

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (12-5-1991 Cleland Baptist Church)

Philippians 2:1-4

Additional Bible reading: John 13:1-17

Introduction

Paul had less cause to criticize this church at Philippi than others. It had many excellent qualities. He described them his **joy and crown** (Philippians 4:1), they were supportive of his work (Philippians 1:5), and were generous in sending gifts when no one else bothered (Philippians 4:14-18). Their only weakness was a tendency to quarrel and be disunited. Did they see too much of one another? Did they get on each other's nerves? Certainly some were too critical and faultfinding.

This is always a danger in a healthy church. The members may be in earnest, their beliefs really matter to them, and they may have definite ideas and plans about progress. But the greater their enthusiasm, the greater the danger of collision. Someone once commented that there was "no friction in the graveyard" – insinuating that there was plenty behind the church doors. Someone else once said, "I love mankind. It's people I can't stand."

When there is disunity smouldering under the surface, there is always the potential danger of explosion. It also weakens the church's witness before the world. People get to know, and make the most of it. We owe it to ourselves, to the world, and above all to the Lord to live in harmony and fellowship. Paul gives his answer in two stages – (a) personal appeal (Philippians 2:1-4), and (b) Christ's example (Philippians 2:5-11).

Statement of Christian position

Paul begins by telling them of four things that are true. **If** (meaning "since") **you have any encouragement from being united with Christ** (Paul had been authorized by the Lord to exhort and encourage them), **if any comfort from His love** (this could mean from the love of fellow Christians because the "His" is not actually there in the Greek), **if any fellowship with the Spirit** (since the Holy Spirit indwells and lives in us all), **if any tenderness and compassion** (this could either mean their affection for Paul, or their knowledge of Paul's affection for them), **then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose** (Philippians 2:1,2). In other words, since these things are already your experience, let them be the basis for deeper oneness in the Gospel. This church already gave Paul a great deal of joy and pleasure, and now the thing that would really make his cup overflow with joy was if there was real unity among them.

The more a church keeps in view the things which are really important, things which unite them, what the church is there for, all belonging to the Lord, living by the power of the Holy Spirit, it helps them to see differences in their true light – as of secondary importance.

During the war, there were many air raid shelters in London into which people from all classes fled when the air-raid sirens sounded. People who would normally not acknowledge each other found themselves speaking together, sharing each other's

food, enjoying each other's company. Everything had changed, because they were united in danger. The bombs were falling, they were on the same side in the war, and they had the same anxieties about loved ones. Oh that we could see everything in true perspective. The things which unite are more than the things which divide. We all belong to the Lord, are under the authority of His Word, aim to please Him, have a common enemy, and have the same destiny and destination. Everything else is so small and insignificant compared with this.

So Paul makes his appeal. Then he goes on to two things to avoid and two things to cultivate.

Two things to avoid

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain deceit (Philippians 2:3). These are ugly things, and both find their source in our wretched pride.

Firstly, selfish ambition, or rivalry, or party spirit, which can be found everywhere – between nations, social classes, between bosses and workers, political parties, football teams – and, alas, in churches. People easily fall into groups and cliques. **I follow Paul, I follow Apollus, I follow Cephas, I follow Christ** (1 Corinthians 1:12).

Selfish ambition also comes between individuals. Life is competitive. We want to win all the prizes, get all the praise, beat everyone else, and eliminate everyone else in the race. Within the church fellowship this spells utter disaster. “My will, my way of doing things, my family first, my rights, what I deserve...” have no place in the church. There has got to be give and take, consideration of others.

Secondly, vain deceit – displaying self, looking for flattery and praise, anxious to be listened to, admired and respected. The spiritual giants displayed the reverse of this. The more mature we are in the Christian life, the more we are like ripe ears of corn, and our heads hang down. When someone called for Ambrose to be made bishop, he fled by night to escape. It was only when there came a direct command from the Emperor that he became Bishop of Milan. When John Knox was first summoned to the ministry, he was abashed, burst into tears, and ran to his rooms. His countenance and behaviour from that day betrayed the trouble of his heart, his deep sense of unworthiness and inadequacy. George Whitefield, who preached 18,000 sermons in 34 years (10 a week) said, “Let the name of George Whitefield be forgotten as long as the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is known.” William Carey said, “When I am gone, speak not of Dr Carey, but of Dr Carey's Saviour.”

