



PHILIPPIANS

Living a Christ-Centered Life

“With all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted
in my body whether by life or by death...”

Philippians 1:20



A Commentary by Aaron Ferguson

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Philippians

Living a Christ-Centered Life

Purpose

To *thank* the Philippians for their generosity and to *encourage* them to live a Christ-centered life

Summary

The church at Philippi was the first one established in Europe (that we know of). While on his second missionary journey, the Lord called Paul to travel to Macedonia (*Acts 16:6-10*), which was an important event in the westward spread of the Gospel. Philippi was a Roman colony and a leading city in that region. It was there that Lydia was converted (Europe's first Christian), that Paul healed a demon-possessed girl (which caused trouble), and that a jailer and his family were saved (v. 11-40). Since the believers in Philippi established the first church in Europe, Paul took special interest in their well-being, and they, likewise, were very concerned about Paul's protection and provision. In fact, the church at Philippi was the only one that supported Paul financially (*Phil. 4:14-16*); and, it was because of this generosity that he felt the need to thank them in a letter. Thus, the letter is very positive. Perhaps it is the most encouraging letter in the New Testament. Paul gives a brief report of his circumstances and, then, he inspires his recipients to strive for unity, spiritual maturity, and joy.

Themes

- Rejoice in the Lord: Look for and celebrate what God is doing both in and around you.
- *Dealing with Difficulty*: God uses all situations, good and bad, to glorify Himself and proclaim the Gospel; but are we viewing our circumstances as obstacles or opportunities?
- *The Secret to Unity*: When God's people are united, they are a glory to His name. The key to unity is to follow the example of Christ by exemplifying His selfless humility.
- *Spiritual Maturity*: God is working to conform us into the image of Christ (sanctification). In that process, we play a part, but we must be pressing towards that goal and not pushing back.
- *Giving to God's Work*: When we give to the work of Christ, we are giving to Christ. He responds by blessing us here on earth, as well as "crediting our account" in heaven.

Leading Ideas

- No one is exempt from the work of the church. All are called to action (*1:1-11*).
- God is able to use our suffering for His good purposes (*1:12-18*).
- We tend to hold on to this life in a way that reveals an obvious misunderstanding (*1:19-26*).
- We are to behave in a way that is consistent with what we profess to believe (*1:27-30*).
- We achieve unity through humility, by following the example of Christ (*2:1-18*).
- Genuine followers of Christ will pursue His interests in place of their own (*2:19-30*).
- We must put our confidence in Christ alone for salvation (*3:1-3*).
- That which the world considers gain is loss in comparison to knowing Christ (*3:4-11*).
- We must never become complacent with where we are in our spiritual walk (*3:12-16*).
- Citizens of heaven must be careful not to following the charlatans of earth (*3:17-4:1*).
- God does not expect us to discount our differences but to find common ground in Him (*4:2-9*).
- When one seeks the will of God, he needs not to be anxious about resources (*4:10-13*).
- All that is given to the Lord's work is given to the Lord (*4:14-23*).

Penman

The Apostle Paul

Recipients

The first church in Europe at Philippi (*Acts 16:6-40*)

Date Written

Since Paul mentioned his imprisonment, the letter should be dated around 60-62 AD, when he was in Rome (*Acts 28:16-31*). He also hinted that the letter was written towards the end of his time there (*Phil.2:24*).

Key Verses

"Now I want you to know that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the Gospel."

Philippians 1:12

"...With all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body by life or by death."

Philippians 1:20

"Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel..."

Philippians 1:27

"I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

Philippians 3:14

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say rejoice!"

Philippian 4:4

Philippians 1:1, 2

¹“Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons:
²Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Overseer/Elder

Qualifications

1 Timothy 3:1-7

1 Timothy 5:19-25

Titus 1:5-9

1 Peter 5:1-4

Responsibilities include leadership, teaching, pastoral care, modeling the Christian life, and protecting “the flock” doctrinally

Acts 6:2-4

Acts 15:1, 2; 20:28-31

1 Timothy 3:1, 2

Hebrews 13:7

James 5:14

1 Peter 5:1-5

Deacon

Qualifications

1 Timothy 3:8-10, 12-13

Responsibilities

Acts 6:1-7

Deacons are servant-leaders who assist the Elders in meeting the needs of the church. The New Testament is silent regarding their ministry responsibilities. Therefore, the Elders of each church have the freedom to utilize Deacons as they deem necessary.

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Complementary Offices

Deacons and Elders

Leading Idea

Deacons and Elders work together for the benefit of the church body and the progress of the Gospel.

Paul clearly identifies himself as the author of this letter (1:1). While there were numerous forgeries circulating at that time, the style, structure, and instruction in this letter are all sound evidence of the apostle’s pen. He describes himself as a “bond-servant of Christ,” which is a voluntary or called position, in which Paul had bound himself to the work of God and the Gospel.

Timothy is included as a co-author. He is Paul’s associate, an impressive young disciple whom Paul picked up in Lystra on his second journey (Acts 16:1-3). Together they traveled to Macedonia and ministered to the people of Philippi. This was the first time that the Gospel officially crossed into Europe (Acts 16:6-40). Thus, the church at Philippi was the first established on the continent and, therefore, it was dear to Paul. He would watch its progress with great interest. The “saints” or believers in Philippi were also very generous. Several times they sent gifts to Paul, to encourage him in his work (Phil. 4:14-16). This letter is his way of thanking them for their thoughtfulness.

The letter is specifically addressed to the “saints in Christ, including the Overseers and Deacons” (1:1). The word “saint” means “holy one,” a term that reflects the work of God in the life of an individual. Unlike the Catholic tradition, where one becomes a saint by a great work of his own doing, biblical saints are made holy by the work of God through Christ. Only by His blood are we made holy and, as a result, God now views us as having never sinned. Thus, all followers of Christ are saints because of His work. If Paul were writing to your church, he would include you in his address to all the saints.

When Paul mentioned Overseers and Deacons in his address, he validated the two offices of the church. The event that triggered the establishment of these offices is recorded in Acts 6, “when a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food” (v.1). The disciples responded by saying, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the Word of God in order to serve tables. Therefore, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task; but we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word” (v.2-4). The idea found approval with the congregation. The people chose seven men and commissioned them to do the work. As a result, “the Word of God kept on spreading and the number of disciples continued to increase” (v.7).

While Overseers and Deacons are not specifically named in this account, their respective roles are represented in the disciples and assistants. The word “deacon” means “servant,” and his role is to assist the Elders in meeting the various needs of the church. Deacon assistance is vital because it allows the Overseers (or Elders, presbyters, bishops, or pastors) to attend to the spiritual needs of the church (i.e. preaching, teaching, leading, praying, administering pastoral care). Both groups are to be selected not appointed, and there is to be a plurality in both offices. Overseers and Deacons are equals in the body of Christ, meant to *complement* not *compete* with each other (although Deacons submit themselves under the leadership of the Overseers). As they work together, the needs of the church body are met, God is glorified, and the Gospel message is effective (see the notes in the margin for more details).

Finally, Paul’s salutation ends with two greetings, “grace and peace to you,” a regular opening for his letters. Grace is the unmerited favor of God, a gift, not something we earn. Peace is not referring to quiet circumstances but to quiet spirits. Our source of peace is God’s grace. No matter what our circumstances, His grace is sufficient to meet our needs (2 Cor. 12:7-10). Knowing that God is in control, that He is good, and that He is gracious to us in our time of need, is a tremendous assurance. Paul said, “But by the grace of God, I am...” (1 Cor. 15:10). Grace and peace to you.

Philippians 1:3-11

³“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you,
⁴always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, ⁵in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. ⁷For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the Gospel, you are all partakers with me. ⁸For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus; ⁹and this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ Jesus, ¹¹having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”

Participants in the Gospel

The Model Church

Leading Idea

No one is exempt from the work of the church. All are called to action.

After his brief salutation (v.1, 2), Paul encouraged the members of the church at Philippi with some very kind words. For example, he thanked God for them every time they came to mind (v.3). When he prayed for them, he did so with great joy (v.4). They were dear to his heart (v.7) and he longed to return to them (v.8). It is clear to see that the people of this church were special to Paul, but why? What had they done to merit such admiration and praise?

