

## Unity in Christ

We are walking through the book of Philippians over the next few weeks and I hope you're taking the time to read through it during the week. We've listed the schedule on the back of your notes, but I would encourage you to read all the way through the book each week and focus on the upcoming passage. If you do that, by the time the series is over, you'll practically be an expert on the book of Philippians.

Last week, we looked at Paul's situation, because that background is critical to understand Philippians. We learned that at the time of Paul's writing, he had been in Roman custody for 3 or 4 years. But that didn't slow him down. Paul was so laser-focused on the gospel that wherever he was no one was going to stop him from sharing Jesus.

And because Paul gave his life to something no trial or opposition could take away, he had incredible peace in excruciating circumstances. That's pretty appealing, isn't it? Wouldn't you like to have peace no matter what you're going through? That'll preach in our world today. But I want to warn about a problem with this.

The world we live in doesn't interpret itself. We all look at life through a lens that colors everything we experience. And we don't create our lens. Our lens is a combination of what we absorb from our family, our friends, and the world around us.

Well, one of the primary lenses our world gives us is the lens of *individualism*. For instance, think about the question of what makes a meaningful life. Even if we're not

aware of it, most people in the west are influenced by something called *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*.

You probably learned about this in psychology class. [maslow pyramid pic] It's represented by this nice pyramid. What I learned in psychology class was that everyone starts at the bottom and works their way up from physiological needs, to safety, love and belonging and finally to the promised land, *self-actualization*. He said in general, we need to have the lower needs met before we can experience the higher needs. But the point is that as a society, we've more or less adopted this as the key to a meaningful life. What's the purpose of life? Self-actualization, of course! Here's the problem...

Maslow's hierarchy isn't a *fact*, it's a *lens*. This is how he made sense of what he saw, but he was looking through the lens of individualism. Now most of us read the Bible through this lens, but it doesn't work because this isn't a Biblical lens. In fact, the more I read Scripture, the more I believe they're incompatible.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs assumes that what's most important is my individual emotional health. The pinnacle of the good life is Self-Actualization, which he defines as "being all I can be." But what does that mean? Do I need to be all I can be physically, or can I be out of shape and self-actualized? Can I be self-actualized on my own private island with no one else around? Do I need to get as much education as my IQ allows? Even then, how do I know if I'm there? And even if we answer all these questions, there's still the fact that it requires us to focus more and more on self.

Now, maybe there are some helpful insights from it, but this is not the lens of the Bible. You won't find a Biblical writer who teaches that self-actualization as the goal of life. More importantly, Jesus never tells us that we should consider anything that looks remotely like Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

And yet, even in the church, we sometimes couch it this way. Think about Spiritual Gifts, for instance. The Apostle Paul says that God gave leaders in the church for this... Ephesians 4:12, **"So Christ himself gave [leaders]...to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."** So, spiritual gifts are given to build up the church.

But too often, pastors try to convince people to serve in the church by telling them that they will be fulfilled if they do it. I know this is the language motivates people today, but if I exercise my gifts so I can be fulfilled, this makes my spiritual gifts all about *me*. If it benefits the church, that's great, but it's really about fulfilling my purpose.

I took some time to look at Maslow's hierarchy and consider what Paul's hierarchy would look like just from the book of Philippians. // Start on the bottom with physiological needs. Paul wasn't afraid to work, but in Philippians 4, he writes, **"I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."** It's clear Paul simply trust that Christ will provide for his needs.

Second, Paul doesn't seem too concerned about his safety when he writes in Philippians 1, **"For me to live is Christ, to die is gain."** // He does value community, but the purpose of community is not happiness, but *partnership* in the Gospel. //

The higher we get in the pyramid, the starker the contrast. Where Maslow sees a need for self-esteem, Paul rejects this and instead values self-abandonment. In chapter 3, Paul lists his worldly accomplishments, but then writes, **"Whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ...I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ, for whose sake I have lost everything."**

And finally, self-actualization isn't anywhere on Paul's radar. Paul's only concern is Christ-actualization. Philippians 1:20, **"I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death."** In other words, if you come to Christ seeking self-actualization, you're looking in the wrong place. It's critical for us to understand Paul's perspective, because if we don't, we won't understand what we're about to read.

