

The Relationship Between Humility, Unity, and Gospel Work

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[0 : 00] Edward Lobb has been going through Philippians with us for a few weeks now, and we're looking forward to hearing from God's Word again this morning. So that's Philippians chapter 2, and we'll start the reading from verse 1.

So, 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.

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.

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. 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.

[1 : 51] And every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of the Lord endures forever. Amen.

Good morning, friends, and good morning to those who are watching from Bath Street and from Queen's Park and perhaps elsewhere. Very good to be with you all. Well, let's turn to Philippians chapter 2 and verses 1 to 11, which is our passage for this morning.

Philippians chapter 2, verses 1 to 11. And my title for this morning is The Relationship Between Humility, Unity, and Gospel Work, which may sound rather bland, but this passage is not bland.

It's one of the most startling passages in the New Testament, as I hope we will see together in the coming minutes. Now, it is, of course, a continuation and development of what Paul has been saying to the Philippian Christians in chapter 1.

Just look at that first word in chapter 2, the word so, which means, of course, what I'm about to say is going to spell out the implications of what I have just been writing about.

[3 : 13] So let's look back a few verses to see the platform from which Paul launches himself into this early part of chapter 2. It's about the overriding importance of unity in the church at Philippi.

Look at chapter 1, verse 27, picking it up halfway through the verse. One spirit, one mind, side by side.

Now, this is battle talk, isn't it? There are opponents who are resisting the message of the gospel at Philippi. And if this opposition is to be successfully countered, it's imperative that the Christians develop and maintain real unity.

Real unity, not a superficial sense of, isn't it nice for us to be together, but a deeply founded, rock-solid oneness of mind and spirit. Oneness of mind, that's an intellectual unity, and oneness of spirit being a unity of heart and friendship.

And Paul goes on to say in verse 29 that this battling for the truth of the gospel will inevitably involve suffering. So he says in verse 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.

[4 : 46] So this is not a program for the faint-hearted. And as Paul puts it in verse 30, he says you're going to be engaged in the same conflict that I have been engaged in and still am engaged in as I write to you from my prison in Rome.

Now, it's important for us to realize that the Christian life in modern Britain is equally a life of warfare and conflict, just as much as it was for Paul in the first century.

It may seem very safe and peaceful sitting here in this quiet building, smiling calmly at each other and listening to the soothing sound of violins and the oboe and the piano.

But the gospel faces fierce opposition today in this country. And Paul's message to the Philippians is equally a message to us to be willing for Christ's sake to suffer and to engage in conflict.

Now, our conflict today is not so much with individuals, although there are articulate individuals who write and speak fiercely against the message of the gospel. But our conflict is primarily against ideas and philosophies and ideologies which deny God, which deny him as creator, saying that the origin of the universe is merely random and purposeless, denying him as judge, denying him as judge, saying that there is no God and therefore there can be no accountability to him.

[6 : 14] Philosophies which deny our need of eternal salvation, which deny human sin, which deny heaven and hell. Now, friends, if we are serious about our faith, we are embattled.

It's part of the package. It goes with the territory of being a Christian. The church is both a hospital and a barracks. It's a hospital where we receive the healing medicine of the gospel, the medicine which gradually puts together our broken lives and our shattered identities.

But it's also a barracks. It's a training ground for soldiers. So as the medicine gets into us and heals us, it strengthens us so that we can then pick up and strap on the weapons of gospel warfare.

And Paul is saying to us that we will never engage fruitfully in gospel warfare unless we develop real unity. As one chapter one, verse 27 puts it standing firm in one spirit with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel and not frightened in anything by our opponents.

And in the early verses of chapter two, Paul explains to us how this real unity is to be developed. So let's try now to follow the line of Paul's thinking.

[7 : 36] In chapter two, verses one to four, he picks up again his insistence that the Philippian Christians work to build up their unity. We have, first of all, an if clause in verse one.

Now, we'll come back to that a little bit later. But after this if clause, he begins to press his point home in verse two. And just notice the unity theme here picked up. Verse two, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

It's almost a repeat of chapter one, verse 27. But in verses three and four of chapter two, Paul then teaches us how to grow in this full accord and unity of mind.

And it's really quite surprising. How would we imagine he would teach us to grow in unity? Well, he doesn't say, let's call a church conference and we'll have a day studying Christian unity.

No, he says, you must learn to turn your gaze away from yourselves and outwards to each other. You must learn to appreciate and love and value one another.

[8 : 45] Look at verse three. Do nothing from rivalry, 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.

So what he's really saying is we human beings are naturally full of ourselves, our own plans, our own interests, our own ambitions.

