

Sermon 10-Apr-2016

Bethel Christian Fellowship, Fair Lawn, NJ

Strive together as one for the faith of the gospel: Phil. 1:27-2:4

[Opening prayer]

Dearly beloved brothers and sisters,

Have you ever thought hard and carefully about how to handle an upcoming interaction with a group of people?

When I used to work for a living (long ago) there would be times when groups would be formed to work together to prepare some work product.

Now it will be no surprise to any of you to learn that whenever a group of people get together, there are likely to be disagreements and a failure to see things in the same way. Sometimes these disagreements and failure to share a common vision can derail or even destroy a project.

So how do you get everyone to work together?

Well, if you are like me, here is what you don't do. You don't think ahead. You don't ask yourself, "What does this person think is important? What does he or she think is the right way to proceed? How can we come to some agreement? What can I do or say that will make the process more flexible and lead to the best possible outcome?"

No, if you are like me, you don't do that. You just barge into meetings and start talking without thinking. Open mouth. And all too often, as I'm sure you can guess, the result was disaster.

Now I'm sure you never do this kind of thing -- oh, wait, maybe I'm not so sure about that. One reason I think that maybe I'm not the only person who needs advice on how to do this better is because Paul here is talking to the Christians in Philippi and counseling them to be thoughtful and considerate and careful in how they live together.

Now when we think about Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi, what we probably remember best is the verses which come immediately after today's text, that is, Phil. 2:5-11. Paul begins "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus." Paul continues with a wonderful description of how Christ, who was himself God, humbled himself by also becoming man, died on the cross for our sake, and now is exalted by God, so "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow."

I'm pretty sure that I've heard Pastor Ron preach on this wonderful passage a couple of times. A sermon he preached in 2004 can be found on the church website if you are interested in looking it up.

But my reason for mentioning these verses this morning is to keep these opening words in mind -- "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus." Because our passage this morning, which leads up to these words, is all about our relationships with one another, our life in fellowship together.

The first thing Paul says in our passage is that, "whatever happens," the Christians at Philippi are to "conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (1:27).

Why does he say "whatever happens"? What is he talking about?

Well, if you were to cast your eyes over the earlier part of chapter 1, you would find Paul talking about the fact that he is in prison. Now you might think that being in prison would be discouraging. But Paul says that his imprisonment, far from showing the weakness of the good news of Christ, has had exactly the reverse impact: his imprisonment has shown the power of the gospel. In fact, many have come to faith through meeting him in prison, and others have been spurred by Paul's example to spread the gospel with more courage and vigor.

Paul knows that his imprisonment may lead to his execution. Still, he says, "whatever happens," -- this is where our text this morning picks up, "whatever happens" -- whether Paul is able to come visit them again, or detained in prison or even executed -- no matter what happens to Paul, the Philippians are to conduct themselves in a way that will show the *power* of the gospel. Paul's life in prison is showing the power of the gospel, and, like him, the Philippians are to show the power of the gospel by their life together.

In verses 27 to 30 Paul mentions three characteristics of conduct worthy of the gospel.

First, in verse 27, he says they should stand firm in one spirit, that is, they should deliberately stand together, united by a common vision.

Our ability to share in a common vision comes from being united to Christ by the Holy Spirit. If we try to do this in our own flesh, if we trust in ourselves and in always having identical interests, then our fellowship is going to fall apart. Self-interest means I can only finally be in union with people who are just like me.

Is everyone here at Bethel just exactly like each other? I don't think so. For Bethel to flourish, then I must be bound to my brothers and sisters by seeing Christ in them and standing firm in them in one spirit.

Next, also in verse 27, Paul says that the Philippians are to strive together as one person for the faith of the gospel.

Again, Paul has in mind our unity in the church. This unity is grounded on a common faith, a common gospel of Jesus Christ. And notice -- we are to *strive*, to *contend*, to *fight* for this faith.

I seriously doubt if any two people in our assembly this morning have identical understandings of everything which has been revealed to us about God and Christ and the Holy Spirit in the scriptures. Or to put it another way, when we start talking together about the details of how we understand what the scriptures say, I'm pretty sure that we are going to find points where we come to different conclusions.