So, with that in mind, let's look at Philippians, chapter 2:1-11. Now, at the end of chapter 1, Paul says that whatever happens to him or them, they should **"live as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven."** He fleshes out what that means in chapter 2.

The chapter starts with a series of "ifs." **"If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ."** **"If you have any comfort from Christ's love."** **"If you have any common sharing in the Holy Spirit."** **"If you have any tenderness and compassion."**

Now, I'm not going to get too far into the weeds of the individual things he says here because he's not putting together a checklist for them to study. But notice that the first two "ifs" focus on Christ. By doing this, he's reminding them of their claim to know Jesus. He's saying, "I know you guys say you follow Jesus and you find your comfort in Jesus. You claim to be followers of Jesus."

The third and fourth "ifs" focus on their relationship with Paul and each other. **"If you have any fellowship in the Spirit, if you have any tenderness and compassion,"** It would be something like, *"If you think the Holy Spirit binds you together. If you claim to be gentle and compassionate..."* In a sense, Paul is holding them to what they claim. It's like someone coming to church and saying, "I want to be a church of a church that really get's into evangelism!" Paul would say, "That's awesome! Now, let go then!"

And he uses the phrase, **"make my joy complete..."** This is a clumsy phrase, but what he's getting at is that he's really happy about their faith. In the introduction to the letter, he tells them, **"Every time I think of you, I give thanks to God...and I pray with joy."** (1:3-4) So he's not criticizing or correcting them, but he wants them to take their faith to the next level. And the way to do that is to actively pursue unity in the church.

Verse 2, **"Make my joy complete by being...like-minded...having the same loves...and being one in spirit and purpose."** When I read a list like this in the Bible, I always want to parse the words—what does he mean by "mind?" What does he mean to have the same "loves?" But that's not the point of this list. Paul is simply saying the same

thing over and over from different angles so they get the point. He doesn't want them to study the words, he wants to make sure they don't miss the point.

The point is unity doesn't happen accidentally. He uses a word twice that emphasizes this. We translate it...*Set your minds*. It's the Greek word, *phroneo* which can mean "set your mind" or "set your heart." It's more than a thought that pops into your head. It's a verb, so it shows *intentionality*. And it's not helpful to make a distinction between setting your *mind* on something or setting your *heart* on something. We never use just one or the other, they're in collusion with each other.

We you want something badly, your "heart" or emotions use your brain to justify why you should get what your heart is set on. But it can work the other way, too because our emotions aren't fixed. They can be trained so just because you feel one way now, doesn't mean you can't train your emotions to feel another way. Over time, you can change your emotional response.

You can see this with married couples. I've counseled with couples whose marriage was struggling. And typically, I can tell almost immediately from the conversations I have with them whether they'll get through it or if they'll end up divorced. I can hear it in their voice. I can hear it in the way they talk about their spouse.

It doesn't matter whether they agree to counseling. If their heart is set (*phroneo*) on getting out, no amount of counseling will help. But if their heart is set on staying married, they can work through anything. In couples that make it, the mindset that we

*are not the type of people who get divorced* has been cultivated long before the struggles. If a couple sets their mind on staying married, they can get through anything.

I have a friend who had an affair and confessed it to his wife. When she first found out, it wrecked her emotionally. She didn't feel like staying married to him. She felt betrayed. She resented him and wondered if she could ever trust him. But she had made up her mind that they were staying together and they did counseling and worked through it, and over time, her emotions toward him began to change.