We're self-centered by nature. Number one comes first. And we're naturally full of rivalry and conceit. We want to be top dog, the biggest dog in the kennel, the ruling cockerel in the farmyard.

We're conceited by nature. We think that most of the talents obviously came to us and not many to our fellow Christians. We preen ourselves and stand on top of the dunghill and crow loudly like a cockerel.

Now, brothers and sisters, this must stop. Paul is saying to the Philippians rather verse three in humility. Count others more significant than yourselves.

[9 : 51] The key word here is the word humility. And verse four, just notice how this is addressed to individuals in the church. Let each one of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Now, this is revolutionary teaching to individuals like us who are naturally self-centered. Paul is commanding a total revolution in the way that we think of ourselves and of other people.

But what is going to persuade the Philippians to make such a radical change as this? You see, they might read verses three and four and then say to Paul, Paul, help us, brother.

It's difficult. You're asking us to develop humility towards each other. But can you please expand on that teaching? Can you give us perhaps an illustration, an example to help us to see what this kind of behavior looks like?

Yes, he says, I can and I will. Verse five. You need to develop a mind, a pattern of thinking, which is yours in Christ Jesus.

[11 : 00] You're in Christ and therefore his mind needs to grow in you. You're in him in the sense that you belong to him and he belongs to you. You live in him and he lives in you.

And if you are to grow in the unity that is necessary to your being made fit for conflict, you must grow in humility. So I'm going to teach you now how Jesus exemplified humility to an extraordinary and shocking degree so that you can learn to pattern your behavior on his so that you can learn to think as Jesus thinks.

So verse six. He has always been God. Paul puts it here. He was in the form of God.

And that's not a very good translation. It would be truer to say being in his very nature, God, not just in the form of God, but in very nature, God. And this is consistent with everything that the New Testament teaches about Jesus, that he possesses full deity from everlasting to everlasting.

As John puts it in the opening words of his gospel, in the beginning was the word, Jesus, and the word was with God and the word was God.

[12 : 16] By which he means was always God. So as the fully divine son of God, Jesus has no beginning. He had a beginning as a human being just over 2000 years ago, but he was always God truly and fully from everlasting.

Now back to verse six. He was and is truly God and is equal to God, the father and has the same nature as God, the father. But he did not count his equality with God as a privilege to be held onto and guarded at all costs, grasped hold of and retained come what may.

No. He left his glorious divine privileges. And verse seven. He emptied himself or he made himself nothing. In other words, it was of his own will and volition that he laid aside his glory.

He never laid aside his deity. But he laid aside his glory. As the hymn puts it that we sang a moment ago from heaven, you came helpless, babe entered our world.

Your glory veiled. Now, Paul has not finished his description of the extent to which Jesus humbled himself. Not at all.

[13 : 33] The Philippians must keep reading if they're to know what true self humbling looks like. And we must also. Verse seven, then taking the form of.

A servant. Slave is a better translation of the word. Taking the form of a slave. Now, that would have shocked the Philippians because they knew what slavery was really like.

Philippi was a Roman colony like a mini Rome. And many of its inhabitants there were slaves. The whole Roman Empire ran on slavery. Slaves were a commodity to be bought and sold.

They were the lowest of the low. A bit like people of the lowest caste in Hindu society in India today. I visited India briefly a number of years ago.

And I remember one day in a hotel lobby. I witnessed an Indian man of high caste speaking to a hotel employee who was obviously a man of very low caste.

[14 : 31] The brutality and contempt in the high caste man's voice really shocked me. Really shocked me. I'd never seen anything like it in Britain. But that's the kind of treatment that slaves would regularly receive in a city like Philippi.

But it would have shocked the Philippians who knew about slavery to read that Jesus took the form of a slave. But that word form, again, is not the best translation here.

I pointed out that in verse six, Jesus was in very nature God. And in the same way and using the same word, Paul's point in verse seven is that Jesus of his own will took on the very nature of a slave.

A shocking thought, especially to Philippians of the higher levels of society. However, back in chapter one, verse one of this letter, Paul had described himself and Timothy as slaves of King Jesus.

Paul and Timothy, the lowest of the low, slaves of a king who is the lowest of the low. Jesus took on the nature of a slave. Now, Paul is not finished yet.

[15 : 42] In verse eight, he's going to push the Philippians to a further point of shock and even horror. Verse eight, and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death.

Even death on a cross. Not just death, death on a cross. Capital punishment is something that seems pretty remote from British people today.

We have, I guess, a hazy national memory of people being hanged at Tyburn Hill in London centuries ago. We perhaps have a national memory of martyrs being burned at the stake during the Reformation.

