

Paul's Letter to the Philippians

Session Four April 15, 2020

Philippians 1:27 – 2:4

Paul encourages the Philippians to live a life of united harmony, despite the anti-church flow that might influence the church and families from the Roman culture and or Christian opposition.

Paul also encouraged the Philippians that sometimes the result of following Christ is suffering. In these times of struggle, the koinonia of the Christian community and fellowship with Christ brings the greatest sustaining joy – with purpose!

Opening Questions...

(1) What do you think your community is saying about the Christians who are living in it?

(2) What do you think your closer community is saying about the Christians at FBC Elon? Your Christian influence?

Paul has just shared that he believes that God still has plans for him with the Philippian church and on his earthly mission proclaiming God's message, so he believes he will be found innocent of his charges at trial. He again turns to the importance of unity within the Philippian church. This brings up two possibilities: either Paul has heard rumors that there is discord within the walls at the church, or he is aware of the increasing diversity outside the church walls and potential for disunity that could develop inside. Most scholars lean towards the second of the two.

To understand why Paul keeps coming back to "unity", it is essential to understand the dynamic of the environment of the Roman culture of that time. As we are becoming an increasingly diverse Western culture, we are beginning to understand this more and more. In Paul's time, diversity was the norm. To walk out in the streets of Philippi was to walk in a melting pot of five or six different cultures, let alone eight or ten different religious beliefs. Polytheism, the belief in more than one god, was the expectation. The Christian belief in one God was the extreme, unusual – weird.

From a cultural perspective, there was not an idea of a "private life". Everything was open to the public – houses, work, shopping, and family. Only the richest of the rich could afford to isolate themselves from the rest of the city. In a city like Philippi, very few would be able to afford the luxury of "private". In most cases, they would not want it – the rich would want to flaunt their wealth. When it came to worship, I think we often feel that in most cases the Christian church would go and huddle up in an upper room and hide their worship from the others. In areas where Jewish leadership was dominant, maybe, but in most Roman cities where Paul traveled, like in Philippi, the

Christian church's gathering for worship was not hidden and was open for anyone to join in. This is the reason why Paul emphasized unity – everyone was watching – what message are you sharing!

1:27 – 2:4 – Introduce us to what is commonly called the “Heart of the Philippians” Letter

Vs. 27 - “Only” Behave! – 1 Spirit, 1 Mind

Paul reminded the Philippians that the “Only” way to act was united! Paul's ultimate desire was to come and visit the church, but whether or not this was going to happen, his hope was that the message that came back to him was that their behavior was worthy of Christ. Notice that it is not worthy of Paul or the church, but the ultimate authority of Jesus.

Paul's goal for the church – not an easy goal at that – was for them to be standing firm in one spirit and in one mind. This is difficult for any church today! Just think about the last business meeting! The world loves to see a fighting church – they live for it! It makes for good press! A united church is a powerful church! Paul recognized that the Philippian church was facing a difficult crowd and that they needed to stand united, they were being watched.

Vs. 28 – Who are the “Opponents”?

There are list of possibilities – Judaizing Christians, Civil Authorities in Philippi, Other Religious Teachings, etc. – we do not have the answer. Paul emphasizes that a unified church is a contested church, but koinonia survives! Proof – salvation for you (rescue, like we talked about two weeks ago!), destruction for them.

Vs. 29 – If Christ suffered, why do I?

Paul understood what it meant to suffer for Christ. This is a hard concept for the Western Church Christian to understand. Suffering is a privilege – remember others are watching, takes our eyes off ourselves, serves as an example for others to follow.

Vs. 30 – Paul was encouraging Philippians to join with Him.

The koinonia fellowship that the Philippians had with Paul meant joining him in the suffering as well – good times and the bad. Swimming upstream. Same suffering, same glory. See more about this in Philippians chapter 3. (See also Romans 8).

Vs. 2:1 - 2 – What does shared life look like?

Paul builds on this idea of unity and describes what it looks like for the Christian church. This describes his mutual koinonia with the Philippians and God as well.

- (1) Encouragement in Christ
- (2) Consolation in Love
- (3) Fellowship of the Spirit
- (4) Affection and Compassion

This all leads to being of the same mind focused on the same purpose – and it keeps repeating. In a nutshell – UNITY! (In addition, what did this bring Paul – JOY!)

These are some of the essential elements and practices of Christian unity – not just for the Philippians, but also for all Christians!

Vs. 3 - 4 – Looking Beyond Ourselves – No “I” in “Church”

Paul closed out this section by reminding the Philippians that the way that he was challenging them to approach the world was the exact opposite of the way that the Roman culture was telling them to live. The “Me first” attitude was not a “Christ-like” attitude and it would be noticed. N.T. Wright mentioned that it was as if Paul was preaching from Mark 10 (even though he probably was not) when he was penning this part of his letter. He was encouraging the church to stand strong, united, and stand out. It was okay for others to notice, because they would notice. It was okay for others to ask questions, because they would ask questions. That is when the door would be open to share the message and love of Christ. To be “the church”. It may take some suffering in the meantime, but count it all joy until that time comes (and stay united)!

Follow Up Questions...

Why, according to Paul, should believers living in the present age expect to experience suffering?

Where have you experienced opposition in your attempts to live your faith publicly?

Paul’s teaching challenges us to fight for unity within the community of faith. How can you personally contribute to unity within the larger Christian community?