

Sermon Summary #8

Cultivating a Christ-Exalting Relational Culture at Bridgeway Philippians 2:1-4

What kind or sort of *relational culture* do you want to see and experience here at Bridgeway? What ought to be *the personal, inter-relational atmosphere* here in our church? For what do you want to be known by those outside our community? When people speak of Bridgeway and the way all of us interact with one another, what do they say? What do you want them to say? That's what I want us to think about today. But before I go any further, let me give you an illustration of the kind of relational culture that we must at all costs *avoid*.

My aunt, who is now with the Lord, found a copy of the history of *Providence Church*, a small congregation just north of Liberty, Missouri, that as far as I know no longer exists. My grandfather, Charles Samuel Storms, after whom I was named, and my grandmother, were married in that church. But what was of even greater interest to me were a few of the stories of the people there.

In one particular case, a church member was excommunicated for disrupting a service one Sunday morning. He had jumped to his feet, screaming, after being hit in the back of the head by a man's hat that had been tossed, Frisbee style, across the auditorium during a sermon. I don't know what it was in the sermon that provoked the man to throw his hat, nor do I know what the man yelled who was struck by it, but evidently it was sufficiently obscene to warrant his being kicked out.

Another gentleman who had been rejected by a young lady decided to take out his anger on the man who had won her affection. So, during the Sunday morning service he slipped out the back door of the church building and located the team of horses belonging to this man, pulled out a knife, and proceeded to cut off their tails.

Then there was the man who was excommunicated because of his love for tap dancing! Here is the description given of him, and I quote: [He was] "a good six feet tall and over two-hundred pounds, tap dancer par excellence, light on his feet and cat-quick; he could move across the dance floor as quiet as baby shoes on the bare boards. His natural ability could have commanded top-billing with salary to match in any theater. Although David danced before the Lord in the Holy Scriptures, for [him] it was considered a sin, and he was excommunicated!"

Finally, I read the account of one man who was so angry at everyone else in the church that he returned to the building after services were over, piled wood shavings in the middle of the auditorium, and set them on fire! Thus the original structure of Providence Church burned to the ground in 1880.

My point is simply that such is not the sort or kind of relational culture that Paul calls for in Philippians 2:1-4, nor is it what we want here at Bridgeway.

Before we jump into the text, let me take a brief moment and say something about how this paragraph is put together and the way it functions in Paul's overall argument. Clearly, it is closely related both to what has preceded in 1:27-30 and to what follows in 2:5-11. It is in a sense *both a conclusion and an introduction*. We know it is a conclusion because of the word "so" or "therefore" with which v. 1 begins. This tells us that what Paul is about to say is in some way grounded in or based upon the things he has said in 1:27-30. Look also at the repeated emphasis on unity or harmony among Christians, first in 1:27 and then again in 2:2.

But this paragraph also serves as an introduction to what follows in 2:5-11. The unity that ought to exist among Christians is possible only if we humbly put aside our own agenda, only if we humbly lay down all rights and demands, only if we put aside an attitude of entitlement and serve the best interests of others. And *the chief example of just such an attitude or mindset is found in Jesus himself*, who although existing in the form of God humbled himself and became a human, indeed a slave, that we might be granted eternal life through his life, death, and resurrection. Thus 2:1-4 is something of a *hinge*, upon which both the preceding and subsequent paragraphs depend.

If it will help you to follow Paul's argument, think of it in terms of **why, what, and how**. That is to say, in v. 1 Paul will tell us **why** we should love and humbly serve one another; in v. 2 he will tell us precisely **what** this looks like; and in vv. 3-4 he will explain **how** it is done or how it is manifest.

Why (or the Motive) – 2:1

There's no way around the fact that the earnestness with which he makes this appeal indicates that **he had heard or sensed a disunity in Philippi**. This suspicion grieved him, or at least was a hindrance to his joy.

What had happened? We don't know, but perhaps egos were running rampant, some thinking themselves superior to others and thus entitled to special treatment; perhaps others were insisting that everyone agree with them on secondary doctrines; maybe they had divided up into separate factions or parties, some siding with Sam while others took up with J. J., and then of course there were those drawn to Joel and Bob Willis, while a few identified more with Tom Ball and Eddy Helker. In any case, the problem was real and Paul wants it to end.

