

**Lights in a Dark World
Philippians 2:1-5, 12-16**

Good morning Grace Family – by now you have no doubt heard the announcement that we will gather back at the church in two weeks on June 7. You are likely as excited as I am to be able to see one another in the flesh, and since we will be meeting outside, no masks will be required, even though you are more than welcome to wear one. When we meet inside, we will request that everyone wear a mask, but meeting inside is not scheduled, yet, so our gatherings in the near term will be somewhat dependent on weather.

It is ironic that on this first day when those who are leading today's service are doing so at the church, I am at home. The reason for my absence from the building is indicative of our times, though. In preparation for a full knee replacement on Tuesday, May 26, Alison was required to be tested for COVID-19, 3 days ago on Thursday. After she was tested, she was informed that she, and all who live with her – that would be me – would need to self-isolate between the test and her surgery next Tuesday. If you think this news was difficult for me, imagine what it meant for Alison who was scheduled to be in Raleigh on Friday for her last day of work where she would have been able to see her students for the first time since the middle of March, even though the reunion would have been without teacher hugs and behind masks.

What is it about this virus that has challenged the unity of like-minded believers at surprisingly high levels? I am not sure, and while I do not sense division in our church family, we should think about our responsibilities to one another in these unusual times. Today's text is Philippians 2:1-5 and 12-16. Next Sunday morning, I will preach from Philippians 2:5-11 and then we will hear about our plans going forward from a panel that will be represented by elders, deacons, and staff.

If not the first Sunday in June, it will not be long before we return to John 17, one of the most fascinating chapters in the whole Bible, in which Jesus offers what we know as the High Priestly Prayer, and he does so in the presence of his disciples. It is after this public prayer that Jesus goes deeper into the Garden of Gethsemane to pour out his heart to his Father in agony of body, soul, and spirit. Here is a hint about the prayer in John 17 – it emphasizes our union with the Triune God, and on that basis, Jesus prays for unity among believers. I have been taken aback at how many connections there are between the truth Jesus shared with his disciples in the Farewell Discourse and the encouragement to unity that Paul shared with the Philippians.

As you know, the first three principles for interpreting Scripture are context, context, context. As such, I will give a little background for today's text, and then we will find much instruction for the unique challenges we face in these modern times. Today's message will be mostly application, but it is important to understand the setting.

I would imagine that Philippians is a favorite NT book for many of you. How can you not like Philippians? Paul's letter to the Philippians was, essentially, a thank-you letter from a missionary to a supporting church in which he reported events and made biblical connections to his circumstances even as he addressed the Philippians' issues. We know that there was a strong commitment to the pure gospel at Philippi Church. The congregation was filled with generous souls to the point that Paul said no one ministered to his material and spiritual needs like they did. Paul's repeated references to joy indicate that at least some in Philippi were able to distinguish between happiness and joy.

Almost all the boxes were checked for this church, but there was a concern. Two prominent women in the church were at odds with

one another and in his thank-you letter, the Apostle Paul gently encouraged the two sisters to get along for the sake of unity.

We are in the second chapter of Philippians. The call is for humility. The best reason for our humility will be covered next Sunday in verses 5-11, and after the sermon the panel will discuss our return to onsite services. Three points of application today:

- 1. Humility cannot exist if you think first about yourself
(Philippians 2:1-5)**
- 2. Obedience is required, but it is God who sanctifies us
(Philippians 2:12-13)**
- 3. Our calling is to be lights in a dark world, and we shine
brightest when we love one another according to God's design
(Philippians 2:14-16)**

We will think first about:

- 1. Humility cannot exist if you think first about yourself
(Philippians 2:1-5)**

Augustine of Hippo, who you may know as St. Augustine, was asked to list the key principles of the Christian life. His response was, "First, humility. Second, humility. Third, humility." Does this surprise you? Perhaps you might have said, "Faithfulness," or, more precisely, "Faithfulness to the God of the Bible as he has revealed himself to us in his Word," or you would have gone with a more contemporary response, such as "Quiet Time, Prayer, Fellowship, etc." But Augustine, probably the most influential theologian in church history outside of the Apostles, said that the key principles of the Christian life are humility, humility, and humility.

