

Humility - the secret of unity

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- [0 : 0 0] Let's pray together. Our gracious God and our loving Heavenly Father, we thank you for our fellowship, our partnership in the Gospel of Christ.
- And we pray now as we meet that you will encourage us, that we might be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind, that we might strive side by side for the faith of that same Gospel.
- And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Now I apologise in advance if I do not look to this side of the church. I played golf last week and I pulled my neck and it's nothing personal, it's just a minor injury.
- That, I should say, was a lesson in humility and if you saw my scorecard you would know why. So, okay. The famous preacher George Muller of Bristol in the 19th century wrote his autobiography.
- And one of the characters he introduced his readers to was a Prussian, a German man by the name of Baron von Kamp. He was a German aristocrat. And he was a very kindly man.
- [1 : 1 5] He would often take pity on poor students and he would offer to support them during their studies. And there was once a student called Thomas who had run out of money.
- His dad had nothing to support him with. Thomas was a philosopher. And he didn't like Baron von Kamp's Christian faith but he thought, well I'm on hard times, I need to ask someone for help. So he wrote to him.
- And the Baron said, well young man, you're very welcome to come and stay with me while you're studying. You will have a room in my house. You'll have a place at my dinner table and you can stay at no cost. So Thomas turned up to the Baron's house and he moved in.
- And the Baron was very kind to him. He would greet him when he came in at night. He would help him with practical tasks. He would even sometimes help him to take his boots off. And Thomas just couldn't quite understand this.
- He wanted to argue with the Baron. He wanted to discuss philosophy and religion and take his Christian faith to pieces. And all the Baron seemed to do was want to help him. And one day he lost his temper and he said, Baron, why are you treating me so kindly?
- [2 : 1 9] Why are you so nice to me when I care nothing for you? And the Baron said to him, my dear boy, I learned from the Lord Jesus Christ what it means to be a servant.
- And I wish that you would read the Gospel of John for yourself. Good night. And he went to bed and Thomas went and he read the Gospel of John and he came to a living faith in the living Lord Jesus for himself.
- See, the Baron had learned from Christ what it meant to be a servant. And that is Paul's hope for the Philippian church and for our church today. The church in Philippi, a church Paul had founded, was in many respects a very positive church.
- Chapter 1, verse 4 says that Paul prays for them with joy because of their partnership, their fellowship, their sharing in the Gospel from the first day until now.

This was a church which had stuck by Paul as he'd been thrown into prison where he was writing from. It was a church which had continued to pray for him, to pray for his release and to pray for his ministry in prison.

[3 : 31] It was a church which had sent somebody to visit him in the form of Epaphroditus, his brother and fellow worker. And importantly, it was a church we learn in chapter 4 which had contributed financially to Paul's mission, which had demonstrated genuine partnership in genuine giving.

A church known for its partnership, its fellowship and its giving. And Paul is delighted that the church is united in chapter 1. And he longs that it will continue to be united in these verses we've read today.

1, verse 27. 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.

It is a manner of life worthy of the Gospel when Christians are united. But there is another reason, verse 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. 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, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

[5 : 02] The Philippian church was under attack. There were opponents. They were involved in a conflict. The same conflict Paul had. And Paul's conflict is very clear, isn't it?

He's in prison. He's in prison for preaching Christ, Christ as Lord in the middle of a Roman Empire, in which Caesar was Lord. And when Paul had gone to Philippi, he'd encountered that opposition as well.

You remember the scenes as he got to that city, how they met Lydia, and the Lord opened her heart to receive the message. And then they'd gone to the marketplace. And there was a girl possessed by a demon who made a lot of money for her managers by predicting the future.

And Paul had exorcised that young lady from the demon, liberating her from Satan. But her managers weren't very happy. And they said, well, our way of making money is gone now, isn't it?

Can't predict the future anymore. And so they brought trumped up charges against Paul. They got a crowd and they said, this man, he's disturbing our city. He is advocating customs not lawful for us to accept or practice.

[6 : 09] Paul was subject to false, slanderous, libelous accusations by people who misunderstood his message and misrepresented him in society.

And Paul was thrown in prison. And you know, of course, that God delivered him. But it's clear that when he moved on, the Philippian Christians were still facing opposition. People misunderstanding the gospel.

People misrepresenting them in the society around them. There was opposition to them and opposition to their message. And Paul says, you need to be united to withstand that opposition.

Some years ago, I worked in a hospital and one evening we had this lady come in with a child. She came in quite a lot and actually everything seemed to be in place for the child's investigation and treatment.

But she was just very anxious and she came to the hospital for reassurance. And I explained to her that everything was in place. It just had to wait for the tests and so on. But sensing her anxiety, I said to her, well, do you have a faith that helps you when you're anxious at all?

[7 : 18] Or could I pray for you? And she said, no, I don't have a faith. That's fine. Thank you very much. And so we moved on to talk about something else. The next day, this lady phoned the consultant and she complained that the doctor had no interest in her son's medical condition and only wanted to talk about religion, which I don't think was quite true, but that's how it came across.