Remember, this church was the first one established in Europe (*Acts 16*), and Lydia was the first person to convert to Christianity. Besides, who could forget the night that he and Timothy spent in jail, singing praises to God, when an earthquake rattled the doors open? What a story! The whole ordeal led to the jailer and his entire family coming to know Christ! These are great memories! As one tends to remember the firsts of his life – his first job, his first car, or his first child -- it makes sense that Paul would fondly remember his first church on the new continent.

However, there are more reasons why Paul had such kind things to say about this church. This church was unique. It could even be called a model church. How so? The members of this church were *not* pew-perchers; rather they were *participants*. Paul wrote that he was grateful for their “participation in the Gospel from the first day until now” (v.5). What had they done to be participants of the Gospel?

The church at Philippi was a loving church. Paul acknowledged this truth and even prayed that their love would “abound more and more” (v.9) and that they would “know and discern and approve those things that are excellent” in their demonstration of love (v.10). The church at Philippi was “filled with the fruit of righteousness” (v.11). They sought out the Lord’s will and endeavored to obey Him to the best of their ability. Paul prayed that they would remain “sincere and blameless” until the end, when Christ would honor their actions (v.10). Their love for righteousness was evidence of the work of Christ in their hearts, “to the glory and praise of God” (v.11). The church at Philippi was a thoughtful church, looking for ways to bless others. They sought to encourage Paul in his work, perhaps through prayer, letters, and gifts (v.7). The church at Philippi was a generous church, multiple times taking up a collection to support Paul’s ministry and perhaps the ministry of other churches (4:15, 16).

What is clear by the Philippian model is that membership in a church is not like membership in a club, where you can simply enjoy all the benefits. Rather joining a church is to commit to a service organization, where *all members are expected to participate*. Too many people in the church today have the idea that they attend only to be ministered to, when, in reality, *every member of the body of Christ is to be a minister*. Paul wrote in another letter, “God gave some as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, for the *equipping of the saints for the work of service*” (*Eph. 4:11, 12*). As Christians, we have a responsibility in the local church not to watch but to do, not only to receive but to give, not only to enjoy being ministered to but to engage in ministry. That’s what it means to be a participant in the Gospel. No one is exempt from the work. All are called to action!

Finally, Paul encouraged the Philippians when he wrote, “He who *began* a good work in you will *perfect* it until the day of Christ Jesus” (v.6). Two key doctrines are hidden in this short verse. First, *salvation is a work of God not man*. It is He who began the work. He opened your heart to Him, He provided the faith to believe in Him, and He reconciled you to Himself through His Son. Second, the work He started is *not yet* completed. While your soul is clean and your spirit alive, both are trapped in your sinful flesh (body). In your time left on earth, God will *sanctify* or perfect you, by conforming you to the image of His Son (*Rom. 8:29*). That process ends with your glorification in heaven.

¹²“Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the Gospel, ¹³so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well-known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, ¹⁴and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear. ¹⁵Some to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will. ¹⁶The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the Gospel; ¹⁷the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. ¹⁸What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and, in this I rejoice.”

The Greater Progress of the Gospel

Learning to View Obstacles as Opportunities

Leading Idea

God is able to use our suffering for His good purposes.

After a rather lengthy introduction (1:1-11), Paul addressed his first topic, that of his imprisonment in Rome. While he did not refer to Rome in his letter, we can deduce that he was there because he mentioned the “praetorian guard” (v.13), which was a special division of troops, set aside for protecting Caesar and his palace. We also know from Luke’s account in the book of *Acts* (28:16-31) that Paul was taken to Rome in order “to escape the Jews” and stand trial before Caesar.

However, part of Paul’s purpose in writing this letter was to comfort the Philippian believers in regard to his circumstances. Not only were his living conditions agreeable (he stayed in his own rented quarters, *Acts* 28:30), but he was allowed to have visitors. As a result, he was able to continue his ministry, encouraging fellow believers in Rome, writing letters to the churches he had established, and sharing the Gospel with everyone who would listen (28:31). In that, Paul wrote that his “circumstances had turned out for the greater progress of the Gospel” (v.12). Evidently, he had become “well-known throughout the whole guard and to everyone else” (v.13) and “the brethren had far more courage to speak the word of God without fear” (v.14). The Romans had stationed one guard with Paul at all times (*Acts* 28:16), which allowed him to share the Gospel with that guard. Then, as guards rotated, Paul had the opportunity to convert many to Christ, which affected the entire praetorian patrol!

Paul also shared the fact that many believers followed his lead and shared the Gospel throughout Rome. They saw the difference it was making in people’s lives and recognized that God had given them a golden opportunity to affect change in the most important city in the empire. Though many shared their faith “from good will” (v.15), love (v.16), and with “pure motives” (v.17), more concerned about the souls of men, others saw and seized the opportunity for self-display, advancement, or even financial gain (v.17). Some sowed seeds of false doctrine or attempted to draw attention away from Paul, in order to cause him distress. However, Paul wrote that these things did not bother him, because “Christ was being proclaimed” and in that “he could rejoice” (v.18).

Typically, when we encounter various trials or difficult circumstances, we view them in a *negative* light. But, notice that Paul viewed his imprisonment in a *positive* light. The difference is that Paul recognized the providential hand of God working behind his circumstances to provide him with opportunities to glorify Him and reach others for Christ. Rather than sulk and think, “Woe is me,” Paul recognized that God had arranged it so that he could meet, talk with, and witness to people whom he would otherwise not have the chance. In other words, how would Roman guards ever hear about Christ unless a Christian was imprisoned? How would Caesar ever know the truth about Jesus unless a Christian stood trial before him? How would Rome ever receive the good news of the Gospel unless an apostle was kept in chains there for two years? *God orchestrates events for His good and glory.*

Though a situation may not appear “good” to us, we must understand that God has good purposes for it. We might ask, “How can I use this trial to glorify Him?” Or “Whom will this trial allow me to meet, talk with, or witness to that I would normally not get to?” Or “What fortunate outcome will be produced from this unfortunate circumstance?” Knowing that God will bring about good through our suffering, we can be at peace. In fact, we can rejoice, as Paul did. Furthermore, how we view and respond to suffering has a lasting impression on those around us. Are we recognizing our problems as *obstacles* or *opportunities*? Are we taking advantage of all situations for God’s glory and good purposes? Are we rejecting His divine orchestration in our lives or rejoicing over it? What we view as *accidental* is really *intentional*, intended by God to help us grow in Christlikeness and to give us opportunities to reach others for Him. May we learn to embrace His good purposes in our lives and rejoice over the fact that our suffering will be used for “the greater progress of the Gospel.”

¹⁹“For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ,²⁰ according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always be exalted in my body whether by life or by death.²¹ For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.²² But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me, and I do not know which to choose.²³ But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ for that is very much better;²⁴ yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith,²⁶ so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again.”

Life & Death

Which Is to Be Preferred?

Leading Idea

We tend to hold on to this life in such a way that reveals our misunderstanding of what is to come.

While Paul was a prisoner in Rome, he wrote a letter to the people of the church at Philippi, to encourage them regarding his situation. He explained that his circumstances had “turned out for the greater progress of the Gospel,” because people were hearing of Jesus for the first time, both in the palace guard and throughout the city (1:12-18). In that, Paul said he rejoiced (v.18).

Next, Paul described the two options that he saw for his future – discharge or death – both of which he wrote would “turn out for his deliverance” (v.19). He recognized that he would be “free” one way or the other. Either the Romans would find him innocent of any wrongdoing and he would be freed of his prison chains, or the Romans would find him guilty, though he was innocent of any wrongdoing, and execute him, thus setting him free from his earthly chains to go to heaven. Whatever his fate, whether it was life or death, Paul’s “earnest expectation and hope” was that “Christ be exalted” (v.20). His most important goal was not that he lived but that he glorified God. *For Paul, life or death meant very little, but doing right by God was of utmost importance*, “that he not be put to shame in anything.”

Notice that Paul wrestled with these two options – life or death – not “knowing which one to choose” (v.22). In his mind, both were preferable, for “to me,” he wrote, “to live is Christ and to die is gain” (v.21). Paul’s view of life and death is instructive here. *For most people, to live is gain and to die is loss*. In other words, life is good and death is bad; but, for Paul, it was quite different. While life was good, death was “very much better” (v.23). He did *not* fear death but *welcomed* it.

