

The Path to Unity

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[0 : 0 0] We're going to read now in Philippians chapter 2, page number 921.

Now, you might want to keep your Bibles open during this sermon because we're going to be referring a lot to the text this evening. Philippians 2 from verse 1 to 11, page 921.

This is the Word of God. So, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

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

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.

[1 : 2 7] 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 upon 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.

This is the Word of God. He gives it to us because he loves us. A vandal is someone who deliberately destroys.

We were all shocked recently when vandals decided to chop down the famous sycamore tree at the gap in Hadrian's Wall in Northumberland.

Just for kicks, they went out with a chainsaw and cut down one of Britain's most beautiful trees. But this is just one example of the kind of vandalism we see every single day.

Whether it's shattered bus stops or broken windows, mindless graffiti, or rocks thrown from bridges onto cars, vandals destroy.

[2 : 5 1] In the old St. Vincent Street building, some of you will remember, we were always attending to broken windows in the large hall. But there's also a kind of vandalism that takes place within a church.

The unity that we enjoy as Christians is easily vandalized. That unity has perhaps taken years to foster. It's such a beautifully fragrant, attractive, and life-giving virtue.

It's dealt a blow from which it can take many years to recover. It can be thoughtless words. It can be the hobby horse of one of its members.

It can be a temper tantrum. It can be a campaign of manipulation. But it vandalizes and destroys the unity of a church, resulting in divisions and factions and disillusionment.

And worse still, God is not glorified. The gospel power of Jesus is tainted. And the Holy Spirit is grieved.

[4 : 01] Listen, nothing from outside a church can destroy a church. But disunity from inside the church can destroy it forever. Too many churches in their own day have ceased to exist, not because they took the wrong strategic decisions, but because of division, the vandalism of disunity.

By contrast, as we discovered last time from our study of Psalm 133, from those of you who were here, unity between Christians is a beautiful, delightful thing.

It's good. It's fragrant. It's life-giving. It brings glory to Jesus Christ, the king and head of the church. It is a strong evangelistic witness, attracting unbelievers to the gospel of Jesus.

According to our passage this evening in Philippians 2, especially verses 1 through 5, the path to this kind of unity consists in three things.

Pattern, verses 1 to 2, where we'll consider what unity looks like. Portrait, in verse 5, where we'll see that Christian unity models itself on Christ himself.

[5 : 23] And thirdly, practice, verses 3 through 4, where we'll consider practical steps on the path to unity. So we'll begin, first of all then, with the pattern of unity in verses 1 and 2, the pattern of unity.

The church in Philippi had many problems, but chief among it was its disunity. Preachers were competing for top spot, and there were arguments between prominent members.

Two are mentioned by name, Iodas and Syntyche. Too often, churches become battlegrounds between arguing members.

By contrast, the apostle pleads for unity and oneness in the gospel. He describes that unity in verse 2. He paints what that unity looks like. He says, being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

The path to unity consists in the pursuit of conformity to the pattern of unity described in this verse, where every single Christian in our church is of the same mind, has the same love, is of one accord, and is of one mind.

[6 : 51] Now, you'll notice that these four features are bracketed by the importance of having the same or one mind.

Look again. Being of the same mind, of one mind. Between them are the other two features, having the same love, being in full accord.

It should be apparent to us, therefore, that unity in the church begins in the mind, in the way we think. Now, Paul's not using the word mind here in the context of abstract thinking.

Rather, we are to understand his use of mind here, phroneo, more along the lines of mindset. Our settled attitude toward one another.

In other words, he's saying, set your mind on the same thing. Set your mind on one thing. Let unity be the settled purpose of your mind.

[7 : 57] Don't let those things which get between us as Christians distract us from our unity. Thoughts which, if acted upon, lead to disagreement, are like birds landing in our minds.

But we must not let these birds build their nests there. Unity is to be the settled attitude, disposition, and purpose of our minds.

Set your mind on the same thing. Set your mind on the one thing. Now, it requires self-control on our part to set our minds in this way.

It requires self-control to not speak those thoughtless words we want to, or to refrain from a temper tantrum, or to refrain from our hobby horses, or to stop ourselves from manipulating others to get our own way.

But this is what, if we are all to enjoy the life-giving and fragrant blessings of unity, we are to strive toward. Our minds are the control centers of our actions.

[9 : 21] So, we must make sure that unity is at the helm of our minds. We'll come back to that in a moment. But between these two brackets of having, being of the same mind and being of one mind, are two further features of this pattern of unity.

