

THE KEY TO UNITY
PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

He was born 55 days before I was. In December of 1989 he watched angry crowds storm the compound of the East German secret police in Dresden. He called for backup from KGB headquarters. He was told, "Moscow is silent." When the crowds approached the inner sanctum of the KGB headquarters, he yelled that armed guards inside would open fire. The bluff worked, and the crowds backed off.

KGB Lieutenant Colonel Vladimir Putin (PROJECTOR ON--- VLADIMIR PUTIN 1) later told an interviewer, **"I had the feeling that the country was no more. It had disappeared."** He later said that the collapse of the Soviet Union was inevitable. But he also said, **"I wanted something different to rise in its place. And nothing different was proposed. That's what hurt. They just dropped everything and went away."** (history.com, 2/28/2022)

In the 1990s Vladimir Putin left the KGB and entered politics. He became the deputy mayor of St. Petersburg. In 1996 he was called to the Kremlin to work for President Boris Yeltsin. In a 1999 article which Putin wrote shortly before he became President, he warned of Russia's danger of becoming a second or third tier power. He called upon the nation to unite to remain a first tier power.

Over the ensuing years he consolidated power. Critical journalists disappeared. Independent news outlets were shut down. Opposition leaders were jailed. His quest for power was reflected even at home. His first wife Ludmilla said in a 2005 interview that she was allowed to ask him questions only when he came home at night. He never said anything positive about her cooking.

Vladimir Putin sought to glorify his image as the face of a macho Russia. He was pictured driving a race car, piloting a fighter jet, and riding bare-chested on a horse. I watched highlights this week of an all-star hockey game where Putin amazingly scored eight goals. He looked unsteady on his skates, and in the victory lap afterwards, he tripped and fell.

Some speculate that he has become the richest man in the world. An opposition leader created a documentary about his little cabin on the Black Sea (PUTIN'S MANSION) that is estimated to be worth over a billion dollars. That opposition leader is now in jail.

Over the last twenty years Putin has sought to rebuild something of the old Soviet Union by invasions into Georgia, Crimea, eastern Ukraine, and now all of Ukraine. (PROJECTOR OFF) In the last week he has unleashed bombs and missiles on civilian areas. He has become a pariah on the international stage.

Tim Keller writes in his book *Counterfeit Gods*, “**One of the great ironies of sin is that when human beings try to become more than human beings, to be as gods, they fall to become lower than human beings. To be your own God and live for your own glory and power leads to the most bestial and cruel kind of behavior. Pride makes you a predator, not a person.**” (*Counterfeit Gods*, p. 121)

Pride is a danger not only for national leaders but also for every human being. Pride produces conflict and fighting and division and broken relationships. Pride is a problem endemic to mankind. It can even infect the church.

The Apostle Paul in the first century dealt with churches existing in secular cultures that had people problems. The church at Corinth had an especially difficult problem with divisions and personal pride. But even in the church at Philippi, which was regarded as a good church, pride had reared its ugly head. Later on in the Book of Philippians we will see reference made to a major division between two leading women in the church. Thus the apostle saw the need to address the subject in his letter to the Christians in that Greek city. If we want to be unified as a family, as a church, as some other group, we will benefit from the instructions that he provided those first century Christians.

We have seen from our study of Philippians that Paul was writing to the Christians in a church in Philippi in Greece (PROJECTOR ON--- PHILIPPI MAP 2) that he had been involved in starting ten or eleven years earlier. At the time of writing Paul was a prisoner in Rome awaiting trial over the issue of his right to preach the gospel of Christ. In the first chapter Paul made reference to his circumstances and talked about how he was able to live above them. He acknowledged that his readers also faced a situation of persecution. He encouraged them to remain steadfast, but he also recognized that when the pressure is on a group of Christians, their unity will be threatened. So in our passage this morning Paul talks about the key to unity.

I.

