

Prayer

God Almighty, You have come to earth in Jesus Christ to reveal the mysteries of Your glory, Your love and Your Redeeming power. Our minds cannot take this in, our feelings cannot encompass it and our thoughts can barely grasp such wonders. Yet by a miracle of grace, You respond to every effort of ours to reach out to Your truth and glory, and You take hold of us and clasp us to Your breast in divine embrace! We praise You, Lord God; Alleluia!

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Think back over recent events and offer to the Lord your feelings about things that have gone wrong. Seek His wisdom and help.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for countries of different religious beliefs.** Pray for atheistic countries such as China where religion is repressed.
- Give thanks to God for smiles and laughter and pray for the gift of happiness
- Pray about the world-wide efforts to curb national debt

Meditation

Jesus, Your kindness touches every part of our being.

You inspire us to have the courage to forgive others;
You faithfully assure us of Your presence in the future;
You lift us up when we fall, and continue to care for us;
You are concerned about our welfare as Your disciples;
You empower us to stand firm and persist through trials;
You comfort us with Your kindness when others reject us;
You sustain our joy with a great abundance of generosity;
You protect our souls when we encounter trouble and strife;
You are with us in Spirit and power as we strive to do our best.

Jesus, Your kindness touches every part of our being. Thank You.

Bible passage - Philippians 2:1-4

Paul delivers a direct challenge to the Philippian church. He asks to them to prove to him that they are united in faith, and living a life of service just as Jesus did.

¹ Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any empathy and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being of the same mind, having the same love, and being united in one spirit and purpose. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility think of others as better than yourselves. ⁴ You should each pursue not merely your own interests, but those of others.

Bible Study

Review

This is a fascinating passage of Scripture, and after the introduction to the letter in chapter 1, it begins Paul's message to the Philippians. He asks them to show him that their faith is rooted in the Gospel by being united

in '*spirit and purpose*' (2:2), and by placing their faith above personal opinions and serving each other (2:3,4). It clearly hurt Paul to hear that the church might be divided by different teaching (1:15,17,28), so his letter now encourages them to stick together (2:1,2) and live according to the example of Christ (2:3,4)

It is impossible to read this passage and not notice that the following verses are famous (2:5-11). They are one of Scripture's highlights, and they present Christ's humble service as an example to all people, as an explanation of His power to save, and as the reason for His glory. But this great text cannot just be plucked out of Scriptures as if it was an independent theological treatise about Christ. Today's reading sets the scene for this great passage, and helps us understand it. It tells us that Christ's supreme example of humility in service is the very antidote to selfishness and division within the church.

We do not have to read between the lines to spot what Paul is thinking. He was fond of the people at Philippi, and was concerned about any confusion within their teaching about Christ (1:15,17,28). From a distance, he was able to see that differences of opinion about Christ created problems, because they were rooted in ambitious and selfish attitudes amongst people who felt they knew more about the Gospel than others. It was true in his day as it is in ours, that division grows when people place their whole trust their own powers of reasoning and become unwilling to submit to what others say. So he begged his readers to put aside such '*selfish ambition and vain conceit*' (2:3), and follow the example of Christ, not of the world.

Remarkably, this passage not only appeals to the Philippians to be united, it tells them how to be united. Paul told them to put aside all personal interest and be selfless, following the example of Christ. This message is important, for although the subject of Christian unity is often spoken about, we do not often hear much about how this unity may be achieved and lived, as Paul describes here. He expounds a way of selfless way of Christian living that promotes and demonstrates the unity God longs to find within His church. We must therefore accept that one of the most notable Biblical descriptions of the work of Christ (as found here in Philippians 2:5-11), is not just an abstract explanation of Christ's work or of salvation. It was written by Paul to explain what binds God's people together. Moreover, if Paul was right about all this when he wrote it, then he is right now, and this passage should therefore be regarded as important guidance for Christian unity.

Behind all this lies a revealing picture of the church, which was clearly in Paul's mind as he wrote and contains some important signposts for God's people today. At the heart of this picture stands the theme of encouragement, for Paul not only wrote this to encourage the Philippians, he also asked them to encourage him by their unity (2:2). How encouraging it would be for Christians today if they could put aside their differences and be seen to be united in Christ? In addition, Paul's picture of the church depends on selfless sharing, which is demonstrated by practical compassion and results in joy (2:1,2). More than this, the picture suggests that God's people not only feel each other's feelings, but also '*pursue*' their interests in preference to their own. Service that goes this extra mile will yield the important fruit of '*unity in spirit and purpose*' (2:2), something that shows the world that God is at work in His people.

