

Knowledge that Produces Unity
Philippians 3
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On the night in which He was betrayed, Jesus prayed fervently for those who would believe in Him in the centuries to follow, in John 17:21, that they might be united, as Jesus put it, “that the world might believe that Thou didst send Me.” Unity among believers was to be one of the evidences that Jesus is the Son of God.

How can we impress this fervent prayer of Jesus on those sincerely religious people we know, that unity really matters: not worldwide religious unity hammered out by organizations, but unity between believers, between individuals. This is the overriding theme of Phillipians: unity between believers in one location, a congregation not on the verge of a split like Corinth, nor beset by false teachers like Colossae or the Galatian region, rather, a group of believers in one major city among whom were few if any problems. The city was large enough to have generated a sizable congregation, certainly large enough to have split along geographic lines if not doctrinal, into groups centered on preferences or backgrounds or teachings that were a half-bubble off plumb.

In chapter 1, Paul encouraged them to persevere in their unity, through good times and especially bad, as in chapter 1 verse 27, “Standing firm in one Spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, in no way alarmed by your opponents.”

In chapter 2, Paul gave the Philippian Christians the attitudes necessary for unity, as in chapter 2 verses 1 and 2, “If there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.”

Throughout Phillipians, Paul illustrates again and again that unity is based on closeness, love for one another, that fellowship of the Spirit, not doctrine. When we are united by love, we will refuse to be divided by those sticky, complex, debatable topics that historically have divided the church and are responsible for the mess we have made of the Kingdom.

As Paul begins chapter 3, there is a slight shift in tone. He includes some warnings, but still focuses on the joy of our unity in Christ. His intensity kicks up a notch, but his focus is still on the mindset that yields unity. In chapter 3, the things we must know to have unity. First, we must know what is valuable.

(Philippians 3:1 – 11) Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you. Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh, although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in

Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Paul draws contrasts in each paragraph of this chapter. In this paragraph he illustrates the concept of value (verse 8). What is valuable? The contrast is between rejoicing in the Lord (verse 1) versus in the flesh.

Let's look at the positive side first. Paul listed at least three facets of the source of joy as the focal point of unity. To most people, the first two, "fellowship of His suffering" and "conformed to His death," hardly seem in keeping with our concept of rejoicing. But this is the kind of rejoicing that brings about unity. We will develop that "fellowship of the Spirit" if we are working together, not relaxing together.

What is this "fellowship of His suffering"? What is this "conformed to His death"? The value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord is in our being a living sacrifice as Paul wrote in Romans 12:1, or understanding that "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" in Galatians 2:20. Jesus' suffering and death were for us. We rejoice in that by participating in it. We, too, are sacrifices, although not on the scale of Jesus' sacrifice. We suffer and die for the lost and in that we find a realistic cause for rejoicing. Remember that a sacrifice is not wasteful and is not something given up (unless you are a pagan). A sacrifice is a sharing of the best in the presence of God in which we rejoice with God that we have found our purpose.

Compare Paul's description of rejoicing in the Lord to that practiced by most churches. Isn't rejoicing primarily reserved for good times? Not that we should be glum when things go well, rather the valuable part of the gospel is that we can take the parts of life that the world sees as undesirable and rejoice, not rejoicing in adversity for the sake of adversity, but rejoicing that we have purpose and meaning in our lives as Jesus did on this earth. A lot of uncomfortable stuff happened to Jesus, yet He was the happiest Man who ever lived. Why? Because of the surpassing value of His life.

What is my life worth by comparison? Can I give God anything that He does not already have? Can I do anything for God that He cannot already do? Where is my value? The things of this world have no value by comparison to rescuing those destined for eternal condemnation.

But how do I qualify for a life of value? By superior self control? By being the best that I can be for God. No. Instead, it is a concept never before found in the religions of the world. We qualify because of the faith of Jesus and by knowing the power of His resurrection, the fellowship of His suffering, and conformity to His death.

These concepts may seem a bit abstract at the outset, but they become more and more real to us as we consider how I am supposed to do these things. The magnitude of the power of Jesus' resurrection is played out to the same degree in my resurrection in baptism (Romans 6). The Holy Spirit did them both. The emotional suffering of Jesus (which was much more intense than the physical suffering) is ours, if we set out to seek and save that which is lost. We are conformed to His death when we forego that which our abilities could reap for ourselves in this world and instead share with the lost this life we have found.

Paul also describes those who would distract us from this fellowship of the Spirit. In verses 2 through 5, Paul describes them almost harshly. Who are these people of whom the Philippian Christians should beware and, because evil has not gone away, of whom we also should beware?

These are not mean and nasty people. They are intensely religious people. They followed the one true and living God. Paul will add to this description later in the chapter. For now, they are those who trust in the flesh, in the Law. They are legalists, whose righteousness is defined by their activities as opposed to the faith of Jesus. But, I will hold off on that application until we have all the information in the chapter.

So, let's move on to the second thing we need to know in order to have unity. After knowing what is valuable, we need to know where we are.

(Philippians 3:12 – 16) Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.

Paul's contrast in this second paragraph is a play on the word perfect. Rather than diluting Paul's illustration by explaining the multiple ways this word can be used, let's look at it as Paul wrote it, as counter points of the same idea.

We are not perfect because there are things left to do and things left to learn. But, looking at ourselves another way, we are perfect when we have this attitude of forgetting what lies behind and looking forward to what lies ahead, namely that fellowship of His suffering and conformity to His death.

The mistakes of the past cannot prevent us from becoming living sacrifices, from housing the Holy Spirit, or from Christ living in us.

Pressing on to greater things in the kingdom does not mean I am sinful. Changing how I understand something does not mean I was outside of the grace of God before. It just means I have matured. Learning something new does not deny the past; it merely helps us develop a greater appreciation for how far grace extends.