The first is that we're to have the same love. Have the same love. Now, the word love, Paul uses here, is that from which we most recognize in the life of Jesus, that self-sacrificing, agape love of the Christ who died on the cross for us.

In the previous verse, verse 1, Paul has already mentioned the comfort we derive from the love of Christ. The love with which we are to love one another if we want to walk this path of unity is nothing less than the love of Christ shed abroad in our hearts the love of Jesus himself.

We all focus upon showing that gospel love in the church. Unity grows and produces the fruit of life. That disagreeable or prickly Christian who shows little or nothing of the love of Christ to other Christians for all their theological aptitude is in all likelihood almost definitely ignorant of the love of Christ themselves.

A mind and heart filled with the love of Christ is horrified at the thought of division in the body and the bride of Christ.

[11 : 06] If we as individual Christians want to walk the path of unity through fostering a close relationship with Christ in prayer and Bible study, we need to be filled with that love of Christ, that love shaped like a cross and characterized by a self-sacrifice.

Again, we'll come back to that in a moment. But then Paul also tells us to be of full accord with one another. Full accord.

Now the word behind this translation is more accurately be together in soul. Be together in soul. I'm not sure why they translated it this way.

Being together in soul. It's not so much a term referring to our agreement with one another in a project as much as it points to how us Christians we're joined together in soul.

You know, Siamese twins are joined together by different parts of their bodies and we say of close friends that they're joined together at the hip. But Paul's saying here that we are joined with other Christians at the level of our souls.

[12 : 19] That the innermost essence of who I am as a Christian is inextricably linked to the innermost essence of who you are as a Christian. The path to unity does not consist in withdrawing from other Christians and going it alone, but being in practice what we are in principle, joined together at soul level with other Christians.

It involves a commitment to community with all its challenges. And you know, this is one reason why disputes in the church hurt so much. Because those with whom we are arguing are joined to us at a deeper level than anyone else is.

That is why we must practice, that's why we must be in practice what we are in principle, joined at the soul rather than living in splendid isolation.

So then, what a marvelous pattern of unity Paul paints in verse 2. It begins in the mind where our settled mindsets are fixed on unity.

It expresses itself in Christ-like love and the life of close community. The only place that picture is fully realized is in the church of God in heaven.

[13 : 44] But that is the pattern that casts its floodlight on the path to unity here on earth. But while yet here on earth, what a life-giving, fragrant, beautiful thing unity is.

Both to Christians in the church and to non-Christians who, having come into our church, meet something they can't find anywhere else in this whole world. True, deep down, spiritual unity.

So we have the pattern of unity in verses 1 and 2. But then secondly, we have the portrait of unity in verse 5.

The portrait of unity. It is one thing to teach by talking, it's another by showing. These verses, Philippians 2 verses 5 through 11, contain what is understood to be one of the earliest Christian hymns, the so-called Carmen Christi.

It is introduced by the words, have this mind among yourselves which is also in Christ Jesus. Have this mind among yourselves which is also in Christ Jesus.

[14 : 58] Paul proceeds to declare the greatest of all truths, the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ the Lord. He who was in very nature God humbled himself unto slavery and death.

He who was so deeply humiliated was in the fullness of time exalted by God to the highest place. These verses contain truth sufficient to satisfy even the emptiest heart.

they comprise less than a hundred words in the original text but they will fill us with joy and hope for more than a hundred years on earth.

We could take each word of the Carmen Christi and chew it over meditating and praying until the truth of Christ delights us but it's in the introduction that we find this great portrait of unity.

Have this mind among yourselves which is also in Christ Jesus. Have this mind among yourselves which is also in Christ Jesus. God has given us a portrait of unity and his name is Jesus.

[16 : 12] Every feature of that portrait exemplifies a life devoted to the oneness and togetherness of the church. notice here the reference again to the mind of Christ.

In our previous point based on verses 1 and 2 we saw the importance of the mind in our pattern of unity being of the same mind of one mind.

We're now told what that mind is to be. It is to be the mind of Christ. Our mindsets, our attitudes toward one another aren't to be dominated by our intellects but by the self sacrificial example of Jesus.

The Jesus who emptied himself but who God exalted. I've been listening to a rather scary podcast series recently called The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill.

Some of you here may have listened to it as well on Spotify. Mars Hill was a megachurch in Seattle, Washington led by a charismatic edgy pastor called Mark Driscoll.

