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## **“The Ins and Outs of Christian Unity”**

### **Philippians 2:1-11**

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**(Philippians 2:1-11)**

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, <sup>2</sup> then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, <sup>4</sup> not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

<sup>5</sup> In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

- <sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
- <sup>7</sup> rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.
- <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!
- <sup>9</sup> Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,
- <sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
- <sup>11</sup> and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

This passage is one of those passages that is so rich that it would be very difficult to say everything that needs to be said in one 30-minute sermon. That’s why I’m only focusing on the first few verses. Before we get into the depths of this passage, I want to share some observations from this passage.

The passage begins with the word ‘Therefore,’ which always points backwards to what was already said. What is this ‘therefore’ referring to? It’s referring back to the end of chapter 1, the passage we looked at last week, when Paul introduced the theme of unity. If you recall, he said, “stand firm in the one Spirit; striving together as one for the faith in the gospel.” He was talking about Christian unity. And then he ended that section saying, “it has been granted to you, graced to you, on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.” So, in light of that...therefore...

Second, you’ll notice that in verse 1, Paul mentions 4 or 5 experiences we have as Christians. Each of them begins with the word ‘if’ which describes a condition. When you see an ‘if’ what should expect to see a few lines down? The word, “then.” If this is so, or if this is true...then...such and such should follow. That’s how we use that word. Which then forces us to ask ourselves, whether the conditions have been met? Is the condition raised by the ‘if statements’ indeed true for each of us and for our church?

Also, in proposing these ‘if statements,’ he’s not really asking us to take out our pencils. He’s not giving us a list in order to start checking off the boxes if these things apply to us. Paul knows that each of those statements are true for all believers. Though he begins each phrase with the word ‘if’,

what he means by it is actually the word 'since.' Since you have encouragement in Christ, since you have comfort from love, since you have common sharing in the Spirit, since you have tenderness and compassion...then do this. He is not stating possibilities but rather certainties.

This passage can be divided into two points. The basis for our unity, and the application of our unity. What is the foundation of our unity, and then, what should that look like in our church?

**Let's look at the four things that make up the foundation or the basis of our unity.**

First is encouragement from being unity with Christ. When we think of the word encouragement it can actually take on at least a couple different nuanced meanings. It can take on the form of an exhortation, like the words, "Hang in there" or "You can do it" or "Endure it just a little bit longer." That's one way. But encouragement can also take on the meaning of consoling. When we console someone, we identify with their pain and with their struggle. We say, "I'm here for you." Both are aspects of encouragement. Part of our Christian experience is having encouragement in Christ. That means we receive encouragement from our union with Christ, which is another way of saying we receive encouragement from Christ. What is that exactly? Well, think of it this way. When we are going through difficult challenges, as precious as the company of close friends and fellow believers might be, isn't there something totally different when we receive encouragement from Christ, from his very presence, from his very words? When we hear his words, "I will be with you" and "I will never leave you or forsake you," isn't that when we experience a depth of encouragement that is found nowhere else? Isn't there something magical when we read Psalm 23 in the midst of our trials? Or when we hear the words of the Lord saying, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." Or what about when the Holy Spirit brings to our mind Romans 8:28, "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." And as we looked at last week, we hear Jesus say to us, "it's been graced to you not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for him." This is the deep experience of the encouragement we receive from our union with Jesus Christ.

What about the next one, comfort from his love? This phrase actually tells us what love is, or better yet, what love does. Love produces comfort. It brings about comfort. And when is it that we need comfort the most? It's when we're going through difficult times. The word comfort literally means "to speak next to" or "to speak alongside," which is what we do when we comfort someone. We come alongside a person and speak gently to them. Already in this letter Paul has spoken several times about love. He mentions his love for the church in Philippi (1:8); he's prayed for their love for each other to increase (1:9); he's grateful for their love towards him (1:16); and he mentioned that all love comes through Jesus (1:11).

Isn't it true that one of the first things we experience upon becoming Christians is this multi-directional love? We receive love from an individual, from a community, and ultimately from Christ. When I became a Christian in university, I experienced my first expression of Christian love at the gym, of all places. This guy at the gym was pretty ripped and you tend to get intimidated by these muscular guys, but he was really friendly. He approached me, introduced himself and befriended me. That was my first experience of Christian love. Then this new friend invited me to a Christian group on campus, and that's when I experienced love from a community. They were so friendly and welcoming. I remember this experience vividly. They knew I was a visitor, so they asked me to fill out an information card—name, address, phone number and birthday and it just so happened to be the week of my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday when I attended this meeting. At the end of the meeting when they were sharing some announcements, they also had a very simple celebration of birthdays from that week. I, of course, didn't know that they were going to do this, but I was surprised that they included me, even though it was my first time attending their gathering. I think they gave us a card or something like that.

Interestingly, there were three of us, including me, who were asked to stand. One guy's birthday was on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of the month, mine was on the 24<sup>th</sup>, and the guy who invited me was on the 25<sup>th</sup>. So, in any case that was my first experience of love from a community.

