

Unity

Philippians 2:1-8

Romans 12

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Psalms 103:6-12

The first word of chapter 2, is therefore, which is linking the previous verses to what we are looking at today, so before start into chapter 2 this morning I want to read the last few verses of chapter 1 that flow directly into chapter 2. Let's go back and start at verse 21 and read through 2, verse 8, so we can get the full scope of what Paul is saying here.

Paul continues on here urging the Philippian church toward unity, urging them to be like-minded. What is it that we should be striving for in unity? He says that we should be striving together for the sake of the gospel. But not only that, we should also be striving to be sure that our conduct itself is also worthy of Christ. This can be something that is done in unity, and even at times may require leadership, council or guidance from another believer. This faith, this Christian walk, is not a singular quest that we are each on, but rather this faith is communal. This faith seeks a community that strives together, fellowships together, encourages, exhorts each other, and even at times when someone in that community falls into sin, we may even have to rebuke that person in the hopes that they would turn and repent.

There are many religions in this world that do not have this aspect. They teach that it is your own personal spiritual journey, you must let your heart, or your mind guide you down the path. While there is of course the personal aspect of salvation, for God saves people, individually, he does not save whole families as some may believe, or certain groups or types of people as some others may believe but God calls individuals, from all nations, creeds, and social statuses. But he doesn't call us to be lone wanderers in this world, he calls us into a fellowship with himself, and all those who claim Christ. When we are called into this faith, we become the family of God, we become God's adopted children, brought together to worship, and to glorify our father who adopted us.

I believe that is why Paul is putting so much stress and effort here into the unity of the family of God. Having this like-mindedness, this unity striving together for the gospel produces a level of comfort, a great amount of encouragement that you do not find in religions calling for solidarity. Right now I think of the example of the Jehovah's Witnesses and their teaching that you must cut off all of those who are deniers. Your family, your friends, everyone around you that are those who are outside. And they are not the only ones who teach such things, there are many religions that teach cutting yourself off from people allows you to focus and meditate on a higher power.

But the gospel says the complete opposite. Hebrews 10: starting in verse 16. "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord; I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them. Then he adds, their sins and their lawless needs I will remember no more. Now where there is remission of these, there is no longer an offering for sin. Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which he consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, his flesh, and having a high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but

exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the day approaching.”

This faith is not something that we can practice out on our own, this faith does not seek solitude but rather it seeks the fellowship of the family of God. As we went through the book of 1st John there were many markers in there that stood as tests of true faith. John put forth 3 tests of faith, the first being right doctrine, The second is obedience, and the 3rd is Love.

I just want to take a moment here for a Quick refresher, John argues that those of true faith will hold to correct doctrine, and he focus' mainly on the doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ. He says, in chapter 2 verse 22. “Who is the liar, but he who denies that Jesus the Christ? This is anti-christ, he who denies the father and the son.” Also in chapter 5:20 “And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God, and eternal life.

Having correct doctrine is vital to true faith, and belief or doctrine that does not come from scripture is false, and is a lie. 2nd, is the test of Obedience. God does not call his children out of this world to just continue along their merry way in sin. He draws them to himself, and expects obedience. If we are not obedient to God's word, then we should not consider ourselves to be numbered among the faithful. 1st John 1:6 “ If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. “ or chapter 3 verse 3, And everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself just as he is pure. Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness. And you know that he was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin. Whoever abides in Him does not sin, whoever sins has neither seen him nor known him. Little children, let no one deceive you, he who practices righteousness is righteous, just as he is righteous. He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil. Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for his seed remains in him, he cannot sin because he has been born of God. In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest. Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.”

Those of true faith will not have a life patterned after sin and lawlessness. They have been freed from the bondage of sin, given a new heart that strives to glorify their father. This does not mean that we will reach sinless perfection in this life, but it does mean that we should not be caught up in habitual, continual sin.

