

Others

It is the fourth message from our series that we are calling *Joyride through Philippians* and we are starting chapter 2 today.

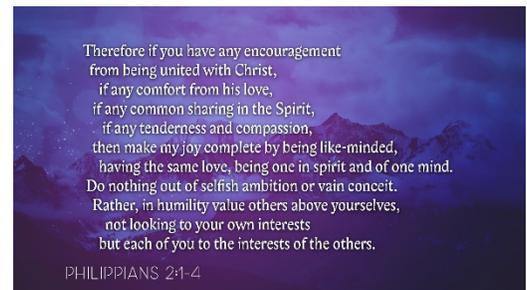
I've had a lot of positive feedback on the series so far; we're finding Philippians to be truly meaningful. I am confident that we'll find what lies ahead as meaningful.

We are looking to just the first four verses of chapter 2 today, a short passage, so let's this aloud together.

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.¹

This is a good time to remember that these chapter and verse designations that we have in our Bibles are usually pretty handy... but the numbers and chapter breaks and headings and such are **not the Bible**. These numbers are great as they help us find things and get on the same page (literally). But I think they sometimes sterilize the text in a way, breaking it up into unnatural pieces, making it too more of an academic exercise rather than the more personal words from God to us. You may have noticed that I usually remove the verse numbers when I put the text on the screen, because I think the numbers often get in the way.

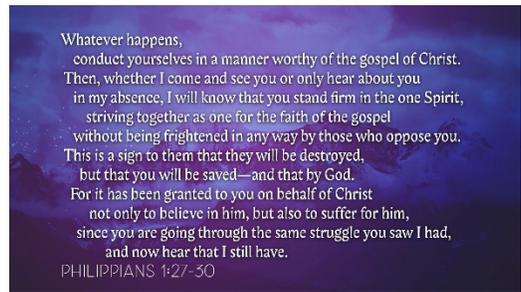
So it is here with what is labeled as chapter 2 in our Bibles. When the Apostle Paul was writing these words, with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to his friends in the Greek City of Philippi, it was a letter... not even a particularly long letter. In a *novel* there are chapters that separate thoughts and themes, just as there are in most books. But *letters* don't have chapters. What we have here labeled chapter 2 is simply the next line in a letter... connected to what came before it and what will follow it.



¹ The New International Version. (2011). (Php 2:1-4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

So as a refresher, let's simply pick up with the end of what is labeled chapter 1.

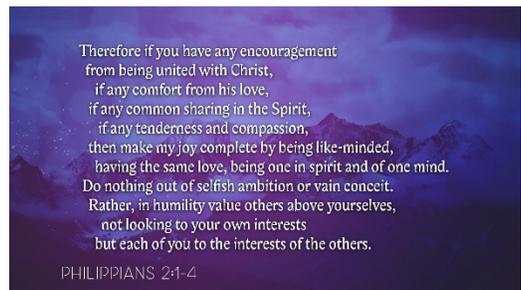
²⁹ For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, ³⁰ since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have. Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ...²



The message at the end of chapter 1 is that behavior matters... especially our behavior when suffering, when being *squeezed*. Behavior matters not in the way that we might usually think about religions; our behavior does qualify us for God's acceptance or favor. Rather, our behavior matters because it is the outward expression of an inward reality, that we are accepted by God by **His** mercy and grace. Our behavior matters because by it we display the Gospel, calling all to believe and be encouraged.

Therefore... with this in mind, we move ahead another step, diving a bit deeper.

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.³



Notice the words that express **affection** and **emotion** that dominate the text: encouragement, unity, comfort, love, sharing, tenderness, compassion, joy. If you had to pick just one word at the root of them all, a word that is even repeated in the text, would you agree with me that it is **love**?

