

UNITED IN SPIRIT, INTENT ON ONE PURPOSE

The Book of Philippians #10

We are in the book of Philippians. Last week we looked at Paul's view of suffering for the sake of Christ. Since Paul begins chapter 2 with the word "therefore" it behooves us to review what Paul said at the end of chapter 1 in order to understand what Paul will say next. In chapter 1 verse 28 we read:

PHILIPPIANS 1:28

"For to you it has been granted to Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me."

Paul is saying that we will suffer for the sake of Christ, just as he has suffered. The Philippians saw the scars on his body from the beatings he took for the sake of Christ. His suffering was visible and the conflict which he experienced in Philippi was seen by all who lived there. But he has suffered more since leaving Philippi and in fact is suffering now in a prison in Rome as he writes his letter to them.

They have seen his sufferings first hand but they have also heard about them directly from him and from other trusted sources such as Epaphroditus whom they sent to minister to the needs of Paul while he was in prison (Philippians 2:25). So when Paul is telling the Philippians they can expect to suffer the same things he has suffered because God has granted it to them, they are fully aware of what this suffering entails.

Now when Paul is writing he is obviously aware that he is living and ministering in a society ruled by Rome. And Rome is currently threatened by this new religion because it does not allow its believers to accept anyone other than Christ as the One True God. And Rome believes Caesar is God. It will not be until Constantine comes to the throne and enacts the Edict of Milan in 313 AD that Christianity would be tolerated in the Roman Empire. And it won't be until 380 AD when the Edict of Thessalonica makes Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. So Christianity and Rome are currently at odds with each other.

But Paul has suffered not only at the hands of Rome but also at the hands of his fellow Jews. In fact his eventual death by Rome comes because the Romans rescued him from the Jews who were plotting to kill him while he was in Jerusalem for the Passover (Acts 21:27-30; 23:12-24).

So when Paul speaks of his fellow believers suffering for Christ he has first-hand knowledge of the current political and religious climate in which they both live. Because of this he can say with confidence that what he has suffered they will also suffer.

If Paul were writing today to believers living in countries dominated by Islamic governments, he would not change his exhortation to them. Persecution and death are imminent threats to their very existence. But if he were writing to American, British, or Canadian Christians today he may have toned down the type of suffering he expected us to experience because it would probably not be as severe as his own.

None the less he would continue to warn us of suffering for the sake of Christ because he has already told us that this type of suffering was granted to us for Christ's sake. It may take different forms in different parts of the world, but persecution would still exist and should be expected even here in America. So regardless of the type of suffering believers experience for Christ, Paul's admonition in chapter two still applies.

Since Paul starts off chapter 2 by saying “therefore” he is in essence saying that what I am about to tell you is based on what I have previously revealed. And since you will suffer the same type of persecution I have experienced let me ask something of you.

He has already requested that the Philippians conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel for which they are suffering. He is now going to instruct them on how this conduct should be manifested. He will give specific instructions regarding unity, humility and personal attitude, and provide the foundational truth for their obedience, some of which we will look at today.

Paul starts out by saying, “If there is any” and then lists 5 things upon which he will build his subsequent requests.

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-2

“Therefore, 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...”

So these five things are ENCOURAGEMENT, CONSOLATION, FELLOWSHIP, AFFECTION, and COMPASSION. Let’s take them one at a time.

ENCOURAGEMENT is something meant to inspire a person with courage or confidence.

The Greek word translated as encouragement (paraklesis) comes from the same root word used for the Holy Spirit (parakletos). It refers to spoken words that bring comfort and encouragement. Notice Paul says this comfort is to be found in Christ, so whatever is spoken is meant to place Christ as the central figure from whom comfort is to be found and the Holy Spirit as the means through which His comfort comes.

CONSOLATION is an attempt to lessen the grief. Notice Paul says it is a consolation of love. The word consolation is also translated as “comfort” or “encouragement”. So within this consolation would be words of encouragement and comfort and it would be an act of love, not of duty.

FELLOWSHIP (of the Spirit): An association of persons having similar interests. It’s a community of people who are jointly participating and enjoying the same thing. In this instance Paul is referring to the Holy Spirit which all believers share and have in common. It is this Spirit which brings all believers into fellowship with one another.

