

We're back in Philippians—starting chapter 2 today. But before we read the text for this morning, let's do a recap of chapter 1.

Paul starts out his letter to the Philippians acknowledging that he's got Timothy with him, and he's introduced themselves as slaves for Christ—servants of Jesus who belong to Jesus. That sets the foundation for everything that Paul says next as he speaks about his own situation.

He is under house arrest in Rome, and from that place of confinement he expresses deep gratitude for the Philippians' partnership in the gospel and prays that their love would abound.

He's explained how everyone in Caesar's palace know that he's in chains for Christ. God's using his situation. So much so that the other believers in Rome are growing more confident because of it. And he hopes, of course, that the Philippians will too.

He's rejoicing, because he knows that whether he's taken before Caesar and executed or is set free for more gospel work, Christ *will be* exalted through him.

And then there's a big shift that happens, because Paul averts his attention away from his own situation and onto that of the Philippians—who are under some opposition in Philippi for worshipping a rival 'Lord and Saviour.' And he urges them to live their lives 'out there' in the public in a manner worthy of the gospel.

Remain in one Spirit, he says to them. Striving together *as one* for the gospel. Because *this is your public witness*. It's what shows your fellow citizens of Philippi what the true way of life is.

And at this point, he shifts from speaking about the Philippians' *public* witness to their *private* witness, their interactions with one another.

Read Philippians 2:1-4.

A BBC article that I read recently outlined some conflicting issues going on in the DRC right now—the Democratic Republic of Congo. There's been an Ebola outbreak, so of course there are agencies such as the World Health Organization trying to get involved and provide aid.

But at the same time, as one of the local doctors put it, in the east of the country especially, they are finding themselves at the center of (what he called) a 'catastrophic collision of disease and conflict.'

It's very difficult, he said, to build trust among a community and isolate the sick when at the same time bombs are falling on you.

Because what's happened there is that the majority of Ebola cases are happening in the same province where dozens of armed military groups are in conflict with one another. So aid workers are struggling to get in and provide help because many of the access points are cut off. People are being pushed into displacement camps, there's severe food insecurity—it's awful.

And so the only hope in tempering some of the outbreak is to have a ceasefire among these military groups so that medical teams can be granted safe access to help.

It's a sobering example of how when there's conflict among people, it doesn't only impact the parties who are fighting. Conflict does so much more damage than we realize. It impacts whole communities—in this case, a whole country—and it pushes out any *positive* influence from coming in.

Paul, here in his letter to the Philippians, seems to realize that. And so he takes a bit more time to urge the church towards unity in the Spirit.

Because there's a lot at stake. When the church falls into conflict within itself, it's never just about the parties involved. And it doesn't only damage relationships within the community.

It also cuts off access for the Holy Spirit to come in to help.

“Therefore,” he says in verse 1, *“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, then make my joy complete....”*

Now remember from our very first week, that this isn't a homogenous group of people. Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female are all present in this church. They're a mixed bag.

So Paul's urging goes into hyperdrive here. He's pleading with them. Because remember from last week, Paul has just finished addressing the importance of striving *together* for the sake of the gospel. Being one person in Christ. We're stuck together; we're in a three-legged race with each other.

“Therefore,” he says, if you have any piece of that—even an iota of it—such as feeling encouraged by your union with Jesus; *or* if His love has brought you comfort; *or* if you've experienced a spiritual commonality with other believers—we're in this together, kind of thing.

Or even, he says, if you've started feeling an increase in tenderness and compassion. Your bedside manner has gotten better, and you suddenly care about people you never really cared about before.

If any of that has happened, says Paul, if any of that is present in your life because of Christ, *“then make my joy complete....”* he says. Make my joy complete.

We need to pause there, because that idea of having ‘fulfilled joy’ or ‘completed joy’ been planted in Paul’s mind from somewhere else. It’s actually a theological concept that comes out of the Old Testament Scriptures.

For example, back in Deuteronomy 16, the Lord is giving instructions on how to observe the Jewish festivals. And there’s a section that speaks to the Festival of Tabernacles, or the Feast of Booths. It’s a festival that commemorates both the temporary shelters that the Israelites lived in during their 40-year journey through the wilderness and marks the end of the harvest.

So it’s a festival that celebrates unity as a people and provision from God. And it was no small event. It was a full week—7 days—after the harvest. All the grain had been threshed, the grapes had been pressed, and food and drink were aplenty.

But it wasn’t the event itself that mattered to God. What seemed to have mattered most was *how they conducted themselves* within it. Because look at who was all invited.

“Be joyful at your festival—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites, the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns. For seven days celebrate the festival to the LORD your God....” (Deut. 16:24-25).

Who’s all there? *Everyone*. Nobody is left out. Everyone gets to benefit from what God has brought in. Everyone gets to have the same spirit of joy together. To be as one in a spirit of celebration.

And when you conduct yourselves in this way, says the Lord, *“...your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete.”*

In other words, *this is when* your joy will be fulfilled. When you all come together and celebrate what I have done. When *everyone* gets to come around the same table and experience the same joy.

See, this festival was meant to be a unifying event. It was the antidote for their inner fighting and conflicts. When they came together, it allowed God’s Presence to be among them and to bless them.

Is this not a picture of what the church is meant to be?

“Make my joy complete,” says Paul, *“by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.”*

In other words, don’t push the presence of God and the blessings of God out of your community because you can’t get along. Paul’s urging them to recognize that the good news of Jesus *is for everyone* and therefore should be the defining characteristic of a people who believe in Him.

Remember that your lives are a prophetic witness, he's saying. How one-spirited you are in the cause of the gospel is what speaks *volumes* to the surrounding society. This is what completes our joy. When we prioritize being one in Spirit, being 'in tune' with one another.