In Paul’s mind, to remain on earth was to live *for* Christ, to honor Him by his words and deeds, to make Him known and to share Him with everyone; but to die or to depart from this world was to live *with* Christ, in His presence, by His side, with a host of believers in the halls of heaven. Today, *we tend to hold onto this earthly life in such a way that reveals our misunderstanding of what is to come*. We act as if we were leaving behind something better for something worse, when, in reality, we are leaving behind something “good” for something “very much better.” This life, as “good” as it might be, pales in comparison to the life that is to come, when we will meet our Savior, when we get to worship Him like we’ve never done before, in His presence with all the saints of time, when our faith will finally be turned into sight, when we will receive our glorified body and stand complete in our sanctification, when we will experience joy unspeakable with no fear, no sadness, no trials, and no tears, when all the mysteries of life will be made known, and when we will receive our rewards and inherit our mansion. Oh how much we have to look forward to!

That is the life that is waiting for us. That is the life to be preferred. Therefore, what do we have to fear with death? If we are prepared, if we are secure in our salvation, and if we have put our trust in God, then “death has no sting and the grave has no victory” (1 Cor. 15:55), rather it is the door through which we must pass to enter into the second and more desirable life that awaits us. However, while that life was waiting for Paul, he believed that his staying behind on earth was better for the sake of the Philippians. Thus, he believed that he would be released and would eventually return to see them.

Notice that while Paul knew that he was to remain a little while longer, he was comforted by the fact that it meant more “fruitful labor” for him (v.22). He knew that his time on earth was limited and that while he was here, he was not to waste it. He was supposed to labor or work. We work all the time but for what – a paycheck, groceries, and gas? Is that fruitful labor? No, Paul is referring to ministry here, labor that bears *eternal* fruit not *temporary* reward. Do you recognize that your time is limited? Do you understand that you are not to be *wasting* your time? Does your work produce fruit that is eternal? What is your “fruitful labor”? Are you just making a living or are you making a difference?

²⁷“Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving together for the faith of the gospel,²⁸ in no way alarmed by your opponents, which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that too from God.²⁹ For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake,³⁰ experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me.”

“When I Hear...”

Paul did not promise that he would return to Philippi. Even if he didn’t, he still wanted to hear that the Philippians were conducting themselves in a worthy manner and working together in the faith.

What are others hearing about you? What is being said about your conduct, your efforts? Are you known for selfishness, complaining, or striving against other believers? Or are you known for your acts of service, discipleship, evangelism, or defense of the Gospel?

If Paul received a report on each member of your church, what would be said of you? Are you conducting yourself in a manner worthy of the Gospel?

A Worthy Manner

Conduct Befitting a Church

Leading Idea

We are to behave in a way that is consistent with what we profess to believe.

After deliberating on whether or not life or death is to be preferred (1:19-26), and after being convinced that while death is preferable, he must remain here on earth a little while longer for the sake of the ministry (v.25), the Apostle Paul shifted gears and offered a challenge to the Philippians (1:27-2:18). In general, whether he was able to visit them again or not, Paul wanted to hear that they were representing Christ well. His challenge hinged on the principle that they “should conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ” (v.27). Thus, everything that followed was an expression of that idea (see also *Ephesians 4:1*).

What does it mean for members of a church to conduct themselves in “a manner worthy of the Gospel”? It is that they *behave* in a way that is consistent with what they profess to *believe*. If they profess to be followers of Christ, then they will think, speak, and act as Christ would. If they are “ambassadors for Christ,” then they will communicate His values in their words and deeds (2 *Cor.* 5:20). A church that conducts itself in a manner worthy of the Gospel will draw attention to the Gospel (not to itself or to a person) and refrain from that which would detract from the Gospel’s effectiveness. Its heart, its motives, its purposes will be to glorify the Lord and make Him known to the lost.

Thus, Paul communicated the importance of *unity*. It was the same message that he shared with the church in Ephesus (4:1-6). Though members are unique, having different strengths, skills, and gifts, they are called to work together for the common goal of the Gospel. Paul encouraged the Philippians “to stand firm in one spirit and with one mind, striving together for the faith” (v.27). Notice that Paul did not expect *uniformity* (all things the same) but *unity* (many becoming one). He acknowledged the differences of members (1 *Cor.* 12), but expected them to work cooperatively as one force. Church members come from different nations, upbringings, backgrounds, and experiences, and carry with them various strengths, weaknesses, opinions, preferences, etc., but they have one thing in common – they are sinners saved by the grace of God through Christ. In their redemption, they are one in Him.

In that we (members of the body of Christ) are one, we are to work together as one, “striving together for the faith” (v.27). Knowing that the Church must act as one in order to be effective, Satan is doing everything in his power to undermine its unity. He continually sows seeds of discord, discouragement, and division, to derail the Church and, therefore, nullify its efforts. How often do believers spend their time striving against each other instead of striving together? How splintered has the Church become with denominations, cults, false teachers, bogus doctrines, and apathy? We have a common foe who pits us against one another. Though we are to be on the same side, he has successfully relocated the battle to inside the church walls. Jesus warned that “a house divided against itself cannot stand” (*Mark* 3:25). Let us save our ammunition for the enemy, instead of wasting it on one another!

Another tactic of the enemy is *persecution*. We should not be surprised or alarmed when we are targeted for harassment, torture, or even death (v.28). Jesus told us it would come (*John* 15:18-20). The enemy uses the fear of persecution to advance his cause, but Christians are not to be afraid of persecution. In fact, we are to view it as a *blessing* (v.29; *Matt.* 5:10-12). When Christians are fearless in the face of persecution, the persecutors are disarmed. They have no weapon against us, which is a sign of their destruction, their powerlessness against God and His Church (v.28). Boldness or bravery in the midst of persecution is a sign of salvation, that one understands his body is temporal but that his spirit is eternal. Paul believed that it was a privilege to suffer, not a curse or a burden (v.30; 1:12-14). Paul also modeled the joy of persecution before the Philippian people (*Acts* 16). Even in persecution, the Gospel goes forth. Not even persecution can thwart God’s plans. Fear not! Though other religions may honor persecutors (i.e. Islam), the Lord honors those who are persecuted.

We Not Me

Unity in the Church

Leading Idea

Life with Christ is an adventure of pursuing His agenda, not ours.

¹Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, ²make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. ³Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourself; ⁴do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interest of others.”

Ingredients of Unity

The Same Mind

Although Christians should believe in many of the same essential doctrines of the faith (i.e. the deity of Christ), Paul is referring to believers having *the mind of Christ*, setting aside our views, preferences, and opinions, and deferring to His values and goals (1 Cor. 2:16).

Maintaining the Same Love

When God’s people love each other with selfless, unconditional, sacrificial love, as Christ modeled, unity is a natural byproduct (Jn. 13:34, 35; 1 Jn. 4:7, 8).

United in Spirit

While all believers are filled and empowered by the same Holy Spirit, Paul is not referring to Him here. Instead, he is referring to harmony or oneness of direction and motivation.

Intent on One Purpose

Our one purpose is to “strive together for the faith of the Gospel” (1:27). It is the reason Jesus came and it is the reason the Church exists.

Paul is in prison and does not know whether he will return to Philippi, but either way, he desired to hear good news about the people in the church there, that they were “conducting themselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel” (1:27). The best way to achieve this task, he wrote, was to strive for unity. Unity, then, is theme of this portion of his letter (1:27-2:16). The stronger the bonds of unity in a church, the more effective will its efforts be in promoting the Gospel in the community. A divided church is a poor testimony of the Gospel and hinders its effectiveness in the minds of men. Is a church filled with turmoil attractive to the lost? Why would anyone accept Christ if all Christians do is argue?

So then, Paul provided the Philippians (and us) the “recipe” for building unity in the Church. He transitioned into that recipe with “therefore” (2:1). In essence, he wrote that unity is the goal. *Therefore*, this is how the church can achieve it. He described it as “being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, [being] united in spirit, and [being] intent on one purpose” (2:2).

