

LESSON 8

Love That Unites

If, then, there is any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, make my joy complete by thinking the same way, having the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. 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.

— Philippians 2:1-4

We become one mind when each of us takes up the mind of Christ, who counted others ahead of Himself and went all the way down to a cross for us.

Introduction

HOW MANY TIMES IN PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11 DOES PAUL TALK ABOUT THE WAY HIS READERS THINK?

Between verse 2 and verse 6, Paul points to the mind six times in five verses.⁴⁰ To Paul, a divided church is first of all a church that's thinking wrong, so he aims his remedy where the trouble starts.

The church at Philippi was dear to him. He thanked God for their *partnership in the gospel from the first day until now* (1:5), and he wrote to them from chains. Yet by chapter 4 he names two women, Euodia and Syntyche, and urges them *to agree in the Lord* (4:2). That same word runs through this chapter. These were faithful women *who have contended for the gospel at my side* (4:3), and somewhere along the way they had stopped thinking together.

Just before our text, Paul says he wants to hear *that you are standing firm in one spirit, in one accord* (1:27). Chapter 2 explains how we get there.

This lesson follows Paul through four steps: the reasons for unity (2:1-2), the two appetites that wreck it (2:3-4), the mind of Christ that went all the way down (2:5-8), and God's answer to that descent (2:9-11). Then it turns to Mark 10, where James and John asked Jesus for the best seats in the kingdom.

Philippians 2:1-2 – Four Reasons and One Mind

Paul opens with four *if* clauses, and the grammar assumes the answer is yes. Read the word as *since*, and the sense comes through: *since there is encouragement in Christ, consolation of love, fellowship with the Spirit, affection and mercy*.

Each of the four is something the Philippians have already received. Paul builds the command to unity on what God has already handed over, which is the thread that has run through the whole quarter. Love is given before it is commanded.

Then the command itself: *make my joy complete*. Paul is in prison and can't sit down with Euodia and Syntyche himself. One thing would complete his joy from a distance: their unity.

He describes that unity in four ways. *Thinking the same way. Having the same love. United in spirit. Intent on one purpose.* The first and last use the verb for setting the mind, and the third is a word found nowhere else in the New Testament, meaning something like *one-souled*.⁴¹

What is Paul asking for? *A shared direction.* The Philippians didn't have to agree on everything. What they shared was the same love, aimed at the same people, and the same purpose under the same Lord. Unity in this chapter is a matter of where the mind is pointed.

That explains how Paul handles Euodia and Syntyche. He never tells us what they disagreed about, and he doesn't pick a winner. He sends them back to common ground: *agree in the Lord*. If you and a brother have drifted apart, the way back starts with standing before Christ together.

Philippians 2:3-4 – Two Appetites and a New Accounting

Verse 3 identifies what breaks a congregation apart. *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit.*

Selfish ambition is one word in Greek that grew out of the world of hired labor and came to describe the person who works every situation for his own advantage.⁴² Paul has already used it in this letter, of men in Rome who were *preaching Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely* (1:17). The Philippians had already seen what it looked like.

Conceit is literally *empty glory*, the hunger for praise with nothing underneath it. The word appears only here in the New Testament, and its close cousin appears in the Galatians text we studied in Lesson 6: *Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another*, Galatians 5:26.

The two appetites attack unity from different sides. Selfish ambition wants to win, and empty glory wants to be admired. You don't get to manage these instincts or keep them in balance. Paul says to do nothing out of them.

What replaces them? *In humility consider others as more important than yourselves.* The word for humility comes from a Greek word that the wider world used for people who were low, servile, and of no account. The church took that insult and made lowliness of mind one of the marks of a disciple.⁴³

Humility here is an act of accounting. *Consider* is a word for weighing things and reaching a judgment.⁴⁴ The question is where you put the other person. When a brother needs help and you need something else, his need goes first. When a sister wants the seat you wanted, she gets it.

Verse 4 widens the field of vision. You still pay your own bills and look after your own family. Paul moves the other person into view. If you're always busy tending to your own needs, you'll never notice another family member in the congregation.

Philippians 2:5-8 – The Mind That Went Down

Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited. Instead he emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity. And when he had come as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross (Philippians 2:5-8).

Verse 5 is the foundation. *Adopt the same attitude* is the mind verb again. You might expect a plan for church unity to follow. Paul points to Christ. Watch the direction of every phrase.