Now, humans are naturally self-centered but we also live in a society that reinforces the idea that our minds should be (*phroneo*) toward self. Virtually every movies or media today promotes this attitude and it even creeps into the church.

But Paul wars against this. He's tells them that if they really do follow Christ, it will show itself by *phroneo* toward each other. So, what does this look like? Well, in the rest of this passage, he shows them *how* to achieve this, he gives them a *model* to pattern their lives after, and then he tells them the result of living this way.

First, how does the church achieve unity? He mentions three things. First, he says, **"Do nothing out of selfish ambition."** The Greek word is a political word, *eritheia* and it describes someone who runs for political office, not for the good of the people, but for the benefits of the position—the recognition, the money, the personal power.

Now, Paul isn't against ambition, per se. Ambition can help us be productive. But it becomes a problem when our motivation is wrong. The Apostle Paul had a lot of

ambition. He worked tirelessly and sacrificed everything, but his ambition wasn't that he would be recognized, but that *Christ* would be recognized.

But there are two equal and opposite dangers in the church. The first is to have no ambition. Some people are workaholics in their career, but coast when it comes to church. If they do anything in the church, their attitude is, "Well, I'm just a volunteer. They can't expect too much out of me. Besides, I work so hard at my job, I don't have the energy to serve in the church or do outreach or evangelism."

I find it interesting that the same people who are ambitious and hold themselves to the highest standards in their work, when it comes to the work of the church, where eternity is at stake, often barely do enough to get by.

The other danger is that people are ambitious and work hard in the church, but they do it to be recognized or get the respect or power they can't get at work.

But good ambition is Christ-ambition. We give our best so Christ will be glorified and the Gospel will spread in our neighborhood and world. If Jesus is the most important thing, we should give our best to him. If you're a board member, give it your best. If you're a small group leader, work at it diligently. If you're a greeter, make the person you're greeting the most important person in the world at that time.

So, do you work like you have a stake in the effectiveness of Waite Park Church? Or do you leave it someone else and give your best to your work or your hobbies? One of

the best ways to build unity in the church is for all of us to have a godly ambition that Christ would be glorified through what we do.

Second, Paul says, **“do nothing out of vain conceit.”** This is the Greek word, *kenodoxia* and it means “unfounded self-esteem.” This someone who believes he’s a VIP even though he doesn’t contribute much. He thinks he’s an expert on the Bible even though he never reads it. He thinks everyone should listen to him when he criticizes everything even though he doesn’t lift a finger to help. They have a sense of self-importance that doesn’t match reality. People like that erode unity.

Third, he writes, **“In humility, consider others better than yourself. Don’t look at your own interests, but to the interests of others.”** Now, humility is an interesting word. I know I’ve mentioned this before, but humility wasn’t a virtue before Jesus. In Paul’s day, everyone operated within the strict rules of society. So, you knew your place and had to survey the room to see who had the highest social status and then sort yourself accordingly. Someone of a higher social status would never give up his seat to someone with a lower status. That’s just not how it worked.

Now, humility isn’t a matter of denying your gifts and abilities. If someone says, “You’re a nice dresser. You’re a really good singer,” humility doesn’t say, “Oh, no I’m not.” Putting yourself down isn’t humility.

No, if you’re humble, you recognize the gifts and graces and resources God has given you. If you’re a good singer, then sing. If you’re a good leader, then lead. If you’re a

good administrator, then administrate. And if someone recognizes it, just say “thank you.” To deny those gifts is to say to God, this isn’t good enough.

But at the same time, while humble people acknowledge their gifts, they don’t use them to claim privilege over others to benefit yourself. Instead, a humble person uses her gifts or wealth or status—not to benefit her—but to benefit others.”