[17 : 25] It was the personality and the gifting and intellect of Mark Driscoll which held that huge church together and made it grow to 15,000 members. The unity of Christians in that church wasn't really modeled upon the example of Christ but wholly dependent upon the giftedness of its pastor.

But the problem was that Driscoll is a bully, a misogynist and a control freak. Mars Hill church dissolved in 2012 after his manipulative control freakery was made public.

When unity in a church is dependent upon the gifting of its pastor, that church is doomed. Again, it's become fashionable to talk about finding unity in a church around a shared vision.

That's the way it works in business, so why not in the church? It's become vogue for every church to have a strap line which every member must subscribe to lest they cease to be part of the in crowd.

Now, to be fair, it's really good for every church to discern its purpose in the community into which God has placed it and to be able to articulate its place in a small way.

[18 : 43] But the unity of a church is not dependent upon buying into a shared vision, but in having the mindset of the Christ who humbled himself to death upon a cross.

Our vision isn't really forwards as much as it is backwards to a Christ humiliated and exalted. this is the portrait of unity in our church, not united around a gifted pastor or a strategic vision, but united in sharing the mind of Christ.

Now, there are so many ways in which we could enter into the mind of our Lord. I want you to look at this passage very carefully. The Carmen Christi from verses 5 to 11 is divided into two parts.

The first from verses 6 to 8, which details his humiliation, his going down from the heights of divine glory into the depths of slavish misery.

The second from verses 9 to 11, which describes his exaltation, his going up from the depths of death to the heights of universal praise.

[20 : 00] What I want us to notice, rather than the details of each verse and clause, are the verbs, the action words in this passage, and what they tell us about the pursuit of unity in the church, how we can practically put this into practice.

The first section, from verses 6 to 8, look at it very carefully, details Christ's downward humiliation, and they are dominated by active verbs with respect to Christ.

Christ. He emptied himself. He took the form of a servant. He humbled himself. For us and for our salvation, Jesus consciously and deliberately took these steps of emptying himself, taking the form of a servant, and humbling himself.

This is what he did. He went down. Jesus humiliated himself. The second section from verses 9 through 11 describing Christ's upward exaltation are dominated by passive verbs with respect to Christ.

God highly exalted him. God gave him a name that is above every name. Jesus did not exalt himself. God exalted him. Jesus did not give himself a name that is above every name.

[21 : 36] God did. God did these things for him. God exalted him to the highest place. Jesus humbled himself, and God exalted him. At no stage in this passage do we read that Jesus exalted himself or gave himself a name that is above every name. It was God who did these things for him.

So the mind of Christ, to which Paul refers in verse 5, consists in our conscious and deliberate downward movements into humbling ourselves. This is the mind we are to have, not the mind which exalts itself, for that is God's doing and not ours, but the mind which humbles itself by taking the lowest place.

I hope you can see the difference in the voice of these verbs in this passage, how that impacts our personal pursuit of the life-giving, fragrant mind of Christ in our unity.

Because you see, vandals of unity turn this passage on its head. They do not want to consciously and deliberately pursue the downward path to nothingness.

They do not want to do this. They do not want to do this. They do not want to do this.

[23 : 28] They do not want to wait for God to do that for them. They want to do that for themselves, so they'll pursue a course of action in the church which will result in them having the most prominent place in getting their own way, in being the most popular member.

We've all seen it. People in the church who want to be in control of everything, who cannot stand the idea of humbling themselves before others, of doing what Jesus did, stripping himself down, doing menial tasks, washing the feet of others.

They want to do what is God's only to do, to exalt themselves, to give themselves a reputation. Well, for all that they might be prominent Christians, they do not have the mind of Christ.

They are unity vandals, and they leave behind them a trail of destruction wherever they go. To have the mind of Christ, it's clear from this portrait of Jesus in this passage, is to make a conscious and deliberate decision to become servants of others, to humble ourselves before others, to become of no reputation.

We dare not exalt ourselves, give ourselves a name, or want others to kneel down before us. That's God's business. Our business consists in humbling ourselves.

[25 : 02] That's the mind of Christ, the practice of which consists in unity. So let's ask then of every thought and every word and every action I might engage in, is this consistent with the self-emptying, humble mind of Christ?

Is this consistent? And if it's not, repent of it. Do not do it. Let's do everything we can to conform to the gospel portrait of Christ.

Well then, lastly, the pattern of unity, the portrait of unity. Lastly, in verses 3 and 4, the practice of unity.

The practice of unity. How does one sum up the mind of Christ? How does one describe the cross other than that the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me? How can I take the mind of Christ and put it into solid action in my life?