He existed *in the form of God*, sharing fully in the nature and glory of God.

He did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited. Here's the word from verse 3. You're told to consider others more important, and Christ had already done that accounting. He weighed His own rightful place and decided it wasn't something to clutch for His own advantage.⁴⁵

He emptied himself. He remained God, and He laid aside the privilege. Notice the word, too. Verse 3 warned against *empty glory*, and verse 7 shows the Lord emptying Himself. We're tempted to chase a glory with nothing in it. Christ poured Himself out.

He took the form of a servant, the ordinary word for a slave. In Lesson 2 we watched Him put on a slave's towel in John 13. Here Paul applies that to His whole life on earth.

He took the likeness of humanity, with real flesh and real weariness.

He humbled himself, a word from the same root as *humility* in verse 3. The Lord did first what Paul asks you to do.

He became obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross. Rome kept that death for slaves and rebels, the lowest place a man could be put.

Count the steps, and every one goes down. This is the mind we are to have.

Philippians 2:9-11 – For This Reason

For this reason God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name. The exaltation came because of the descent. The word for *highly exalted* appears nowhere else in the New Testament.⁴⁶

Notice who does the lifting. It's God. Humility isn't a strategy for getting promoted. You go down because Christ went down, and you leave the lifting to God.

So that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow—in heaven and on earth and under the earth—and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Paul is quoting Isaiah 45:23, where God says *Every knee will bow to me*, and he applies the words to Jesus. We met the same verse in Lesson 4 at the judgment seat, Romans 14:11.

Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess the same words. When you kneel before that Lord now, it's hard to keep climbing over the brother kneeling beside you.

Looking to Christ

Mark 10 shows Jesus dealing with the same two appetites among His own disciples.

On the road up to Jerusalem, Jesus had just told the Twelve, for the third time, that He would be condemned, mocked, flogged, and killed (10:32-34). Right after that, James and John came with a request. *Allow us to sit at your right and at your left in your glory* (10:37). Both of Paul's appetites were in that one sentence, position and glory.

When the ten disciples heard this, they began to be indignant with James and John (10:41). You've seen the same thing in a local church: a few reach for the top, and the rest resent them for it.

Jesus settled the quarrel without assigning a single seat. *Jesus called them over (10:42), the two who had asked and the ten who were angry, and spoke to all of them at once. But it is not so among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you will be a slave to all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (10:43-45).*

Paul says the same thing in Philippians 2:5-8.

Five chapters later, the next time Mark puts anyone at Jesus's right and left, it's at Golgotha. *They crucified two criminals with him, one on his right and one on his left (15:27).* The seats James and John asked for were on either side of the cross, and the glory they wanted came after it.

Jesus was patient with both, the two who wanted the best seats and the ten who were angry with them. He went to the cross for all twelve of them, and He went for you too.

Conclusion and Application

Philippians 2:1-11 shows how love makes us one:

- Unity is built on what God has already given: encouragement in Christ, consolation of love, fellowship with the Spirit, affection and mercy.
- One mind means a shared direction under the same Lord.
- Love refuses both selfish ambition and empty glory, and counts the other person as more important.
- Christ did that accounting first and went all the way down to a cross, and God lifted Him to the highest place.

Now think about your own church life. Where are you climbing when Christ would have you go down? Is there a brother or sister you've stopped thinking together with? When did you last let someone else have the seat, the credit, or the last word? And when you kneel before the Lord, who is kneeling beside you?

For Discussion

1. Count the words for the mind in Philippians 2:2-6. Why do you think Paul puts so much weight on the way we think?

2. Each of the four *if* clauses in 2:1 names something God has already given. Which of the four means the most to you right now, and why?
3. What is the difference between unity and uniformity? How does Paul's handling of Euodia and Syntyche in 4:2 help answer that?
4. Selfish ambition wants to win, and empty glory wants to be admired. Where do these two appetites show up in a healthy congregation, and why are they easy to miss?
5. The world once used the word for humility as an insult. What does it mean to *consider others more important than yourself* without sliding into false modesty?
6. Paul tells the Philippians to *look to the interests of others*. Name one person in this congregation whose interests you could look to this week. What would that look like?
7. Walk through the steps of Christ's descent in 2:6-8. Which one strikes you most when you slow down over it?