But humility is an elusive thing, isn't it? As Tim Keller has said, the moment you think you have humility you have lost it. When you saw

and heard this first point you may have thought, “Hmm, making the case by use of a negative.” Here is the point again, “Humility cannot exist if you think first about yourself.” It is either/or, isn’t it? Either you put aside “me first,” or you humble yourself before the Lord and put others ahead of yourself – as Jesus did. With your Bibles open in front of you, I will read Philippians 2:1-2:

Philippians 2:1 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.

I have studied this text and preached from it multiple times over the years, but I am not sure I have ever fully grasped the importance of two little words in verse one – *in Christ*. While we might ask, “Do you think he is a Christian?”, the Apostle Paul might have asked, “Do you think she is *in Christ*?”. In verses 1-2, Paul is asking, essentially, “Does being in Christ mean to you what it should mean? If so, you will not only fulfill my joy and you will please the Lord as well when you love one another and worship the Lord in harmony.” A simple thing, right? Unfortunately, no. We believe the gospel but *living* as if we believe gospel is a challenge to all believers.

We know that the truths of Scripture are timeless, which is why sometimes we are told of a problem, but we are not given details. We do not know what Paul’s thorn in the flesh was, but we do not that God’s grace is sufficient for us in all difficulties. We do not know what the cause of strife between Euodia and Syntyche in Philippi was, but we do know that Jesus, being fully divine, did not hold tightly to the privileges of deity, but humbled himself to become one of us and was obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross. 100% God and 100% man. It is Jesus’ humility that challenges us this day.

If we were told what the issue between Euodia and Syntyche were, then we would almost certainly say, “Well, anybody can see that Euodia is right. Syntyche needs to yield.” Or, we might back Syntyche. What shall we do since we do not know the reason for the conflict? We apply verses 3 and 4 to ourselves instead of others:

3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

The more things change, the more things stay the same, right? When we regather at the church in two weeks, we will come with different ideas about how the government has handled this health crisis, which is on the way to becoming a serious economic crisis. Our nation was already in crisis politically and socially, and now the divide has widened, although there are different coalitions, now. We will return to church with different ideas, but no matter what your position, I would encourage you to measure your preferences, not by the latest article you might have read, but gauge your responsibility by Philippians 2:3-4. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Do not look on what seems right and sensible to you but care more about your brother’s interests and your sister’s concerns than you care about making your point or having your way.

If you think this is easy for me to say, you are wrong. I want everyone to get along and I do not want to offend anyone. My heart is the same as the Apostle Paul’s – well, in this area, anyway – let us put aside our own interests and care more about the other person than we do ourselves.

There are many questions and there are many decisions that must be made when strong and opposite opinions are swirling all around us, but this time of confusion will pass. Our practices may never be

the same going forward, but this crisis will pass, and it is important that it pass with us being as unified as possible. We will only come out of this unified if we follow Philippians 2:3-4, which directly precedes verse 5: “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.” We will examine this bridge verse more carefully next week but suffice it to say for the moment that verses 5-8 speak of Christ’s humility, and they are given as a model for us. There can be no true unity in Christ without humility, and we do not know if humility is genuine until it is tested. This is a good test, would you agree? The second point:

**2. Obedience is required, but it is God who sanctifies us
(Philippians 2:12-13)**

I had written an extensive paragraph to introduce this topic, but I had to delete it because I was confusing myself. Here is a simple version of what I had written – if obedience is required for my spiritual growth, what is the role of the Holy Spirit in sanctification and what is my role? Is it possible for me to obey without the Spirit’s work in my life? Maybe the best response to the puzzle of sanctification is to affirm that my obedience is required as a follower of Christ, but it is God who sanctifies me. We are to obey in the same manner as Jesus obeyed – in humility. He became obedient to death, even death on the cross. On that basis, verses 12-13 were written to the members of a wonderful congregation who were having trouble getting along. Verse 12:

12 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

There are several points of interest, here. It was easy to obey God and to get along with one another when Paul was in Philippi, when

believers were in the early days of walking with the Lord. Now that Paul was no longer present, it was even more important to obey. Obedience and humility are sometimes easy, sometimes not. They are required in all circumstances.