And lastly, the 3rd test John put forth is Love. We just read one example in verse 10,” Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.” and also in chapter 4:20-21 “IF anyone says, I love God, and hates his brother, he is a liar, for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him; whoever loves God must also love his brother.”

So now that we have reviewed those 3 tests of true faith from John, what we see here by Paul's call to unity, and his writing to the Hebrews to tell them not to forsake the gathering together, is really another test of true faith. The implications of all this, is that it is your faith, and your love for the brethren that is really your motivation for church attendance, this is why it is important. We do not gather together with the idea that through attending we gain sanctification, and we don't do it out of some sort of obligation because it is what we have always done, or some sort of family tradition. The driving force for church attendance is this, the fellowship and love of the saints.

If you think that you can claim Christ, yet deny his body here on earth you are in for a big surprise. You can claim to love Christ, you can even claim to love the brethren, but if you are not actively involved in the lives of those brethren, if you deliberately cut yourselves off from them, you are not loving them as we are called to love. I feel I need to put a little disclaimer here unless I be misunderstood. While I believe that church attendance is paramount to Christian faith, There maybe circumstances where church attendance may not be possible, maybe there are health reasons, or the lack of a solid biblical fellowship that you can join. Those are not the things that I am speaking to, I am speaking to those who decide that anything else they would rather do is more important then church attendance.

The type of people who say, “I am closer to God on my fishing boat, then I ever will be in a stuffy old building.” Or those who in reality don't want to attend in the first place and find every excuse not to. If you are claiming Christ, yet staying home to watch the Superbowl, or you find other things more important then attending the services at your local church, by these standards that Paul is putting forth in his call to unity you need to take a serious look at your christian faith.

One of the great effects of this standing together for the gospel, of this striving together to live a life worthy of the gospel, is the support and comfort that it brings. Paul says to not be in any way terrified by our adversaries. Not only do we have the sovereign all might God of the universe on our side, we have the fellowship of the saints to encourage us and stand with us.

Verse 29 Paul says that it has been graciously given to us not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer on behalf of Christ, and he goes on to say, having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear is in me. I think Paul is referring to the conflict of his desires, on one hand he desires to depart and be with Christ, but on the other hand it desires to remain for the benefit of his brothers and sisters in Christ. Notice that Paul's driving force here becomes his love for the brethren. If it was up to his own selfish desires he would be happy to be rid of all the trials and problems of the world. But he understands this faith is not about himself, it is about Christ, and the family of God.

We see that here in our passage today verse 3 of chapter 2. “Let nothing be done through selfish ambitions or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.” This is the center and focal point that drives Christian unity. God calls his children to love one other, even as Christ loved us. To lay down our lives, to sacrifice, for the benefit of each other, but Christ takes it even a step further and says that we should love our neighbors, those around us as Christ loves us. If we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, how much more so those who are of the family of God? The jealousies, pride, and ambitions that split churches ought not to be. We are to put such things aside and strive together, in unity for the gospel, for this ministry that we have been given.

Obviously this is not something that we naturally desire to do, but rather it is the outworking, and the proof of a truly regenerate heart. That is not only now capable of expressing such love, but naturally desires to do so. In verse 1, Paul says “ If there is any consolation in Christ, or comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. “

For those who claim Christ these things are true. We find our encouragement in Christ, we find comfort in his love, and in the love of our fellow saints, we have fellowship with the spirit who guides and directs us through this life, and we have an affection and mercy for God's people. And because these are traits of all of those who are God's children, we can have unity together.

If we are focused on the main thing, if we strive together for the gospel even though we are different people with 1000's of different opinions we can still come together in Christ, we can worship and praise him, we can encourage and exhort each other to live our lives out in obedience to him.

Paul continues on here using Christ as our example of such fellowship and love toward each other. Verse 4. "Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

So really, to put it simply, this unity that Paul is calling us too, is nothing less than to be bound together in love toward each other, and toward the Father. As we saw in our reading in 1 Corinthians this morning, love seeks to encourage, to build up, to serve others, it is not selfish, it is not provoked and does not envy. Or as Paul says in Galatians, the entire law is fulfilled in one statement, to Love you neighbor as yourself. Christian unity is nothing something that needs to be forced, but rather is the bi-product of this type of self sacrificing self giving love. for when we seek the benefit of others instead of the promotion of ourselves it brings us closer together and builds unity.