Every part of this great text is worth exploring and can provide us with relevant guidance for the church today, if, that is, we are willing to set aside our own thoughts feelings and attitudes!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Unity and the fellowship of the Spirit (2:1,2)
- A picture of Christian living (2:3,4)

Going Deeper

This passage splits easily into two halves. The first is Paul's eager call upon the Philippian Church to live in a visible and spiritual unity (2:1,2). It is a call that we have already commented upon in earlier devotions, so the purpose of our study today is to look more carefully at the words used here to make sure that we understand the full extent of what Paul says. We will also find that some of the words mean a number of different things, which can help us to see that God's Word is broader in meaning than we often assume when reading the Bible without the benefits of a commentary or study.

The second part of the passage is a brief series of commands from Paul about Christian living (2:3,4) in which he sums up discipleship under the general heading of humility and selflessness. This part of the text is often read as an introduction to the verses that follow, but is nevertheless a profound text in its own right.

Unity and the fellowship of the Spirit (2:1,2)

Paul had just spoken to the Philippians about the importance of unity within the fellowship and the way that this exposed the failure of the Church's '*opponents*' (1:28). So when Paul wrote as he did in these verses, he was asking the people to put into practice what he had already told them about living in unity of purpose

and fellowship, under the headship of Christ. These verses were a personal appeal by Paul to '*make my joy complete*' (2:2). It is interesting that in making his appeal for unity, Paul talked of '*encouragement in Christ*' (2:1), for this was just what both he and the Philippian Church so much needed, and he knew that encouragement in their respective circumstances would not come by eloquence or fine words. Paul, although regarded by some as an orator, knew that raising people's expectations or appealing to their emotions and higher sentiments could only ever be a temporary form of encouragement. His appeal was to a higher cause, and the shared knowledge that they had each suffered for the sake of the Gospel bound them together in a common cause which was infinitely greater than their own interests. Through the love of God in Jesus Christ, they were saved for eternity!

In making this appeal, Paul used two words which I have translated as '*empathy and compassion*'. You will find that many versions of the Bible translate these two words variously as some combination of 'tenderness', 'compassion', 'sympathy', 'mercy', and 'affection'. The two Greek words involved relate firstly to deep feelings for someone else, and secondly to compassion for someone in difficult circumstances. I have used the word 'empathy' together with 'compassion' because although empathy is a relatively recent concept, it sums up what Paul was trying to convey in this text. In the world of counselling, 'empathy' refers to the non-judgemental quality of being able to enter into someone else's experience and effectively express that emotion or experience back to that person. This sounds rather abstract, but we all know what it is like when someone talks to us and genuinely seems to understand what we are saying because we can hear from their response that they know what we feel like. That is empathy, and it is what Paul was talking about here as true of real '*sharing in the Spirit*'.

If, Paul said, there was any real empathy and Christian love between himself and the Philippians, then his '*joy would be complete*' because of their shared mind, love and unity of '*spirit and purpose*' (2:2). The first chapter of Philippians tells us much about the circumstances that led Paul to appeal for this sharing and fellowship in the Gospel, but these words reach out beyond this original setting, and remind us even now of the supreme value of real fellowship in the Gospel. Have you been inspired, as I have, by coming into contact with other Christians who, despite all differences of background and culture, believe the same Gospel and are committed to the same Lord as you? When I first went as missionary chaplain and teacher to a school in Zimbabwe, I was struck by the powerful enthusiasm for the Lord of the young people at the school. With little more than a few words and some simple sharing of beliefs, I was deeply encouraged and spiritually moved by the common heritage I shared with them in Christ.

Such fellowship and sharing in the Gospel is our true heritage today, not the divisions and strife we so often see between Christians in the churches of today.

A picture of Christian living (2:3,4)

Paul went on to speak forthrightly of the consequences of real Christian fellowship, and everything he said was derived from the life of Jesus. In commanding us not to do anything from '*selfish ambition or vain conceit*' (2:3) Paul appealed to qualities of life which were exemplified by Jesus (see 2:5-11). It has often been commented that Paul did not spend any time teaching people the same things Jesus did during his life; what he did was to preach the salvation of Jesus through his life and death. For example, Paul did not comment on Jesus' teaching of parables, refer to the parable of the sower, or even mention the famous miracles of Jesus. What was important for Paul was the quality of life Jesus lived, and the eternal consequence of this in his death and resurrection.

