

Sermon – 15/11/2009 am

The Interests of Others

Study Text: Philippians 2:1-4

Many people believe in the innate goodness of every human being. A woman on the radio spoke of how she saw this goodness in the heart of a man. She was with him at his death bed. In the last few moments of his earthly life she saw a flicker of inner beauty and love in his soul. ‘What about the rest of his life’ I thought. Did he live his whole life loving his neighbour as himself? If only in our dying moments an inner beauty is revealed, what hope do we have?

Humanists have to search long and hard to find any goodness in the human heart. They resort to imagination. They have to lower the bar of goodness, and even then only a few can reach it. In the Bible we find a true assessment of the human condition. Our hearts are desperately wicked (Jeremiah 17:9). Even the good we want to do we cannot do, but do evil and commit sin instead (Romans 7:19). No one is righteous no not one, for all have sinned.

The word ‘sin’ is rarely heard these days. Those who use it are branded judgmental and intolerant. But the truth is sin is at the root of all the problems in this world. ‘Where do wars and fights come from’ asks James (James 4:1)? They come from your desires for pleasure. They come from lust and selfish ambition. They come from sin in the human heart. Sin separates; it separates us from God, it separates us from Christ, and it separates us from one another.

What is sin? ‘Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God’ (Shorter Catechism 14). ‘Wretched man that I am who will deliver me’ cried the apostle Paul – ‘I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord’. Jesus bore our sins in his body on the tree that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness. Jesus suffered leaving us an example. This is the truth the apostle was urging upon the Philippians. *Imitate me even as I imitate Christ* he wrote elsewhere (I Corinthians 11:1).

In the verses before us Paul urged the believers to walk in the way of Christ. He did so by way of a simple if/then proposition. This is not an expression of doubt but of explanation. Because of what has taken place in their hearts when they believed in Jesus Christ they will live a new life in Christ.

If

Therefore wrote the apostle as he began this chapter. Chapter divisions of course were not in the original letter that he wrote. *Therefore* indicates a continuation from the preceding verses. Paul was urging those in the church to live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. In particular, to be united in standing fast against opposition from the world. Satan and the world try to divide and conquer. A team that is not united has little chance of winning.

How can believers remain united? Firstly, by looking to Christ. *If you have any consolation in Christ* (2:1). Most translations have ‘any encouragement’. The word in Greek is *paraklesis* which is the name given to the Holy Spirit in John’s gospel. This word means to ‘call to ones side’ or to ‘stand beside someone’. This consolation is in Christ. We have been called to the side of Christ. He is the only true Son but we are adopted children of God. We are members of one family.

The second 'if' is the *comfort of love*. In the context we might ask if Paul was thinking of the Trinity and of the love of God. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. *We love him because he first loved us* (I John 4:19). The love of God is at the very foundation of our salvation. If God had not loved us we would still be dead in our sin. We would still be separated from God, living without hope and without the joy of salvation. If you know anything of the love of God, if you have any comfort in love, then show the same love.

Thirdly, Paul writes *if any fellowship in/of the Spirit* (2:1 – the preposition is not in the original). There is one God, one Lord and one Spirit. *Endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace* (Ephesians 4:3). The Holy Spirit has been given to all who believe in Jesus Christ. If you do not have the Spirit you do not belong to Christ. Since we share in the indwelling of the same Spirit of God there must be a oneness of mind among us. The Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirit, as we read in Romans 8:16. The commonly heard Trinitarian doxology refers to the grace of Jesus, the love of God, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (II Corinthians 13:14).

Finally, Paul refers to *affection and mercy*. These attributes are associated with our humanity. Calvin writes 'if any feeling of humanity and mercy resides in you'. The word 'affection' is literally 'intestines'. This was understood to be the seat of the emotions in ancient times. In the goodness of God there are remnants of mercy and love in the sinful human heart. These human qualities continue to exist in the believer but are renewed and transformed by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Calvin thought Paul wanted the Philippians to consider him in his chains and to do these things for his sake. Paul does go on to say *fulfil my joy*. They would make him very happy if they acted with love and unity, but he was not urging them to do so simply to please him or out of pity for him. He urged them to do so because of who they were. They were a new creation in Christ Jesus.