AFFECTION means fond devotion. The Greek word translated as “affection” refers to the bowels – the heart, the liver, etc. It is a word that is regarded by the Hebrews as the seat of tender affections, especially kindness, benevolence, compassion, etc. For us it would be known as the heart from which our tender mercies and affections arise and is indeed translated as “heart” in other passages. It is a heart in which mercy resides. So by speaking of affection (and notice Paul does not connect affection to any other thing as he has with the previous three) Paul’s referring to the seat or root of all affections towards those who suffer. This would be a genuine care arising from the heart and deeply held by the one who is expressing it. It is the foundational emotion from which tenderness arises.

COMPASSION: a feeling of deep sympathy for another’s suffering or misfortune; to be filled with compassion, pity or mercy for what others are experiencing. It is closely related to affection but it is affection expressed in a specific manner.

Now why would Paul say “if there is any” of these things present among them? Since Paul has great affection for the Philippians and has visited them numerous times over the years, I doubt that he feels these qualities are lacking. He even mentions in verses 9 and 11 of chapter 1 that he thanks God for them and that they have been filled with the fruit of righteousness. This hardly sounds like a group of believers who lack encouragement, consolation, fellowship, affection and compassion. So I don’t believe Paul was inferring anything negative at all. But I want to go down this rabbit trail of possible misunderstanding for a while because it could have occurred and it has relevance to the main point which Paul is making.

Using the phrase “if there is any” is a tricky thing because it could easily be interpreted as by the reader as though Paul were implying that very little of these things are occurring in their midst. If the Philippians who suffered so much thought that Paul doubted their love and affection for one another this might have sounded offensive and arrogant to them. Especially if they found some negative emotions rising to the surface and stopped reading after the first few words. You know we tend to do that sort of thing when we get riled up. Reading further might have helped place Paul’s words in context, but if they were already stirred up and offended by what they think Paul is implying, they might not have been open to any other interpretation until they calmed down and could listened to reason.

If they took offense at what they believed Paul was insinuation, their response might have been something like this. *“If? What do you mean ‘if’? Is Paul saying we have no affection or compassion for each other and that we don’t encourage or console each other during these hard times of persecution? He knows better than that. Why would he say such a thing? If he truly believes that we lack these qualities then he needs to come back here to see firsthand how we hold together and help each other in the midst of these terrible times. Who’s giving him these false reports anyway?”* And they would go hoppin’ down the bunny trail of blame and insinuation just by taking one innocuous phrase and turning it into a misunderstanding.

But let me ask you something. Have you ever read a letter, email, post, tweet, or text message, or even received a phone call that you thought sounded a little harsh, thoughtless, or even worse condemning? Did you ever get your hackles up or feel your anger rising when you read or heard these words? I know I have. I have even been accused of writing them. But neither my attempt nor the writers was to paint any negative picture. However the words we used could be misinterpreted negatively depending on how readily the person was to take offensive, or how poorly the words were composed.

For instance a husband could say to his wife, “That dress makes you look slimmer.” Now he had no intention of implying that she has ever looked fat to him but he knows she is a little self-conscious about her weight so he purposely chose his words carefully so they would reflect positively on her looks. But because she is sensitive about her weight she could easily think that he was not giving her a complement but was rather speaking derogatorily of her weight issues so took offense at his implication that she looked fat. But even if he had changed his comment to say you look “slim” rather than “slimmer” in hopes of avoiding any comparable reference to her previous weight he would still be in danger of giving her the wrong impression. Because the issue is not what he said but rather the way she perceived it.

And women, it works the other way around as well. If a wife says to her husband “How do I look?” she is most likely not asking for an honest answer. She is either looking for a compliment or a confirmation because she already knows how she looks. She just wants you to confirm her opinion. But she won’t tell you her opinion until you tell her yours. And when you verbalize your response if it does not match her own she will convey her opinion of your response either through her words or through her emotional withdrawal. Because the issue is not what is said but rather the way in which it is perceived.

So we need to make sure we understand exactly what is being said or written through the eyes of the one who is speaking and not just through the eyes or ears of the one who is reading or listening.

But this even applies to things unspoken. Take for instance that which we call “personal space” – the distance two people stand away from each other when communicating. This can differ by culture, even by geographical regions. Some cultures like to be close when they communicate but typically we Americans like our personal space to include the 2-3 feet in front, beside and behind us; Anyone who gets closer than that needs to be invited in. No one should ever assume they have a right to our personal space. That space belongs to us and we want to be in control of who can occupy it. If people invade this space without an invitation we feel uncomfortable and maybe even threatened. But sometimes this space is just a matter of someone’s personal hygiene or physical limitations.