We are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, so this is serious business! Does our salvation depend on our obedience? We believe, according to Paul's writings elsewhere, such as Ephesians 2:8-9, that salvation comes by grace through faith, not by our good works lest any person should boast, so why is Paul commanding the Philippians to work out our own salvation? He was not saying that they should work *for* their salvation, but he was encouraging them to respond to what was already theirs in Christ.

We can only be saved by grace, not by works. Furthermore, Paul said in Philippians 3:12 that he had not achieved perfection, nor, by implication, would he ever reach perfection. It is absurd, though to say that one need not work at this life that we enjoy "in Christ." We are called to obey, not only the 10 commandments, but the standard to which Jesus called us, which includes attitudes as well as actions. In context of the whole, genuine humility is the mark of a believer.

I am surprised at how often I will hear one of these two verses quoted without the other one. Frankly, I hear verse 12 without verse 13 more than I hear verse 13 without verse 12. Both are necessary for spiritual growth. We obey God and he changes us. When we think it is impossible for us to obey in the area of our greatest struggle, or, when we fail to see how being humble in any given instance will benefit the body, we must rely on the work of God in our lives. He has called us to a difficult life, but one that is filled with joy when we obey. "But obedience is my problem!" I hear you! Take heart. Not only has God willed for you to live as Jesus lived, he has given you the power to do so. How does that work? Trust and obey – in that order! Trust allows us to be humble and to pursue God's

design for his people to shine as lights in a dark world, which is the focus of our last point:

3. Our calling is to be lights in a dark world, and we shine brightest when we love one another according to God's design (Philippians 2:14-16)

The more you read in the Bible, the more you realize that much of what we are called to obey is for the good of the body, for the good of God's covenant people rather than for the world. But we are on mission to take the good news of the gospel to the world, and you will recall in John 13 that Jesus said that people would know his disciples by their love for one another. In other words, the world is watching, and it is important that we present a unified front as we love one another. Paul says essentially the same thing in verses 14-16, which we will read in a few minutes.

We are to be different from the world, but we already know that, right? Don't we? Of course, I should be humble, but maybe I think the issue in front of me is an exception. Here is a good test. Does it involve false doctrine? Does it involve ungodly behavior? Be careful how you answer that question! If not, then, no, it is not an exception. We have a higher calling than to address the issues of the day, which does not mean we should forget that we live in 21st century America. We do live in this time, but no matter when we are alive, believers live in a crooked and twisted generation.

Wait a minute – *everyone* in our day says that we live in a crooked and twisted generation, only it is the other side that is crooked and twisted. That's right – most everyone has a high standard of how all 7.7 plus billion people should live their lives. Everything is moral today, which means that everything is lived with religious fervor. When you look below the surface, though, it is hard to distinguish one side from the other.

It should be relatively easy, however, to identify God's covenant people. We are called to an entirely different life than we see on social media and in the news. We are given the blueprint for such a life in Scripture, but if the Word is not our foundation, we will look just like the world – divisions and all. Please let me assure you, I am not preaching at you, I am preaching to myself!

We will close where we began. The words we have read today in Philippians were not written to a church that was succumbing to a false gospel, like the Galatians were. This letter was not penned to address wicked behavior, like 1 Corinthians was. This letter was not written to establish and explain doctrine in detail, like Romans was. My goodness, Philippians 2:5-11, our text for next week, serves a helping of prime meat in Scripture that can only be digested by the most mature believers! The church at Philippi, though, was in danger of dulling the light of God's grace to sinners – a light that should have shined brightest in such a mature body of believers.

What could lead to such unnecessary failure? Disunity caused by pride and by a failure to consider others' needs as more important than one's own needs. The word gives us our instructions, and it does so by pointing us to Christ. Hear now the conclusion of Paul's thoughts about unity – through humility – in Philippians 2:14-16:

14 Do all things without grumbling or disputing, 15 that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, 16 holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.

Let's pray.