Or of William Wallace being drawn and quartered. But it's all pretty remote from people in Britain today. It was not remote for the Philippians in the first century.

Crucifixions were common throughout the Roman Empire. The Philippians would often have seen men crucified outside the city walls. Now, people of high standing and Roman citizens like Paul, if they had to be executed, they were never crucified.

[16 : 51] Crucifixion was reserved for slaves and the worst kind of criminal. Now, friends, I won't attempt to describe here just what crucifixion was actually like.

Suffice it to say that the many paintings there are in art galleries, many of the medieval paintings that depict the crucifixion of Jesus, simply airbrush out the gruesome realities.

Crucifixion was quite simply the most brutal, vile form of torture that human beings have ever devised from each other. And Paul says to us in verse 8 that Jesus willingly submitted to death by crucifixion.

Look at Paul's wording there in verse 8. He humbled himself. He humbled himself. He wasn't pushed into it by some outside agency. He did it voluntarily himself.

Now, why is Paul writing verses 6 to 8 to the Philippians? Look back to verse 5. This is the mind, he's saying, that you need to develop in yourselves if you are to learn to abandon the selfish ambition and conceit that you have towards each other.

[18 : 05] Jesus served you. He became a slave for you. He came from the highest heights, and he lowered himself to the lowest depths for your sake. Now, Philippians, follow his example.

So why did Jesus make himself nothing, empty himself, and humble himself to the point of death on a cross? Paul doesn't really spell out the answer to that question in this passage, but he often does elsewhere.

The reason Jesus humbled himself was not so that people should look at him and say, what a humble man that is. It was to save us, to rescue us for eternal life.

There was no other way to bring us eternal rescue. The wages of sin is death. And no one but Jesus was fitted to receive that dreadful wage.

His death was not self-regarding. It was not, look at me, aren't I wonderful? It was endured for others. It was for you and me. He came and endured this dreadful torment to rescue us from the jaws of hell.

[19 : 11] His death was other people-centered, not self-centered. I'd like to read you a passage from C.S. Lewis's book called Miracles, which sheds a lot of light on the reason why Jesus humbled himself to the point of death on a cross.

C.S. Lewis, in the Christian story, God descends to re-ascend. He comes down, down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity, down to the very roots and seabed of the nature he had created.

But he goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with him. Picture a strong man stooping lower and lower to get himself underneath some great complicated burden.

He must stoop in order to lift. He must almost disappear under the load before he incredibly straightens his back and marches off with the whole mass swaying on his shoulders.

Or one may think of a diver, first reducing himself to nakedness, then glancing in mid-air, then gone with a splash, vanished, rushing down through green and warm water into black and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the death-like region of ooze and slime and old decay.

[20 : 43] Then up again, back to color and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he breaks surface again, holding in his hand the dripping precious thing that he went down to recover.

He and it are both colored now that they have come back up into the light. Down below, where it lay colorless in the dark, he lost his color too.

We sing in our Christmas hymn, he came down to earth from heaven, he who is God and Lord of all.

It was a very long way down, but he did it for our sake, making himself nothing, becoming a slave, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

As Isaiah puts it, his appearance was so marred beyond human semblance and his form marred beyond that of the children of mankind.

[21 : 46] And yet Isaiah goes on, he was wounded for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace.

And with his stripes, we are healed. Now, Paul is saying to the Philippians, that mindset that Jesus displayed, serving himself, sorry, not himself, but the needs of others, serving them in the most sacrificial way, even to the point of death by crucifixion, that is the way of thinking that you must develop in your relationships with others in the church.

It is that mindset which will enable you to live as I'm asking you to do in verse two, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

Well, now, with the example of Jesus in mind, let's turn back to the first four verses of the chapter where Paul unearthed the problems that the Philippians had, the problems that were threatening their unity and their ability to stand firm against their opponents.

So, verse one. So, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy.

[23 : 06] Now, that if at the start of the verse is not an if of uncertainty. Paul is not suggesting that perhaps there's no encouragement in Christ and in the other things he mentions there.

That is an if of massive assurance. You could rephrase it like this so as to get the sense of it. He's saying, because there is so much encouragement in Christ, so much comfort from love, the love of God and of Christ towards us, so much fellowship in the Spirit, such abundant affection and sympathy, complete my joy by becoming and being deeply united with each other.

So the encouragement, the comfort, the participation, the affection and the sympathy, these are great incentives to the church to love one another.

And it's then in verses 3 and 4 that Paul puts his finger on the kind of attitudes that were undermining the unity of the Philippian church. Verses 3 and 4 diagnose the problems, problems which can only be removed from their church if the Christians develop the mindset of Jesus' self-humbling.