You see, Paul is setting up the church as an alternative society. The world says, *“Express yourself. Bring attention to yourself. Make people notice you. Be self-actualized.”* But Paul says, *“Acknowledge your gifts, but don’t use them to so you’ll be recognized, use them for the sake of others. Use them to build up the church so Christ can be glorified!”*

And here’s the amazing thing about this alternative system. If a church does things the world’s way, everyone competes for attention. It’s a bunch of individuals saying, “look at me, recognize me, serve me!” But when we do things Jesus’ way, we have a whole church full of people who are serving each other and honoring each other, and everyone receives what they need. But it has to be a whole church effort. If it’s just a few, it doesn’t work. But when everyone has that mindset, it’s incredible. That’s the how-to. //

Starting in verse 5, Paul gives us a model for this kind of life. He says we should look to none other than Jesus as our model. And this is how he describes Jesus. Verse 6,

**“Have the same mindset (phroneo) as Christ Jesus: ‘Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God as something to be used to his own advantage.’”** We live in a world that believes that low self-esteem is the source of many

people's problems. This mindset began back in the 70's with a psychologist named Nathaniel Branden, who did some research that he said pointed to the fact that criminals had low self-esteem and that's what caused them to commit crimes.

So, naturally if we could raise everyone's self-esteem, there would be less crime and people would be better off. Now, that turned out to be nonsense (and in fact, it's been found that criminals tend to have higher than average self-esteem, which gives them a sense of entitlement and helps them rationalize their crime. I *deserve* this.

I was thinking about this the other day and the strange question popped into my mind of whether we would say Jesus had high self-esteem. So, I looked up the dictionary definition and it said self-esteem is "*confidence in one's own worth or abilities; self-respect.*" And I thought, if that's the definition, then Jesus probably did have confidence in his worth and abilities. I suppose it's hard to overestimate your importance when you're the Son of God. But that's the whole point.

What Paul is saying is that Jesus didn't become human because he felt bad about himself. He knew he was God. And God deserves recognition and privileges. If there is anyone who can rightly say, "*I deserve to have other people serve me,*" it was Jesus. Yet, instead of demanding the nicest and best, when he became human, he didn't enter humanity with the wealth and comfort and honor of a king. He entered the world as an ordinary guy. And he didn't use his power to serve himself, but to serve others.

That's what Paul says as he continues, **"7rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.**

**8And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!"** Not only was Jesus not born into luxury; not only didn't he use his power to serve himself, he went so far as to die in our place. And Paul says, "that's the model for what I'm talking about." Talk about a high standard!

But even though Paul doesn't explicitly tell us the *result, it's implied in verses 9-11.*

**"9Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."**

Let me mention two results. First, *Christ is proclaimed.* Now, what Paul says is that because Jesus humbled himself, God glorified him. That's the result of the hymn. But remember that Paul is quoting this hymn because he's trying to motivate the church in Philippi to pursue unity.

So, here he's implying that our unity—our willingness to sacrifice our privilege for the sake of others, points people to Jesus. They will see that and say, "There's something to those Christians." This is the same thing Jesus said in the book of John when he told his disciples, **"35By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one**

**another.”** The greatest witness to the Gospel isn’t being cool or relevant. It’s the church that lives like Jesus.

Now, listen, the purpose of the church is not your self-actualization. It’s to give witness to Jesus as Lord. As long as we have that straight, we’ll be OK and the church will be unified and effective in accomplishing our mission.

But don’t worry, you won’t be forgotten. Remember, Jesus is not just our Savior and Lord, but he is also our model for how we live. And when we model ourselves after Jesus and refuse to use our power, gifts, resources to serve ourselves but instead use them to serve each other, God will recognize us. We don’t have to scratch and claw to get our place. We don’t have to shout, “look at me!” to get recognized. Instead, when we humble ourselves and serve others, then God—the only one whose approval really matters—will recognize us.

And this is consistent with Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 23:12, **“<sup>11</sup>The greatest among you will be your servant. <sup>12</sup>For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”** And here’s where following Jesus is an act of faith. For most people, that exaltation won’t happen in this lifetime, but in the life to come.