



Self-Forgetfulness in Our Life Together

Life Together: Cultivating Covenant Community Series #3

Philippians 2:1-5

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Philippians 2:1-5 says:

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. 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. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus...

May it be so. Amen.

Two young boys were sitting at the kitchen table watching their mom to prepare pancakes. (We'll call them Dan and David just for fun because there are a number of those around here.) As mom was making the pancakes, they started to argue, "Who gets the first pancake?" Mom thought, "What a perfect opportunity to teach a spiritual lesson!" She said, "Boys, if Jesus were sitting here, He would say, 'Let my brother have the first pancake. I can wait.'" Without missing a beat, Dan turned to his younger brother and said, "David, you be Jesus."

The Holy Spirit is setting the bar high in this passage. He is calling us to treat each other the way God in Christ has treated us. What does it look like to be Jesus to one another? It looks like the end of verse three: "... [I]n humility count others more significant than yourselves." That is what Jesus did with us. It also looks like verse four: "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

It is hard for us to count others more significant than ourselves. It is hard to look out, not only for our own interests, but also for the interests of others. Raise your hand if you like to feel unimportant. Raise your hand if you like to feel less significant than others.

T.S. Eliot very insightfully said, “Half the harm that is done in this world is due to people who want to feel important. They do not mean to do harm, but the harm does not interest them. Or they do not see it. Or they justify it because they are absorbed in the endless struggle to think well of themselves.” How true that is!

How true is that in the church? How much harm is done in the church by people who just want to feel important? “They don’t mean to do harm, but the harm does not interest them. Or they do not see it. Or they justify it because they are absorbed in the endless struggle to think well of themselves.” It is self-importance, and it chokes our life together in the community of Christ.

It hinders the advancement of our mission. We are a church that wants to be all about the glory of God through Spirit-transformed lives—lives that are being formed as disciples of Jesus and are, in turn, making disciples of Jesus through the beauty and power of the gospel. That is what we want to be about as a church. However, our sense of self-importance—this endless struggle to think well of ourselves—can often get in the way and hinder that mission from going forward. To live the way we have set forth to live requires us to consider others more significant than ourselves. It requires us to look not only for our own interests but also for the interests of others.

An old hymn talks about having a heart at leisure from itself. I think, “Oh, yes! Oh, to have a heart at leisure from itself—a heart that is not absorbed in that endless struggle to think well of oneself!” That hymn says, “A life of self-renouncing love is a life of liberty.”

(Father, I Know that All My Life by Anna L. Waring, 1850)

Why is it hard to forget about self?

The first question we want to ask is why is it so hard to forget about self? There are a number of problems Paul highlighted that make it difficult for us to think about others as more significant than ourselves. These problems make it so hard to forget about ourselves.

First, in verse two, we see that we are opinionated people. You are opinionated; I am opinionated. In fact, “opinionated” is one of the first big words I learned as a young child because my parents used that word with me. I remember thinking, “What does it mean to be opinionated?” My parents told me, “That’s what you are, David. You have strong opinions about things.”

This is a problem in the best of churches. The church at Philippi was Paul's pride and joy. They were a wonderful church, a healthy church, and a church that brought him much pleasure. But he said to them in verse two, "Complete my joy, my loved ones! My joy and crown, you have given me so much joy already. Now complete my joy. Fill my cup of joy overflowing with gladness." How? Verse two says, "Be of the same mind. Think the same thing." It does not mean have the same thoughts and feelings about everything. Unity is not uniformity. Paul did not squelch creativity and diversity in the body of believers. Rather, he said, "Seek the same goal. Work together with a like mind. Let that mission statement be your mission. Let the Great Commission be the agenda that drives you as a community."

"Have the same love," he said in verse two. That is what he prayed for and what we looked at last week in verse nine. He prayed that their love would increasingly abound in knowledge and with all discernment. He prayed for it in chapter one and he commanded it here in chapter two. He said, "Depend on God? Yes, to cause that love to be poured out in your heart, but do not think you are off the hook. You must cultivate that love and pursue it."