Before diving into the “ingredients” for building unity, first consider Paul’s transitional clauses. They all start with the word “if.” (2:1). In English, the word “if” implies doubt, but here “if” implies certainty. These “if statements” could be written “if and there is,” meaning “since these things are true.” In essence, Paul wrote, “if and there is encouragement in Christ,” and “if and there is consolation in love,” and “if and there is fellowship of the spirit,” and, finally, “if and there is affection and compassion,” then make my joy complete. Paul knew that these things existed among the believers in Philippi, and so he appealed to all of them to achieve the more important goal of unity.

The Philippians had already brought joy to Paul by what they had done for him and the strides they had made for the Gospel. Now he asked that they “make his joy complete” by achieving unity. Perhaps they had struggled in this area and he knew how to challenge them. He encouraged them to “be of the same mind, the same love, the same spirit, and intent on the same purpose” (2:3). Remember, though Paul used the word “same” several times, he was *not* encouraging *uniformity* but *unity*. People are not and can never be the same in all things. God created us as individuals, unique and different. Unity is a voluntary merging of many into one, not that we ignore or compromise our differences but set them aside to achieve the goal. So what did Paul mean by “same” here? See the notes in the margins.

So then, Paul elevated the vision of unity and, then, he provided the recipe and ingredients for attaining it. Next, he offered the key for each person involved – *selfless servitude*. Achieving unity is not a natural process, because our sinful flesh fights against it. Unity is a work of God. Without Christ, we are slaves to sin and unable to overcome selfish desires. With Christ, we can overcome selfishness by His Spirit, follow His example of servanthood (2:5-11), set our agendas aside, and defer to the greater good of the group. That is why Jesus said, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him *deny himself*, take up his cross daily, and follow Me” (Luke 9:23). Life with Christ is an adventure of pursuing His agenda, not ours.

Any time flawed human beings work together, there will be problems. However, if God can change the desires and direction of one life, then He can do the same in a group. The secret to unity has two parts -- *how we view ourselves* within the group and *how we view others*. Paul challenged the Philippians to “do nothing out of selfishness or conceit, but, with humility, to consider others better than themselves” (2:3). All disunity in a group can be traced back to the simple truth that *too often we act selfishly and consider ourselves better than others*. Paul went on to explain that “each person should not look only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (2:4). Sadly, churches that experience disunity and turmoil are typically filled with people looking to their own needs, their own desires, and their own ambitions. Such behavior is *characteristic of unbelievers*, not those with the mind of Christ.

Philippians 2:5-11

⁵ Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. ⁸ Being found in appearance of man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ For this reason also, God highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

“The Father Is Greater than I” John 14:28

At first glance, Jesus’ statement seems contradictory, especially in light of all the statements He had made in regards to His equality with God. However, once a person understands the passage here in *Philippians*, he can make sense of Jesus’ words.

The Father and the Son were always equals in person and power, but for a short time Jesus relinquished His position in heaven to come to earth and redeem fallen man. The Father never dwelt among sinners, never took on the form of a servant, and never suffered cruel punishment or death. Thus, in that sense, the Father was “greater” than the Son. Or one could say that the Son was, for a time, “lower” than the Father. Thus, the disciples should have rejoiced when they heard that Jesus was returning to heaven.

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The Way Up is Down

Unity in the Church

Leading Idea

We achieve unity through humility, by following the example of Christ.

A major portion of Paul’s letter to the Philippians is dedicated to the subject of *unity* (1:27-2:11). Believers who are “of the same mind, united in spirit, and striving together for the faith” (1:27; 2:2) are “conducting themselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel” (1:27). In this section, Paul provided the key to achieving such unity – *selfless servitude* – “regarding one another as more important than yourself” (2:3, 4). Next, Paul held up Christ as the one to emulate in this regard, “to have this attitude which was also in Christ Jesus” (2:5). *Jesus is the greatest example of selfless servitude.*

To describe the example of Jesus, Paul explained what He voluntarily gave up, then what He chose to become or do, and finally what He gained as a result. First, consider what Jesus gave up. Paul wrote that Jesus “existed in the form of God” (v.6). In other words, Jesus is God and has always been. He existed at the beginning, at creation (*John 1:1-4, 14*); He (the Son) and the Father are one (8:58). While He is the visible representation of the Father (*Col. 1:15-17; Heb. 1:3*), He is still God, equal to Him in every way (*John 5:18; 10:33; 14:9*).

Although Jesus “existed in the form of God, He did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied Himself” (v.6, 7). In order to redeem fallen man and to reconcile him to the Father, a mediator was needed, someone who could stand between them and bridge the gap (*1 Tim. 2:5*). Jesus is that mediator; but, to fulfill that role, He had to represent both God and man. Thus, Jesus did what was necessary and “emptied Himself” to become a man, meaning that He temporarily laid aside His place in heaven in order to take on flesh and dwell with sinful people (*John 17:1-5*). It is important to note that while Jesus gave up His place or position in heaven, He did not give up His person or power. Jesus remained fully God, although He veiled His nature with human flesh (though it showed at times like at the transfiguration, *Mark 9:1-8*). Jesus gave up the riches of heaven to dwell among the poor, so that, in time, He could make the poor to dwell among the riches of heaven (*2 Cor. 8:9*).

Next, let’s consider what Jesus chose to become or do. Note here Paul’s purposeful words and how they describe Jesus descending into humility. He left heaven to become a man, not a king, but a servant, captured best by the night that He washed the disciples’ feet (*John 13:1-5*). Furthermore, He set aside His will in order to be obedient to the Father’s will. It was the Father’s will that He should suffer at the hands of men, even die (*Luke 22:42*). His death was not a merciful one (quick, painless), but the lowliest, most shameful and cruel form of the day, that of crucifixion. The cross had its own humiliation. Those who hung on a tree were looked down upon as cursed (*Gal. 3:13*).

However, let’s look at what Jesus gained as a result of his selfless sacrifice. Because Jesus took upon Himself the curse of the Law, He set His followers free from that curse, granting them redemption from sin, rescue from spiritual death, and reconciliation with the Father. As the only capable mediator between God and man, He achieved what no one else could – salvation. As a result of His selfless sacrifice, God the Father “highly exalted” His Son and “bestowed on Him the name which is above every name.” He has since taken back His rightful place in heaven, at the right hand of God the Father, and there He intercedes for those He came to save. He has also been given all authority in heaven and on earth and upon His return all men will bow the knee to Him and confess that He is Lord of all.

The message is clear – in God’s eyes, *the way up is down*. While He is opposed to the proud, He exalts the lowly. Those who finish “first” in His book are those who make themselves “last.” By following the selfless sacrificial example of our Lord Jesus, by considering others as more important than ourselves, we can conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel and achieve unity in the church. *We achieve unity with humility.* When we seek to serve others we will not quarrel with them. We must humble ourselves, set aside our entitlements, and become obedient to the Father’s will.

¹²So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. ¹⁴Do all things without grumbling or complaining, ¹⁵so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, ¹⁶holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain. ¹⁷But, even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all. ¹⁸You too, I urge you, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me.

From the Inside Out

Work Out Your Salvation

Leading Idea

As God works in us His good pleasure, we become lights in the world.

In order to recall the theme of this passage, we must return to *Philippians 1:27*, where Paul wrote, “Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel.” He followed up and explained this principle by exhorting the Philippians to strive for unity among them (*1:27-2:2*), by being selfless and humble and by emulating the example of Christ (*2:3-11*). Next, he charged them to obey this example and these instructions as they had always done before (*2:12*). It is evident that the Philippian church desired to do right by God, to please Him in all respects, by seeking His will and following it. Would this statement be accurate if applied to your church? It should.

Paul used another phrase to explain what it looked like to obey Christ’s example and instructions – “work out your salvation” – which can be difficult to understand at first (*2:12*). Of course, Paul was not suggesting that we are to *work for* our salvation. Redemption is a work of God, not of man. Sinners cannot redeem themselves from sin. Works do not work. Instead, Paul encouraged the Philippians to *work out* their salvation, meaning to live it out, to let it be evident in all they did and said, and to put feet to what they believed and knew to be true. He explained that believers should do this “with fear and trembling” (*2:12*). In other words, we should take our faith seriously. We must be careful to learn what it is that pleases the Lord and be intentional to exhibit His desires in our lives. When we “work out our salvation,” we will be humble and selfless, we will emulate Christ’s example of servitude, and we will, as a result, promote unity in the church.

