encouragement, comfort, fellowship, affection and sympathy as a result of being in Christ.

DEFLATE YOURSELF. Stop looking in the mirror of your self-exaggerated esteem. Humble yourself in the Lord's sight and in your own sight. Don't be a pedestal person, up above others.

ESTEEM OTHERS. Lift up others in your own mind. Put others up above you in your honor and your estimation. Change the point of comparison, the perspective from which you see others and the place in which you position others.

PUT OTHERS INTEREST FIRST. Move towards others with their best interests in heart and mind. What does your friend, your spouse, your children really need? Do you seek to meet those needs or are you simply taking the easy way out?

Thank carefully about these questions, as we move toward a conclusion.

Is my attitude and conduct characterized by self-focused, self-serving promotion of my concerns and interests and complaining when I am not served?

Is my attitude and conduct filled with joyful, sacrificial self-denial?

Is the harmony of my relationships shaped by the cross, filled with joy, aimed at God's glory and enabled by God's power?

What will I do now, this afternoon, to repent myself and to promote this in my home?

So, for joy in people in our relationships:

Courageously stand together for the gospel...

Sacrificially put others first...

Humbly develop Jesus' attitude..

I am a servant...

I am a sacrifice...

All for the glory it will bring to Jesus on the final day.

Notes

³ It is as if the Bible is saying, “Do we have to show and prove to you that there is encouragement by being a Christian? Do we have to argue with you that love comforts; that we are to have fellowship by the Spirit that produces a spirit of cooperation? Does not the whole intersection of God's love and our lost condition mean that we choose and are spontaneously and deeply affected by the needs of others? Beloved, is it significant for our relationships that there is affection and compassion and tenderness in Christ?”

⁴ But what about when a selfish motive is involved in a good thing? Does this mean that if I am getting ready to do something good and I detect selfish motives that I stop doing what I am doing? If I detect that I do not have a joyful heart at the offering I stop giving? Is the wrong motivation a reason to halt a right action? Never. I must choose to have a right heart and a right motivation. I must repent of my wrongful attitude, speak truth to myself and look outward to please God and others in this action.