It is wonderful to have love, feel love, think and talk about love... but true, powerful, meaningful love is **love in action**, it is love expressed person-to-person. It is tragic when we allow ourselves to be satisfied with a mere philosophy of love, idea of love, or even words of love. It is often easier... but not the point or purpose of love. It is easier, right? It is one thing to comfort ourselves with the idea of love for people... but what about love for persons? We can say we love these people at church (we ought to say that)... but look around, do we love Dan and Jody and Aaron and ...? That is the love that truly matters.

² The New International Version. (2011). (Php 1:29–2:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

³ The New International Version. (2011). (Php 2:1–2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

The same holds true for our closest relationships. It is one thing to be comforted with the idea that I love Laurie. Or even say the words “I love you”... but it is **love expressed** and **experienced** that matters most. I can say I love you (and I do, of course, as I should)... but I know I mean it, and she knows I mean it, when there is action with the words... like a touch (and by that I mean I touch the dirty dishes as I load them into the dish washer).

This passage before us in Philippians isn't merely a poem about the *philosophy* of encouragement, unity, comfort, love, sharing, tenderness, compassion, joy and such in our text. There is more to it.

Start with the subject, object, and direction of all of this. I don't intend to make this some sort of *grammar lesson*, diagramming sentences to specify the subjects and objects... but I am confident that a bit of analysis here will reveal something important to us.

There are parts of this that seem pretty clear. For example, Paul says to the Philippians:

any comfort from his love

The Philippians are to do an inventory to see if they have any comfort. They are the **object** (the ones receiving the comfort); Christ is the **subject** (the one giving the comfort). From His love, Christ is comforting the Philippians, and by extension, we who believe are the objects of Christ's love and comfort. That seems pretty straightforward.

But what about the words just before that?

if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ⁴

Again, the object here is pretty clear; the Philippians are on the receiving end of the encouragement. But where does the encouragement come from? Is Christ the subject here? Is it He who does the encouraging? It seems here that the encouragement is from the unity, so isn't the encouragement coming from one another, among themselves? But of course, would there be any unity without Christ? Confused at all?

It says:

any common sharing in the Spirit⁵

⁴ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Php 2:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁵ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Php 2:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Is *sharing in the Spirit* **from** the Spirit, or more **by** the Spirit among believers? Who is the object? Who is the subject? And on it goes:

any tenderness and compassion⁶

What is that tenderness and compassion? Is it tenderness and compassion that the Philippians feel and receive from God, or from one another? Or perhaps that tenderness and compassion is from the Philippians, to and for Paul. Apparently, careful study of the Greek text (the language that Paul wrote in from Greek-speaking Rome to the Greek-speaking Philippians, a language that is a bit clearer than ours when answering these sorts of question) appears to imply that this tenderness and compassion is likely from the Philippians to Paul. Does that help? It is logical as it flows into the appeal here:

then make my joy complete

Paul has joy, but the Philippians have power to complete, perfect, and improve that joy...

by being like-minded

Minded like **who**, or should I say **whom** since this has become sort of a grammar lesson? Like-minded with Paul? Like-minded with Jesus? Like-minded among one another? It is a bit ambiguous... ambiguity that continues through the end of the sentence:

having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.⁷

The same love as one another, the same love as Paul, the same love as Christ? One in spirit and of one mind in unity among themselves, in agreement with Paul, in concert with Christ?

Should I get out a white board so that we can diagram the sentence? Is the ambiguity disturbing; should we *settle this* so we are confident precisely what means what, who are the objects and subjects and such in each clause? We could... we could hash it out, and consult the scholars, and make some judgement calls and diagram the sentence.

⁶ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Php 2:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁷ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Php 2:2–3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Or we could go online and see that there are a number of students who have already done so, in the original Greek. Does that help? It often does; I'm very much in favor of scholarship.

We could try to hash it out... but in this case we might just *miss the point*.

In this case, rather than trying to **resolve** the ambiguity, I suggest we **lean into** the ambiguity. I found that scholars have a number of points of disagreement when it comes to the granular study of the grammar... which leads me to believe that the passage is purposefully and wonderfully ambiguous. That's right...