I knew a man who was the same height as me and he liked to get close to me when he spoke. I had two problems with that. First of all, when he got that close to me my bifocals could not focus on him properly. I tried looking at him through the middle of my lenses which was meant for distance but he was too close so I couldn’t get him in focus when he was that close to me. I had to raise my head like a snooty person and look down my nose at him in order to see him clearly. The second reason I did not like it was because he had bad breath. And because he was the same height as me my nose could easily smell his bad breath. The third reason was that he spoke loudly and I was not deaf. My ears could have heard him if he was half way across the room. So I really wanted him to “back off”.

But here is what it looked like from his perspective. First of all he had hearing issues which is why he spoke loudly. Secondly, I spoke softly so he needed to get close enough to me so he could hear what I had to say. And lastly, he was interested in what I had to say. He regarded my opinion as something to be sought after so he did what he needed to do to make sure he heard what I had to say.

My point is this. Sometimes what we find offensive at is not at all what we perceive it to be. And what we perceive as offensive is not at all what was intended yet these perceptions quickly divide us. James tells us to be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger (James 1:19). And Paul tells us that love does not act unbecomingly and is not easily provoked because love believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things (1 Corinthians 13:5, 7). The old saying, “Walk a mile in my shoes” still holds true. It is better to understand what is being spoken in its proper context examining the heart and motive of the person speaking rather than quickly taking offense at something which we may have either misinterpreted or due to our personal insecurities we simply don’t understand.

I have spoken previously of an incident that occurred while I was attending Walnut Creek Presbyterian church in the late 70’s. A woman and her daughter had an appointment with a friend of ours to audition for one of the music groups in the church. As we were walking into church they were walking out and asked if we knew my friend. We said yes. Then they started speaking very negatively about him and his unreliability because he had failed to show up for their appointment. Though I knew nothing of this appointment I did know my friend quite well, and he did not have one ounce of people rejection in his body. Nor would he have purposely avoided meeting with them by knowingly skipping this appointment.

Since they were ignorant of these traits I reinterpreted their experience for them in light of the person I knew. I would not let a negative perception of my friend stand when I knew that what they perceived as rejection was most likely a cause of heavy traffic, a forgotten appointment, or even other meetings that were running late. Remember, in those days no one had a cell phone so you couldn’t call or text if you were going to be late. You just had to explain later what had happened. But this mother took immediate offense and was ready to let everyone know of her negative experience with whom she perceived as a

totally unreliable person.

I could not allow that perception to stand so I intervened and provided her with a different perspective than the one she had so hastily concocted based on so little information and no prior knowledge of the integrity of the person she was slandering. It's amazing what we can wrongly perceive if we look at something solely from our own emotional point of view rather than attempting to understand the whole picture.

So when Paul says, "If there is any" of these things among you, I think we have to look at what he is saying not from first glance but from a perspective of their total relationship with him and what his actual intent is. For instance, when he says, *"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..."* these words do not have to imply that Paul has any doubt in his mind that these things exist among them. Nor do I think he is trying to bring guilt upon any particular individual in the church.

Paul is quite aware that in the life of every Christian community, whether it be in Philippi, Corinth, Ephesus, Galatia or elsewhere, believers exhibit these qualities in abundance. So he is not implying the Philippians lack any of these traits but rather acknowledging that all of them are operating within their fellowship.

Take for instance the phrase, *"If there is any fellowship of the Spirit"*. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:13, *"For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit."* Since Paul knows quite well there is a fellowship of the Spirit in Philippi he could not possibly be implying that they lack this quality. And the same holds true of encouragement, compassion, affection and consolation as well. Once again it helps to know the whole picture which includes the integrity of the person speaking and the whole of his teachings before you isolate one phrase and take it out of the context of a life well lived.

I rarely quote from the New International Version because I prefer how the New American Standard Bible translates the Greek into English. But I believe the NIV translation of the first verse of chapter 2 of Philippians gets closer to the heart of what Paul is saying than does the NASB to which I so closely cling. Here is how the NIV translates it:

PHILIPPIANS 2:1 (NIV)

"If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from His love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion..."

