

## A CALL TO SPIRITUAL UNITY Philippians 2:1-5

Our text is a continuation of the train of thought that began in Philippians 1:27, where Paul exhorts: “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.” The remaining verses of chapter 1 address the first of two major challenges to a gospel-honoring life: EXTERNAL CONFLICT. Our text addresses the second major challenges to a gospel-honoring life: INTERNAL CONFLICT. If the enemy cannot overthrow the church from without, he will try to undermine the church from within. Paul indicates this in the first word of verse 1: **So**. Literally, “Therefore.” More than connecting this passage to the previous passage, the grammar of the text indicates that what Paul says here about internal conflict is based on what he said about external conflict at the end of chapter 1. The message of the progression of the text is clear and important.

- **The way to overcome external conflict is to first overcome internal conflict.**
- **If we are going to be able to stand together against the world, we must first be able to stand together as a church.**
- **We best honor and promote the gospel of Jesus Christ by living together in spiritual unity.**

SINCLAIR FERGUSON said it well: “The gospel is a message of reconciliation and peace with God. How can non-Christians be convinced that Christ reconciles us to God if we are not reconciled to each other?” I know this idea sounds foreign in a day when many churches are more concerned about protecting personal anonymity rather than building spiritual community. But the Lord is more concerned about the health of a local church than he is the size of it. And healthy congregations can be identified by three vital signs: fidelity of doctrine, holiness of life and unity of fellowship. A lack of unity is a great sickness of many churches. In fact, the reason why so many churches tolerate false teaching and immoral living is because they have failed to build and maintain true spiritual community that challenges these things. So I stand to day to call us to spiritual unity. In 1 Corinthians 1:10, Paul says, “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.” Philippians 2:1-5 teaches us why we should practice spiritual unity, what spiritual unity in the church looks like in practical terms, and how we should think, live, and treat one another to maintain spiritual unity

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### I. THE MOTIVATION FOR SPIRITUAL UNITY

Philippians 2:1 answers these questions: “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy.” The “ifs” of this verse present the motivation for spiritual unity. They are all in the first-class condition, which assumes the things mentioned are true. The emphasis really is “since,” rather than “if.” In other words, Paul says, “Because these

things are true, you ought to live in unity with one another. Likewise, notice the repeated use of the word any in this verse. Paul uses the word any to make the point that this call to unity is not addresses to the spiritual leaders or spiritually mature people in the church. Rather, this call to unity is issued to every member of the church who has personally experienced the saving power of Jesus Christ. In fact, the first clause of the verse speaks of “encouragement in Christ.” This text speaks to every person who is in Christ. Paul appeals to the shared union in Christ and the experience of our spiritual benefits in Christ to encourage harmony in the church. Listen to the appeal again.

- **Are you strong because you belong to Christ?**
- **Does his love comfort you?**
- **Do you share together in the Spirit?**
- **Do you have affection and sympathy for one another?**

Notice that Paul does not use any commands, threats, or gimmicks here. He appeals to Christ and the Holy Spirit to inspire the saints to unity. In pointing to the Godhead, Paul does not refer the Philippians to the authority of Christ or the power of the Spirit. The references are to encouragement, love, comfort, affection, and sympathy. JOHN MACARTHUR writes, “This unity that the Word so highly exalts is inward, not outward; it is internally desired, not externally compelled. It is spiritual, not ecclesiastical; more heartfelt than creedal.” The unity of the church is ordained by God the Father, established by God the Son, and sustained by God the Holy Spirit. So when we do not make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, we are not merely rebelling against the spiritual leaders, corporate vision, or institutional progress of the church. We are sinning against the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. We are sinning against God himself. According to Proverbs 6:19, God hates one anyone who sows discord among the brothers.

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## **II. THE MARKS OF SPIRITUAL UNITY**

Verse two begins with the primary command of this passage. Paul says, “Complete my joy.” Philippians 1:4 records the initial statement of Paul’s joy over the church at Philippi. But in this command to complete his joy, Paul tells us what it would take to fill his cup of joy to the brim. Paul was in prison. He did not know whether he would be acquitted and released or convicted and executed. He has joy, but it is not complete. But there is something the Philippians can do to complete his joy. He does not ask them to send him more money. And he does not ask them to help get him out of jail. He tells them that even though he is in jail, his joy would be complete if they were living together in spiritual unity.

WARREN WIERSBE comments: “Circumstances may cause us to lose our joy, but people can also bring trials that rob us of joy.” This was Paul’s burden. He was more troubled by the division of the church than by the threat of martyrdom. So he commands the church to complete his joy by living in unity. This command is an x-ray of the heart of a spiritual leader. Verse 1 tells us that spiritual unity is the concern of God. But this opening line of verse 2 tells us unity is also the concern of

the godly. People who are willing to split a church into factions to gain power, control, and followers should not be allowed to lead the church in any way. True spiritual leaders have a passionate concern for the unity of the church. Paul's godly concern for the health of the church moves him to exhort the saints to "complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord, and of one mind." These four overlapping phrases reveal the marks of spiritual unity.