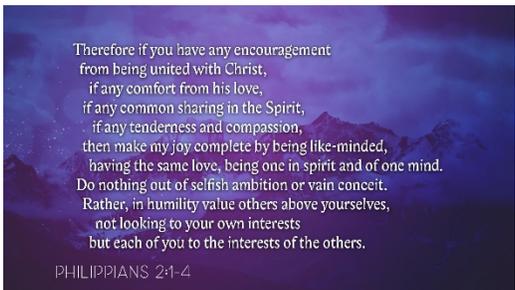
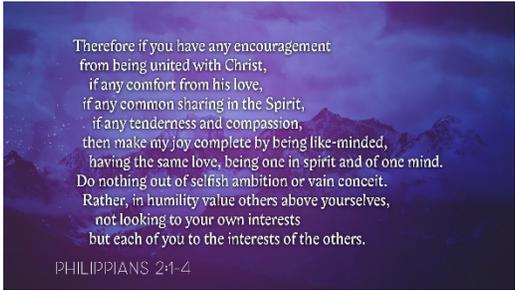
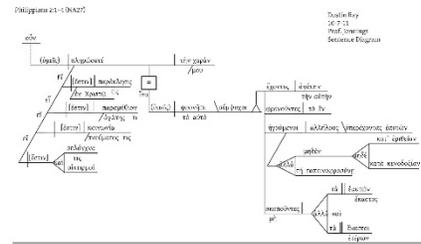
purposefully and wonderfully ambiguous; there is a bit of mystery here that we should likely embrace.

We routinely **embrace mystery**, for example, when we speak of **The Trinity**, God in Three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When we speak theologically, we are monotheists, believing in One God... but we know and understand that God in three persons: Father, Christ, and Spirit. The construct helps us know and understand God, and it even helps us understand how the Triune God relates with Himself... but The Trinity remains a mystery, even to the most studied and wise.

There is a bit of a trinity in our text (not **The** Trinity, **a** trinity). There is:

- **God:** In this case expressed mostly in terms of Christ, the Son
- **The Church:** In this case the believers in Philippi, and
- **Individual Leaders:** In this case, the founding pastor of the Philippian Church, the Apostle Paul

While it may be that there is ambiguity as to the specific objects and subjects and the direction of these expressions of love, they are all within this trinity. God to the Church and the leaders. The Church to the Apostle and among one another.



Even if we could be certain about all of the various components, we would see a ***swirl*** of relationships among this trinity... a complex, overlapping, sometimes ambiguous symphony of relationships. And that is the point.

When it comes to expressions of encouragement, unity, comfort, love, sharing, tenderness, compassion, joy, and such in the context of church life, there often isn't a reason to draw distinctions among these three elements: Christ, the Church, and its individuals.

When there is love expressed within the Church, it is an expression of love for Christ (the Church is described as the Body of Christ, Christ in action in our times and circumstances, *Jesus with skin on*). When love is expressed by individual church leaders, we understand and know that as an expression of love from God... and, likewise, we honor and respect the Churches leaders as God's ambassadors.

It is a beautiful, complex, overlapping, sometimes ambiguous symphony of relationships.

One could make the argument that this all could be simplified vertically. That all of the encouragement, unity, comfort, love, sharing, tenderness, compassion, joy, and such is simply from Jesus and to Jesus. That it might be going through the Church or its leaders as some sort of conduit. There is, of course, some truth to that... but it is overly simplified to the point that it misses some important meaning. If one adopts such a simplified, vertical view, we could get the impression that we can ***go it alone*** with Jesus. That there is our *personal relationship with Jesus*, and nothing else is needed.

That is simply not true. I would go so far as to say that you can't be a Christian alone. At least we cannot live a Christian life on our own. We need the Church. We need each other. We need others.