Unity requires every member of Christ's body to be committed to loving one another the way God in Christ has loved us—that amazing love! Have that same love. "Be in full accord," he said in verse two, "and of one mind, one soul." Have such a deep, strong friendship that knits your souls together as one. All of this requires a willingness to relinquish your own agenda and preferences and to embrace a common allegiance that is greater than your opinions, your agenda and your preferences.

This is a call to become preoccupied with seeing, savoring and sharing Jesus Christ with others. It is a call to become so preoccupied with following Jesus and forming other people who will follow Him that your hearts start to beat with that passion, in sync and in rhythm with one another. Your voices are in harmony with one another. This is an exhortation from the Apostle Paul to get rid of the mindset that is focused on my rights, desires, preferences and opinions. Instead, we must be more concerned about a bigger, more compelling agenda that Christ sets for His church.

What does that mean for New Covenant Bible Church? Recently, Donna and Reba put together some data for us about those people who call New Covenant Bible Church their home. Right now, there are 181 male adults and 203 female adults who call New Covenant home. That means the men are outnumbered by the women in that category. If you add the children and youth, we have 129 male children and youth and 106 female children and youth. That brings the numbers to a grand total of 310 males and 309 females. That means, ladies, if you want to catch up, the next baby must be a girl.

Think about the age divisions in our church:

- Infant through pre-kindergarten: 34
- Grade school: 35
- Middle school and high school: 68
- College and young adults: 66
- Younger couples and adults: 45 family units
- Middle-aged couples and adults: 126 family units
- Older couples and adults: 46 family units

In our church right now, there are 113 family units who came from the former Fox Valley Bible Church, 40 family units who came from the former Grace Community Bible Church in Elgin, and 72 new family units who have joined New Covenant since 2010. How many opinions do you think that represents? How many preferences? How many different agendas do we find in a group of people like this? Yet there is something powerful enough, something strong enough, to unite all of us.

Isn't it beautiful to come to church today and to have an organ, a choir and a different approach to corporate worship than we have some other weeks. I don't even think that much about my preferences anymore. What I want is to glorify God in Christ. I want to do that no matter what the styles, no matter how it is put together. I want my heart to be so overflowing with love and adoration with Jesus, so delighted in His gospel that my preferences and opinions start to fade away, then He becomes all-consuming and all-absorbing. I don't want to bring self-importance to the table, driving the agenda of Christ's church.

We had a beautiful discussion at the O.K. Club luncheon recently ("O.K." stands for "Older Kids"). We heard one of the ladies talk about efforts she has made to enter into the world of younger people. There was a particular young person she wanted to reach who loved drums. This woman said, "I spent hours and hours and hours listening to heavy drumbeat music, just so I could come into her world, show her that I care about her and gain a hearing." I thought, "That's what this passage is about." Each of us should look not only to our own interests but also the interests of others.

It's interesting to me that we have about an equal number of older couples and adults as younger couples and adults in our church (46 and 45, respectively). Isn't that interesting? It means there are many opportunities for those who have already raised children and are now influencing grandchildren and great-grandchildren to come alongside families who have young kids and show them how much we value those children. It is an opportunity to care for them and influence them. It also means younger families have a great opportunity to teach their kids that

they are not the center of the universe—to show deference, be considerate and learn from those who are older.

The question is are you more aware of how others are treating you? How others are responding to your needs and desires? Or can you honestly say, “In humility, I count others as more significant than myself; I’m looking not only to my own interests but also to the interests of others”? Can you say that? We are opinionated.

We also see in this passage we are competitive. That is one of the reasons why it is so hard for us to forget about self. We are competitive. Paul said at the beginning of verse three, “Do nothing out of rivalry, selfish ambition, contentiousness, faction or strife.” This is the essence of why we fight with one another. In our hearts, there is an ugly competitiveness and self-promotion that is willing to step on the necks of other people in order to lift ourselves up. There is a pride that is intent on advancing itself and it causes us to be hyper-fighting. That is the idea behind the words “selfish ambition.” It does not just mean “fighting to live,” but “living to fight.” This is the attitude that makes you unreasonable in a conflict. You cannot even think about what is right. All you can think about is your own rights, then you take everything personally.