By rejecting ambition and all forms of selfishness as nothing more than 'vanity' (a word used frequently in the book of Ecclesiastes), Paul made it quite clear that such behaviour was not acceptable for a Christian. You cannot read verses 3 and 4 without concluding that the only way of life for one who wishes to follow Christ is to put the interests of others first. This is not very easy for us to put into practice, for, as many have pointed out, we cannot be in a position to help others if we do not look after ourselves properly. It is important, however, to remember that nowhere in scripture does it say that we must neglect ourselves, and this scripture asks us to live a life in which we are always willing to be generous both spiritually and practically to others; to value their comments, to consider their circumstances and interests, and act in a manner that demonstrates our empathy and understanding of whoever the Lord gives us to meet. It is a message that calls us to cut across all cultures, creeds and prejudices, and that is why it is so important.

I have written in this way to try and put some flesh on what may be a difficult passage for some. I have heard people say, referring to Phil 2:3,4, 'I am not doing that, because people will walk all over you and make a mockery of the Gospel.' Criticisms such as this can be answered, and in this case, the text does not ask us to submit ourselves to irrational, inappropriate or dominating behaviour. However, some will use any excuse to avoid the scriptural injunction to live the Gospel life of putting others first, and we must constantly be reminded that it is our Lord who is the one who we take instructions from in such matters, not our natural selves which always tend to plead vanity and self interest. This is the 'self' which needs to die in the baptismal waters if Christ is to have his place of honour in our lives and our Christian fellowship.

Application

The challenge of these words is to put them into practice. It can be profoundly hard for us to be empathetic towards those people within our own Church with whom we disagree, and yet this is a fundamental part of Christian fellowship. If we all believe in the same Gospel and the same Lord, then our differences must surely be of lesser significance than that which binds us together. Whilst people struggle with problems and disagreements within their local churches, I strongly suggest one way in which they can overcome such unrest and unhappiness is to start looking at the Gospel of Christ on a larger map. Paul, in his day, ventured far beyond the experience of most of his peers, and could grasp both the Gospel and the Church of God on a universal scale. We need to do the same.

If we follow his example, we can explore the experience of different Christians in many different ways. We can visit others Christians in their place of worship, or trawl through the internet to read the experience of Christians who we would never normally meet, and this is without even moving too far away from our homes! If we can travel to other parts of the world and spend time (preferably more than a few days!) with Christians who have to live in circumstances very different to our own, then we will soon learn some important lessons. In particular, the difference between the true Gospel of Christ which binds us together and the irrelevance of the problems which too often beset us when we are unable to get things in perspective.

There are many ways we can widen our experience of the Church of Jesus Christ; even studying God's Word and reading the history of the Church will help as well. There are some exciting stories! Any means that help us to get out of our own limited experience and see things from other people's perspectives will help us enormously in our spiritual journey. This does not mean that Satan does not use even these experiences to try and distort the work of Christ in us, but we should always be on guard against that. It is fashionable today to talk of thinking 'outside the box' when asking people to make the effort to go beyond their current experience and consider things from different perspectives. That is no small part of what scripture asks of us here, but only as it applies to the Gospel and to our call to live for others.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Which words within this scripture speak to you most? Discuss this within a group and see whether any words dominate your responses. Why?
2. How can Christian unity best be expressed today, and are we neglectful of our calling if we do not pursue it?
3. How does thinking '*of others as better than ourselves*' (2:3) help us to be better Christians?

Personal comments by author

I find these words in scripture deeply moving. There is a poetic feel to them which helps us build up to the verses which are coming next. Nevertheless, they speak about values of Christian faith which are very precious, love, compassion and joy, and those qualities which make fellowship in Christ more important than a thousand other things in life. One of the great features of scripture is its ability to remind us of what we value so much in each other within the body of Christ.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Spend some time thinking about how you put into practice the call to put others first in your life. Do you do this in the family? In church? With your work? With your neighbours? How can you live your life so that you are able to live for others and not collapse under the weight of other people's problems?*
- *Pray and fast about whether you can indeed work to put someone else's priorities higher than your own, as bidden by this text! Let the Lord guide you as to how you can respond to this great challenge!*

Final Prayer

Jesus, fill our minds with Your knowledge, our feelings with Your compassion, our bodies with Your strength, our spirits with Your power, and our hearts with Your love. Complete in us the work that You have begun, and bring us in Your time, to Glory. AMEN
