

Lesson 5

Focus on One Another

Introduction

As we consider how we are knit together in this study, this lesson will concentrate on the need to focus on each other. Although there is nothing new under the sun, our culture today, more than ever, seems fixated on self. From selfies to TikTok videos, to social media “likes” and “followers” our society is infatuated with self-promotion. Media doesn’t help either, as it feeds this insatiable desire by telling us what we deserve, what we must have, and what will make us feel good. We are also inundated with self-help books, blogs, and videos that push us to cater to ourselves, encourage us to get in touch with our feelings, and bolster self-esteem. The constant focus on self is having very serious ramifications for families and parenting . . . impacting how our kids are raised and how society in the next generation or two will function.

The extreme focus on self does carry over into congregations. When self is the focus, we hold on to our pet issues and sometimes try to push them on others. We become offended when our wants and desires aren’t given the priority. We view the congregation primarily from the perspective of *what can it do for me*, instead of *how I can serve the congregation*. We take things personal when confronted with shortcomings and sin. And the list goes on and on.

So, what can we do? How can we fight back against the constant and often subtle impact culture and society have on congregational life? In this lesson we’ll look at how one congregation placed itself in grave danger by tolerating selfishness and carnality. Then, we’ll examine another one that experienced joy and togetherness through being focused on each other. One is an example of what not to do. The other is one that we need to be sure to follow.

Corinth: A Congregation on the Verge of Coming Apart

A quick summary of 1 Corinthians reveals a congregation divided, arguing about which spiritual leader was the best to follow. Their worship service was in disarray. They talked over each other, spoke in different languages, no matter if an interpreter was present or not, and sang hymns without warning. Wives of the prophets spoke openly, publicly questioning teaching. The Lord’s Supper was being abused and the meals they shared together became a gluttonous occasion for some, who filled themselves up completely, while ignoring others leaving them out completely.

The congregation was beset by lawsuits against one another, and each person seemed to be focused on his or her own traditions, while others were infatuated with their “rights.” They were fraught with immorality, seemingly unable to see any standard to follow. One brother had taken his father’s wife and the congregation appeared to be OK with it. Others wondered if they had to remain married to an unbeliever now that they had become a Christian. Could widows remarry? Should one allow their kids to marry at all? Almost on every page we have a new problem to deal with – each of which was capable of tearing the congregation apart.

For Corinth, the problem rested in their carnality or *worldliness*. Too much focusing on self, resulted in *envy and strife*. Paul chastised them for being *worldly and behaving like mere humans*, 1 Corinthians 3.3. Most members in the church at Corinth needed a heavy dose of humility:

Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks he is wise in this age, let him become a fool so that he can become wise, 1 Corinthians 3.18.

Much of the trouble congregations experience would be eliminated if more members were not so impressed with their wisdom. A person who feels he or she is wise in contemporary human wisdom only deceives themselves. A person who buys in to the hype that they are somehow better than others or that their opinions and judgments matter more than others is regarded as foolish by our God. When we begin to express and follow our own ideas about the gospel, the church, and Christian living . . . saints cannot help but become divided.

Some people are not happy unless they can express their opinion on virtually everything. Some are not happy unless they take the opposite side from what they perceive to be the majority. Others have to always speak up and criticize. For them it is important to always win out on an issue. They hate opposition or contradiction. Selfish pride will seek to justify itself at any cost and often looks down its nose at all who disagree.

Intellectual and selfish pride are the enemy of congregational unity. The focus must be removed from self.

Philippi: A Congregation with the Right Focus

Philippi is one of the few congregations that are written to without rebuke. From beginning to end of Paul's letter, there is praise and thankfulness for their spiritual growth, unity, and sense of service. All of it was rooted in a deep sense of selflessness. Paul's relationship with them was strong, close, and personal. At the beginning of the epistle, He writes:

Indeed, it is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I have you in my heart, and you are all partners with me in grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how deeply I miss all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus, Philippians 1.7-8.

At the end of the epistle Paul thanks them for their sacrificial service in meeting his needs:

Still, you did well by partnering with me in my hardship. And you Philippians know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you alone. For even in Thessalonica you sent gifts for my need several times. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that is increasing to your account. But I have received everything in full, and I have an abundance. I am fully supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you provided—a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus, Philippians 4.14-19.

It is clear the Christians in Philippi had the right focus . . . not on themselves . . . but others. What can we observe about their behavior?

The Church in Philippi abounded in prayer

As Paul worked in his ministry, he was bolstered by the constant prayers of the Christians in Philippi. He recognizes their petitions on his behalf here:

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice because I know this will lead to my salvation through your prayers and help from the Spirit of Jesus Christ. My eager expectation and hope is that I will not be ashamed about anything, but that now as always, with all courage, Christ will be highly honored in my body, whether by life or by death, Philippians 1.18b-20.

Paul deeply appreciated the prayers of this church and expresses them here with sincere thanks and gratitude. No doubt the congregation had been taught by its leaders how *the prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect*, James 5.16a. The apostles often requested the prayer of the churches. Paul urged the Corinthians to *join in helping us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gift that came to us through the prayers of many*, 2 Corinthians 1.11. To the Romans Paul appealed, *strive together with me in prayers to God on my behalf*, Romans 15.30. And finally, to the Ephesians Paul wrote:

Pray at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and request, and stay alert with all perseverance and intercession for all the saints. Pray also for me, that the message may be given to me when I open my mouth to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, Ephesians 6.18-19.