I saw a survey by a man named C. Michael Patton called “How You Can Know if You Take Yourself Too Seriously.” If you have a check next by any of these, you might need to lighten up a little bit:

- I can’t look bad in front of others.
- I’m always concerned about my image as I think others see it.
- I respond with anger, sometimes violence, if someone thinks badly about me.
- I am disgruntled often.
- I always have to get in the last word or I might look bad.
- I always must respond, often with book-length writing, to the bad things others say about me.
- I am always trying to prove myself to everyone else.
- I can’t take it when people make lighthearted jokes about me.
- I am always right.

If these attitudes are true of you, there is probably some rivalry going on; there is probably selfish ambition underneath the surface. It makes it very difficult for you to forget about self.

The third problem that makes it difficult to forget about self is that we are people who are starving for glory. Paul said in verse three, “*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit...*” The King James Version translates “conceit” there as “vainglory.” It comes from the Greek word

kenodoxia, which means “empty of glory.” Tim Keller makes an insightful observation about this reality of *kenodoxia*, this emptying of glory that is in the human heart. He says, “The person who is *kenodoxia* is empty, starving for glory. He is filled with glory-hunger.” Keller says:

I can't think of a better word to describe us, that we are all starved for glory. We all want to have substance, to matter. Deep down inside, our greatest fear is that we don't matter, that we are not important. The worst thing for you and me is not to be hated or opposed, not to be vilified or called 'bad.' The worst thing is to be ignored, to not matter. The thing we fear most is that we are unimportant, marginal, peripheral, ephemeral.

We are starving for glory. We are *kenodoxia*. There is in our hearts this fundamental problem. We feel small. We are trying to convince ourselves that we matter. Paul said, “If that hunger for glory does not get satisfied with something bigger than yourself, you are going to be conceited and it's going to cause problems in your relationships. You will look at other people as a way to fill that glory-hunger inside you. You will look at other people from a selfish perspective.” So we have these issues in our hearts and they are in all of us.

What can free me from the stranglehold of self-importance?

Is there anything that can exert such a powerful influence over us that it frees us from our obsession with our own opinion? Is there anything that empowers us to put others' interests alongside our own? Is there anything that enables us to consider others more important than ourselves? What can free us from this stranglehold of self-importance? What can fill us with such glorious joy that we are no longer starving for our own glory?

Now, before I say the answer, what do you think it is? What are we all about as a church? The functional centrality of the gospel. Look at Philippians 2:1-5. Where do you see gospel truth in this passage? The gospel is the answer. It is the gospel that frees us from the stranglehold from self-importance. Where do you see it? Paul frontloaded his exhortation with the gospel. It is in verse one: “Consider what God has done for you in Christ.”

Doesn't it encourage you to be united to Jesus? Do you get comfort from knowing you are loved by the Heavenly Father? Does it bring you delight to be knit together in a community woven together by the Holy Spirit and sustained by His presence? Does what God has done for you in Christ exert such a sweet, freeing, loving influence over you that the stranglehold of self-importance starts to be loosened? Does the gospel free you to think more importantly of others than yourself?

Let me read a paraphrase of verse one by J.B. Lightfoot, a professor at Trinity College, Cambridge in the 1800s. “If, then, your experiences in Christ appeal to you with any force, if [the love of God] exerts any persuasive power upon you, if your fellowship in the Holy Spirit is a living reality, if you have any affectionate yearnings of heart, any tender feelings of compassion, listen and obey.” God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have invested great care, concern and dignity into our lives. We don’t need to be starving for glory because the One Who is all-glorious stripped Himself of all His glory and emptied Himself of all of that in order to lift us to the heights of His throne. He has crowned us with eternal glory and honor.

If that exerts any influence over us, Paul said it should radically free us from this stranglehold of self-importance. The blessings we receive through Christ through the gospel now encourage us to be to each other what God in Christ has been to each of us. The key to self-forgetfulness—the key to being free from self-importance—is to be so filled up with what God has given us in Christ that we don’t even notice when we are not receiving from others what we would want to receive.

The key is:

May the love of Jesus fill me
As the waters fill the sea.
Him exalting, self-abasing,
This is victory.

(Kate B. Wilkinson, *May the Mind of Christ My Savior*, 1925)

That’s how we give and give and give. The love of Jesus floods our hearts like the water fills the sea.

