

Father, may these spoken words be faithful to your written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

We continue with our sermon series today moving from the growth of the early church in the Acts of the Apostles through the start of Paul's missionary journeys. Last week we heard about the church in Antioch and this week we move to Paul's epistles where he writes to the churches which he established on those journeys. Paul's letters are usually written to the churches to address particular issues that have arisen. In his letter to the church in Philippi, which Paul writes from prison, he writes to thank and encourage the Christians there; for like many churches today, they were having some petty disagreements and showing signs of selfishness.

The one danger which threatened the Philippian church was that of disunity. There is a sense in which that is the danger of every healthy church. It is when people are really in earnest and their beliefs really matter to them, that they are likely to come up against each other. It is against that danger Paul wishes to safeguard his friends. Paul points them to a better approach to interpersonal relationships.

In Philippians chapter two we find two great causes of disunity but Paul also helps us to understand how we can combat these by following some great Christian truths.

First there is selfish ambition. There is always the danger that people will work not to advance the Kingdom but to advance themselves. Paul begins by reminding them of the blessings they have been given by Christ and then asks them in verse 2 to make his joy complete as they "be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind."

He is not just asking them to think like one another. He wants them to be like-minded with Christ — to be encouraging, comforting, sharing, tender and compassionate, as Christ is. He wants them to have the same kind of love as Christ has, being like him in attitude and purpose. That is the only sure way to be united with one another. The bottom line, he says in verse 3 and 4, is to "Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory;" Don't be motivated by selfishness or pride, for they destroy unity and are the essence of sin. Instead, "in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others." We may consider our own interests, but we must also look out for others. This is the way of Christ.

He, the best of all humans, did not put himself first, but considered the needs of others. Paul is reminding us that we must learn to recognise the authority of God and we have absolutely no other pattern for it, except Christ.

Secondly, there is the desire for personal prestige. For many people prestige is an even greater temptation than wealth. To be admired and respected, to have one's opinion sought, to be known by name and appearance, even to be flattered, are for many people most desirable things. But the aim of the Christian ought not to be self-display, but self-denial. As Christians, we should desire to focus men's eyes not upon ourselves but on God.

"Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: " (vv. 5-7).

The great characteristics of Jesus' life were humility, obedience, and self-renunciation. He did not desire to dominate men but only to serve them; he did not desire his own way but only God's way; he did not desire to exalt himself but only to renounce all his glory for the sake of all people.

Paul is using these words to remind his readers and us of the example we are to follow: someone who was divine, having the greatest of honour, yet who did not cling to his rights and privileges. Jesus willingly set his rights aside, in humility becoming a human, serving our needs. "And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross!" (v. 8). His humility, his desire to serve, was complete. He endured the most painful and most shameful form of death, just to serve our needs. How willing are we to set aside our rights, what we want in order to grow God's Kingdom?

How should we respond to Jesus' humility and service? Paul pleads for action: the Philippians have been a responsive church, eager to do what is good. Paul is asking them to take one more step, applying the humility of Christ to their interpersonal relationships.

They are to work not in order to gain salvation (salvation is a gift that they and we already have), but to work out its implications — to diligently apply it in their lives by imitating their Saviour. They are to work, and yet realise that they are not working alone: "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. " (v. 13). We cannot make ourselves more like God — only

he can, and he does it by changing our desires and our actions. He doesn't force us, but enables us.

"Do all things without murmurings and disputings," Paul writes, "that ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; "(vv. 14-16). In other words, as we share the gospel, be aware of the example we set. Be content, be peaceable, and we will be seen as points of light. Society doesn't make it easy to be Christ-like, but instead of viewing this as an obstacle, let's see it as an opportunity to make the gospel attractive.

The whole aim of Jesus is not his own glory but God's. Jesus draws men to himself that he may draw them to God. In the Philippian Church there were men whose aim was to gratify a selfish ambition; the aim of Jesus was to serve others, no matter what depths of self-renunciation that service might involve. In the Philippian Church there were those whose aim was to focus men's eyes upon themselves; the aim of Jesus was to focus men's eyes upon God.

So as followers of Christ, we must always think, not of ourselves but of others, not of our own glory but of the glory of God. Paul's appeal to the Philippians is more than an appeal to live in unity in a given situation; it is an appeal to live a life which will lead to salvation not only for themselves but for all. How will we ensure both individually and as churches that our behaviour leads people to Christ? In Jesus' name. Amen.