

Sermon – 28/03/2010 pm

Help These Women

Study Text: Philippians 4:3

When we were in India people would often come to us asking for help. Sometimes it was simply for food. Often it was for medicines. Other times it was for education expenses or some other need. One day a man came asking if we could find him a wife in Australia. He had heard that that was the easiest way to emigrate. Being there, meeting the people, and if possible visiting them enabled us to assess each need.

When we came back a brother in Christ, a man who worked with us for some time and thought the way we did, continued in the work. He took on ministering to families that we had ministered to. He has since arranged marriages for the girls of one of the new Christian families. If they, or anyone else, send us letters or emails asking for help we refer them to this brother. We simply ask him if he thinks the need is genuine and if so send whatever help we can to him to pass on to the needy person.

The apostle Paul had a *true companion* in Philippi who he could rely on to help the two women in the church who were not getting along at this time. As he wrote this letter he wrote directly to these two women. He wrote with great concern imploring them to *be of the same mind in the Lord*. He did not take sides but wrote with Christian love to each of these sisters in the church. What he wrote was brief because this letter was to be read in public and also because he was not fully aware of the current situation. Paul was over a thousand kilometres away in Rome and had not been in Philippi for some time.

Paul firstly addressed the women by name. He addressed them as the individuals they were before the Lord, and in the church. But they were also women who had shared together in the ministry. They were members of the body, the body of Christ which is the church. He called upon them to pull together in the Lord, as we saw last time. That was step one of his strategy for them to be reconciled. Step two was for a faithful brother to step in and help them. Step three was to remember the Book of Life.

Brother to Help

The apostle began this letter telling the church how in his prayers he was *making request for you all with joy* (1:4). He prayed that their *love may abound more and more in knowledge and all discernment* (1:9). These two women would have been mentioned in his prayers. At this closing stage of his letter, he gives practical advice on how these women can be helped. He asks a particular person in the church to intervene on his behalf and help these women.

In the process of reconciliation nothing can replace a face to face meeting. Even with all the sophistication of modern communication a meeting of minds and hearts cannot be achieved without this physical presence. In the court system criminals are now required to meet their victims or their relatives. This has a tremendous impact on both parties. We are finding so much hurt being done to people these days through the anonymity of the internet. Even the phone conversations are fraught with danger in matters of conflict resolution. Since he could not be present in Philippi, Paul asked someone he knew well and trusted to intervene and help these two women.

Who was this person? In some translations we read 'true companion' and in others 'loyal yokefellow'. In the Greek the word is 'syzygus' where 'zygus' means 'yoke'. Paul knew, and the person receiving the letter knew, who this was. We are left to speculate and that is what many have done. Calvin argued against those who suggested it was Paul's wife - Paul was not married. Others have suggested Lydia but the word is masculine gender. James Boice favoured Epaphroditus but Epaphroditus was in Rome with Paul. Others have pointed to Luke but with no evidence.

Some prefer to leave the word untranslated. They say 'syzygus' is a proper noun and the name of this man. They argue that Paul named the two women and then goes on to name Clement so this was his pattern. Paul could be making a pun that this man was being true to his name. Apart for this speculation it is reasonable to assume that this man was an elder or deacon, one of those mentioned in his greeting to the church.

More important than **who** he was, was the task that he was given. Paul does not give him instructions beyond saying *help these women who laboured with me in the gospel* (4:3). The word help literally means 'together take or catch'. The women most likely had not been talking to one another. They were avoiding each other at church and elsewhere. Getting them to sit down together would be a great achievement in itself and indeed would have achieved much with a little help from this 'helper'.

Self righteousness or self pity, or a strange combination of both, can keep people from coming together for reconciliation. Both these attitudes are sinful. In the grace of God, and with help from a third party, these attitudes can be overcome. Pride can be overcome by humility. This is what we learn when we take the time and effort to look into God's word. *Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up* (James 4:10). Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you above the barrier that brought the separation.

'Focus on what you have in common' writes Carson. 'Make sure you agree over the gospel. Work hard to develop perfect agreement on matters of greatest importance: the gospel, the word of God, the glory of Christ, the good of God's people, the beauty of holiness, the ugliness of sin, especially your own'. 'Work hard and humbly on these central issues and in most instances the peripheral matters will take care of themselves'.

Paul did not go into detail instructing this yokefellow on helping these women. He would have known what to do from Paul's teaching and example. Paul in turn knew what to do from Christ's teaching and his example. Calling the women together and focussing their minds upon Christ who loved them and gave himself for them was what was needed. *Be of the same mind in the Lord* said Paul.

Book of Life

What things were these two women to put in their minds in order to drive out thoughts of the hurt they had experienced, and maybe of ways of taking revenge? This is what happens after a dispute. Our minds keep going over things that were said or done. We cannot get rid of such thoughts. Our thoughts move on to how we are going to deal with the situation. This is when thoughts of retaliation can arise. We have the tendency to nurse our anger and let it grow, to the delight of the devil. The Scriptures warn us *in your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger* (Ephesians 4:25).

The apostle called upon these women *to be of the same mind in the Lord* (4:2). He called upon them to think about the Lord. When we are hurt and angry there is a tendency to stop praying and stop reading our Bible. That is the worst thing to do. That is why we must establish a pattern of reading

and praying, and of attending worship regularly. If you only come when you feel like it then you will not be here when you most need to be.

What does thinking about the Lord mean? Paul gives more detail about such thinking in verse 8. Here in this verse he makes what seems to be an unrelated remark about the Book of Life. He names the two women, he refers to his *true companion* and then to Clement, and then to *the rest of my fellow workers whose names are in the Book of Life* (4:3). What is this book, whose names are in it, and how did they get there?

Moses once spoke to the Lord about his name being blotted *out of your book which you have written* (Exodus 32:32). In Psalm 69 David spoke of *the book of the living* and not being written with the righteous (Psalm 69:28). Jesus spoke to his disciples saying *do not rejoice that the spirits are subject to you, but that your names are written in heaven* (Luke 10:20). It must have seemed a strange comment to the disciples who were rejoicing with Jesus after casting out demons in his name. The Book of Life will be opened at the Judgment because it is the book where the names of the elect are recorded (Revelation 20:12).

Jesus knows whose names are in this book. In a sense they are written there in his precious blood. The names of all who are saved by grace through faith are listed in this book. When we repent and believe, the Holy Spirit *bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God* (Romans 8:16), and that our names are written in this book. But how could Paul say of others that their names are written in this book? Calvin answers this question saying ‘we may in some measure form a judgment from the token by which God manifests his election’.

Paul was following the example of Jesus in pointing these believers, and especially the women, to the Book of Life. He was pointing them to issues of eternity. He was pointing them to issues that transcend our earthly disputes and difficulties, and even the power to defeat demons. While some churches are straining under the weight of disputation, others are rejoicing over signs and wonders. What is needed, according to the Bible, is for all who believe to focus upon the Lamb’s Book of Life.

Those hearing this letter had just heard Paul tell them to set their minds on heavenly things, to remember their citizenship is in heaven and that Jesus is coming soon (3:20). With the same focus upon heaven they now hear about the Book of Life. This was Paul’s focus, even as he ministered from his prison cell.

If these women would think about the Lord Jesus Christ they would realise the depths of their own sin and the great height of Jesus’ love for them. In the light of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ they would see their lives, their dispute, and all their problems from a whole new perspective. In this light they will surely be reconciled, and once again work together in the gospel.

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