So he encourages us to ask ourselves this question: "Has being a Christian brought me any encouragement? Have I been uplifted and empowered because of what Christ has done for me? Have I found reasons to press on in the face of horrible obstacles because of who Jesus is and because of what he accomplished on the cross for me? Is the reality of his presence in heaven right now where he intercedes and prays for me a source of strength and a boost to my sagging soul? When I feel led to quit, just quite simply to throw in the towel and move on to some sin that keeps nagging at my heart, have I instead found that my mind is suddenly overwhelmed with the reality of grace and forgiveness and the love of Jesus such that I experience a surge of energy and confidence to say No?"

Well, is that true of you? If so, says Paul, "**if there is any encouragement in Christ**" (v. 1a), there is something I want you to do.

Or again: "Have you derived comfort for your soul knowing that God's love for you is eternal and ceaseless and permanent and powerful and kind and is of such a nature that it will never let you go? Have you discovered that in times of severe loneliness, even seasons where you have felt utterly abandoned, you nevertheless experienced comfort when you reflected on the magnitude of how much God has loved you in Christ? When the pain and hardship of life almost became unbearable, have you been energized to hold firmly to your faith in Jesus and your hope for the future because the love of God overwhelmed your soul and reminded you that 'while you were yet a sinner' Christ died for you (Rom. 5:8)?"

Well, is that true of you? Have you experienced "**any comfort from love**" (v. 1b)? Perhaps it's only true to a *small degree*. Perhaps it's not overwhelming or magnificent but has come to you in short spurts or in tiny drops. That's ok, because Paul is asking if there is "any" encouragement in Christ or "any" comfort that comes from being loved. You don't have to have experienced it all, but only a little here and there. If even that has touched you and changed you and kept you going when it felt so reasonable to give up, there is something he is asking you and me to do.

"What about your '**participation in the Spirit**' (v. 1c)? Have you experienced the Holy Spirit in any meaningful way? Have you sensed his presence? Have you been the recipient of his power? Have you been upheld and sustained by his power? Have you tasted even a little of his sweet presence? Have you enjoyed, even if only for a short season, the intimacy of fellowship with him and through him fellowship with other believers? Have you tasted the sweetness of the Spirit's touch on your soul during worship or during a time of reading and studying God's Word or during a time of prayer or while sitting with other Christians listening to what God has done in their lives? Have you had a time when you were meditating on God's Word and suddenly the lights went on in your heart and you saw for the first time some glorious truth, some reassuring word, some good reason to praise God?"

Well, if so, if you were able to say Yes, even if it was only due to a momentary taste of these realities, or perhaps for some of you it was a virtual flood of spiritual awakening, however so much it may have been, there is something Paul is asking you and me to do.

"What about your experience of '**affection and sympathy**' (v. 1d) from others in the body of Christ? No group of Christians does it perfectly. No church loves the way they know they should. There may even have been times when

you were desperately needy and no one took notice of you or showed up at your door or reached out to you on a Sunday or offered to pray for you at a small group gathering. But surely you've known here and there something of the affection and concern and love of other believers. Surely you've seen their sincere desire to help you and support you. Surely you've felt their heartfelt sympathy when you've walked through difficult times or suffered great loss."

Well, if you have, if you know something of the affection and sympathy from God and from other believers, there is something Paul is asking you and me to do.

To sum up, Paul is appealing to the blessings we have because of who Jesus is and what he has done for broken, fallen sinners like you and me. ***Let the reality of all you have in Christ wash over your heart and wake you up to the incredible inconsistency of claiming to be a recipient of these gracious blessings while at the same time you treat other Christians as trash.***

These are all an appeal to your experience as Christians. If you've touched it, if only in part, if you've tasted it, if only some here and there, if you've reveled and rejoiced in the sense of belonging to the body of Christ and being united to others who care deeply for you, there is something that you must do, says Paul.

What (or the Matter) – 2:2

We have not only been graciously called to enjoy the comforts and blessings of the gospel but also to pass these along to others.

