

The Mind(set) of Christ Philippians 1:27-2:11

Introduction:

We closed last week's lesson with the question for reflection: "What value for Christ's kingdom is there in my continuing to live?" It was an unnerving question, I'm sure. It was in no way, however, designed for anyone to have bad feelings about the possibility or impossibility in completing some conscience-driven list of tasks or goals in life. As Paul goes on from where we left off last week, his emphasis is not so much on "what" or "how much" anyone accomplishes in particular, but rather how we go about living for Christ every day, all day.

Paul loves the Philippians. He's treating them with all the love friends share between them. He knows they have to fulfill all the duties of everyday life for themselves and their families. He isn't concerned about specific church growth goals or outreach projects. He is concerned, however, on their earning the right to be heard when the possibility arises for offering testimony to their faith. As we continue in Philippians, the reading assigned for today begins with the shift of Paul dealing with his own affairs to addressing the those of the Philippians as he understands them from what he's heard. All of this is done with the goal of leaving the Philippians in joy and confidence that the gospel really is the truth of God and that the Lord is in charge of all things, and that it is truly worth it all to keep one's full trust in, and loyalty to Him. Paul will continue to use the language of friendship, including the use of *koinonia*, which we introduced last week. But he will add language from two aspects of life particularly dear to the Philippians: the language of citizenship, because just about everyone living in Philippi was a Roman citizen, and was well aware of that privilege; and the language of competition, whether military, economic, or athletic.

I. Live as Citizens, Philippians 1:27-30

This section opens the response to the dilemma Paul was facing about his own future, whether he would be allowed to live, or sentenced to die for his faith. The first word of that response is the one word, "only," or "only one." It is here in the NIV translated as "whatever happens." The point is that regardless of what happens to Paul, "Only one thing matters." To say what matters, Paul uses a word found only here in the New Testament. It's actually the verb formed from the word "citizen." The Philippians are to behave worthily as citizens of the kingdom of God. Paul's first point about their affairs is that they are citizens, yes, but more importantly, as believers, citizens of the kingdom which the gospel proclaims. And somehow, the word "only" needs to be understood in that context. To put this sentence in our current context in the US it would mean the same thing as "live by the Constitution" of the Gospel. Here's where the 'rubber meets the road' for the Philippians. Citizens of Rome recognize one

Lord—Caesar. But citizens of the ‘kingdom’ recognize a different “only” Lord—Jesus Christ. Up to a certain point, one can be citizen of both ‘kingdoms,’ but in many circumstances, a choice has to be made between the two.

Paul is well aware of the problems created for believers by the political forces which demand loyalty to Rome. Therefore, he addressed the situation with the language of competition—“stand firm,” or “hold your ground.” Or, as the defensive football coach in the movie, “Remember the Titans,” says to his defensive line, “Don’t let them gain another yard!” Living this way, our unified sense of purpose and visible demonstration of God’s transforming grace in our love for each other will demonstrate the truth of the gospel and allow the opportunities to speak and be heard. Verse 30 seems to indicate that the opposition is from those persons opposed to the radical social changes that occur when the gospel is put into action, which was the same thing that landed Paul in jail.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How does conducting ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel translate into our daily lives here?
2. What is the most appropriate way to arrive at a unity in spirit?

II. Friendship among all, Philippians 2:1-4

As we get into this paragraph, verses 1 & 2 form another of Paul’s long, elaborate sentences. It’s filled with the language of friendship. The sentence moves from the Philippians’ relationship to Christ to their relationship with each other in the context of their love for Paul. The key expressions of friendship include:

- comfort
- common sharing (*koinonia*)
- likeminded
- having the same love
- one in spirit (literally, ‘common soul’)
- one mind set

The first thing we must recognize is that Paul is not promoting a kind of “group-think” policy, in which one person, with an autocratic attitude, forces all the others to keep in agreement with him. Given the few people we know who started this church—a wealthy businesswoman (and her fellow worshipers), a political appointee, and a freed slave girl, it appears that such a “group-think” atmosphere would not come out of that mix. Being of one cohesive mindset would require some work and mutual humility. The entire construction of this thought is built on the idea of “if . . . then” ideas. In order to achieve a common mindset and work toward common goals, there needs to be serious exercise of love for each other and for the Lord, on the one hand, and a common understanding of the nature and mission of the kingdom on the other. That can only be done through listening together to the voice of the one and only Holy Spirit, and the willingness to relinquish personal goals and wishes for the good of the kingdom. And as true friends, putting the needs of the friend above one’s own.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. From these 4 verses, what does it mean to be “the body of Christ”?
2. How would you describe, “not looking to your own interests”?