Reading this translation the Philippians could easily say, "Yes, we have these things in Christ. There is encouragement that comes from being united with Him and there is comfort that comes from His love. We do have fellowship with His Spirit which allows us to have tenderness and compassion." Just a little different way of saying something can make a big difference in how you perceive it. Now I am not knocking the NASB translation of this verse but what I am saying is that sometimes we need another perspective to see what is actually being said. This holds true in life and it holds true in Biblical studies as well. Things are not always what they initially seem. But with further investigation we can come to a better understanding of what was originally intended.

From the NIV translation we can see that instead of the emphasis being placed on the believers in Philippi and what they do or do not have (as the NASB could have suggested), they are instead being placed on Christ and what He supplies through faith in Him. Of these things there is no question that

they exist among them because Christ Himself is providing them. It is not something they are drumming up themselves it is something that Christ Himself supplies. This immediately stops any implied offense from taking root.

So Paul is in essence saying “because these things exist among you, I want them to be magnified through the following actions” which he then proceeds to mention in verses 2 and following. And he is calling on the attributes of encouragement, consolation or comfort, fellowship, affection, tenderness and compassion to be the motivating factors that propel them to do what he is asking them to do. And what does he ask them to do? To make his joy complete. How? By doing the following:

PHILIPPIANS 2:2

“Make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.”

So they were to:

BE OF THE SAME MIND
MAINTAIN THE SAME LOVE
BE UNITED IN SPIRIT
INTENT ON ONE PURPOSE

These words echo what Paul said a few verses earlier in chapter 1:27-28. *“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; in no way alarmed by your opponents.”*

For the second time within a few verses Paul is instructing the Philippians to be united in spirit, mind and purpose as they strive together for the faith of the gospel. He asks them to stand together for the gospel with no divisions or weakness in their defense of the faith, not alarmed by their opponents, and submitting to the suffering which comes from standing up for Christ. In this manner the church would not be divided with some standing for Christ in boldness and power and others seeking to appease their opponents. They would all be on the “same page” as it were in word and deed.

When I was growing up at the start of school every morning we said the Pledge of Allegiance. This united all students at least in the words we spoke. We would put our hands over our hearts and repeat after the teacher or the principle broadcasting his voice over the PA system and say,

*“I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands,
one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”*

These words were composed by Francis Bellamy in 1892 and formally adopted by Congress as the pledge 50 years later in 1942. The official name of *The Pledge of Allegiance* was adopted in 1945. Because I attended school right after the words “under God” were added on Flag Day of 1954 I never recited the Pledge of Allegiance without these words included in it.

When we pledge allegiance to our country and its flag we are uniting in our allegiance to a nation that is one nation, a nation that is indivisible, providing liberty and justice for all. Because we understood from the very foundation of our country that this oneness came from God Himself we added these words to our pledge 12 years after its adoption. Yet there are those who now oppose this and wish these words removed. They are offended that we include God in our pledge and that we should have anything to do

with forcing our religious beliefs on everyone else by making them recite this pledge. Suddenly there are those who seek to divide us over 2 simple words added to our Pledge of Allegiance 61 years ago.

How quickly the concept of God in American society has changed. Once universally embraced, the mention of God is slowly being shut out of many aspects of the secular world. Mentioning the God who once united us is now being used as a tool to silence and divide us.

But this is not the first time America has had its dividers. Just think about the Civil war when we were divided on the issue of slavery and state's rights. Even this week we have a 50 year remembrance of Martin Luther King's march on Selma to remind us that not so long ago we were divided on the issue of race. And some would have you believe nothing has changed in those 50 years.

There have always been and always will be people who seek to divide us as a nation. Jesus said that "A house divided against its self cannot stand." And Abraham Lincoln also quoted this passage when he was running for the senate in his home state of Illinois in 1858. Here is a portion of what he said.

"A house divided against its self cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently, half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved — I do not expect the house to fall — but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward, till it shall become lawful in all the States, old as well as new — North as well as South."

Change the topic to be about radically transforming America or to Gay Rights or the Separation of Church and State and this speech sounds eerily familiar. As Lincoln said, either the opponents will arrest the further spread of it, or the advocates will push it forward till it becomes the norm in all the states. If the people of this nation were to ever allow the things that are different about America to divide it, America as it exists today will not stand. As Lincoln said it will become one thing or the other. It cannot continue to be divided.

There are many forces at work in America today seeking to divide her people into those that have and those that do not, those who believe in sexual freedom and those who do not, those who believe in God and those who do not, those who are in power and those who are not. Some wish to make these haves and have not's equal by taking from those who have and giving it to those who don't. Others want to gain their right of expression by taking away the right of expression from others. It seems the sinful nature of man has never been and never will be without a lack of opportunity to divide one group from another.