So what can we do to accomplish this? What can we do to strive together for the gospel in unity? Dietrich Bonhoeffer lays out 7 essential tips for fostering Christian Unity in his book Life Together.

1. Hold your tongue, refuse to speak uncharitably about a Christian brother or sister.
2. Cultivate the humility that comes from understanding that we, like Paul, are the greatest of sinners and can only live in God's site by his grace.
3. Listen, long and patiently so that we may understand the needs of our brothers and sisters.
4. Refuse to consider our time and calling so valuable that we can not be interrupted to help with unexpected needs, no matter how small.
5. Bear the burdens of our brothers and sisters in Christ, both by preserving their freedom and by forgiving their sinful abuse of that freedom.
6. Declare God's word to our fellow believers when they need to hear it
7. Understand that Christian authority is characterized by service, and it does not call attention to the person who performs the service.

If more members of our churches around the world would take these words of advice to heart, I think we would see a lot less in fighting, a lot less loss of fellowship, and a lot less division among the churches. The world would see a more unified church, and it would stand as a witness to the love of Christ that is working in us and through us.

Blake White in his commentary on Philippians says, "Jesus is the ultimate model of a self denying, others centered attitude. He embodied this love-mindset at Calvary. The Cross is not only the provision for our salvation, but it also stands as the subjective pattern for the Christian life." He then goes on and lists a few passages that I will read pointing out that this Love that Christ showed toward us is exactly the love we are called to have, and in which we find unity together around the gospel of Christ.

Ephesians 5:25 “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her.

John 13:34 “I give you a new command; Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you must also love one another.

1 John 4:10 “Love consists in this; not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins. If God loved us in this way, we also much love one another.

Romans 15 1-3 “Now we who are strong have an obligation to bear the weaknesses of those without strength, and not to please ourselves. Each one of us must please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even the Messiah did not please himself.

1 Corinthians 10: 24, 31-11:1 “No one should seek his own good, but the good of the other person, therefore whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for God's glory. Give no offense to the Jews or the Greeks, or the church of God, just as I also try to please all people in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, so that they may be saved. Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ.

2 Corinthians 8:9 “For you know the grace of our lord Jesus Christ; though he was rich, for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

This love, this unity that we share in Christ is our driving force for everything that we do. Here in fellowship together, and also in our contact with the world. There are so many who do not seem to understand that it is the love of God working through us that is the driving force in our lives. They set up lists, rules, regulations and requirements upon the body of Christ to create a sort of forced unity, a way to make sure people attend service as they should, or even give offering as they should.

Instead the reality is, we gather together to worship and fellowship because we love the family of God, we give generously in tithes and offerings, and towards those who are called to share the gospel to unreached people not out of some requirement or obligation or law, but rather we give out of love for each other and for the ministry of the gospel. That is why you will never hear a message from me trying to guilt you into your obligation to attend church services, and why I will not chase you down if your attendance lacks. This is also why you will never hear from me preach a message about your obligation to give tithes to the church, because I believe that those who love the local body will attend the services, they will not forsake gathering together and worshiping with those they love. And they will likewise give freely from that which God has given them to help support and further that ministry, and fellowship.

I think God has given us much grace here at SH, we share a unity that I don't think is found in many other places. Yes, we are small, but we have been through a lot, but our unity is not because of our small size, rather it comes from our focus, we have one unified voice that has driven us forward in all that we do, a voice that cries out, To God be the glory! I think this is something that sums us up, we strive to always keep our focus on Christ, no matter what happens we here are striving together for the glory of God, and we strive together in the ministry of his word. And because this is our focus I think that we actually accomplish the unity that Paul is calling for. Praise God for his love, praise God for his Grace.