What is it that Paul is asking them to do? He wants the Philippians to ***bring his joy to consummation***, to cap it off, to cause it to bubble up and overflow. Does this strike you as *self-serving* on Paul's part? Here he exhorts the Philippians to embrace these responsibilities of Christian unity and growth so that his joy can be made full. Is he being *selfish* in asking this of them? Is it selfish of me to ask that all of us at Bridgeway be committed to unity and harmony ***so that my personal joy*** might be consummated? No!

Ask yourself this question:

Wives, if your husband takes you out to dinner tonight while the Super Bowl is in full swing and you ask him why he chose to do this, and he says: "Because nothing brings me greater joy than being with you. Nothing, not even watching my favorite football team win the Super Bowl can compare with you when it comes to making my joy complete," you are not going to throw water in his face and scream: "You selfish jerk! All you think about is what brings you joy!"

No, I don't think so. My guess is that you are going to sit there with your mouth gaping in astonishment and gratitude, as you say: "Wow! Do you really mean that? Is it really the case that I mean that much to you, that you would seek your joy in my presence rather than in watching a football game? If that's the case, I'm honored beyond words. Honey, I love you too!"

And how precisely will Paul's joy be enriched and consummated? By their doing ***three things***, each of which is expressed in some form of unity or the sharing of some common experience or value.

First, strive to be "of the same mind" (v. 2a), which simply means, "be like-minded." He's not telling us to think about the same things, but to ***value*** the same things; to be of a similar disposition and aim for the same goals. He's talking about our common purpose as a local church. As different and diverse as we may be in terms of personality and political affiliation and style and external appearance, there has to be an underlying unity, a commonality.

Second, have "the same love" (v. 2b) for one another. Love is already present in Philippi and Paul has earlier prayed that it would abound more and more (1:9). But there is a threat in their midst, the potential for internal friction and divisiveness to undermine their mutual affection for one another.

Third, be "in full accord and of one mind" (v. 2c), or more literally, be ***together in soul.***" This is almost a repetition of the first phrase but with emphasis on the totality of their unity: let it be true not only of your mind but also of your feelings and soul. His emphasis is on a life directed towards one ultimate goal.

This can express itself in countless ways, but none more important than *our Statement of Faith and our Mission Statement*: “We exist to exalt Christ in the City, through Gospel-centered Worship, Discipleship, Community, and Mission.”

If we are going to cultivate a relational atmosphere and culture that is healthy and prosperous and appealing to outsiders and effective in making Christ look great and glorious, we have to be of one mind on the nature of the Scriptures and their authority over what we believe and how we behave. We have to be of one mind on the nature of God, that he is Triune, existing eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We have to be of one mind concerning who Jesus is and what he has done. We have to agree on the nature of the gospel, that it is the gracious work of God in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to satisfy God’s wrath and reconcile us to himself, through faith, forever. We must be of one mind when it comes to the nature of God’s saving grace, that we are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, apart from any work of our own or any religious ritual. These are the fundamental truths that unite us, apart from which we have no hope of making a meaningful impact on our city .

Consider also our Mission Statement . . .

How (or the Means) – 2:3-4

There are three specific ways in which this unity of mind and soul and affection should be expressed. That is to say, the unity and harmony Paul desires for them and for us can only be achieved if we reject all forms of rivalry, self-seeking, and conceit.

First, we must be diligent to “do nothing from rivalry or conceit” (v. 3a).

This word translated “*rivalry*” has already appeared in Philippians 1:17 where Paul used it to describe the motivation of those who preached Christ with a view to aggravating Paul’s distress. He has in mind that sort of *one-upmanship* where people are always trying to outdo others so that the attention and praise will come their way. Simply put, *the spirit of competition may be great on the football field or in business but it has no place in the local church*. Trying to trump one another to gain recognition and power is simply unacceptable.

As for “*conceit*,” he is thinking of the tendency we all feel to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. In particular, Paul is probably thinking of the person who is puffed up because he/she is convinced they are always right on every issue. It’s as if this person says: “What I think is more accurate, simply because *I’m* the one thinking it. How can everyone else be so dense?” Or, “What I propose will work better; my reasons for my view are more logical and grounded in reality; the others are a bunch of dreamers who can’t think straight; my schemes cannot be thwarted; my judgments are always right; my leadership can’t be faulted.” In essence, arrogant conceit and the absence of a teachable spirit are in view, and they are absolutely contradictory to and destructive of genuine spiritual unity.