Next, Paul reminded his readers that “God is at work in you” (*v.13*). He is likewise at work in our lives, arranging all things “for His good pleasure.” What is His good pleasure? It is to “conform us to the image of His Son” (*Rom. 8:29*), to make us look more like Christ by producing in us the fruit of His Spirit (*Gal. 5:22, 23*). He has revealed to us His will for our lives in His Word, and through the power of His Spirit, He is working in and through us to achieve it. It is reassuring that we have not been left here alone, with no purpose or direction in life. If we are truly His followers, then we are being transformed from the inside out (*Rom. 12:1*), and we are a part of His glorious work on earth.

Having said that, God uses the circumstances in our lives, especially the difficult ones, to stretch and grow us into the image of Christ. It is nearly impossible to produce His character in us through a life of comfort and convenience. It is through difficulty that God uncovers our weaknesses and strengthens our faith in Him. Therefore, we must be careful not to gripe about trials and tribulations when they come our way. “Do all things without grumbling or complaining” (*v.14*), Paul wrote, understanding that God is able to use trials to produce “His good pleasure” in us (*James 1:2, 3; Rom. 5:3-5*).

As people who view problems in a positive light (see comments on *1:12-18*) and who do not complain when difficulty comes our way, we will prove to be different than unbelievers in the world. As Christians, our lives should be “blameless and innocent, above reproach, as lights” in the darkness (*v.15*), not that we are perfect or sinless, but that we stand out from others because of our lifestyle choices, our words, our good works, our attitudes, our perspective on life, and our godly character. What about you? Are you living a life of integrity, purity, virtue, and godliness, even though you are surrounded by “crookedness and perversion”? If you are no different than the world around you, then perhaps you are not “working out your salvation with fear and trembling.”

Finally, Paul exhorted the Philippians to “hold fast the word of life” (*v.16*), which is the Gospel, so that his time and efforts were not wasted. We do not act differently than the world to gain attention for ourselves. Everything we do is for the sake of the Gospel. Notice that Paul was content to “be poured out as an offering” (*v.17*), or to suffer and die for his part in the Gospel. He encouraged the Philippians and us to “rejoice in the same way” (*v.18*). Trust God’s work in your life for the sake of the Gospel.

¹⁹But I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, so that I also may be encouraged when I learn of your condition.

²⁰For I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. ²¹For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus. ²²But you know of his proven worth, that he served with me in the furtherance of the gospel like a child serving his father. ²³Therefore I hope to send him immediately, as soon as I see how things go with me; ²⁴and I trust in the Lord that I myself also will be coming shortly.

²⁵But I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger and minister to my need;

²⁶because he was longing for you all and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick. ²⁷For indeed he was sick to the point of death, but God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, so that I would not have sorrow upon sorrow. ²⁸Therefore I have sent him all the more eagerly so that when you see him again you may rejoice and I may be less concerned about you. ²⁹Receive him then in the Lord with all joy, and hold men like him in high regard;

³⁰because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me.

Proven Worth

Timothy & Epaphroditus

Leading Idea

Genuine followers of Christ will pursue His interests in place of their own.

Before Paul wrote the closing of his letter to the Philippians (which begins at 3:1), he wished to encourage them by sending two men with news – Timothy (v.19) and Epaphroditus (v.25). Since Paul was in prison, awaiting his trial before Caesar, he was not able to come and go as he pleased, at least not yet. Thus, he often sent messengers with letters on his behalf. However, he was hopeful that he would soon be released (v.24) and get to visit Philippi again in person.

Before we look specifically at the two messengers, let us first back up and look at the larger context of this passage. Paul just finished challenging his readers to strive for unity and, then, he provided the key for achieving it – *selfless servitude* (2:3, 4). “Look not to your own personal interests,” he wrote, “but also to the interests of others.” Then, he focused on the perfect example of Christ (2:5-11). To follow, Paul offered three other imperfect but commendable examples of selfless humility -- himself, as he was willing to suffer for others’ sake (v.17), then the unselfish examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus.

Let’s consider these two men in reverse order. Epaphroditus (whose name meant “belonging to Aphrodite,” the goddess of love) had been sent by the Philippian church to Rome, to minister to and encourage Paul in his imprisonment (4:14-18). We are not sure what it was that he brought – food, money, clothing, letters, etc. – but the Apostle wrote that he had “received everything in full” and that he was “amply supplied” (4:18). As the one chosen for this task, and the one who would carry Paul’s letter back to the church, we can assume some things about Epaphroditus. For example, he was *trustworthy*, to have been given such an important assignment. He must have had a *servant’s* heart to have undertaken such a menial but difficult task, to take time off to travel so far away (700 miles), and to accept the errand without any recognition or compensation. He must have been *caring*. The Philippians were known for their loving spirit, and they would have sent someone who embodied that spirit. He was their *ambassador*, able to accomplish what they could not do themselves (v.30).

Evidently, Epaphroditus had fallen ill either on the way to or after he arrived in Rome, perhaps even for an extended period of time, because he feared that family and friends would begin to worry about him (v.26-28). Paul praised him for his work and immortalized him in his letter. He called him his “brother” (in Christ), “fellow worker” (in the ministry of the Gospel), and “fellow soldier,” one who was willing to give his life for the cause. Paul also wrote, “hold men like him in high regard” (v.30).

Paul was also going to send Timothy to the Philippians (v.19), so that he could “learn of their condition,” which begs a question to be asked. Why would Paul need to “learn of their condition” when Epaphroditus had just come from there? Didn’t he tell Paul what he needed to know? I am sure that he had news, but he may have also had troubling news, perhaps news about problems that needed to be resolved, issues that required someone with more knowledge, wisdom, or experience. Since Paul could not go himself, he had to send someone in his place. He was confident to send Timothy.

In Timothy, Paul found a “kindred spirit,” a person similar to him in disposition, calling to ministry, passion for the gospel, hunger for the Scriptures, care for the health of the church, love for the people of God (v.20), and fearlessness in the face of persecution (see 2 Tim. 1:15). He was also well-known to the Philippians, since he was from there (*Acts 16*) and the people knew of “his proven worth” (v.22). Proven worth in Paul’s mind was “serving in the furtherance of the Gospel.” Also, Timothy did not “seek after his own interests but those of Christ Jesus” (v.21). Too many “spiritual leaders” today pursue their agendas. Too many are consumed by their fame, fortune, or power. Too many Christians are derailed by worldly pursuits (*Luke 8:14*). We need to be more like Timothy and Epaphroditus, people with the right perspective of life, an eternal perspective. Where do your interests lie, in making your way or following the Lord? How would Paul have described you in a letter?

¹Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things again is no trouble to me and it is a safeguard for you. ²Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision, ³for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh...

In Whom Is Your Confidence?

Self vs. Savior

Leading Idea

We must put our confidence in Christ alone for salvation. Anything else is a false gospel.

As we transition into the third chapter, notice that Paul also made a transition. He introduced the third topic, movement, or phase of his letter. The first topic was that of his *imprisonment* (1:12-26). He was content and, in fact, viewed it as another opportunity for the Gospel to progress. The second topic was that of *unity* in the church (1:27-2:16). Unity is best achieved when members exhibit selfless servitude towards one another, Jesus being the best example to emulate. The third topic he addressed was that of the *pursuit of perfection* (3:1-4:1). Is perfection achieved through our own works or the work of God in us? Are we to put confidence in ourselves or in our Savior?

To begin this transition, Paul reminded his readers to “rejoice in the Lord” (v.1), which is a recurring theme in his letter. He wrote that he rejoiced even though he was in prison (1:18). He encouraged the Philippians to rejoice in the midst of their trouble and potential persecution (2:18). Later, he reminded them to rejoice even as they experienced disharmony in their church (4:4). While our circumstances may be unpleasant, we can still experience inner joy and peace (4:7) because of what Christ has done for us, because God is sovereign and will use our circumstances to produce good in and through us, and because our ultimate destination is heaven, to be with Christ (1:21; 3:20).

Next, Paul wrote a sentence that is somewhat mysterious, “To write the same things again is no trouble for me, and it is a safeguard for you” (v.1). What exactly were “the same things”? Was Paul referring to what he had just finished writing, regarding unity in the church? Was he referring to his recurring theme of rejoicing? Or were the “same things” referring to what he was about to address? Was there another letter, perhaps, that he had written, one which we do not have today and one in which he had already addressed this subject? It is unclear what “the same things” are here. Since Paul described these “same things” as “a safeguard,” it makes the most sense that he was referring to the subject that he was about to address, that of false teachers, to protect the Philippian church.