That *Body of Christ* metaphor that Paul wrote about elsewhere in the New Testament is really helpful. We are meant to be members of a body, and each part of the body needs the other.

So when we read these first few verses, I think it is best understood in a swirling relationship of love God to us, us to God, us to each other, and such.

if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.⁸

And here is how we participate in that wonderful swirling relationship, by how we put ourselves in the mix. **Selfish ambition** has to do with putting others down so that we can get the high position we want. **Vain conceit** has to do with elevating ourselves above others to obtain the high position.

We are not to put our efforts into either putting others down, or raising ourselves up...

Rather, in humility value others above yourselves⁹

Notice that it does not say to devalue yourselves, or in any way humiliate ourselves, placing ourselves *under*. The Gospel calls no one to be a *doormat*. The call is to be **humble**, not **humiliated** by anyone, including ourselves.

The call here is to value others above ourselves, to raise others up... from whatever high place we enjoy (and that is truly a high place for those made citizens of God's Kingdom by the Gospel) raise others above, lift others ahead to the next rung.

It is interesting that it says to **value** others. Perhaps you are following along in another translation and see the word translated differently; some say *consider* or *think of* or *esteem* others. But I think **value** is a solid translation because it emphasizes the good in others.

In some ways this is a lesson in management as it causes us to find, celebrate, and enjoy the good in others. It is often said of good leaders that they *staff for their weaknesses*. The idea is that they are aware of their strengths and weaknesses and find others with whom to partner that are strong in those weak areas. **Valuing others** above ourselves isn't some mere philosophy or mindset, it is practical.

Of course Paul did not say value **me** above yourselves. Wouldn't that be shocking to see that in the Bible? But would it be all that shocking knowing human nature, looking around and seeing how we both explicitly and implicitly demand that we be served by others? We see it in popular culture, in business, in government, on the playground, and sadly... in religion including the Christian church. But that is not the Gospel.

⁸ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Php 2:1–3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁹ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Php 2:3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. ¹⁰

Since we have been carefully considering words, let's be sure to consider this: who are the **others**?

I noticed that it says *others*, not *one another*. *One another* would make sense, since it is in this context of the church-people in Philippi (that Body-of-Christ idea is, again, helpful). We'll see that it does say *one another* in verse 5 (but that is for the next message). Valuing *one another* is easier than just *others*. One another would mean that those in the group have met some minimum qualification. Valuing one another makes it seem that we would stand a chance of benefiting from that relationship.

It turns out that what is translated as others here is a point of disagreement among scholars. I think it is another example of purposefully wonderful ambiguity. Valuing others above ourselves is both *one another* and **all** others. It is among our closest relationships (like family and church) and all relationships.

The Church is distinct in that it is an organization with a mission focused on the benefit of **others**. I know that churches can be inward focused; but an inward-focused church is not in line with the Mission of God. God's design is an outward-focused church. We endeavor to be an outward-focused church (upward facing, inward strong, outward focused)... a church focused on others.

And in the passage that lies ahead, starting with verse 5, we will see that we have **the** definitive model of selfless service of others in Jesus... but that is for the next message (or two).

Today let's pray for God's help to "in humility value others above" ourselves. I think this is the sort of thing that we have to **pray** about... because it is simply hard. And it is hard for others to help.

Even though this is an example in which Paul is telling others to be humble and value others, it seems to me that this is a particularly difficult message to hear from others. It seems that when someone says "you ought to treat others better" there is an implication that "you ought to treat me better."



¹⁰ The New International Version. (2011). (Php 2:3-4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Face it, it is against our nature to take ourselves out of the center of it all. If we can truly “in humility value others above” ourselves, it is a ***miracle***. So let’s ask God to make that miracle alive in us in new, deeper, more powerful ways.

Perhaps it is

- A relationship that needs to be repaired.
- An act of service
- Releasing a successor or subordinate
- Relationship with God