First, in vv. 1 & 2 of #2 the apostle describes THE NEED FOR UNITY. (I. THE NEED FOR UNITY) Paul says, “**So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, 2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.**” This English translation may leave the mistaken impression that there is some uncertainty as to whether there is encouragement in Christ, consolation of love, and so on. The grammar of the original Greek is more definite. We might more accurately translate the verse as “Since there is encouragement in Christ, since there is comfort from love,” and so on.

Given that these conditions are true, Paul urges the Philippian Christians to be of the same mind, to have the same love, to be in full accord, and to be of one mind. Paul was convinced that unity in a local church, especially in the face of opposition, is essential. Where did he learn about that? Besides his own experience and wisdom and study of

the Hebrew Scriptures, he probably had heard about the stress that the Lord Jesus placed upon it.

On the night before He was crucified Jesus was praying to His Father about His disciples. This is what He said (JOHN 17: 20-21), according to John #17 vv. 20-23: **“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (JOHN 17:22-23) The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”**

What does this tell us about how to point people to Jesus? It tells us that showing unity with fellow believers is a tremendously effective evangelism tool. As our culture becomes increasingly secular, we have more and more broken homes, we have more and more problems with people getting along with each other in the workplace, we have more and more rivalries and cliques at school, we have a greater national partisan divide. So when a church or a family or a Christian business or a group of Christians at school demonstrates an exceptional degree of unity, it catches the attention of a watching world. People sense that they are missing something and wonder how that family or group has such unity and mutual commitment. (PROJECTOR OFF)

If unity is so important to our testimony as Christians, we can be sure that it will also be the object of attack by the spiritual forces of evil. When we read the rest of the letter to the Philippians, we find out that there were a couple of ways in which the devil and his crew were stirring up trouble in that church. If you turn the page to #4 vv. 2 & 3, you find that Paul says, **“I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. 3 Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life...”**

Apparently there were two women in the church that weren't getting along with each other. They weren't twice a year church attendees either. They were women who had been actively involved in Christian ministry. It doesn't appear that either of them had any particular major sin in their life. It doesn't seem that there was a doctrinal problem. It doesn't seem that one of them was right on a particular issue and the other was wrong. They just weren't getting along with each other, and it was having a negative effect on the congregation. It was hurting the church's unity.

The first part of #3 makes reference to what was probably another issue of conflict within the church at Philippi. Paul there describes a situation involving Judaizers. Judaizers were Jewish Christians in the early church who insisted that Gentiles who had become followers of Jesus needed also to be circumcised and to follow some of the laws of Moses in order to be completely right with God. Paul argued strenuously against this thinking. At the beginning of #3 he calls people who hold to this theology “dogs.”

So there are at least two kinds of divisions that may occur within a local church. One kind involves doctrine. Paul regarded fundamental issues of the faith as matters worthy of argument. Churches need to be based on truth. So he was not willing to sacrifice basic truth about the manner of salvation for the sake of getting along with the Judaizers. On fundamental issues of the faith we likewise should not compromise for the sake of unity. Matters like the authority of the Bible and the deity of Christ and the method of salvation are so important that we ought not to sacrifice doctrinal truth for the sake of unity. Unity is impossible if there is fundamental disagreement about the basis of our unity.

There are other secondary matters of doctrine about which evangelical churches and Bible-believing denominations have differences. Within many churches Christians have divided over matters like the role of women in the church, the existence and practice of spiritual gifts, and the proper method of baptism. Many churches have chosen to take official positions on these issues.

The other kind of conflict in a local church is what I suspect poses the greatest danger to us and to other evangelical churches. I would give it the technical theological term of "people not getting along with each other." This involves people who have personality clashes with fellow believers. This includes people who disagree on nonessential matters--- on how to do things, on how to spend money, on the style of worship service, on the color to choose for the church carpet, on how decisions should be made. Sometimes there are people in the church who are insensitive and tactless and even downright nasty. They may have a propensity to stir up conflict. The problem described in #4 with Euodia and Synteche falls into this category of "people not getting along with each other." It is the danger of disunity posed by this kind of problem that Paul addresses in the remainder of our passage.