I recall with great horror a band concert that I was involved in during my first year in college. I was asked to play the baritone saxophone, which was admittedly a bit overwhelming. [I don't think I've ever told anyone this story before—so you all should feel very privileged.]

It was the first concert of the year, and it's common that before the band begins their actual set list, they need to do a public tuning session. So certain instruments play a note, and then other instruments play a concordant note to make sure they're all harmonious with one another, so that there's a wholeness—a consistency—to the overall sound.

As the baritone saxophone player, I was tasked with giving the first note, the very first note. And then all the other saxophones would follow suit. But when I was cued to play, what came out of the saxophone was less of a note and more like a squawk. To this day, I have no idea what happened.

The conductor looked at me quite quizzically, and the other saxophonists all cranked their heads towards me as if to inquire what had just happened. I tried again, and to my horror, the same squeaky, squawk-like sound came out.

Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13 come to mind—when he talks about those without love being like a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. He might as well have added in a squawky saxophone.

Don't be a squeaky saxophone is the moral of that story. Because there's a lot at stake.

Our 'discordant' attitudes not only hurt the whole community of players but also, even more tragically, push out the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit cannot move when we refuse to give Him access into our more fragile moments.

The sound that we produce together—the celebratory joy that is produced—*depends on* us playing together as one person. Striving together for the same ultimate goal. Being of 'one mind' in the sense that we *know the notes that we're meant to be playing together*. We know the script.

It's why Paul now gives a picture of how to live out this oneness, because it's essential to our witness. Again, it doesn't mean that we're all exactly the same. Obviously we're not—we are also a mixed bag of individuals. But it means that we *posture ourselves* in the same way.

Look at what he says. Verse 3. "*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.*"

Later on chapter 4, Paul addresses two ministry leaders in the church—Euodia and Syntyche—who have ‘contended at his side in the cause of the gospel’ but are apparently in a bit of a spit-spat argument in one another.

“I *plead with [them]*,” says Paul, “*to be of the same mind in the Lord.*” There’s a reason why Paul waits until later in the letter to call these women out, because he’s already urged the whole church to do this.

“*Do nothing out of selfishness or vain conceit,*” he says, or another way to put it, out of rivalry or pride. Always put others before yourself. Value others, he says, above yourselves. Put their interests above your own. Why?

Because who else looks like this? Jesus. And when you all are one person in Jesus, then *this is what it looks like.*

When our life is Christ, we see the inherent value and goodness in one another—despite our flaws and limitations—and naturally want to lift one another up.

Just this past week, Pope Leo came out with a 250-page encyclical letter titled *Magnifica Humanitas*—or ‘Magnificent humanity’—and in it he argues a defense for true humanity, with all its limitations, against the growing dependence on the ‘perfections’ of AI.

Because according to Leo, much of our beauty as human beings *comes from* our limitations. It is precisely *because* we experience limits, he says—vulnerability, suffering, failure—that we can recognize the inviolable dignity of every person.

So when we’re talking about putting others needs before our own, that’s all about recognizing dignity within the other person—quirks and all. Putting others first is all about seeing that others are *not* perfect, just as we aren’t, yet have inherent value *as themselves.*

What many of the tech giants down in Silicon Valley are trying to do is make AI as ‘perfect’ as possible—to a point where some of the loudest voices are starting to question what value humans have at all, when we’re increasingly outsourcing more-and-more of our ‘imperfect decision making’ to the more-intelligent AI.

And the journalist who was reporting on the Pope’s encyclical said this: “Homogeneity, efficiency, and productivity are not what human life is about: Our calling isn’t to operate like computers, but to do exactly what computers cannot, which is to love.”

Let your love abound, more and more, Paul said back in chapter 1. Because our limited and imperfect attempts at love have the opportunity to give God the wheel and *do something with us*, to work through our imperfections.

So when Paul writes these words at the start of chapter 2, he's not expecting us to be perfect. He's expecting us to rely on Christ so much that our love gradually begins to mimic *His*.

As NT scholar F.F. Bruce put it, "Unity of mind is not easily cultivated when human beings of disparate backgrounds and temperaments find themselves sharing one another's company, but the resources that make unity possible are available to the people of Christ in their fellowship with him."

What is the 'resource' available to us? Fellowship with Christ. We'll find this out next week, but how the Philippians conduct themselves is indicative of their oneness with Christ.

If you are in union with Christ, says Paul, *this* is what it looks like. So if you are struggling to be of one mind and one Spirit with another believer, the question to ask is simple: 'How is your fellowship with Christ?'

Because it is only in connection to Christ, and relationship with Christ, that *His* joy and unifying love within us can build bridges. Bridges that perhaps we never even knew were possible. Situations when we don't see eye-to-eye but have an opportunity to practice gospel living and test the Spirit's capabilities.

I mean, what better way to invite the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives than to challenge us with what He can do?

As a Taiwanese student said to me this past week, to be truly intercultural requires *mutual* transformation. If we want to demonstrate that the gospel is for *everyone*, we all need to be stretched and to practice what putting others needs above our own looks like.

And we need to allow the Spirit space to move, to have access, to provide the help that we need without being hindered by internal conflicts.

Because when we are in partnership, when we feast together in unity with other brothers and sisters from different backgrounds and experiences, when we see with the eyes of Christ and see the inherent dignity that we all possess in Him, *then* we do seek to put others needs before our own, and we are a visual demonstration that the gospel of Jesus Christ is for everyone.

Then we experience the blessings of God. *Then* we live in a Spirit-filled one-mindedness.

Then, perhaps, our joy is complete.