So let me read verses 3 and 4. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.

[24 : 32] Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. And there are three problems mentioned there. Rivalry or selfish ambition, conceit, secondly, and thirdly, self-interest in verse 4.

Now we might immediately think, but aren't these such petty things, trivial things? Paul, however, makes it clear that they are serious problems, so serious that he has to bring the whole weight of verses 5 to 8 to bear on them.

So let's consider these problems, these features of our humanity which can so undermine the loving unity of the church. Selfish ambition and conceit first.

They usually go hand in hand. The conceited person feels a rivalry very often towards other people. Looks at himself and says, you know, I'm really rather good at the things that I can do.

I'm accomplished. I'm skillful. The church ought to be very glad to have me as a member because, though I say it myself, I have a lot to offer. I'm not sure that I'm appreciated or recognized quite as much as I deserve, but at least in my own heart I recognize that I'm the bee's knees, the cat's whiskers and the cream on the milk.

[25 : 53] Now, friends, any of us is capable of thinking of ourselves like that, aren't we? It is our natural go-to position. We have this powerful tendency to want to be noticed and praised.

And with this natural conceit, there comes a sense of personal superiority over other people. I'm accomplished. I'm skillful. That quickly becomes, I'm better at my thing than he is or I'm smarter at my job than she is.

Isn't this a deeply rooted tendency in our nature? Now, think of the many different skills or forms of service that we can offer and do offer to each other in the life of the church.

I'll just mention a number. Skills at welcoming people. Skills at offering friendship and hospitality. Skills at catering. Administration. Cleaning.

Building work. Electronic communication. IT. That stands for internal therapy. Music. Leading groups.

[26 : 57] Teaching. Preaching. Handling money. Artwork and design. Marriage preparation. Offering guidance and advice to others. Caring for the elderly and the infirm.

Teaching the young. Encouraging the young. Even holiday care of somebody else's dog occasionally. The list goes on and on. There are so many things that we do for each other.

Good things and right things. The problem is we can become proud of ourselves and feel superior. And then we can crave a certain recognition and feel a bit cross if we don't get it.

So we might say well I'm obviously better than she is at the thing that I do well. So why is she asked to do it more often than I am? So then I get sulky and sour. I can look like somebody who's just had his mouth smacked.

Cross. I withdraw a little bit. I might even gossip to other people about my sense of things being unfair to me. And the result is that my love for others is diminished.

[28 : 01] In fact my very capacity to love others becomes diminished. And the unity and joy of the church is in some degree undermined. And Paul is saying to the church stop it.

Verse 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit. But and here's the remedy for the problem in humility count others more significant than yourselves.

So that is the essence of humility. This is the mind of Christ outlined in verses 6 to 8. He counted the needs of lost mankind as being more significant than his own comfort.

He could have held on like a limpet to his exalted status being equal with God the Father but he let it all go in the interests of grimy and wretched sinners like you and me.

He left the dazzling courts of heaven and made himself nothing. He took the nature of a slave. He submitted to the most horrifying death death on a cross for us.

[29 : 07] He exemplified in the words of verse 3 what it is in humility to count others more significant than himself. He exemplified the attitude of verse 4 looking not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others.

He was utterly centered on other people. He kept his glory veiled. So how do we do this?

How do we learn to do it? How do we who are naturally conceited and self-important how do we learn in humility to count others more significant than ourselves? How do we learn in the words of verse 4 to look to the interests of others?

Well no doubt there are many different ways in which we can learn these things but I want to mention just one way and this is very practical and we can all start doing it in about 10 minutes time when the service is over and it's this that when we talk to each other talk to another person let's try in our conversations as much as possible to talk about them rather than about ourselves.

Just imagine yourself in a few minutes two of you standing together each with a cup of coffee in your hand you smile at each other and then you begin to talk but your thinking your approach is then shaped by verse 4 so you're asking yourself what are his interests?