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

[26 : 28] The central word in these verses is, halfway through verse 3, Do nothing from selfish ambition or in conceit, but in humility.

But in humility. Unity. Or translated more literally. You can't see this from the English text, but trust me, it's there in the Greek. With a humble mind.

With a humble mind. For nails there again, Stephen. See again the importance of the mind in the pursuit of unity. That word for nail, Greek for mind, is used five times in these verses.

If we want to practice unity here, and in so doing, let this church be a life-giving and fragrant reflection of Christ, we need to have humble minds.

What the New King James translation translates as, lowliness of mind. Lowliness of mind. How we think about each other, how we relate to each other, is to be dominated by the mind of humility.

[27 : 37] You know, we talk about sometimes wearing rose-tinted spectacles, and what we mean is that in our eyes, that person to whom we're referring can do no wrong.

We have rose-tinted spectacles when we're thinking of them. Paul is calling us, in our pursuit of unity, to wear humble-tinted spectacles.

To view each other not from above, from a place of superiority, but from a place of below, and a position of service.

Always asking the question, listen up, always asking the question, never, how can they serve me, and my agenda, but how can I serve them?

Never, how can they serve me, but how can I serve them? So, expanding upon this, Paul says, do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit.

[28 : 42] The word selfish ambition was originally used to describe the actions of someone who sought political office by unfair means. We see it in our Scottish Parliament all the time.

It's using other people to get what I want to go. It's stepping on the heads of others to get what I want to go. Don't really care about them, I just want to get somewhere.

I'll use them to get what I want to go. The problem is people aren't objects to be used, but human beings to be served. Conceit is when someone has an exaggerated view of their own importance or significance.

The word actually means empty glory, kenodoxy. Do we view ourselves as more important than we really are?

More important than other Christians in this church? The word narcissist comes rather close to this meaning where a person is in love with their own reflection.

[29 : 49] You know, compare ourselves with the glory of Christ who made himself nothing. Who do we really think we are? By contrast, Paul says, in humility, count others as more significant than yourselves.

See others as more important, as more significant. Networking can be a curse in the church where today, people toady up to prominent Christians just to be seen by them.

Often, for as much as they publicly deny it, these prominent Christians rather like the attention. And it becomes a snare to them.

Listen, Paul is saying, rather than looking for the most important person in this church to speak to, go looking for the person who sits alone and never draws attention to themselves, because in so doing, you may be entertaining angels unawares.

And then he says, let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. He's not talking about interests here in terms of pastimes or hobbies.

[30 : 59] He's referring to the health and well-being of others, their reputations, their social interactions, their reputations, their spiritual engagement. Are we really so self-consumed that the person who's sitting next to us can be breaking their hearts?

But we don't notice, and we don't care. Do we view the money as stepping stones on the road to us achieving our selfish ambitions for status and reputation?

Or with gentleness and tenderness in Christ-like love, rather than getting up off our seat and wandering away to get away from them? We engage them in conversation and minister to them the comfort of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is one way, in a concrete way, we can practice Christ-like unity. Now, this can't be a sermon where I give all the answers, because I don't know all the answers.

It's a taster. It requires all of us to work. The work of thinking through how I, in my situation, can apply these principles of unity in my own setting as an individual Christian.

[32 : 18] How can I do it? How can you do it? We've all got our own individual settings. How can we apply these principles in those settings? To be a vandal of unity is to be a bad thing.

We've had far too many of them over the years, and they've only done us harm. What we need are counter-cultural Christian men and women who, wearing humble-tinted spectacles, follow the example of Christ who gave himself to take away all our sins and guilt.

We need Christ-minded Christians whose minds are wholly aligned with his. This and this alone is what will produce that good and delightful unity which we examine together in Psalm 133, that fragrant and life-giving oneness of gospel health in our church.

And in so doing, by God's grace, all the good will be ours and all the glory will be his.

Let us pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for your Word, a Word which, when we begin to examine its context and the very words that you have used here, we dig deeper, and it challenges us as to our attitude toward one another.

[33 : 53] It shows us the brilliance of the gospel in the glory of Jesus Christ, how he, who was in very nature God, didn't count equality with God something to be grasped or held on to the prerogatives of divinity, but rather himself he emptied and became nothing.

Lord, forgive us when we refuse to empty ourselves in the service of others, but rather help us, O Lord, to make ourselves of no reputation as long as we bring glory to you by ministering Christ to others in the gospel.

Give us Christ's love for one another, O Lord, we ask. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.