The subject of false teachers is a theme throughout Paul’s letters and the rest of the New Testament, so it is not surprising that he addressed it here. He used the word “beware” three times (v.2), which is like a flashing red light that communicates danger. Then, he used three different nouns to describe the same group – “dogs, evil workers, and false circumcision.” In the Old Testament, dogs were not domesticated like they are today, rather they were free-ranging and wild. They wandered around and survived on refuse or waste left out in the streets. Thus, dogs were an unclean animal and became objects to be despised. So then, the term “dog” was used to describe enemies or godless or worthless people (Ps. 22:16, 20; 2 Sam. 9:8; 2 Kings 8:13). Therefore, it is no surprise that Paul described false teachers as dogs and, then, followed up by calling them evil workers. They are minions used by the devil to sow seeds of weeds in the church and cloud the minds of unsuspecting “believers.” Finally, Paul called these evil doers the “false circumcision.” What does that mean exactly?

Circumcision, in general, was expected of Abraham and his household as a sign of their covenant with God (Genesis 15) and was later instituted by Moses with the nation of Israel (Lev. 12:3). Circumcision in itself achieved nothing spiritually for the Jews but was only symbolic. However, over time, the Jews grew to be prideful in their ability to follow the laws of God as a means to be right with Him. In other words, they put “confidence in the flesh,” their own works, to deliver them from sin. That in itself is a false gospel and does not work. Thus, Paul called them the “false circumcision.” The law does not save anyone, but rather all are condemned by it. When Jesus died on the cross, He removed the law as master over us and crucified the flesh, the old sinful nature, and made a way for us to be right with God through Him (Col. 2:11). Therefore, He and His followers are the “true circumcision” (v.3). We put “no confidence in the flesh,” the law or our works, but rather we put confidence in the work of Christ alone for salvation. Paul will continue this discussion in the following verses (v.4-14).

Philippians 3:4-11

⁴...Although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more, ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, as to the law a Pharisee, ⁶as to zeal a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. ⁷But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ ⁹and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, ¹⁰that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, ¹¹in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Trophies to Trash

The Pursuit of Personal Perfection

Leading Idea

That which the world considers gain is nothing but loss in comparison to knowing Christ.

This section of Paul's letter to the Philippians falls in the middle of his third topic to address (3:1-4:1), that of *personal perfection*. Is perfection achieved through our own works or the work of God in us? Are we to put confidence in ourselves or in our Savior? This passage comes on the heels of Paul's warnings about false teachers (3:2, 3). He called them the "false circumcision," meaning that they presented a false gospel, putting "confidence in the flesh" (keeping the law) for salvation; but, of course, works don't work. Sinners cannot save themselves from sin with sin-ridden activity, no matter how sincere it is. Paul said if that worked, then he would have "far more" confidence in the flesh than anyone, because of his pedigree, his education, his passion, and his rule-keeping ability (v.4-6).

Paul could boast of his ancestry. He could follow his genealogy back to Benjamin. He was privileged to have the best education available at the time (*Acts* 22:3). He was disciplined by Gamaliel, one of the Pharisees (pious ones), who were strict adherents to the Law of Moses and prided themselves on protecting it from corruption. Because of his zeal, Paul quickly rose to the top of the Pharisaic order. He was so passionate about "protecting" his religion that he led out in confronting and persecuting the newly-formed Christian church called "the Way" (*Acts* 22:4). As to following the rules of righteousness, Paul was spot on, "blameless" in his sight and others. While we can see that Paul's assurance was placed in the wrong things, we are guilty of the same pride and self-confidence. We might base personal righteousness on the fact that we are from a religious family, because a relative is "in the ministry," because we have been members of a church for decades or given so much time or money to the needs of others, or perhaps because we've been educated by certain people at a certain school, or we have lived a "good life" in our own estimation.

However, Paul discovered the correct view of these things (v.7). While they were considered "gain" to him, they were actually a "loss" to God. Not one of them ever helped him gain a right standing before God, because they were a sinner's attempt at self-righteousness through sinful means. Therefore, Paul took all of these *trophies* and threw them in the *trash*. He considered them "rubbish" (v.8) when he recognized that all of his righteous deeds were as "filthy rags" (*Isaiah* 64:6). What about you? Are you still counting anything in your life, other than Christ, as a gain towards your spiritual standing before God? If so, then you are holding onto meaningless trophies. "There is no other name under heaven by which men may be saved. There is salvation in no one else but Christ" (*Acts* 4:12), especially not in yourself or your own feeble attempts at self-righteousness (*1 John* 2:15-17).

We must follow Paul's example here and "count all things to be loss or rubbish," in order to gain Christ. In other words, we must forsake all other means of perfecting ourselves in order to gain Christ. *Christ plus anything else equals nothing, but Christ plus nothing equals everything*. He alone is our salvation. A relationship with Him is to be our "trophy." We must let loose every other man-made idol and cling only to Christ for our salvation, "be found in Him" (v.9). Jesus said Himself, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (*Luke* 9:23). Have you forsaken your trophies to follow Christ, or are you still trying to save yourself?

Note that Christianity is about having a personal relationship with Christ, not about following religious guidelines and regulations. In comparison to "knowing Christ" (v.10), having a personal relationship with Him, everything else in this world pales significantly. Paul desired to know Christ, not just know of Him but to experience Him, His regenerative power in his life (as He makes all things new), and to surrender all to His service. Though he once considered it a privilege to persecute Christians, he now considered it a privilege to be persecuted for Christ's sake, "to know the fellowship of His suffering." He considered himself to have died with Christ (*Gal.* 2:20) and knew that one day he would live with Him at the "resurrection of the dead" (v.11). Paul's trivial losses in life would result in terrific gain!

Pressing On

The Process of Sanctification

¹² Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. ¹³ Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ Let us, therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; ¹⁶ however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.

Sanctification
Matthew 5:48
Romans 12:2
2 Corinthians 7:1
Galatians 3:3
Hebrews 10:14

Leading Idea

We must never become complacent with where we are in our spiritual walk.

We are still in the third section of Paul's letter to the Philippians, in which he addressed the topic of *personal perfection* (3:1-4:1). What does it mean to be perfect anyway? It does not mean that we can somehow become sinless or never make mistakes. Remember, though our inner person has been renewed by salvation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), we are still trapped in the body of our sinful flesh (Rom. 7:14-8:2). We will never achieve sinlessness in this life. So then, what does Paul mean when he used the term "perfect"? The word is better defined as "complete or mature," which is the best way to describe the process of sanctification. Sanctification is God's work of conforming us to the image of His Son, that we may be on the outside what we are on the inside, a work that will not be finished until we are on the other side, in heaven, when we receive our glorified bodies (1:6; 4:21; Rom. 8:29, 30). Thus, Paul wrote, "I have not already obtained it" (v.12) and "I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet" (v.13), meaning that God's work of sanctifying Paul was not yet completed.

However, notice what Paul wrote next, that he was "reaching forward to what lies ahead" (v.13) and "pressing on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God" (v.14). In other words, Paul was not *passive* about his sanctification, rather he was *active*. He pursued it and pressed for it. This brings up two important points. First, sanctification is a work of God in us (1:6), but, second, sanctification is a process in which we join him in the work. We play an active role. Sanctification can be described like a seed that Christ has planted in our hearts. Though we must water it, give it sunlight, and tend to the soil, it is God who ultimately causes the growth (1 Cor. 3:6). Likewise, though the seed is in us, if we do nothing to encourage its progress, the seed will lay dormant and never grow as it should. That is why every believer is at a different stage of personal growth or sanctification.

While there is not enough space here to explain all the ways that we can encourage the sanctification process, let's consider what Paul wrote to the Philippians. First, "forget what lies behind" (v.13). Satan will constantly attempt to shame us with our past, our life before Christ, the mistakes or failures after Christ, or the weaknesses and sin traps to which we readily succumb. Do not pay attention to him. He is simply trying to distract us from the work that God is doing in our lives. Pay him no mind, for he has been defeated, and he no longer has any power over us. Also, "forgetting what lies behind" includes looking past our successes, our achievements, our trophies. Satan will use them to cater to our ego and puff us up with pride or self-confidence. We must follow Paul's example and "consider them as rubbish for the sake of knowing Christ."