Unity is essential for our witness to an unbelieving world. Given the situation of great opposition to the gospel in the first century Roman world, Paul saw it as doubly important. In the face of a culture like ours that is in moral decline we likewise should give attention to the need to stay unified as a body of believers and as Christian families.

II.

In vv. 3 & 4 we are told about THE ROUTE TO UNITY. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE ROUTE TO UNITY) Verse 3 says, "**Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit...**" The word for "selfishness" was often used of factionalism. The term was used to describe situations where people split into different groups because of disputes over a particular issue that was not worth fighting about. It would describe the kind of situation where the church decided to get a new carpet. Some people step forward with a strong opinion that the church ought to get another blue carpet. Others get wind of that and suggest that the church get a red carpet. The red carpet people label the blue carpet people traditionalists. "Those traditionalists just are never willing to change anything. They always oppose any changes." The blue carpet people label the blue carpet people

“trouble-makers.” “Those trouble-makers are always looking for an opportunity to rock the boat. They are always stirring up trouble.” So there is a nice fight over a nonessential issue. That would describe a situation of factionalism.

The term in v. 3 “conceit” literally means “empty glory.” It describes an attitude of desiring to bring glory to self. “Conceit” seeks to build up self and tear down others. It is pride that is at work with both conceit and contentiousness.

The proper remedy for this condition is humility. Paul points out in v. 3 that this humility begins in the mind. It reflects itself in behavior in which believers regard one another as more important than themselves. When we regard others in this way, we will treat others as more important than ourselves. It is hard to have conflict in a group of people when everyone is trying to treat the others as more important than themselves.

To the Greeks, among whom the Philippians lived, humility was regarded as weakness. Philippi was also a Roman colony. According to historian Meyer Reinhold, the Romans had **“the most status-symbol-conscious culture of the ancient world.”** There was no city in the eastern Mediterranean that was more Roman in orientation than Philippi. Multitudes of inscriptions have been found in ancient Philippi where people declared their successes and contributions to the community.

Here is an example of one such inscription: (PHILIPPIAN INSCRIPTION) **“Publius Marius Valens, son of Publius, from the tribe Voltinia, honored with the decorations of a decurion, aedile, also decurion of Philippi, priest of the divine Antoninus Pius, duumvir, sponsor of games.”** So this recognition starts with his family, then his tribe. He becomes a decurion, a member of a town council. Then he is an aedile, a town magistrate. Then he is a councilman of Philippi. Then an official representative of the Roman emperor. Then he achieves the highest political position in Philippi. He also becomes a sponsor of the Philippian games. Such was how a Philippian citizen climbed the social ladder to success. (PROJECTOR OFF)

There were great cultural pressures exerted upon the young Christians at Philippi to conform to a culture which focused attention upon self and upon accomplishments--- pressures that many of us experience today. If you are going to get ahead at work or at school, there are these pressures to promote self and personal accomplishments. Paul says that this is not the Christian way.

In v. 4 Paul recognizes that we Christians do have legitimate self-interests. Our translation says, **“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”** Elsewhere he says that if Christians don’t care for their own families, they are worse than unbelievers. But for us the danger is far greater that we don’t look out for the interests of others. The need is for unity. The problem is pride, which leads to division. The remedy is humility.

Andrew Murray describes humility in this way: **“Humility is perfect quietness of heart. It is to expect nothing, to wonder at nothing that is done to me, to feel nothing**

done against me. It is to be at rest when nobody praises me, and when I am blamed or despised. It is to have a blessed home in the Lord, where I can go in and shut the door, and kneel to my Father in secret, and am at peace as in a deep sea of calmness, when all around and above is trouble.”