[30 : 36] You gently try to find out what his concerns are it's not that you're being prying or nosy you want to express love and support so you ask him what he's up to he tells you about his work about his family his vegetable patch his elderly father who's not very well his daughter who's just passed grade 2 at the piano he may open up a little bit about some anxiety and you might be able to help him or you might be able to recommend somebody else who can help him you might be able to guide him into a growth group or a welcome team so that he can begin to be more involved in the church you might be able to invite him home to have lunch with you today now conversation of course is a two-way thing if friendship begins to grow of course he will be interested in you as well as vice versa so then you'll begin to talk to him about your vegetable patch and your elderly father and perhaps your own anxieties so it's not one-way traffic if it's to be real but if we can concentrate on the other person's concerns and interests and make that a habit in our relationships with everybody else the unity of the church will really grow we will really be getting to know each other we shan't be the kind of church where people rush away at the end of Sunday service and hardly greet each other or even catch each other's eye which does happen in some churches fellowship is really friendship friendship rooted in the Lord and the gospel and where that kind of friendship grows rivalry and conceit wither and this sort of friendship grows right across the old divides and boundaries young and old black and white working class middle class we see each other as real human beings we learn to appreciate and value each other as verse 3 puts it we learn in humility to count others more significant than ourselves the bubbles of our pride and pomposity and standoffishness get pricked and it's all because of Jesus' example shown here in verses 6 to 8 there was no pride in him he was willing to leave his glory behind and in C.S. Lewis' phrase to go down to the very roots and seabed of the nature that he had created now where this is happening the church really begins to function just look back to chapter 1 verse 27 to function in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ and then still in chapter 1 verse 27 we shall be able to stand firm in one spirit with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel and not frightened in anything by our opponents standing firmly together as a church we shall be able to expose the folly and emptiness of the cultural ideologies which are carrying western society away with the force of a flood and we shall not be carried away with them now perhaps you're asking what about verses 9 to 11 where do they fit in well I hope you're asking that question stick with me for just a few minutes more we're on the home straight now look again at verse 5 because verse 5 governs the whole passage from verse 6 to verse 11 verse 5 have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus everything from verse 6 to verse 11 is the mind of Christ Jesus which needs to develop in us and which will shape our conduct towards each other enabling us to love each other with humility and Paul is describing here this mind of Christ Jesus in two very distinct parts part 1

verses 6 to 8 he humbled himself part 2 verses 9 to 11 therefore God exalted him so verses 6 to 8 describe what Jesus did of his own free will he became a slave he made himself nothing he emptied himself he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death that's what he did in his human flesh during his short life as a man on earth but verses 9 to 11 describe what God subsequently did for him God then exalted him and gave him the greatest name of all a name so great and awesome that at the sound of it every knee should bow and every creature on the earth above the earth and under the earth should confess that he is Lord you see Jesus knew this is his mind think of his mind he knew that after his suffering and death he was going to be raised and then taken up to the glory of heaven he said repeatedly to the disciples you must understand that the son of man will be rejected by the Jewish leaders that he will be killed and on the third day he will rise and it was that certain prospect of his resurrection and ascension that sustained him through the agony of his suffering as Hebrews chapter 12 puts it who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross despising its shame and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God a certain joy of returning to the glory and love of the father sustained Jesus through the horrific ordeal that he had to endure now Paul is saying to the Philippians this mind of Christ Jesus this self understanding of Jesus is what needs to shape your understanding of yourselves both part one verses six to eight and part two verses nine to eleven so you're to follow his example in self humbling it's what he did he humbled himself and you must humble yourselves and get rid of your rivalries and your self-centeredness but bear in mind your glorious and eternal future because your future is patterned on his future he humbled himself to the depths and God exalted him to the heights in fact in his own preaching

Jesus often said to the crowds he who humbles himself will be exalted and verses six to eleven are simply unpacking the meaning of that short statement Jesus humbled himself and then God the father exalted him so this is to be the mind the mindset of the Christian during our life on earth we learn to humble ourselves to become the servants the slaves of others and to be prepared if necessary even to lay down our physical lives for other Christians but it's the prospect of our glorious final exaltation that gives us the motivation to serve others and to look to their interests rather than our own this mind of Jesus is just so different from our natural earthly mindset our natural mindset is to serve ourselves to put our own interests and pleasures before anything else to suck as much pleasure out of our short earthly life as we possibly can the motto of the man of the world is let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die but the Christian says tomorrow we live an eternity of bliss and joy and delight lies before us it's the assurance of that glory that strengthened Jesus to become the slave of all and to die for us and it's the assurance of that glory that enables us to serve others and to love others in humility in the church so what is Paul's goal in giving the Philippians and us this teaching well there it is back in chapter 1 verse 27 it's the goal of a properly functioning and really effective church

I want to hear of you says Paul 1 27 that you're standing firm in one spirit with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel and not frightened in anything by your opponents well let's pray together our dear God and Father we praise you for the pattern of the life of Jesus for the way that he humbled himself and then you raised him exalted him to glory at your right hand fill our own minds we pray with that same pattern of self humbling and the assurance of future glory so that we can serve each other with humility and strive side by side for the faith of the gospel unafraid of any kind of opposition and we ask it in Jesus name

Amen Amenlia