The Beauty of Self-Forgetfulness

We see the beauty of self-forgetfulness in Jesus. Look at Philippians 2:5-11. I’m not going to expound these powerful verses but will just read them to you. Marvel at the beauty of a self-forgetful life that was completely free from self-importance. If anyone had the right to claim glory and honor, it was our Savior, Jesus. But look how He treated us in emptying Himself.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and

on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

How beautiful! How beautiful!

John Chrysostom, the “golden mouth” preacher of the early church, preached in the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, which is now Istanbul. Chrysostom reflected on all that Christ gained through His humble sacrifice. He asked the question, “Why are you afraid of humility?” Listen to what he said:

Look at all Christ gained through humility. He erased the curse. He triumphed over death. He opened Paradise. He struck down sin. He opened wide the vaults of the sky. He lifted our firstfruits to heaven. He filled the whole world with godliness. He drove out error. He led back the truth. He made our firstfruits mount to the royal throne. He accomplished so many good deeds through His humility that neither I nor all humanity together could set them before your minds in words. Before He humbled Himself, only the angels knew Him. After He humbled Himself, all human nature knew Him. You see how His humbling of Himself did not make Him have less, but produced countless benefits, countless deeds of virtue, and made His glory shine forth with greater brightness. God wants for nothing and has need of nothing. Yet, when He humbled Himself, He produced such great good, increased His household and extended His Kingdom. Why then, are you afraid that you will become less if you humble yourself?

It was the exact opposite with Jesus. Why are you afraid of humility? Why are you afraid that you will become less if you count others as more significant than yourself? If you think not only about your own interests but also of the interests of others, why are you afraid that that would make you less? That was not the pattern of our Lord’s life. He humbled Himself, even to death on a cross. Therefore, God highly exalted Him.

He gives grace to the humble. *“Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you...”* (1 Peter 5:6). That is God’s promise. Thanks be to God!

Now, lest you say, “That was Jesus, but Jesus is Jesus. I’m just a mere man.” Jesus was fully man, too. He did this in the power of the Holy Spirit, but we see the same beauty in other human beings. Look at 2:17-18. The Apostle Paul said, *“Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith [even if I am to become a living sacrifice for you], I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.”*

“I delight in pouring myself out so that you may be lifted up,” Paul said. We also see this in Timothy in verses 19-22, which say:

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel.

Timothy lived a beautiful life, seeking not his own interests but the interests of others.

We see this in Epaphroditus in verses 25-30. He was ill and near death, but, instead of being concerned about his own illness and what impact it had on him, look at what Paul said about Epaphroditus in verse 26: “... [F]or he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill.”

That's what troubled him. Epaphroditus knew they were worried about him. He was more concerned about the effect his illness had on them than on the effect it had on himself. That is a beautiful life, freed from the stranglehold of self-importance. How beautiful it is to meet a self-forgetful person! It makes you the kind of person others want to be around.

C.S. Lewis captured this in Mere Christianity:

To even get near humility, even for a moment, is like a drink of cold water to a man in a desert. Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man, he will be what most people call humble nowadays. He will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person [When was the last time you called someone greasy or smarmy? Those are British adjectives, I guess.], who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. [“Oh, I'm just nobody. I'm no good.”] Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap, who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him, it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility. He will not be thinking about himself at all.

Let's pray for this.

Our great God and loving Father, we pray not that we would just think less of ourselves but that we would think about ourselves less. We pray that You would free us, as the gospel penetrates more and more deeply into us, from the stranglehold of self-importance. The more that has a grip on us, the less we will be forming disciples who make disciples of others. We pray, Father, that You would make us the kind of community whose interest in others is so attractive that, when people who do not yet believe the gospel meet us—even if they're not convinced the

gospel is true—that being around us would make them wish that it were true because they are attracted to You through our Christ-exalting lives. May His beauty rest upon us as we seek the lost to win. And may they forget the channel—may they forget about us—and see only Him. Only by Your grace. Only by Your grace. It frees us from sin and clothes us with power to do what is right. Fill us afresh with Your grace unmeasured, rich and free. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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