The first Christians knew that nothing is more encouraging in ministry than to understand that fellow believers are standing side by side, holding their leaders and teachers up before the Lord in prayer. A congregation that focuses on others prays for others.

The Philippian church didn't wait to be asked to get involved in the Lord's Work

Notice how, in Philippians 4.15-16, almost from the very beginning, not long after its establishment, the congregation got involved in supporting evangelism. They cared. Paul writes:

And you Philippians know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you alone. For even in Thessalonica you sent gifts for my need several times, 4.15-16.

In fact, they continually worked to supply Paul's needs (2.25; 4.10, 14, 18). This all stemmed from their having a strong relationship with Paul. This was not just an impersonal check going to a person in exchange for a written report of the work . . . it was close fellowship and participation in the work of the Lord in another place.

I have always been touched by the story of Epaphroditus in chapter 2. He was dispatched by the Philippians to travel to Paul as a messenger and minister. Somewhere, either along the journey, or after he arrived at Paul's location, he became sick, *so sick that he nearly died*, 2.27. However long was necessary he stayed with Paul tending to his needs. Paul commended this brother as someone worthy of great joy and honor *because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up what was lacking in your ministry to me*, 2.29-30. I believe Epaphroditus typifies the entire congregation in Philippi.

Carl McMurray has written, "when they saw the need, they went to work."¹⁴ They didn't wait to be coaxed into giving. They didn't put their finger to the wind to see who else was going to contribute. They simply got involved, meeting Paul's need to the best of their ability. There is no more important work

¹⁴ McMurray, Carl. *Studying New Testament Churches*. "The Church in Philippi." Waynesville, OH: Spiritbuilding Publishers, 2023, p. 48.

than the spreading of the gospel. We need to be looking for, praying for, and making a way for opportunities to heed the call of Jesus in Matthew 28.19-20.

Philippi exemplified the principles of Philippians 2.3-4

Here Paul writes:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others.

Notice how Paul defines the word in our text. Humility is where we make the decision to count others as more important than ourselves. It is the very opposite of selfish ambition and conceit. It is a realistic appraisal of oneself and others as being in the image of God. It is an attitude that is expressed by positive action. We allow the needs of others to surpass our own. We do this by:

- Respecting them
- Listening to them
- Serving them
- Speaking good about them
- Strengthening them

Encouraging them.¹⁵

Verse 4 spells out how the previous verse works. The primary aim or goal of our life is to become involved in the lives of others and their cause. Again, this is in total contrast with the world that emphasizes the worship and promotion of self. Instead, we are to “look,” which means “to pay careful attention.” Paul does not mean here that we should completely neglect ourselves, but we need to reprioritize our life so that the greater share is focused on others. Their needs and concerns must pass our own.

“Interests” in 2.4 is a filler word. Youngs Literal Translation says, “each not to your own look.”¹⁶ It’s an open-ended statement. Today, we would say, “Let each look not to your own _____.” (Just fill in the blank.) That blank could be your finances, property, family, reputation, success, or happiness. We are to be concerned about the things of others.

We could rightly connect v. 4 back to Matthew 22.39 where Jesus recites the second greatest commandment: *you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

What are some ways you can make the good of others the focus of your life?

- Who is a widow or widower you can spend time with?
- Who is a young person you can take under your wing?

¹⁵ Hansen, G. Walter. *The Letter to the Philippians*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009, p. 115.

¹⁶ Young, Robert. *Young’s Literal Translation*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1997.

- What young newlywed couple could use some guidance and encouragement?
- Who can you go to and pray with?
- Who is going through a valley that you can join with and walk through it together with them?

When you do this, you are literally changing your life *and* the life of someone else. It is not about where they are presently in life, it is about whether you will count others as worthy of your help and encouragement? Will you serve your brothers and sisters? Will you make the time to do what builds them up?

Conclusion

So, which congregation more closely identifies yours? Corinth or Philippi? I hope you can answer “Philippi.” When the members of a congregation are focused on each other, they are fulfilling the first and second greatest commandments:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands,” Matthew 22.37-40.

For a congregation to function as God intends, it begins with you. Will you do your part?

For Thought and Reflection

1. What are some ways you think today’s culture and its complete emphasis on self-promotion and pride is impacting the church? Explain.
2. What are some examples of how the church in Corinth was in disarray? What attitudes were contributing to the situation? How did Paul describe the problem? (1 Corinthians 3.3)
3. What is the problem with an exalted opinion of oneself . . . and one’s knowledge, ideas, and judgments? How is this regarded by God?
4. How does a praying congregation exemplify what it means to focus on others? How can we improve in this area?
5. What is so impressive about the Philippian church’s commitment to supporting and encouraging evangelism? What can we learn from this today?

6. How does Epaphroditus typify the entire congregation at Philippi?

7. What is humility, in the context of Philippians 2.3-4?

8. How does Philippians 2.4 help us understand how to carry out the expectation of the previous verse?

9. What are some things you can personally do to increase your focus on others?