Then

Believers are in Christ and they are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. We know the love of Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. If this is so, what is the outcome? Paul identified three outcomes: oneness, lowliness and helpfulness. He had a deep personal interest in the church at Philippi. In fact he could have used his apostolic authority to discipline those who were causing divisions in the church. But he chose to make a personal appeal instead.

He loved these believers and he knew they loved him. They had sent Epaphroditus to help him while he was in prison in Rome. Despite his suffering he was rejoicing that the gospel was advancing in Rome. Churches were established and growing throughout Europe and Asia. To complete his joy Paul called upon the brothers and sisters at Philippi to be united in heart and mind.

Oneness: *be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one accord and one mind* (2:2). If anyone is in Christ they are a new creation. How are we a new creation? We still look the same – with maybe some minor exceptions. We are new in our inner being. We have been transformed by the renewing of our minds. We no longer think as we did before. Our minds have been enlightened. Life for us has a new meaning and a new purpose.

With a new heart and mind we will think completely differently to unbelievers. That is why we are told in the word of God not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers. But our thinking will be completely the same as believers – at least in matters of faith and doctrine. We will look to the same Jesus who died for our sins and rose again from the dead. Paul was not thinking about minor

matters and ‘distinctives’. He was thinking about the truth and about what we have in common as those who belong to Christ.

Put aside all malice, all deceit, all hypocrisy, envy and all evil speaking ... if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious wrote Peter (I Peter 2:1, 3). You are the holy temple of the Lord. Be of one accord. This means to be of one soul. Believers are to be soul mates, united in a life of love. Together we go forth to serve Jesus Christ our Lord and master and king.

Lowliness: ‘Conceit is the disease and selfish ambition is the symptom’, writes one commentator. Conceit is a disease of the heart. It is self centred thinking, thinking of yourself more highly than you ought. It is judging everyone else but refusing to judge yourself. This attitude and this way of thinking are promoted by the world, but not by Christ. Worldly thinking says ‘I am the greatest and I deserve the best’. It is the exact opposite of Christ-like thinking.

How do we lift other people up? We can encourage and praise them. When was the last time you did this? To lift them up we must take a lowly position ourselves. We do not say ‘Oh you did so well, but I did better’. That is not lifting someone up. We must put on humility. A good place to start is to humble ourselves before the Lord.

It is not easy to be humble when you are richer, more talented and more beautiful than the other person – as you see it. But what measure are you using to make these judgments? Are these not worldly measures? In the church outward beauty does not count. Riches do not count. Talent does not count because we have all received gifts of the Holy Spirit (Romans 12:3). We must get our thinking right. We must get our thinking in harmony with that of Christ and not that of the world.

With all lowliness and gentleness, bearing with one another in love (Ephesians 4:2). *In humility count others better or more significant than yourselves* (2:3). How can we get this attitude? Paul goes on to tell us. *Let your attitude be the same as that of Christ Jesus* (2:5). Jesus the Son of God, the King of kings and Lord of lords, humbled himself and became a man. He suffered at the hands of men but remained humble in obedience to his Father in heaven. *The Son of God did not come to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many* (Mark 10:45). Humble service, not selfish ambition, is what you are called to as a follower of Jesus Christ.

Helpfulness: *Let each of you look not only to his own interests but to the interests of others* (2:4). This is one of the key verses in this book. Taken with 2:21 we get two great principles of Christian living: look out for the interests of Christ and lookout for the interests of other. The chorus about JOY sums this up wonderfully – Jesus first, yourself last, and others in between. ‘He must increase, I must decrease’ said John the Baptist. If Christ is increasing in your life then those around you will be increasing also.

Many seek joy and happiness in putting themselves first and trying to satisfy their every desire. They gather up things, they gather up titles and achievements and they seek to multiply their friends. I hear people boast about the number of people listed on their ‘Facebook page’.

You will never be satisfied with living to please yourself. Put on the mind of Christ and live to please him. Look out for the well being of your brother and sister in Christ as the apostle Paul did and you will find joy to the full.

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