8. Why does it matter that God did the exalting in 2:9? What would go wrong if you used humility to get ahead?

9. Read Mark 10:35-45 alongside Philippians 2:3-8. How did Jesus handle a quarrel among His disciples? What does His answer teach you about settling a dispute with a brother?

10. James and John asked for the seats at Jesus's right and left, and Mark 15:27 shows who was there at the cross. How does that change the way you think about wanting a place of honor?

Looking Ahead

Lesson 9 – Love That Teaches, Titus 2:11-14

Philippians 2 showed grace coming down to us in a Person. The next lesson shows what that grace does once it arrives. It teaches. *For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, instructing us to deny godlessness and worldly lusts and to live in a sensible, righteous, and godly way in the present age*, Titus 2:11-12. Paul writes to a young preacher on Crete about older men and women, younger men and women, and how each is to be shaped by the gospel. Read Titus 2:1-14 before class, and notice how often Paul's instructions come back to a sound and sensible mind. It's the same family of words we saw in Lesson 2 in Romans 12:3.

⁴⁰ *Phroneō*, "to set one's mind on, be intent on," BDAG, s.v. φρονέω. It occurs twenty-six times in the New Testament and ten times in Philippians: 1:7; 2:2 (twice); 2:5; 3:15 (twice); 3:19; 4:2; 4:10 (twice). The six words for the mind in 2:2-6 are *phronēte* and *phronountes* (2:2), *tapeinophrosynē* and *hēgoumenoi* (2:3), *phroneite* (2:5), and *hēgēsato* (2:6). The phrase *to auto phronein*, "to think the same thing," appears also at Romans 12:16; 15:5; 2 Corinthians 13:11; and Philippians 4:2. Romans 15:5-6 joins it to the same end as Philippians 2:11: *so that you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with one mind and one voice*.

⁴¹ *Sympsychos*, “harmonious, united in spirit,” BDAG, s.v. σύμψυχος, compounded from *syn*, “with,” and *psychē*, “soul.” Philippians 2:2 is its only New Testament occurrence.

⁴² *Eritheia*, “selfishness, selfish ambition,” BDAG, s.v. ἐριθεία. It occurs seven times in the New Testament: Romans 2:8; 2 Corinthians 12:20; Galatians 5:20; Philippians 1:17; 2:3; James 3:14, 16. *Kenodoxia*, “vanity, conceit, excessive ambition,” BDAG, s.v. κενοδοξία, is compounded from *kenos*, “empty,” and *doxa*, “glory,” and occurs only at Philippians 2:3. The adjective *kenodoxos* occurs only at Galatians 5:26.

⁴³ *Tapeinophrosynē*, “humility, modesty,” BDAG, s.v. ταπεινοφροσύνη, is compounded from *tapeinos*, “low,” and the *phren*-root of *phroneō*, so the word for humility belongs to the same family as the mind words around it. Outside the Bible, Greek writers commonly used *tapeinos* with contempt, for the servile and the base. The noun occurs seven times in the New Testament: Acts 20:19; Ephesians 4:2; Philippians 2:3; Colossians 2:18, 23; 3:12; 1 Peter 5:5. Ephesians 4:2 opens the quarter’s anchor chapter, and Colossians 3:12 belongs to the text of Lesson 10. The verb *tapeinoō*, “to humble,” is the word at Philippians 2:8.

⁴⁴ *Hēgeomai*, “to engage in an intellectual process, think, consider, regard,” BDAG, s.v. ἡγέομαι. It occurs six times in Philippians: 2:3; 2:6; 2:25; 3:7; 3:8 (twice). In 3:7-8 Paul does the same accounting with his own advantages: *everything that was a gain to me, I have considered to be a loss because of Christ*.

⁴⁵ *Harpagmos*, BDAG, s.v. ἀρπαγμός. The CSB margin offers *to be grasped* or *to be held on to*. *Emptied* is *kenoō*, “to empty,” BDAG, s.v. κενόω, which occurs five times in the New Testament: Romans 4:14; 1 Corinthians 1:17; 9:15; 2 Corinthians 9:3; Philippians 2:7. It shares the root *kenos* with *kenodoxia* in 2:3.

⁴⁶ *Hyperypsoō*, “to raise someone to the loftiest height,” BDAG, s.v. ὑπερυψόω, compounded from *hyper*, “beyond,” and *hypoō*, “to exalt.” Philippians 2:9 is its only New Testament occurrence. Isaiah 45:23 is quoted again at Romans 14:11.