And I was on night shift the next evening and so she phoned up the registrar at the start of the shift to tell him just to watch the doctor that he wasn't going to talk to too many people about his faith.

And she phoned up this friend of mine and she explained the situation. And he said, well, I appreciate and respect that, but I share that faith.

And the registrar was a very keen Christian from Edinburgh. Christians need to stand by each other. They need to be united such that when they face the pressure of an unbelieving world, they will be able to strive for the gospel.

The Philippians needed to know that. They were striving against each other in chapter 4, verse 2. These two ladies, Iodia and Syntyche, fighting. We're not sure of what, but they were striving against each other.

[8 : 33] And Paul says, no, be united around the truth of the gospel. And so we need to know that because the opposition hasn't gone away.

And as you read your news and as you study what's going on in the world this week, all sorts of things happening. There was the case of another paediatrician who was struck off the adoption register for refusing to sanction same-sex adoption, for taking a biblical stance on the family.

Next week, the MSPs are debating end-of-life assistance, whether it should be legal for a doctor to end the life of a patient at their request. A fire brigade in England last week dropped any Christian references from the Remembrance Day parade.

There is opposition to the Christian gospel and to the standards of the gospel at every level of society. And Paul says, you need to be united. So there's a clear challenge there, isn't there?

Who are we striving against? With whom is our conflict? And as we think about that, we can look at our spheres of Christian fellowship and say, are we building one another up?

[9 : 48] Or are we tearing each other down? In our youth groups, our youth fellowship groups, are we building one another up in love? Or are we tearing one another down with our attitudes and with our words and with our behaviour?

Within university, Christian unions, and often they're not very united, are they Christian unions? I remember my time at university. Are we building one another up? Strengthening one another?

Or are we continually fighting and quarrelling about some secondary issue which really isn't all that important? In our workplace, are we standing with other Christians?

Are we demonstrating love and support and friendship to them and standing by their sides if they come under false accusations? Or are we relationships with other churches how do we relate to people in different fellowships?

Is it with ongoing prayer and partnership? Or is it with belittling comments and uncaring attitudes? Who are you striving against? Are you striving with your brothers and sisters?

[10 : 54] Or are you striving, like you O'DK, and Syntyche against them? Paul says, chapter 2, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord, and of one mind.

Because Paul realises that unity is a very fragile thing. And one of the greatest threats to it, verses 3 and 4, is simply human pride.

Verse 3, Do nothing from rivalry, selfish ambition, vainglory, 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. When I was at university, I was actually in a band, which probably comes as a surprise to anyone that has sung a hymn standing next to me, but it was a bit of a joke band.

I was the joke, and the rest of the band were the musicians. But there was a battle of the bands, and we decided to enter it. And I had a friend who was an incredibly gifted guitarist, another friend who was a drummer, another friend who was a bass guitarist.

[12 : 15] And we formed this little group, and we sang some cover versions. And quite remarkably, we won. The Battle of the Bands. And this went to our heads, so we decided to play an open-air concert in one of the colleges, and after that, the band was disbanded.

But what I discovered was the band sort of quietly fizzled out, and then a few months later, every other member of the band was actually in a new band, with the exception of myself.

And I found this a little bit odd, but I supported them, and I went to see them, and I have to say, they were quite good, even their new singer was quite capable. But they had a problem in that band, because the guitarist and the singer had a very different idea of where the band was going.

It's fair to say, each of them considered themselves the talent in the band, and as such, there was this constant tension and friction, this rivalry. And it came as no surprise when about a year later, that band also disbanded.

It's a danger in every walk of life, isn't it? Verse 3, rivalry, selfish ambition, conceit, and verse 4, looking to our own interests.

[13 : 29] And that was what was threatening the church in Philippi. In chapter 1, verse 15, we find that some people were preaching Christ from envy and rivalry, preaching from selfish ambition.

We're not told exactly why. Maybe they wanted a reputation as a preacher, maybe there was some financial gain in it, but they were preaching Christ out of their own motives, for their own glory.

And in chapter 2, we discover elsewhere in the Christian church this was going on. Verse 20, Paul describes Timothy, a fellow brother, I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.

They all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. There was an endemic selfishness going around the churches at that time. And Paul says, don't let it infect you.

It is the enemy of humility. A problem in the first century and a problem in every century among the people of God. You remember Moses in the wilderness told the numbers and Miriam and Aaron came up to him and said, why are you so exalted among the people?

[14 : 40] A few chapters later, Korah leads his rebellion saying, why only Aaron making these sacrifices? Can't we do the same? You remember the disciples on their journey to Jerusalem with Christ arguing among themselves which of them is the greatest?

Which of them would sit at Christ's right hand and is left in glory? And in the early church, one of the earliest and the greatest splits in the church was caused by a man who was described as his contemporaries as full of pride, loving to be the first.

Selfish ambition, conceit, pursuing their own interests. And Paul says, the remedy to that is to have the right mind, the right humility, which is the mind of Christ.

Verse 5, have this mind among you, which is yours in Christ Jesus. we've already thought of Prince William and Kate, his fiancée, and it's a wonderful thing to look forward to, isn't it, a royal wedding.