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**A COMMON PERSPECTIVE.** The call to be "of the same mind," means, "to think the same way." It is in the present tense, which denote continuous action. One mark of spiritual unity is the ability to constantly think the same way. This does not mean we should submit to brainwashing, or agree with everything that happens, or let other people do our thinking for us. Like-mindedness is not about uniformity of thought. It is about unity of purpose. A church cannot stand together where there are competing visions, philosophies, and agendas in that congregation. In a united church, there is a common perspective. We are all looking and heading in the same direction. A.T. ROBERTSON comments that the church should be "like clocks that strike at the same time." A church that is serious about unity will pray Romans 15:5-6: "May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

**A COMMON PRACTICE.** The call to unity is also a call to have "the same love." We are to love everyone the same way. I hear you. You're thinking, "How can I love everyone the same? There are people in the church that I care deeply about. But there are others who I do not love like that. I am just trying hard to tolerate them without going off on them." To think that way is to tell yourself. It says that you do not understand what Christian love is all about. Christian love is not about positive feelings, strong emotion, or warm fuzzies. Christian love is about how we treat one another, in spite of how you may feel. In marriage, you do not vow to love your mate as long as you feel in love with them. You vow to love your mate for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health. In a real sense, our love for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ ought to be the same way. 1 Corinthians 13:7 says, "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

**A COMMON PASSION.** The call to unity is also is a call to be "in full accord," which translates a Greek term that means to be joined or united in soul. Literally it is to be "one-souled," a term Paul apparently coined. It speaks of a common passion the church of Jesus Christ should have. To be in full accord is to conduct yourself toward one another as if you were one person sharing the same heart, mind, and soul. "Having the same love" speaks of how we treat on another; but "being in full accord" speaks of how we feel about one another. It means...

- **I feel the anxiety of your fears.**
- **I feel the emptiness of your loneliness.**
- **I feel the frustration of your problems.**
- **I feel the pain of your sorrow.**
- **I feel the weight of your burdens.**

**A COMMON PURPOSE.** The call to unity is also a call to be “of one mind.” On one hand, there is a progression of thought here. We go from having the same mind to having one mind. At the same time, these phrases overlap. What you have here is a picture of unity coming full circle. The church should be an endless cycle of fellowship, communion, and brotherhood. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 says, “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him – a threefold cord is not quickly broken.”

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### **III. THE MEANS TO SPIRITUAL UNITY**

How is true spiritual unity accomplished and maintained? Verses 3-5 provide the answer. These verses are filled with negative and positive exhortations that call us to live in a manner that facilitates spiritual unity.

#### **A. HUMBLE YOURSELF.**

Verse 3 says, “Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourself.” This verse cuts to the heart of the issue. It shows us that the essential reason why we find it so hard to build and maintain true spiritual unity is because of our pride, selfishness, ego-tripping, over-inflated self-importance, and inverted idolatry.

- **Rivalry and conceit are the mortal enemies of unity and harmony in the church.**
- **There cannot be genuine unity where there is no real humility.**
- **Humility is the heart of Christian unity.**

C.S. LEWIS wrote, “Pride is the mother hen under which all other sins are hatched.” In verse 3, Paul forbids the saints from allowing pride to hatch two particular sins: rivalry and conceit. Rivalry refers to strife or selfish ambition. The Greek word is used in Galatians 5:20, where it is identified as one of the works of the flesh – alongside things like adultery, idolatry, and murder. The term predates Christianity. Aristotle used it to describe the self-seeking pursuit of political office by unfair means. It is the pride that causes people to push for their own way. Conceit, translates a compound Greek term that means vainglory, empty praise, or groundless exaltation. The picture is that of a self-deceived person who thinks he is more than he really is. JOHN PHILLIPS comments: “Strife pulls the other person down; vainglory puts oneself up.” Both produce discord in the local church. Even a little contentiousness and conceit can ruin a gathering of God’s people.”

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Verse 3 says, “Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others as more significant than yourself.” After condemning pride; Paul commends

humility. Humility translates a compound Greek word that combines a word that means “the mind” and a word that means “not rising far from the ground.” The NJKV translates it “lowliness of mind.” It is the opposite of high-mindedness. Romans 12:3 says, “For by the grace give to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.” WARREN WIERSBE wrote: “Humility is that grace that, when you know you have it, you have lost it.” He’s right. You cannot be proud that you are humble. When you begin to recognize your humility, it becomes pride. So how is humility demonstrated?