III. *The mindset of Christ* (the “kenosis” hymn). **Philippians 2:5-11**

Most of the sources I consulted for this lesson use the same word as they approach this portion of the lesson: humility. One source stated, “humility is not something a person of low status practices.” Because friendship in the first century was a feature of life between persons of the same status, to bring friendship into the church the way Paul is talking about, there can be recognized only one level of status into which all the members fit. The best picture of this in Paul’s letter to Philemon, where Paul tells Philemon to receive Onesimus (his escaped slave, of a lower class) as he would receive him (Paul being a member of the same social class). In other words, the vertical relationship must be converted to a horizontal one. (Recreate the hand movements for the song “Deep and Wide,” and think of the motion for “deep” as the vertical relationship between different levels of social status, and the motion for “wide” as the horizontal relationship called for on the same status level.) It has been said that all believers are on the same level at the foot of the cross.

To illustrate what Paul is talking about in terms of humility and crossing status lines, he exercises another form of “intertextuality.” This time, instead of bringing scripture into the mix, he cites a known Christian hymn (at least parts of it, if not all), which has become known as “the kenosis hymn.” (The word Kenosis is taken from the verb in the first line of v. 7, translated in NIV as “made himself nothing,” or, as other versions have, “emptied himself.”) This hymn, and Paul’s use of it in this context, has been the subject of much study in Pauline literature ever since the discovery of its language as poetry rather than prose, with language and thought patterns that are not necessarily his own. (I brought to class the second edition of Ralph Martin’s, *opus maximus*, on these verses, printed in 1997, *A Hymn of Christ*, published by Intervarsity Press.)

The portion of the “hymn” that is included in Philippians has two balanced, nine-line stanzas: the first depicting the self-humiliation of Jesus; the second, reporting God’s renewed exaltation of Jesus as a result of his obedience. I have printed the lines of the hymn below, with some translation suggestions of my own.

The construction of the ‘Kenosis Hymn’

The humiliation of Christ

- 1a He who was by identity God
 - b did not consider it something to hang onto
 - c being equal to God
-
- 2a But he emptied himself
 - b taking the identity of a slave
 - c becoming in likeness to human beings

- 3a And being found structured as a human
- b he humbled himself
- c becoming obedient unto death

even death on a cross

The exaltation of Christ

- 4a Therefore, God highly exalted him
 - b and graced him with the name
 - c which is over every [other] name
-
- 5a Such that at the name of Jesus
 - b every knee shall bow of those in heaven
 - c and on earth and under the earth
-
- 6a And every tongue confess,
 - b “Jesus Christ is Lord” [*note: the Greek word “that” here serves as a quotation opener*]
 - c unto the glory of God the Father.

Almost all analyses of this hymn indicate that five words in the middle are not part of the original song, because of how they break the rhythm of the text. They appear to be Paul’s addition to it, as a means of defining, specifically, the ultimate level of humiliation to Jesus—being cursed of God by his death on a cross.

It is obvious to all scholars working in Philippians how the first half of this hymn illustrates what Paul is talking about here in terms of the kind of mindset believers need to have as they relate to each other in the kingdom. It begins with Paul’s opening verb of “behaving as citizens” (1:27) and ends with the idea of “dying as criminals” (2:8). The status of Roman Citizen is as close as many people could get to the top rung of a social ladder in Paul’s day, a status far beneath anything that Jesus held before “emptying” himself to become one of us. Since we don’t know for sure where Paul was when writing this letter or when it was written, we can’t link it to the time of Nero’s rule as emperor, during which time, being a Christian was considered a crime against Rome. Whether or not Paul was living under that situation or just envisioning its future when writing this letter is unsure. However, he never forgot the stoning of Stephen, and it’s possible he saw such persecution of all believers on the horizon. (This is happening literally in several countries in the world today where our brothers and sisters in Christ are being arrested, denied their civil rights, and/or executed for the sole crime of being Christian.)

The issue among scholars concerning this text is that of understanding why Paul continued the citation of this hymn through the exaltation of Jesus. But I would suggest that Paul might be saying something else about human nature: that there is never a time or place for self-exaltation in the believer’s life. It is only God who does that, and only after the kind of self-emptying depicted in the hymn which lasts through to the end of one’s life.

Conclusion:

As I was working my way through this lesson, the two parallel ideas which I mentioned above struck me. The passage starts out with an expression speaking to how we should live—*live as citizens*. However, the only mention of dying comes from the “Kenosis hymn” where Jesus dies as a criminal. The implication becomes that believers should live like a citizen but die as a criminal.

In v. 29, Paul says that the grace of God has allowed us not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for Christ. The first apostles, upon release from the first time they were arrested and flogged, came back rejoicing that they had suffered “in the place of” Christ. Paul has the same testimony, and here calls it grace to suffer, with words from another text, “to fulfill the sufferings of Christ.” Most of us know very little, if anything, about what “suffering in the place of Christ” means or what “standing firm” in the face of it implies. The call of this text to be “like-minded” and to “have the same mindset as Christ” may require more from us than we’ve been willing to offer up to this point. But to live like that is also part of the grace that God has for us.