At the other extreme is the fear that, if I take a stand now, I will be proved wrong later, so I will take no stand at all. Paul says, "No. Consider yourself perfect, and at the same time remain open to God's promise of understanding."

Of course, when someone disagreed with Paul, he could be certain that the other person was wrong since Paul got his information straight from the top. But this promise in verse 15 remains. In a letter all about unity, Paul reveals how it works. It is patently impossible for people to be united. I suppose that is why Jesus said that unity in His kingdom would be a miraculous sign that He is from the Father. When we disagree, when two perfect people disagree, both are certain that the other person is wrong. If we divide, we step outside the kingdom and all promises are off. If we will stick together, united in Spirit, intent on one purpose (which is evangelism), God promises to reveal the correct answer. How? Paul does not give details. God just promised; we don't need to know how. We walk by faith, not by sight.

An amazing number of people have ignored this promise and divided over various doctrinal positions, and continue in division while excusing their obvious failure to fulfill Jesus' request and prayer. They make excuses about doctrinal purity and doing things God's way, when doctrines and practices are not in Paul's list of attitudes and actions that create godly unity. Paul gives us more detail about that sad state of affairs in the next paragraph.

The third thing we must know in order to have unity is whom to follow.

(Philippians 3:17 – 21) Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.

Again, Paul presents a contrast: good examples, bad examples. I'll address the bad examples first so we can end on a positive note.

“Their god is their appetite.” That sounds really bad. But these are the same folks Paul mentioned at the beginning of the chapter: good, highly moral, intensely religious people who got off track with the gospel and allowed physical goals and standards to overtake “the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord,” “that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His suffering, being conformed to His death.”

Who are these people? I suppose I could present little historical glimpses of people in Paul's time to whom he could be referring, but that would only remove a very real problem from the here and now and make us feel safe by assigning it to the long ago and far away.

I submit to you that this problem is rampant today: good, moral, intensely religious people who draw lines based on earthly goals and legalistic arguments.

First, earthly goals, how do religious people make this mistake? “Whose god is their appetite,” how does faith devolve to his level? When we fit God in around our employment, when we cannot imagine being without a microwave oven, a television, a telephone, an automobile, a house, electricity, municipal drinking water, a sewer system, a retirement account, when evangelism doesn't happen because it would affect our standard of living, our comfort level, then our god is our appetite.

Our glory is our shame when a significant part of congregational assets are tied up in comfort expenses, our facilities. We glory in our presentation of the gospel of prosperity when it is really our shame.

Our minds are on earthly things when we measure acceptance by authorized practices. We assign status to individuals or groups based on physical measurement rather than chapter 2 verse 1: encouragement, consolation, fellowship, affection, and compassion. Physical measurement is easy. Those other things mean we need to actually interact with each other, open our very hearts. It is so much easier to determine, for example, eligibility for leadership by number of marriages and attendance records of children, or love of God based on certain rituals and traditions.

Of course, those who do such things do not see themselves that way. They sincerely believe that they are following, as in verse 17, the example of Paul, that they are walking “according to the pattern.” What they overlook is that the hermeneutic concepts of “command, example, and necessary inference,” and “do only that for which we find authority in the Scriptures” are, as Jesus described them in Matthew 15:9, “teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.”

A small example that I have used before (and I am sure you could find dozens of others) is the example of the collection in 1 Corinthians 16:1 – 2. If we assemble all the details about

this event, we will find that the church in Corinth, and presumably those in the rest of Achaia and also in Macedonia, (1) accumulated funds (2) on the first day of the week (3) for famine relief (4) for believers (5) in Jerusalem. Those of the “authorized activities” mindset use different numbers of those details to manufacture Scriptural support for what they want to do or what they want to prohibit. I don’t know anyone who uses all five details, or we could only collect up money on the first day of the week for famine relief for believers in Jerusalem. The number of details that are dropped depends on what position the presenter is trying to justify.

Most religious people are firmly convinced that we must have rules, or people will do whatever they please. The last part of that is true. People will do whatever they please. But the Scriptures say that law is for the lawless, not the righteous (1 Timothy 1:9). The desire for rules is legalism, the mindset of minimum requirement. It is the unreasonable conviction that God will be forced to take sin into heaven if we don’t have a rule for it, that bad behavior will suddenly become acceptable to God if a corrupt but creative mind can tap dance around the truth fast enough to make evil look like good. No, Paul’s method of drawing lines was to look at what was profitable and edifying, not what was lawful (1 Corinthians 6:12, 10:23). He sought the best, not the minimum requirement.

A very important point is to look at how Paul felt about such people, those whom he labeled as dogs, whose god is their appetite, whose end is destruction. Was Paul writing them off, proud of being the last bastion of truth in a corrupt religious world? No, “of whom I often told you and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ.”

What was Paul’s pattern? It was encouragement, consolation, fellowship, affection, and compassion. It was rejoicing in suffering, conforming to Jesus’ death, finding faith through Jesus’ faith and the power of His resurrection, pressing on to the upward call, absolutely trusting in God’s promise that odd understandings will be fixed by God, not by me.

“For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.” (Philippians 4:20 – 21) Our citizenship is in heaven. Citizenship, that is an important concept. If you have traveled abroad or know many foreigners who visit here, you probably have noticed the tremendous value of our US citizenship. It provides us with respect and protection and value all over the world. Citizenship in heaven is unimaginably greater.

How do we gain this citizenship? We acknowledge the King and do things the King’s way. We are patriotic and tell others about our great country. We are naturalized through baptism. We receive our passports (the Spirit that dwells within us). We are neither resident aliens nor guest workers, but citizens.