The second thing we can do to aid our own sanctification is to "reach forward to what lies ahead..." or "press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God." We must embrace the truth that God is never through with us and will not be finished until we are with Him in heaven. He always has something else for us to do, another way for us to grow or to become more like Christ. Therefore, *we must never be complacent with where we are in our walk with God.* We must never stop pressing the accelerator and just coast. As soon as we begin to coast, we start slowing down and losing ground. We are like a car on an incline. We are either progressing up the hill or rolling backwards. In our spiritual lives, *there is no such thing as neutral.* Neutrality is a sign of apathy. We always have work to do and growth to be gained. That is the attitude Paul had. He encouraged us to think the same way (v.15, 16).

Paul continued this train of thought through the next several verses (v.17-21), but before moving on, he offered this challenge, "to keep living by the same standard to which you have attained" (v.16). It is a good challenge for us as well. Let us pursue the path we know to be right and true. Let us not fall back or fall away because of those who would persuade us to follow our own paths in our own way. Let us keep on keeping on, reaching for the better things that God has in store for us. Ask the Lord to reveal which attitude you have towards your sanctification. Are you pressing on or pushing back?

¹⁷ Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.

¹⁸ For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, ¹⁹ whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. ²⁰ For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; ²¹ who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.

^{4:1} Therefore, my beloved brethren, whom I long to see, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, my beloved.

Citizens of Heaven

Avoiding the Trappings of Earth

Leading Idea

Citizens of heaven must be careful not to follow the charlatans of earth.

In this portion of Paul's letter, he is still addressing the topic of personal perfection or sanctification, that process in which God is conforming us to the image of His Son (3:1-4:1; Romans 8:29, 30). The Apostle expressed his approach to sanctification, that he "forgets what lies behind" – his life before Christ, his past sins and shortcomings, even his successes – and, instead, "reaches forward to what lies ahead" (3:13). He challenged the Philippians not to coast in their spiritual growth but to keep "pressing on" (v.14), understanding that there is never time to take our foot off of the accelerator. There is always room for growth. Though we as Christians will never be fully complete or perfectly mature in our spiritual walk, we must not let that hinder us from progressing towards Christ-likeness. Thus, Paul encouraged his readers to follow his example and the example of those who "walk according to this pattern" (v.17). Who do you know who lives by this pattern? Who is always "pressing on" to grow spiritually? You would do well to follow their lead for, no doubt, you have others watching you.

Just as you know people who fit into the first category – they are pressing on to spiritual maturity – you probably know people who fall into the second category, those who will lead you astray (v.18, 19). Though God desires for you to look more like His Son, Satan desires for you to look less like Christ and more like him, to be conformed to the image of this world (Rom. 12:2; 1 John 2:15, 16). Thus, he has many "dogs and evil workers" (3:2) who have infiltrated the church and who are doing his dirty work. They are "enemies of Christ." They may appear to be working in line with His values and mission, but the discerning Christian can see that they are working against Him. How can we tell?

Paul gave us three clues. First, "their god is their appetite" (v.19). Their driving passions are not the glorification of God or His Son but their human lusts – money, popularity, control, sex, you name it – more of whatever desires they harbor in their hearts. Second, their "glory is in their shame," meaning that they boast of things of which they should be ashamed. They are proud of their immorality when it is (or will be) a disgrace to their name. Third, "they set their minds on earthly things." A child of the devil will pursue the treasures of this life instead of the life to come, because that is all he can hope for. Thus, he is easy to identify, for his lusts are for those things that are passing away (1 John 2:17). Having said all of that, Paul wrote that "their end is destruction." All man-made efforts to achieve salvation "fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23; 6:23); and, the wages of their sin is death.

Unfortunately, many undiscerning people have fallen prey to the schemes of such people as this. We must fall not for their lies, their immoral lifestyle, or the trappings of this fallen world. True followers of Christ, Paul wrote, "set their minds on things above" (Col. 3:2), because they realize that their citizenship is not of this world but of the next (v.20). While we live here for a short time, we are just passing through. This is not our home, but rather our ultimate destination is with God in heaven. We do not look for anything on earth (including ourselves) to save us from our brokenness. Rather we place our trust in the promises of God through Christ for our salvation and "eagerly await His return."

It is upon Christ's return that our sanctification will be completed, when "He will transform the body of our humble estate into conformity with the body of His glory" (v.21). The final phase of our salvation is glorification (Rom. 8:30), when what we are on the inside will shine through to the outside and we will be like our Redeemer. Christ will use the authority He has been given to transform us from what we are now to what was promised to us when He was on earth. That does not mean that we will be gods (as the Mormons teach) but that we will be free from sin and restored to Adam's original state. As Paul concluded his thoughts on this topic (4:1), he encouraged the Philippians to "stand firm in this way." They were "a joy and a crown" to him (a credit to his name and work), and he dreaded seeing them fall prey to the schemes of the devil. He would write the same to us. "Stand firm" and do not let the work of God in your life be hijacked by the works of the devil.

Disarming Disharmony

Navigating the Rough Seas of Relationships

Leading Idea

God does not expect us to discount our differences but to find common ground in Him.

²I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord.

³Indeed, true companion, I ask you also to help these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel, together with Clement also and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life. ⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! ⁵Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near.

⁶Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God, ⁷and the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence, and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. ⁹The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things; and the God of peace will be with you.

The Book of Life?

Paul mentioned that the names of his fellow-workers were in the “book of life” (v.3), but he says nothing else about it.

The names of those people who have given their lives to Christ and look only to Him for salvation are recorded in the Lamb’s Book of Life (*Dan. 12:1; Mal. 3:16, 17; Luke 10:20; Rev. 3:5; 17:8; 20:12*). As a result, they will not experience the second death but have everlasting life (*John 3:16*).

As Paul wrapped up his thoughts on personal perfection or sanctification (3:1-4:1), he turned his attention to an issue between two individual church members – Euodia and Syntyche (v.2). Evidently these two women (pronounced “ee-oo-da” and “send-thee-hee”), who had worked alongside Paul, Clement, and others in the work of the Gospel (v.3), did not see eye to eye on some things, and it was causing disharmony between them and, perhaps, even affecting the church. He asked “the true companion” (he and Clement are unknown to us) to help them navigate through their differences.

Satan has used the old divide-and-conquer strategy on many congregations. All it takes is for two people to demand their way and the damage is done. Thus, it is crucial for members to treasure unity while acknowledging their diversity, or else the presentation of the Gospel is tainted and the effectiveness of the church is jeopardized. Though Paul had written much on the subject of unity (1:27-2:16), perhaps because of this conflict, he added a few more comments here. While the next few verses (v.4-9) could be viewed as disconnected comments (which may be true), let’s consider them in light of this relationship, for twice he mentioned the word “peace” (v.7, 9) which is the result when a conflict has been resolved. How could Paul’s counsel be applied in the case of disharmony?

First, Paul returned to the theme of his letter by writing, “Rejoice in the Lord” (v.4). Our joy should never be attached to people, because they are flawed and will let us down. We are to “rejoice in the Lord,” not in people, for He will never let us down. Likewise, when two people are not in harmony, it is usually because each of them is demanding his way or looking only to the negative qualities, actions, or attitudes of the other. Instead, if both parties sought to rejoice in the Lord and celebrate what He was doing in their midst, and join in the work, harmony would be achieved. *God does not expect us to discount our differences but rather to overcome them by finding common ground in Him.* As both parties set aside their own agenda and rejoice in His, peace results.

Second, Paul wrote, “Let your gentle spirit be known to all, for the Lord is near” (v.5). While we are free to disagree with others, we are not free to be rude, hateful, or disrespectful. As we represent Christ (He is near or present in each of us) through the power of His Spirit, who is working to produce fruit in us (*Gal. 5:22, 23*), we will be gentle towards others, forbearing and forgiving, patient and merciful, and lenient towards their faults and failures. Our sinful flesh is too quick to go to blows, to defend our pride, to put people in their place, when God says “a gentle answer turns away wrath” (*Prov. 15:1*).