Shortly thereafter, I think it was within a few weeks, that the Lord Jesus Christ revealed himself to me. The love I received from that new friend and the love I received from the community, both were incredible, but they nothing like the love I received from Christ. The love from the individual met the need for friendship. The love from the group met the need for belonging. But the love I received from Christ, that met the need for forgiveness—to have my sins forgiven and my heart cleansed. What comfort I received from that multi-dimensional love! And isn't that what it means to be a Christian?

Some of you I would think, have received the love of a Christian friend and that's a beautiful thing and some of you have received the love from the church community and that too is very special in that you get to be a part of a larger group of people and feel a sense of belonging, but have you also experienced the love of Christ? Have you received his forgiveness for your sins? If you haven't then you're actually missing out on the greatest kind of love, the deepest kind of love, the kind of love that you need more than the love of friendship or the love found in a community, but that's our common experience. We've received comfort from his love.

Let's look at the third thing. Common sharing in the Spirit.

The original word for the phrase 'common sharing' is the Greek word for fellowship. It's fellowship in the Spirit. We can say that all true fellowship is fellowship in the Spirit. This is what binds the Christian community together. The Holy Spirit is the deposit of salvation that's placed within each person at the moment of their conversion. And then it's the Holy Spirit that not only indwells each person, but indwells the church. That's what's going on when the church gathers. Much more is going on than just singing the same songs and listening to same sermon and being around the same people. At the deepest level, there is a fellowship of the Holy Spirit. That's what brings us together. That's what makes the church the church.

Then finally, tenderness and compassion. These two words are very similar in meaning. The word tenderness refers to the internal organs, which is the seat of the emotions, equivalent to our use of the word 'heart.' The word for compassion is similar to the word for mercy or pity. This is what every Christian has received from Christ. We received from Christ the deepest form of His mercy. Just think about it. We were in the most pitiful state; we were not only wallowing in our sin, we were in sin's prison, we were on a crash course with destruction, we were headed for hell. As the song we sing says, "a hell-bound race, indifferent to the cost, you looked upon my helpless state and led me to the cross." Those are the lyrics of a song, but here's the original from Paul in Titus 3:

**(Titus 3:3)** At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. <sup>4</sup> But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, <sup>5</sup> he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, <sup>6</sup> whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, <sup>7</sup> so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

This is the testimony of all Christians, isn't it? Isn't that your testimony? When I read that, I think about it and then I sigh, and say, "Yes Lord, that's me." And this is true for all of us. We have shared in the tenderness and compassion of Christ.

Now before we move on, I want you to notice something, if you haven't noticed it already. In these four things, Paul does not mention theological truths per se, but Christian experience. If I could be a bit philosophical. He's not making ontological statements, statements related to our being, like being justified and being made into a new creation or you have been baptized with Christ. Those are more ontological statements. What he lists in the four things are things that have to do with our experience. It's the difference between saying "The sky is blue" and "Doesn't it warm your heart when you see a blue sky?" The first is a statement of fact, the second is a statement of experience. All the things that Paul shares are experiences.

We have experienced encouragement in Christ, we have experienced comfort from his love, we have experienced fellowship in the Spirit, and we've experienced his tenderness and compassion. When we look at these things, we say, "Yes, yes, this is true. I've experienced all of these things." This is the foundation, the basis of our unity. This is the answer to the question "why should I be united with my church family?"

Here's the second and final point. **In light of this, what should unity look like?**

Before he describes what unity looks like he says to the Philippians to make his joy complete. As I've mentioned when we began Philippians, one of the main themes of the letter is joy. Paul is not only concerned that the Philippians are filled with joy, but he himself also wants to be filled with joy. We shouldn't think that Paul is being selfish here. I think he's saying something like this. "Nothing would make me happier than seeing you live in unity." In saying that, he's also implying the opposite. "I would be deeply saddened if you continued in disunity, if you lived selfishly." Pastors know this feeling very well. It grieves us when members of the church are not getting along. It grieves us when members choose to live in sin. It grieves us when members backslide in their faith. And nothing makes us happier than to see people serve each other, and love each other, and care for each other, and forgive each other, and growing in spiritual maturity. This, of course, is not an experience reserved only for pastors. All of us are filled with joy when we hear of these things and grieved when those close to us are not living as they should.

Now, here are the things that Paul asks them to do. First, be like-minded. Second, have the same love. And lastly be of one spirit and mind. What does it mean to be like minded or to have the same mindset? One commentator says that it has to do with the dominant attitude and settled disposition of the entire person. This means that Paul is not asking everyone to be an exact of copy of each other. Rather, it means they are to have the same goal. They are to be committed to the same grand purpose. That means each person, with their unique gifts and personalities, and even with each person's differences, they can still come together for the same purpose. In saying that, Paul is merely asking them to be the church. Just think, what is the church? It's people from every race, language, every age, male and female, rich and poor, smart and not so smart, artistic and not artistic—literally all types of people, saved by grace, who come together for the same purpose...to glorify God and enjoy him forever; to proclaim the Gospel. That's what would make Paul filled with joy.