But what would happen to America if we allowed these divisions to continue to separate and alienate us? What would happen when the thing that made us indivisible is forsaken? It would become a house that is divided against its self and unable to stand under the pressure of separation. Instead it would implode on itself and be at the very least unrecognizable and at the worse no more than a memory like Rome and Greece.

What makes America great is its diversity of peoples and opinions and that we are free to be different and express these opinions without fear of losing our lives or our livelihood. If America loses its freedom of expression it will lose its unity. If America loses its God it will lose its indivisibility. And if America's citizens lose their liberty they will also lose the justice that this liberty protects.

The church is not unlike America. It too is a house that cannot stand if those who seek to divide are constantly working to undermine the very foundation upon which the church was created. The chief cornerstone of that foundation is Christ and there has always been and always will be forces at work in

this world and in the spirit world that will attempt to undermine the work that Christ is doing in His church. But as long as those who belong to Christ stand firm the church remains strong. It's when the church lets division grow in its midst that the church suffers and unity is lost.

Just like in America, the church has forces that seek to divide it so that it will fall and be no more. We know that Jesus said the gates of hell will not prevail against the church, so we can be assured that the church will exist into eternity. But the unity of the church here and now is up to us. We are called to preserve the unity of the faith in the midst of these attacks on our very foundation. And Paul says we must be of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, and intent on one purpose. In this way, when we face persecution, this unity, as Paul says, will be a sign of destruction for our enemies, but a sign of salvation for us.

It has often been said of the people and events happening in the Old and New Testaments that "we are they". We have the same propensity for good and evil that those who came before us did. So even though our church is not at the present time suffering for the gospel, these four things should still be manifested among us. We should see if there is any evidence of these four things occurring in our church. If we do see them then we should be able to state what they are and where they occur. But if we don't see them occurring in our midst we should at least attempt to understand why they are not happening and make attempts to correct them.

To help us discover how our church is doing in light of Paul's admonition to the Philippians, I have prepared four questions that we should ask of ourselves.

#1 - Are the leaders, teachers, servants, and the members of our church of the same mind? Do we maintain the same love? Are we united in spirit and intent on one purpose?

#2 - When the worship service is led by different people, do they manifest the same purpose in their teaching and leading? Are they building on each other's thoughts and actions? Are they driving to (or headed in) the same direction?

#3 - Do the teachings at The Refiner's Ministry complement each other or are they random teachings which reflect the thoughts and intents of individuals with no cohesiveness in their themes?

#4 - Do we as a church hear the same thing from the One Spirit and follow and lead accordingly in our teachings, leading, worship and personal actions?

By asking these questions we are not seeking to see if everyone is acting and thinking the same in every area of their lives. God made us as individuals with our own personalities and methods of expressing them. He also gave each of us different gifts which operate differently in the body. We are not seeking to clone any pastor or leader or helper or anyone else in this body of believers. Nor are we trying to be somebody or something we are not.

What we are asking is: What is the purpose of The Refiner's Ministry? Why has God placed His lampstand among us and are we united in trying to achieve it? What is the faith of the gospel and are we striving together with one mind for this faith?

I would like you to think about this and come back next week with some thoughts on how well we are doing and what we might be able to do better. Persecution may not be here yet but it is on the horizon. Are we ready or do we need to better prepare for what lies ahead? Let's hear your thoughts next week.

To help you remember I have printed out these questions and placed them on the table in the back of the church (see below). Take one with you and think about what they are asking. See if you can't come back next week with some answers of your own.

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-2 (NIV)

“If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from His love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.”

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, You alone provide unity through your Spirit dwelling in and among us. Because of the encouragement and consolation that comes from being united with you we have the ability to be of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit and intent on one purpose. We confess we don't always fulfill this vision for us perfectly but we know that with Your Spirit these things are possible for even this small church to accomplish. So help us to conduct ourselves worthy of Your gospel and to draw on the fellowship of the Spirit that dwells within us to accomplish all that you would have us be and do. We ask these things in the name of Christ who died and made this all possible.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:13

“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”

UNITED IN SPIRIT, INTENT ON ONE PURPOSE

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By answering these questions you can help all of us to conform to Scripture. We ask that you bring your answers to church next week, March 15th so that we may take advantage of your feedback. Thank you.