Paul had learned humility. There was much around him that seemed like trouble. The Romans had him in chains and were soon to put him on trial. The unbelieving Jews hated him. Even some Christians were trying to cause him distress. It may have been tempting for Paul to bring attention to himself. but Paul was still preaching the gospel. He was writing encouraging letters to churches. He was praying for individual Christians. He was rejoicing that even those preachers who had questionable motives were still preaching the gospel.

III.

Paul was indeed a prime example of humility. He modeled what he preached. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE ULTIMATE EXAMPLE...) But let's look at THE ULTIMATE EXAMPLE OF HUMILITY. That description comes in vv. 5-11. That example, of course, is Jesus.

A.

In vv. 5-8 we are reminded about CHRIST'S HUMILIATION. (III. THE ULTIMATE... A. CHRIST'S HUMILIATION) In v. 5 Paul tells Christians, **“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus...”** Then in v. 6 he describes the reason that Christ had not to be humble. **“...he was in the form of God.”** Being in the form of God might indeed give one some legitimate reason for pride.

Now the term “form” in this verse might be a little unclear. When we think of “form,” we tend to think of a physical shape. But God, of course, is spirit. The original Greek word that the apostle used refers to **“the outward expression of an inner nature.”** Before Jesus took on the outward expression of a human being, He had only the outward expression of Deity, which involves a spirit being. He was the Second Person of the Triune Godhead. If anyone should be able to claim his rights, it should be the Son of God. He is God. He was involved in the creation of the world. He is involved in the sustaining of the universe. He deserves to be worshipped and praised. He deserves to be the center of attention. He deserves to get His way.

But notice what the Son of God did. He **“did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men...”** He regarded others as more important than Himself. He looked out not merely for His interests but also for the interests of others. He acted accordingly by becoming one of the creatures which He created. In the process He emptied Himself.

This expression has caused considerable controversy among theologians down through church history. Verse 7 is known as *the kenosis passage*, because the original Greek word for “empty” is *kenosis*. The big question is: What does this mean?

There have been a number of suggestions made about what it was about Himself that the Son of God emptied in becoming a human being. Some have said that He emptied Himself of some of His divine characteristics, or attributes. In becoming a human being He gave up some of His divine attributes. But one of God's essential characteristics is something called "immutability." This term means that God doesn't change. Several times in the Old Testament God says, "I do not change." If God gave up some of His attributes, isn't that changing? How could God give up some of His characteristics and still be God?

A second explanation that has been somewhat popular is that God the Son gave up the voluntary exercise of His divine attributes. He agreed to exercise His characteristics only according to the will of God the Father. Thus he somehow gave up some of His rights as God. The response to that is: Does God the Son ever exercise His attributes independently of the other two Persons of the Godhead? Does He ever get up in the morning and go off and do His own thing without telling the Father and the Holy Spirit? That sounds pretty questionable to me.

There are four other times that this Greek word *kenosis* is used in the New Testament. One example of this is Romans #4 v. 14. (ROMANS 4:14) There Paul writes, "**For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.**" "Is null" is the translation of that Greek verb. The idea here is that if followers of the Law of Moses are the true heirs of God's promises, then faith is of no effect.

What this understanding points to in our passage is that Jesus nullified His position in heaven by becoming a human being. The whole context has to do with pride and humility. Jesus gave up His position in heaven by becoming a human being. In fact, he took the form of a servant. As we saw in the inscription from that man in Philippi, the cultural perspective in Roman culture was that life was about advancing up the social ladder. This Philippian Roman started with family and advanced up the ladder until he was the top official in Philippi. Jesus presents the opposite model. He left His position in heaven and became a slave. That is the model that we have as Christians.
(PROJECTOR OFF)

Our ESV translation uses the word "servant" to describe Christ's new position. The most accurate translation is really "slave." This was the lowest that a person could go on the social scale. The Son of God chose not to be born into a palace or a hospital. He chose to take on the life of a slave. His earthly life was devoted to humble service. The Creator of the universe had to borrow a place to be born. For much of His life he lived in borrowed homes. He had to borrow a donkey to ride into Jerusalem. He borrowed a room for His last supper. He borrowed a cross on which to die. And He had to borrow a tomb in which to be buried. During His earthly life the Supreme Lawgiver became subject to His own Law. During His life the Lord of the Sabbath had to put up with religious leaders who told Him what He could and could not do on the Sabbath. Jesus lived a life of humility.