And last year, of course, William was in the news because on Christmas Eve or Boxing Day or sometime in the Christmas period, he left his palace and he spent the night sleeping behind a bin near one of the London underground stations.

[15 : 59] He wanted to experience firsthand what it was like for a homeless person in London over Christmas. It's quite a picture, isn't it? A prince leaving the comfort and the opulence and the luxury of a palace and sleeping in a bag behind a bin.

Well, says Paul, that is a small picture, isn't it, of what we read in verse 6 to 11. Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

Christ, in the form of God, takes the form of a servant. He who dwelt in unapproachable light became flesh and dwelt among us, fallen humanity.

He who knew the riches of heaven for our sake became poor, impoverished himself. He who was surrounded by the worship and the praise of the entire heavenly host entered into our world and suffered the rejection and abuse and insults of violent men.

He was the form of God and took the form of a servant. And we see this supremely in Mark's gospel as Christ comes to minister to the people of Israel, serving them and healing their sick, feeding the hungry, comforting the downcast, opening the eyes of the blind and restoring the legs of the lame.

[17 : 47] We see it in the gospel of John when as he approaches Jerusalem riding upon that donkey and the great crowd says, Hosanna, blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord, the great king entering the capital.

And he takes his disciples upstairs to a room and he begins to wash their feet and he takes their dirt and their filth and their muck upon himself in that upper room.

The son of man, he taught them, came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Verse 8, being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

To the Romans, crucifixion was an unimaginable horror reserved for the worst criminals. To the Jews, it was seen as nothing more than being under the curse of God, hanging from a tree.

To be rejected by men and under the curse of the living God. Christ came from the highest of highs and was taken to the lowest of lows, forsaken by his father, rejected by his people, bearing their sin.

[19 : 09] He stepped down from his throne and was hung upon a tree. Verse 9, 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.

And Paul here puts his finger on a theme that runs all the way through Scripture. That those who humble themselves will be exalted. Conversely, those who exalt themselves will be humbled.

Supremely seen in Christ, who humbled himself and God exalted him. He went as low as it was possible to go. And God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name above every name.

All the way through Scripture. from the day the men in Babel said, Come, let us build for ourselves a city and let us make a name for ourselves. A society ordered with no reference to the living God.

And God scattered them in the pride of their hearts. And one chapter later we find Abraham, the father of faith. And God speaks to him and he believes God when he says, I will make of you a great nation and I will make your name great.

[20 : 46] Those who humble himself he will exalt. But those who exalt themselves he will humble. And so Paul says to the believers in Philippi, how are you treating one another?

Are you humbling yourselves before one another? doing nothing from rivalry? Counting others more significant than yourselves? Looking out for the interests of others? Or are you exalting yourselves over one another?

Seeking for power? Seeking for prestige? Seeking for pre-eminence in your fellowship? And he says, if you humble yourself you will be exalted. But if you exalt yourself you will be humbled.

Well, they're very challenging words, aren't they? They're certainly challenging to me as I read them. There was a second century preacher who wrote a book on patience. He said, I'm writing this book because I'm not very patient and I hope that in writing this book I will become more patient.

And as I have been preparing this sermon I feel the same. I'm not very humble but in looking at the example of Christ I hope that in some way I will become more humble. There is much to be encouraged about in Paul's assessment of the church in Philippi and we ought to take encouragement ourselves that in our fellowship there is partnership in the gospel striving side by side against our opponents.

[22 : 14] That there is genuine fellowship exercised in visitation in prayer in gospel giving. that there are lives lived worthy of the gospel united in spirit and in mind and in love.

And Paul says take encouragement from that. Verse 28 this is a clear sign of your salvation. It is an evidence of a work of grace among you when people are united in Christ.

But there is an early warning as well. The first seeds of pride were creeping into Philippi. the first cracks were appearing in the plasterboard and so Paul wants to nip them in the bud and he warns these believers in love not to get proud not to become self-seeking but to always look to the example of Christ and to have his mind among them humbling themselves before one another humbling themselves before God and trusting that in his time he will exalt them.

So I pray this week as we go to our separate homes and our workplaces and our offices that we will be united that we will individually and corporately stand firm and strive in the faith of the gospel and seek the interest not of ourselves but of Jesus Christ and our brothers and sisters in him.

Let's pray together. Father we do thank you for our Lord Jesus who though he was in the form of God took the form of a servant gave his life as a ransom for us that we might be freed from our sins from Satan from the fear of death and from the wrath to come.

[24 : 06] And so we ask Lord by the inspiration of your spirit that we will live lives which are worthy of him that we will have that same mind among us a mind of humility of seeking to love and serve others and seeking above all to glorify that name which is above every name the name which by your grace we have the great privilege of bearing the name of your son our Lord Jesus Christ.

And so we ask you to be with us as we go our separate ways be with us each day this week and empower and equip us to live lives which are worthy of your kingdom and we pray this in his most blessed name Amen Lord Jesus Christ for playing in Bear through the things have caused only a lot of many things that we need to know at the end the prayer and look and see there's some Gosthen where we can enter a chapter of the kids inesting doing that we with you as well as we may be with you as we pray