Second, he says, have the same love. Paul just established that every Christian has received comfort from Christ's love. So now he says, have that same love. Now this is important because it tells us how we should be like-minded. We should be like-minded as we love each other. Think of a sports team. Every sports team has the same goal. It's to win games and ultimately to win the championship. And anyone who has played team sports knows that what happens in the locker room is just as important as what happens out there on the field. Coaches and players know how important team chemistry is. They know that one person can destroy team chemistry. They know that without team chemistry, without the players actually liking each other, it's hard, if not impossible, to win. That chemistry is what the love is. We're all in this together as Christians, we're all after the same goal. Serve God, worship God, build his church, do missions, etc. But the way it has to be done, in fact, the only way it can be done is by having the same love; love for God, and love for each other.

Then he says, 'being of one spirit and of one mind.' The word literally means, 'with souls together.' The same commentator I mentioned earlier pointed out that this word was used to describe deep strong friendships, kind of like our word soul-mate. We don't only use that word between boyfriends and girlfriends. It's also used to describe deep friendships with the same sex. But that's what Paul asks the church to be. Be of one soul. Be soul-mates. And then the phrase 'one mind' means to think the same thing. It means to be on the same page.

After sharing these things, we must be, that we must have, he then says here are two things we can't have and one final thing we have to have. Listen again to his words,

“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.”

Selfish ambition was a word used in ancient Greek to describe the way politicians gain popularity. They use trickery and deception. The origin of the word actually means to spin wool. You can see how the word evolved to mean trickery, spin the truth, to deceive. Their only interest is their own gain and advancement. Selfish ambition flies in the face of being of one spirit and of one mind. They are incompatible.

What about vain conceit. The word is a compound word of the words 'empty' and 'glory.' Empty glory. That's why some older translations like the KJV used the phrase, 'vainglory'. It means empty pride, vain glory. The Greek dictionary says it means, to glory without reason. Here's something that's really interesting. The first part of this compound word, which means empty, is the same word used a couple verses down to describe the emptying of Jesus in become a man, in becoming a servant. The NIV says, “made himself nothing.” Paul is purposely trying to show the contrast between Christ who emptied himself of his glory, with those who are empty of glory. The Christian, Paul tells us, should glory only in the cross, the symbol of humiliation, the symbol of our salvation. To glory in anything else is a vain exercise, an unwarranted behavior. Again, if the church is to be of one mind, of one soul, there can't be people who are seeking their own glory.

How then should we be instead? We are to be humble. Humility is the very opposite of vain glory, of empty glory. We are to have a humble opinion of ourselves, we are to be modest about our gifts and accomplishments. Then, while having this sober and honest and humble opinion of ourselves, we are to value others above ourselves; or consider others as superior to yourself. Isn't it interesting that he doesn't say we are to value each other equally? That's the word on the streets, isn't it? That's the word in our sophisticated culture isn't it? We're all the same, treat each other fairly, let's tolerate each other. That's what it means to value each other equally. But that is not what Paul asks us to do? He says, I want you to take it one step further. That other person in the church? Value him, consider her, regard that person above and beyond the value you place upon yourself. That's insane. Is it no wonder the church has been so counter cultural, so revolutionary?!

So how do you do that? Well first you yourself have to be humble, in the sight of God and before others. Then you look at the other person as a child of God. Then you look out for their interests, for their needs. How do you do that specifically? I'll give you an example. When I was in seminary, I had this mentor. He took me under his wing and shared with me a little tip about how to do pastoral ministry, which he also picked up from someone else. Now remember, this was before the day of smart phones. Wherever he went he would always carry around a small pocket-sized notebook. So when he got into a conversation with someone, and the person shared a need, or he thought of something that could help that person, he'd write it down. It might have been something like, “Connect him to so and so.” “Get him a copy of this book.” Or even, “Remember to pray for him about what he shared.” Simple things like that. So in my own way I've tried to do that too. Just this week, some of you might have seen on Facebook, where I posted, “A new resident to Toronto is in need of some kitchen supplies. Let me know if you can help.” And before the end of the day, two people had responded saying, I have what the person needs. Now with our smartphone apps it's even easier. We can make a list, make a reminder. That's one way we can begin thinking of others before we think of ourselves. It's small. It's simple. It doesn't have to be grandiose.

Perhaps another way this can play out is like this. When we do something, anything, we can ask, “will this in any way take away from building unity in the church?” Or “is there a way I can do what I was planning to do, in a way that would build even more unity in the church?” Think of the ministry you're involved in.

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Think of the various tasks in the CoaH Challenge that have to do with community and serving others, or even the sections on prayer. Spend 30 minutes praying for others. That's an incredible way to consider the needs of others before your own needs.

This is what Christ calls us to be. We've experienced so much because of Christ, encouragement, love, the Spirit, tenderness and compassion. We've tasted all these undeserved things. Taste them again and again and let that stimulate you; allow what Christ has done for you to move you to get rid of selfishness and to love and serve others.

Paul caps off this rich teaching on unity and humility and thinking of others with the most powerful illustration, that of Jesus Christ. That'll be our message for next time.

Let's pray.