This humility reached its climax in a humiliating death. In v. 8 Paul says, **“And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”** If being a slave was the worst position to have in the Roman society of Philippi, crucifixion was the most humiliating punishment one could receive. The only human being who did not deserve to die did die--- in order to pay the penalty for our sins, so that by placing our trust in Him we might have eternal life. Death on a cross was the cruelest form of execution known in the ancient world. No Roman citizen, including the Apostle Paul, was permitted to be subjected to it, except, perhaps, for the crime of treason.

The one individual who could most legitimately claim his rights sacrificed the most that we might have the best--- eternal life. In the process He also established the greatest example to us who have trusted Christ as our Savior for the attitude of humility which we ought to have in this world..

It is this attitude of humility exemplified by Jesus that has kept our church united and our families intact. It is this attitude of humility that will keep our families and our church strong into the future. It is this attitude of humility which produces volunteers who keep our church functioning.

But unity can disappear in a hurry. We have to be on guard to protect it. The key to doing that is maintaining humility. We need to be on guard against insisting on our own way, against encouraging the negative attitudes that build up ourselves and tear down others, and against behavior that brings attention to ourselves and ignores others. What may help us to do all of this is to remember the example of our Lord who humbled Himself to the point of becoming a man and dying on the cross so that we might have eternal life.

B.

What we also need to remember is that humility is not without its reward. In vv. 9-11 the apostle speaks about CHRIST'S GLORIFICATION. (III. A. B. CHRIST'S GLORIFICATION) He says, **“Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”**

That name which is above every name is Lord, although it is the reputation and person behind that name which is the key. “Lord” is the New Testament equivalent for YHWH, or Jehovah, which is used in the Old Testament. It is the personal name for God. In the Book of Acts Peter tells his audience (ACTS 2:33) on the Day of Pentecost, **“Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.”** In v. 36 (ACTS 2:36) he additionally says to his Jewish audience, **“Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”** Christ's glorification included His resurrection from the dead, His ascension into heaven, and His placement at the right

hand of the Father. One day in the future He will also be glorified when He returns to this earth as a conquering king.

The encouragement for us is that we will also be rewarded for our humble behavior performed in service to Christ. Jesus said that the first shall be last, and that the last shall be first. (MATTHEW 23:12) He also said, **“Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”** The Apostle Peter encouraged the followers of Jesus in 1 Peter #5 v. 6 (1 PETER 5:6), saying, **“Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you.”** Sometimes we receive a certain measure of recognition and exaltation in this earthly life. Sometimes we get recognized and honored and appreciated. Sometimes we do not. (PROJECTOR OFF) But the ultimate exaltation for all believers will happen on the other side of the grave. It will include our recognition by Jesus, our reception of rewards, our resurrection from the dead, and our return to earth with Him at the Second Coming. That exaltation will make all of our striving to be humble worthwhile.

In a world that is increasingly divided, unity among people attracts attention. Unity in the church and in the family is a powerful witness to our identification with Christ. But that unity comes only from people who are willing to humble themselves. It comes from people who are willing to give up their rights. It comes from people who are willing to put the interests of others above the interests of themselves. That humility among Christians comes from following the example of our Lord, as Paul has stressed. It also comes from depending upon Jesus Himself. For we are naturally selfish and prideful people, and it is only dependence and trust in Him that can change that.

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”