But -- and this is a big "but" -- but yet we love each other as fellow believers in Christ, we pray for each other, we worship our God and Savior together in hymns and songs and praise and the Lord's Supper.

What I think Paul wants us to do is this: to understand that there is a common core of belief, without which you are not holding to the apostolic teaching. We must strive, we must fight for that common core. If you don't have that core, you don't have Christ, and you don't have the God who can only be approached through him. To depart from that common core is apostasy, with all the terrible consequences which the author of the book of Hebrews describes.

But there is also room for diversity within the fellowship. There are many ways in which we can disagree about the minor details while yet seeing each other as brothers and sisters with whom we worship and pray together.

Finally, in vv. 28 and 29, Paul exhorts the Philippian Christians not to be frightened by opponents.

In fact, Paul says that their courage in the face of their opponents would act as a sign to the opponents. These opponents will see that their attempts to harm the Christians are hopeless, and not only that, they will see from the courage displayed by the Christians that they themselves are doomed to destruction.

Despite this outcome, Paul says, the Philippians must expect to share in opposition and suffering, just as Paul is experiencing opposition and suffering.

You sometimes hear -- not in this fellowship, I know! -- that God has a wonderful plan for you and once you believe in Jesus all your troubles will go far away. Is that the message of the Bible? No, it is not. Does Paul say the Philippians will never experience suffering for the sake of Christ? No, he does not.

We should be aware that we will experience conflict for the cause of Christ. When we stand firmly together in the midst of conflict and suffering, we will be a witness to a lost world of the power that God gives us through Christ. And that is the kind of witness I want to be!

When we turn to the next section of our text, chapter 2, verses 1 to 4, we find Paul describing what life together, in union with Christ, looks like.

Paul begins by enumerating four realities which we have from being united with Christ.

He says "IF you have" these things, but the commentators make it clear that the Greek construction is not hypothetical. That is, Paul is not saying, well, I'm not sure whether you are encouraged by being united with Christ, but if you are, then No, the Greek construction actually represents what really is in fact the case: yes, you really have encouragement from being united with Christ, and because of this, then

Let me start unpacking these by suggesting that we enjoy union with Christ in two ways. First, there is the spiritual reality that in a mysterious way I, as an individual believer, have Christ's Spirit within me, animating me, spurring me on, and linking my life directly to Christ's life. As Paul says in Col. 3:3, if you have died in Christ, then your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

But in addition to this, we are “in Christ” when we are in fellowship in the church. That is, our life together is our life in Christ.

With this in mind, let’s look at the four realities which believers have in Christ. First, Paul refers to “encouragement” in verse 1. Here I think Paul refers both to the individual experience of union with Christ and to the fellowship experience. Individually, I find encouragement from knowing that when God looks at me, he sees not my failures and sins but Christ’s obedience and righteousness.

But in addition to this, Paul is saying that it is a reality that we receive encouragement from each other. It is tremendously encouraging for Joy and me to come here together with you, to share our common friendship, to make new friends, to break bread around the Lord’s table, to talk about our woes and our joys. In our fellowship as Christian brothers and sisters, we receive tremendous encouragement.

Next, there is comfort in his love: When I am sick or suffering conflict, then I can pray, “Oh, Jesus, how I love you, how you love me, comfort me,” and I do really, in fact, receive encouragement and comfort from knowing that prayer is heard.

Third, common sharing in the Spirit, or fellowship in the Spirit: when we have true fellowship together, it is only as empowered by the Holy Spirit. We share the Spirit, and because we see him in each other, we can be united to stand against the conflict and suffering in the world.

Finally, tenderness and compassion. Of course, this is how we directly receive God’s love in our hearts from the Spirit. We know God’s tenderness and compassion, because the Spirit makes them real to us. And because they are real to us, then we can have tenderness and compassion towards each other.

These are the realities of our Christian life together. We experience these internally, but especially we experience them as we live life together.

I know we aren’t perfect. I know we fight and scrap and show that the fall of Adam lives in me, right now. Yet, although I still wait longingly to be perfected, already I know encouragement and comfort and fellowship and tenderness and compassion, and most of all, I find these within the bonds of Christian fellowship.