Third, dealing with people can cause a great deal of anxiety or worry. It is easy to stew on their words, their actions, or their attitudes, and allow them to brew discontentment, anger, or even bitterness in our hearts. The solution, says Paul, is to release control of the situation and the person to God through prayer (v.6). Only He is able to change people, so why would we fret about what we can never accomplish? Let us talk to God, vent to God, release the tension through prayer and exchange the overwhelming pressure for His indescribable peace (v.7). Attempting to control people and circumstances is a hopeless endeavor. Its end is only fear and frustration. Let us release control (or acknowledge that we have no control) and appeal to the King of heaven who controls all things.

The next bit of wisdom that Paul provided, in order to disarm disharmony, is the most difficult of all to enact. To summarize, it is to dwell only on the positive aspects of a person or circumstance (v.8). Our depraved minds naturally feast on gossip, rumors, and lies. We tend to focus on the negative, on getting revenge, on holding grudges and harboring resentment. Christians, it ought not to be this way with us! We must put our guns down or, if not, aim them at the enemy instead of each other. We are on the same side, fighting the same battle. Let us work together instead of destroying each other! Follow the words and wise example of Paul (v.9), and the peace of God will rule in your relationships.

¹⁰But, I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity. ¹¹Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. ¹²I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both having abundance and suffering need. ¹³I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

The Crown of Contentment

Trusting God for His Faithful Provision

Leading Idea

When one seeks and does the will of God, he needs not to be anxious about resources.

One of the key factors for Paul's writing to the Philippians was so that he could thank them for the gift they sent to him (4:17, 18). They were a loving and giving church, unlike any other, and he wanted to make sure they knew how much he appreciated their thoughtfulness and generosity. The expression of his gratitude started here and extended to the end of the letter (4:10-23).

"I rejoiced in the Lord greatly," he wrote, "that you have revived your concern for me" (v.10). Paul was delighted to receive the gift, but he was more delighted that God was stirring their hearts to give it. The Philippians had concern for the spread of the Gospel elsewhere, not just in their own town. Furthermore, they cared about the wellbeing of those chosen to do the work. All churches could benefit from this example, to develop a broader scope of God's kingdom on earth and to play an active part in sending and supporting missions and missionaries "to the ends of the earth" (Matt. 28:19, 20). Paul noted that this church had been concerned before, but "they lacked opportunity" (v.10), meaning that there was no way to find Paul, much less to get anything to him.

What Paul did next is very interesting. Rather than continue his expression of gratitude (see v.14-18), he inserted some comments about *contentment*. For some reason, he wanted the Philippians to know that he was not on the other end counting the days before he received another gift from them (see v.17). Though he appreciated their offering, he was not greedy for it, nor was he lacking financial support. Paul made sure they knew that he was "not speaking from want" (v.11). He could have written, "Thank you for your gift. It came just in time, because I was almost out of money," or "I wouldn't have known what to do if your gift had not come." He wanted the Philippians to know that he was not experiencing a shortage of funds. Thus, Paul followed a brief tangent and shared how God had taught him to be "content in whatever circumstance" he was (v.11).

Though Paul took a tangent here, his thoughts regarding contentment are instructive. To be content is to contain oneself within limits, to be satisfied with a minimum, and to secure a mind at peace. Paul wrote to Timothy in another letter, "Godliness is a means of great gain when accompanied by *contentment*. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it. If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content" (1 Tim. 6:6-8). It has been said "contentment does not produce riches, but it achieves the same object by banishing the desire for them."

Most of what we have is excessive and unnecessary. We could live without it, or could we? Many people spend their lives acquiring money and possessions, neither of which can they take with them in the afterlife. Why do they spend so much time and energy gaining in this life that which means nothing in the next? Why do they live to get what the Father says they cannot keep? Sadly, many people sell their souls to acquire earthly goods (Mark 8:36). God's people must know better and live differently. We must view material wealth in light of His purposes. He blesses us so that we can bless others, not so we can have more but so that we can do more for Him. When we learn contentment, when we learn to contain ourselves within limits, to be satisfied with a minimum (food and covering), our resources are freed to allow us to be generous and giving to His people, for His causes. Such contentment gains a peace of mind and an unselfish and generous heart.

As difficult as it sounds to be content in a world so addicted to materialism, Paul shared that he had found the secret (v.12) – "He could do all things through Christ who strengthened him" (v.13). When one seeks and does the will of God, he does not need to be anxious about resources. *What God calls us to do, He enables us to do*. We can be content in knowing that God is sovereign and He will meet our needs (4:19; Heb. 13:5-8). Because of our faith and joy in God, we can rejoice as if we have everything when we might have nothing.

¹⁴Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction. ¹⁵You yourselves also know Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; ¹⁶for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs. ¹⁷Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account. ¹⁸But I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God. ¹⁹And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁰Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen. ²¹Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren who are with me greet you. ²²All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. ²³The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Giving & Receiving

Supporting the Lord's Work

Leading Idea

All that is given to the Lord's work is given to the Lord.

As we close Paul's letter to the Philippians, we arrive at one of the primary reasons for his writing it – to thank them for their generosity and thoughtfulness in sending him a love gift (4:10-23). They were a thoughtful and giving church, unlike any other, and he wanted to make sure they knew how much he appreciated their sacrifice. Though he had started his expression of gratitude (v.10), he interrupted it with several comments on contentment (v.11-13), but now he finished his remarks, which would complete his message to this dear church. The idea to watch here is that *giving to the Lord's work is our way of giving to the Lord*. As God is blessed, He returns the blessing.

After Paul left Macedonia (the region in which was Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, etc.), no other church supported his work like the Philippians. They had sent gifts to him more than once (v.15, 16). Thus, he told them that “they had done well to share with him in his affliction” (v.14). First, notice that to give to the Lord's servants is to “share in their affliction,” their work, their ministry, their progress. In any missionary venture, there are those who *go* and those who *send*. *Both are equally important*. Those who send must rely upon those who go to do the work, to be effective, and to be faithful to share the Gospel abroad. However, those who go must have the support of those who send, their prayers, their encouragement, and their financial support. Therefore, even though there are more who send and less who go, *all are necessary* for the work of the Gospel, and *all share in the success*.

Second, notice that when the Philippians shared in Paul's affliction or gave towards his ministry, they had “done well.” What did that mean exactly? The Apostle explained the meaning when he followed up with, “Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek the profit which increases to your account” (v.17). When the Lord's people give to His work (particularly those ministries that clearly declare the Gospel), it is a blessing to Him. As a way of returning that blessing, the Lord responds in two ways. First, “He supplies all our needs” (v.19). *We can never outgive God*. “He who sows sparingly shall also reap sparingly, but he who sows bountifully shall also reap bountifully... for God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed” (2 Cor. 9:6-8; Prov. 3:9, 10). Second, the Lord takes note of our unselfish generosity and “increases our account” (v.17). This account refers to our way of “storing up treasures in heaven” (Matt. 6:20). God knows what we have given to His work. Though we might give it in secret, He sees and makes note, and one day, when we stand before Him in heaven, He will give us our reward. Christians may not be able to take earthly wealth with us to heaven, but God has made a way for us to send it on ahead, by giving to His work on earth.

Therefore, Paul described the Philippian gift as “well-pleasing to God, an acceptable sacrifice, and a fragrant aroma” (v.18). All of these terms are references to Old Testament ceremonial worship. God's people were to give a sacrifice that was acceptable to Him, and when they did, it was a fragrant aroma to Him, well-pleasing indeed. What exactly is an “acceptable sacrifice” today? In the Old Testament it was the tithe (tenth) but in the New Testament (today), we are not bound by the Law. We are free to give as we “purpose in our hearts, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). When it comes to giving, there is not one size that fits all. God does not require an equal amount but rather an equal sacrifice. Is what you are giving to God's work a sacrifice for you? Are you giving to His work cheerfully, out of delight rather than duty? Is your offering a fragrant aroma or a foul, apathetic, and offensive effort? God stirs up our hearts to give, uses our gift for His glory, and then returns the blessing to us, the giver. Glory to His name for doing all of that (v. 20).

As Paul closed, he made sure to greet every saint in Philippi and to send greetings from the saints in Rome, “especially those of Caesar's household” (v.21-23). It was a fitting end, as he reaffirmed how God was using his imprisonment there. People were getting saved despite his suffering. Rejoice!