

Mind & Body

Philippians 2:1-13 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy,² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.¹² Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;¹³ for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Mind & Body

The journey to get to a sermon was a bit different this past week. I had picked a couple of passages from the scheduled readings for next week to preach on. One seemed so simple and obvious that I wondered if I'd find much at all to say about it. The other was a text that had always irritated me a bit, so I figured that maybe I should wrestle with it. For whatever reason, my right wrist became so sore that for a day or two I couldn't even use my right hand. Couldn't type, couldn't sign my name. For a couple of days all I could do was read. The book that the Parents of Young Children is studying had comments on the Philippians text. The DVD for the class next Thursday night talks about the Philippians text. I ended up spending a lot of time with the original Greek of this text. I've learned a lot this past week and I'm eager to tell you about it!

First, we need to back up to verse 27 in the previous chapter to set the stage for today's lesson. Paul says,^{NRS} **Philippians 1:27** Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel. If you heard this verse in the King James, as I did as a child, it begins, "Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ." It sounds like this is all about what we say in conversations. Tell people about Jesus and the Gospel. Watch you language. Don't use any naughty words. That's good advice, but it isn't what Paul is saying in this verse. The Greek doesn't have anything to do with conversations. Evidently the English word "conversation" meant something different 400 years ago. Paul isn't just saying "watch your mouth," but, "live **all** of your life in a manner that is worthy of the good news of Christ.

A furniture store manager from Minnesota came to High Point for his very first trip to the furniture market. He went to eat breakfast at a mom-and-pop diner close to his motel. He told the waitress that he wanted coffee, eggs over easy, sausage, and toast. When she brought his plate he noticed a pile of white stuff next to the eggs. "What's that?" he asked. "Grits," she said. "What' is a **grit**?" he asked. In a way that only a Southern diner waitress can do perfectly she replied, "Honey, they don't come by themselves!"

In this verse, and in the entire passage we will study today, every single time the word "you" occurs, it is plural. It always is referring to the entire church in Philippi. "Conduct your lives, lead lives, in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, let your lives be at home in the Good News of Christ. Paul says we are to have one mind for the faith of the gospel. The word *mind* here means we're to have a common perspective, a common frame of mind and outlook. "Grits don't come by themselves, and neither do Christians. The Christian faith is not an individualistic faith but a community faith. Followers of Christ need a community of faith to worship God, serve their community, love and support one another, ask hard questions, grow and learn, laugh and cry, experience healing, navigate ethics, seek transcendence, affirm

faith and hope, and find strength for the journey. Christians [like grits] don't come by themselves. Instead they come in communities."¹

With this setting, we're ready to start looking at today's passage. Paul is writing from prison, but he is thinking more about them than himself. His attention is focused on the interests, the well-being, the spiritual health of the church in Philippi. Paul talks about various aspects of life as a community – joy, fellowship, love, partnership, affection, unity, and attitude. And he says, "When you do these things well, it makes me completely happy. We might hear these first four verses as, "If you would just act these ways, even though I'm sitting in prison, I'd be happy and content." We shouldn't read this as stop acting selfishly, etc, nor even as *do not start* acting selfishly. Why? Because there is only one verb in the first four verses: *make my joy complete!* Greek grammar isn't the most exciting topic at a party, but it is very important here. This lonely verb clause ends in the letters ei instead of ean, and that difference changes the meaning to indicate that Paul assumes the reality of the conditions that he describes. Paul is saying not that this is what you need to do, but rather you are doing these things, this is ongoing behavior, which gives me complete joy!²

I think most of us might be a little confused when we read the first verse of this chapter in the King James. *If there be* therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies. . . ." If there be any bowels in the congregation? In the first century, the bowels were considered to be the seat of emotion. We still use the expression today, "I have a gut-level feeling about this." Still, "compassion and sympathy" is a clearer way of saying this today, rather than "bowels and mercies."

Paul speaks of humility, which was seen as weakness rather than virtue in Greco-Roman culture. He continues to speak about regarding others as better than yourselves. That is a first century expression that meant "put others in line in front of yourself" – offering dignity to others, recognizing their dignity as God-given. Paul is giving very high praise to this congregation in Philippi!

Verse five, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Here's one place where I would throw up my hands and balk. There's no way I can have the mind of Jesus! I'm too . . . well, I'm too a lot of things – like everybody else – to have a mind like Jesus. Here again, going and looking at the Greek definition and nuance helped me. Being of the same mind doesn't mean being identical, agreeing on everything, but having a common attitude or orientation. I can work on changing my attitude and my orientation!

Now we come to what has been called "The Christ Hymn." We're pretty sure the next seven verses are an ancient hymn, one that belonged to the early church in the first two or three decades of Christianity. These verses have liturgical style, rhythms, and balanced clauses. They're poetic. They interrupt the flow of Paul's thoughts and they use at least five words that aren't found anywhere else in Paul's writings, so it's pretty likely he's quoting a hymn that people knew.