Philippians is often called the epistle of joy because over and over again Paul refers to his joy and their joy. But in the context of these wonderful realities, Paul goes on to say

in verse 2 that his, Paul's, joy will be made complete -- complete! -- by the Philippians if they live a life which demonstrates true unity.

He refers to three ways in which these realities will be made apparent.

First, they (and we) will be "like-minded" ("having the same mind," ESV). In the context of the fellowship, this means having a common pattern both of thinking and of acting. For example, in terms of what Paul had said in the first part of today's text, they would have a common approach to thinking about the faith once delivered, and a common pattern of acting in response to the demands of living life together in Christ.

Next, they (and we) are to have the same love, being one in spirit and in mind. In the context of the fellowship, we know that when we look at each other, we see the Spirit of Christ in our brother or sister. And because we all have the same spirit, we share in Christ's love together, demonstrating that love to each other and the world.

That is why a hostile world looks at the church and grinds its teeth in anger and despair. Even in the face of suffering and persecution the fellowship shares a common love which demonstrates itself in oh so many practical ways.

And finally, Paul calls upon them (and us) to demonstrate unity and fellowship by displaying true humility. A person who is humble avoids ambition and conceit in the fellowship. He or she values others above himself or herself, and looks to the interests of the other person.

Do you recall my opening illustration, of how hard it can be to work together with other people to achieve a common goal? When I think back on some of the times when I was least successful, I almost always recall being bull headed and demanding that I get MY way. And isn't this just a manifestation of ambition and conceit? Why was I so sure that my way was always going to be the best way?

And looking back on my experience of many years of life in Christian fellowships, I guess I would conclude that Paul's advice here is not just theoretical, but very practical and very real. Over and over again I have found that when I have actually opened my ears (for once) and *listened* to what my brothers and sisters were saying to me, my eyes were opened to a better way, to a better understanding, to a better decision -- to a more mature and more perfect life together.

Avoid ambition and conceit. Be humble, so that you will in a tiny way imitate the great humility of Christ our Lord.

Application: Charity and practical wisdom

Let me close with two points of application which I take from a talk I heard recently.

<https://vimeo.com/53512349> : Stephen Fowl (Loyola University Maryland) - Theological Interpretation, Historical Criticism and the Ends of the Christian Life

The talk was given by a professor of theology named Stephen Fowl. In the talk Professor Fowl pointed out that when Christians want to live and work together, there are two practical virtues, two ways of deliberately being towards each other, which they need to cultivate. He named these two practical virtues Charity and Practical Wisdom.

By Charity I understand him to mean the virtue of giving the other person the benefit of being treated as an intelligent person. As such, he or she has a real point of view which should be carefully considered and pondered.

By Practical Wisdom I understand him to mean the cultivation of the practice of thinking hard about what the best course forward should be in a given situation, taking into account everything we are trying to be and do in the light of our union with Christ.

So what would this look like for you and me?

Do you recall that earlier I mentioned that I doubt whether any two of us agree totally about every nook and cranny of our understanding of scripture?

Suppose that comes up in the life of our fellowship. Maybe for example you and I don't agree on all the fine points of eschatology, about where and when Christ will return and bring the new heavens and the new earth.

If we are cultivating the practical virtue of Charity, then each of us will listen carefully to the other person. And what is more, we will not just listen, we will try to think about what he or she is saying, and how that fits in with *my* overall understanding.

At the end of the day, I may still not agree, but I will understand you better, and you will understand me better, and, in God's providence, we may find our own views being adapted to be more careful and comprehensive.

So that is one good result, don't you think?

But what about Practical Wisdom? What is that? I think "Practical Wisdom" is when we actually stop to *think* about how we want the fellowship to flourish. I stop to *think* about and *plan* how my speech and my actions and my prayers can enhance that flourishing. It is taking our responsibilities seriously, and trying to live up to them. It is very deliberately cultivating a common pattern of thinking and acting in the bond of love with each other.

When we do this, we demonstrate to each other the humility and love of Christ. May such attitudes fill our hearts and minds so that we may show our opponents and the world how much the love of Christ has made us new. Amen.