Second, instead we should be diligent “in humility” to “count others more significant than” ourselves (v. 3b).

But what does it mean to “*count others more significant*” than ourselves? It *doesn’t* mean that they *are* more important or more significant, as if they have more value in the eyes of God than you do. Rather, he means you must “regard” them as such or “count” or “esteem” them as such so that you treat or care for them more so than you do for your own self. It means to put their needs ahead of your own. Will you serve them and encourage them and seek their welfare above your own, even if it comes at great cost to you?

The only way you can do this is through *humility*. In the ancient world, humility was considered a vice, a reflection of weakness and something to be despised. But Jesus transformed it into a virtue. Much could be said of the meaning of “*humility*” but let me highlight only two things.

First, perhaps the single greatest reflection of humility is *the willingness to allow others to say of us in public what we freely admit in private*. Are you self-defensive when people confront you with what you

know to be true about yourself? Or do you acknowledge your shortcomings and sins and then repent and seek to learn and grow from the correction that others have brought?

Second, “humility” at its core is simply *the antithesis of entitlement*. Entitlement says, “I deserve this” and “you owe me.” Humility says, “The only thing I deserve is eternal death. God owes me nothing other than judgment, and he has chosen in grace not to give it to me but to Christ in my place.” That is the soil where humility grows. If you don’t relate to other people from that vantage point, from that perspective, you will never grow in humility.

Many people say something today, almost as a joke, and often in false humility, but the first person I heard say it meant it. My spiritual mentor was Russ McKnight, and when he was asked, “Russ, how are you doing?” he would always respond, “*Better than I deserve.*” That wasn’t a cute, catchy cliché. He meant it. He believed it. People would often laugh, and Russ would interrupt them and say: “No, you don’t understand. I *really* mean that. I really do deserve eternal death, and as bad as today may be, it’s infinitely better than what justice would require of me.”

Third, you should rather look attentively and with deep and sincere concern to the other person’s “interests.” However, the word “interests” is not actually in the original text. It might be more literally rendered, “*one another’s things.*” There is no limitation put on what Paul had in mind. It likely means things related to their job, their family, their physical health, their emotional and spiritual state, their children, their knowledge of God, their personal property, their reputation, their overall success in life, their happiness, their salvation, etc.

The idea here is somewhat parallel to the famous words of Jesus when he commanded his followers to “love your neighbor as you love yourself” (Matt. 22:39). *Seek your joy in the joy of your Christian brother or sister.*

Conclusion

So let’s bring this to a very practical and somewhat painful conclusion by asking several questions.

(1) Are there specific things I’ve done or doctrines I believe that make it difficult to be of the same mind and share the same love and embrace a common purpose with other believers in this church? Identify what those might be and humbly reevaluate whether you were justified. And if you should discover that you were in the wrong, lay it down. Repent. Go and make it right with that individual. If you find that difficult to do, reflect long and hard on what God in Christ has done for you.

(2) Have I formed judgments against another Christian in this church body because they failed to embrace my agenda or disagreed with my opinion about what is of ultimate importance or didn’t get on board with something that I believe is crucial to living the Christian life? If you find that difficult to admit, reflect long and hard on what God in Christ has done for you.

(3) Have I contributed to disunity and disharmony by arrogantly holding on to things that in the big picture are only of secondary importance? Have I based my sense of personal value on whether or not I could get others to agree with me on these matters? Have those who disagreed with me been made to feel inferior or judged or sub-spiritual? If so, what ought I to do to make it right with them? If you again find that difficult to embrace, reflect long and hard on what God in Christ has done for you.

(4) What are some very specific and concrete ways in which I can begin to take a greater interest in the needs and desires of others, even if it means setting aside my own preferences? If you again find it hard to come up with an answer, reflect long and hard on the lengths to which God in Christ has gone on your behalf in seeking your best interests.

(5) Have there been occasions when the opportunity existed to change your schedule and lay aside your goals in order to be of help to someone truly in need, but you chose not to because you regarded them as undeserving and less important or less significant than yourself? If so, meditate on how God in Christ loved you and gave himself for you that you might have eternal life.

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