There is no more outstanding opportunity for vain glory than the Christian ministry. Many people think the Christian ministry is a difficult job, a thankless task, badly paid, being at people's beck and call for 24 hours a day, therefore people can only enter it from the highest motives. Surely there could be no temptation to enter the Christian ministry for unworthy motives. But in truth, all kinds of unworthy motives come into play. For some, the ministry carries prestige, standing, empty glory – which can be a greater temptation than wealth. It gives a man the opportunity to be admired, have his opinion sought, have a prominent position, to be listened to, to have his name well known inside and outside of the church, to be the centre of attention, to be on

many committees and exert his influence. All these things can, to some, more than compensate for a low salary and the problems that come a minister's way.

Anyone aspiring to the Christian ministry, and many other forms of Christian service, needs to think long and hard about his reasons why. "That hundreds have missed their way and stumbled against a pulpit is sorrowfully evident from their fruitless ministries and decaying churches" (Spurgeon).

And when vain conceit is added to selfish ambition in the Christian fellowship, you have all the ingredients for disharmony, disunity and division. How often this happens. Hence the Biblical teaching about denying self, dying to sin, saying "Not I, but Christ – he must increase and I must decrease" becomes very relevant.

Two things to cultivate

In humility, consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others (Philippians 2:3,4). True unity is not a matter of obeying a set of rules, but an attitude of heart. It involves having a modest opinion of yourself, and being realistic about it.

Considering others better than yourselves does not mean pretending that the godless person and the criminal is better than you, thinking that the illiterate man would make a better church secretary than you, or that the man gifted in common sense is better than the scatterbrain, or that the casual, half-hearted church member is better than the loyal, hard-working one. This is taking Paul's meaning to the ridiculous extreme. Obviously we must recognise the clear and plain differences between man and man. Nor does it mean we are to be at everyone's beck and call, or religious doormats for everyone to use. Nor are we to buy friends, or create a spurious unity in the church by giving into everybody's whims and wishes, however foolish or silly.

What Paul means is that we should, as a general rule, count and regard everybody better than ourselves. Respect others. Always believe the best about them until we know otherwise. Be quick to recognise gifts and achievements in others, and show real appreciation, noting their good points. This will be possible when we have a modest opinion about ourselves. And that should not be difficult. The more we know about ourselves, what goes on in our hearts, what we are like when others are not watching or in ear-shot, the bits we hope no one will ever get to know about, the things which cause us to say, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Paul described himself as **the least of the apostles** (1 Corinthians 15:9), **less than the least of all the God's people** (Ephesians 3:8), **chief of sinners** (1 Timothy 1:15).

A friend called on Alexander Whyte, and reported that he had heard an evangelist in Edinburgh lash out at other ministers. Whyte was indignant and furious when he heard that Dr Hood Wilson had been accused of not being a converted man. But when he was told that the same accusation had been made of him, he was humbled. He sat on his study chair with his head in his hands. He asked the visitor to leave so that he could be alone with the Lord to search his heart. He displayed the attitude Paul speaks of – he esteemed others better than himself.

Looking after the interests of others, rather than our own, also takes work. How much my rights, my affairs, my comfort, my position fills my horizons. What about the other man's? Rather than worrying about the best course for me, I should be concerned for everyone else. Remember how Jesus washed the disciples' feet in the Upper Room. Since He is our Lord and teacher, how much more ought we to wash one another's feet. **As we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith** (Galatians 6:10).

Conclusion

There is a tendency to quarrel and disunity in many fellowships. Sometimes it gets very close to the surface, and causes great damage when it breaks out. In light of the things that we have in common, and of our privileges, we should seek to be united in mind, purpose and spirit. At the same time, we must avoid selfish ambition and vain conceit, cultivating the attitude of considering others better than ourselves, and bearing in mind their interests.

How do we do it? We need to go back to the great facts of the Gospel – the Cross of Christ.

*“When I survey the wondrous Cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride”*

The Cross will humble us like nothing else can. We also need the ministry of the Holy Spirit. We need the love of God poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.