Verse One

Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant,

Verse Two

Being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

These first two verses are parallel in subject and meaning. And they were composed before the early church had really developed the doctrine of the trinity. Adam and Eve were created in the image of God, in the form of God. But, we are told that Adam and Eve sought to be equal with God by eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Christ, on the other hand, didn't look at equality with God as something to be grasped or sought after, but took the path of being a servant, being humble. Verse two repeats the concept that Jesus was a man, but Jesus chose humility. In so doing, he was obedient to God's will, even though that obedience subjected him to the powers and principalities of the world and resulted in his death.

Verse Three

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name,

Verse Four

That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The hymn itself contains no moral messages. If we moralize this hymn, it can become a formula for self-aggrandizement – get humble now so you can be number one latter. That misinterpretation turns the gospel of Jesus Christ into a program to achieve success. We can fool ourselves into acting humble in order to get ahead. That isn't real humility – it's just pretending to be humble in order to get un-humble results. God isn't buying it. Instead, it appears from this very early hymn that some early disciples believed that "Christ empties self, served, and died – without promise of reward. The grave of Christ was a cave, not a tunnel. Christ acted in our behalf without view of gain. That is precisely what God has exulted and vindicated: self-denying service for others to the point of death with no claim of return, no eye upon a reward."³ That's not how we are likely to understand all of those events now, but it certainly does highlight the value of humility and service to others.

Now, Paul returns to his message to the church at Philippi. "Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;" Work out your own salvation? Did we just hear Paul, "saved-by-grace-through-faith" Paul, say that works would make us righteous and save us? Ripping this phrase right out of its context has caused books to be written on "How good do I have to be to be saved?"

Don't lose sight of the fact that the word you here is plural. Y'all work out all of y'all's salvation. This is in the present tense. This is something we are to be doing, not some one-time event in the past. We're supposed to do this together, as a community. Christians belong to one another in Jesus Christ; together they "work out" their salvation.

"Salvation is a lifelong process. Getting saved is not a one-time experience. Instead, salvation is a lifelong journey of relating to God. For example, when Jesus called people to himself, he did not say, "Here are four spiritual laws you must believe," or "Here's a sinner's prayer you must say." No Jesus simply said, "Follow me."⁴ Paul tells us to continue to work out our salvation. Salvation isn't a ticket you get; it's a lifelong journey on a path following Jesus. If we follow closely, maybe a bit of the dust from his sandals will land on us!

We can get so focused on the hereafter that we lose sight of the here and now. We can be so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good. But as a community we can experience a life of salvation – salvation that Paul praises in the opening verses - encouragement in Christ, consolation from love, sharing in the Spirit, compassion and sympathy, love, humility, looking to the interests of others. This is salvation from selfishness, from greed, from loneliness, from anger, from fear, from meanness and spite, and from the other poisons that twist and deform our minds and spirit. Our salvation makes itself known and felt in the present, but, yes, it will be completely disclosed in the future. For now, we're to take responsibility for understanding what that salvation means in daily life.

But what about credit for my good works – my holy atta-boy points – the stars to set in my heavenly crown like holy merit badges? Verse thirteen sets all of that straight. "¹³ for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Paul is telling us, don't "Devote yourselves energetically to the saving of your own souls, but co-operate with God in producing the fruits of a Christian life, which are love, joy, peace, and all the rest."⁵

Verse thirteen corrects any concept that we earn our salvation. A southern translation of verse thirteen could rightly read, "With fear and trembling, y'all's salvation? - work it out – for God is at work in all of y'all." Paul reminded the Philippians that "what looks like their good work – even their humble service to

one another – is really God at work in them"⁶ God's presence and involvement makes this command possible and joyful. God's presence and involvement also makes being the body of Christ a matter of **great importance** and **consequence** – a matter of fear and trembling! This isn't something done lightly, lazily, occasionally, on Christmas and Easter. "We . . . work because that salvation is so total and so complete - that it demands a practical, everyday response from us."⁷

What's the bottom line on all of this? What did I learn from studying this week? Just this: Salvation is something we receive as we live it in the drama of our lives together, and "the central event in the drama of salvation is an act of humble service."⁸ Jesus led the way. If Jesus could humble himself, then so can we! Amen.

Matthew 21:28-32 "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.'²⁹ He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went.³⁰ The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go.³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.³² For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

¹ Martin Thielen, *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2011) p 123-124

² Verse 1-4 Greek meaning = *If there is (and there is) or Since there is . . .* Either would be a clearer expression for us today. The verb form is subtle.

³ Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians*, (Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1985) p 42

⁴ Martin Thielen, *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2011) p 148

⁵ Archibald M. Hunter, *The Layman's Bible Commentary*, (Richmond, John Knox Press, 1959) p 96

⁶ David Bartlett, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 4* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2011) p 115

⁷ Earl Palmer, *The Lectionary Commentary, Second Readings* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2001) p 354

⁸ Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians*, (Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1985) p 42