Verse 3 says unity happens when we treat everyone else as if they are more important than we are. Notice the clause says each of us must do this, from the pastors on down. Just think of what kind of church we would be if each of us counted others as better than ourselves, rather than acting like the world orbits around us. Now be clear. This text does not teach that everyone is superior, more talented, or more valuable than you are. It teaches that true Christian love sees others as worthy of preferential treatment. Romans 12:10 says, “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.”

How can I learn to count others better than myself? It is easy. Just ask yourself this question: Who is the biggest sinner you know? For some of us, a friend or relative may come to mind. That’s understandable. The problem is that everyone we know about the sins of others is second-hand information. We may hear about or witness other people’s sins, we may even participate in them, but there is still so much we do know about other people’s thoughts, motives, attitudes, words and deeds. On the other hand, you have intimate knowledge of every fleshly motive you embrace, every ungodly thought you entertain, every bad attitude you harbor, every sinful deed you commit, and every mean thing you say. Based on first-hand information, you are the biggest sinner you know! This is why the Apostle Paul referred to himself as “the chief of sinners” and “less than the least of all the saints.” Paul was the biggest sinner Paul knew. I am the biggest sinner I know. And you are the biggest sinner you know. Therefore, we have no reason to be proud. In humility we should count others as more significant than ourselves.

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## **B. MOVE BEYOND YOUR PERSONAL AGENDA.**

Verse 4 says, “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” There are two exhortations in this verse, one stated in negative terms and the other stated in positive terms. In negative terms, Paul says, “Let each of you look not only to his own interests.” This exhortation does not forbid you from having personal interests. And it does not forbid you from paying attention to those interests. In fact, it is a sin if we do not look out for the gifts, duties, persons, resources, and opportunities the Lord has entrusted to you. Galatians 6:4-5 says, “But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load.” You have a right, a good reason, and a personal responsibility to look out for your own

interests. But shortsightedness that only allows you to see your own interests is selfish, foolish, and childish. THOMAS MERTON said, "To consider persons and events and situations only in the light of their effect upon myself is to live on the doorstep of hell." So Paul says, "Let each of you look out not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

This verse is good and godly advice for all of our interpersonal relationships. Just imagine what it would be like if husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, friends and neighbors, coworkers and classmates would look not only to their own interests, but also to the interests of others. All the more, imagine the love, power, and witness for Christ the church would have in the world if we would get beyond our personal agendas and show interest for the concerns of others. Romans 15:1 says, "We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves." Galatians 5:13 says, "For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another." Galatians 6:2 says, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." James Montgomery Boice commented on this verse: "The unbeliever naturally puts himself first, others second, and God last. And he may think that he merits this order. The Bible teaches that we should reverse the series. God is to be first, others must be second; and we must come last." But how can we learn to live in such a humble, selfless, caring way? That's the last point I want to make...

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### **C. FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF CHRIST.**

Verse 5 says, "Have the mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus." This exhortation to Christlikeness is an important statement of the transforming power of the gospel of Christ. Many religions of the world are able to help a person reform his or her conduct and change their ways. But they cannot convert the heart. This is what sets Christianity apart from the religions of the world. True Christianity focuses on the heart and leads to spiritual change from the inside out. Jesus is not only able to change your behavior; he can change your attitude! This is what we find in the practical exhortations of verses 3-5. Verse 3 calls for lowliness of mind and exhorts us to regard others as worthy of preferential treatment. Verse 4 bids us to move beyond our personal agendas and to be concerned about one another's needs, desires, and perspectives. And verse 5 instructs us to adopt a Christlike mindset toward God, self, and others. Don't tell me that you cannot control your mind or change your attitude. God's commandment is God's enablement. The fact that verse 5 tells us to have the mind of Christ means that Christ can change the way you think.

Verse 5 is the key that enables us to enter into the way of life described in verses 1-4. It simply teaches us to focus on Christ. True change does not happen by mere introspection. It happens through the divine nature, obedient life, humble service, atoning death, and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ. Verses 6-11 celebrate the person and work of Christ. It is called THE HYMN OF CHRIST, because

scholars tell us that these words were probably an actual hymn sung by the early church. But this hymn is not placed here to give us some abstract theology or a look at first century worship. It is placed here to reveal to us the mind of Christ that we might be like him. It begins by praising THE DIVINE NATURE OF CHRIST. He was in the form of God. That is, Jesus was and is very God of very God. It continues by praising THE SELFLESS HUMILIATION OF CHRIST. He did not hold on to the privileges of deity like a robber grabbing his loot. But he made himself of no reputation and took on the form of a bondservant, and came to earth in the likeness of men. That is, he humbled himself. Almighty God himself and became obedient to the point of his death on the cross. Then it ends by praising THE EXALTED NAME OF CHRIST. God exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, at which every knee in heaven and on earth, and in hell will bow. And every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Here's the point.

- **If you will be a servant, God will promote you.**
- **If you will be humble, God will promote you.**
- **If you will be obedient, God will promote you.**