

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

## Christian Unity Philippians 2:1-4

**Intro:** Our text today begins with the word, “Therefore...” And, as a rule of thumb, whenever you see “therefore” in the Bible, in order to grasp the context of the passage, you need to look back to the previous verses to see what it is there for. In vs27-30 of ch1, Paul was exhorting the Philippian believers to live their lives in a manner that revealed or reflected their heavenly citizenship – to walk worthy of it. This proper Christian conduct will reveal itself in unity and an aggressive evangelism. Paul then reminds them that an aggressive evangelism always brings persecution. Paul’s encouragement in these verses was for the Philippians to stand strong for the Lord against external conflicts.

As we begin our study of ch2, Paul now instructs them on how they are to conduct themselves in the face of internal conflicts within the Body of Christ. Taken together, Paul’s focus on the matter of unity reveals 2 important reasons why it is necessary. The first reason is that unity is necessary in time of war. Christians, whether we recognize it or not, are constantly besieged by the forces of this world. We are daily in a battle for the souls of the lost and because of this; we must come together in unity. We have the Lord and the presence of the Holy Spirit but we also need the direct support and encouragement of each other as we come together to worship, study the Word and fellowship.

As important as this is it is, at best, a secondary reason for Christian unity. What if the opposition were to let up for a little while? What if the gospel made such and effective advance into our society that it brought a temporary peace? Would Christian unity be rendered unnecessary and we can all go our separate ways? Of course not! Sure, unity is necessary in the face of external opposition but the real reason for Christian unity is found in our mutual relationship to Jesus Christ and what we know of Him. This is a family relationship and it is lasting; in fact – it is everlasting! Being a Christian is not just a grim call to suffer for Christ. It comes with its own real time benefits that add up to a fulfilling and exciting life! Paul is about to make a rather emotional appeal to his readers to see exactly what life in Christ brings and live up to it!

**1-2** – It's extremely difficult to relay the force of these expressions that Paul offers in this verse. He's not just rattling off a list of benefits that believers not only have but should recognize. Paul here is pouring out his whole heart to a group of people that he loved with his whole heart. He loves them so much that he not only is willing to instruct them on the basis for unity among believers but desires to see them take this information and achieve this unity. This is his goal, this is his desire and, as he states in vs2, this would fulfill his joy.

Paul begins his exhortation to unity with the phrase: if there is any... This phrase introduces a series of rhetorical questions. The idea being that if the Philippian Christians have received the things he mentions, which they had, then they have a responsibility to do the things he is about to describe. In vs1, Paul says there are 4 solid columns on which Christian unity rests and because of these 4 things, we are to be like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. It's because we're members of God's family and have learned from Him, that we must live in peace and unity with one another.

The reality of the Christian existence is that there are constant pressures from sin, not just from the world around us but from within each one of us as well. If left unchecked, these pressures will eventually destroy the Christian unity we now enjoy and will render our witness for Christ useless unless they are offset by the supernatural realities listed here. Have you found these things to be real in your relationship to God? Of course you have, if you're a believer in Jesus Christ. If so, you are to make them become realities in your relationships with other Christians.

The 1<sup>st</sup> rhetorical question Paul asks is if there is any consolation in Christ. Of course there is! In fact, **Lk 2:25** says that one of the titles for Jesus as the Messiah is the Consolation of Israel. Of course, to be precise, what Paul is referring to here is encouragement. Is there any encouragement in Christ? Yes! It's seen in the support Jesus gave to His followers to live together in love. Jesus taught that love was to be their highest virtue. He prayed for all who would believe in Him through the word of the disciples, "that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I in You; that they also may be one in U, that the world may believe that You sent Me" (**Jn 17:21**). John is describing a visible unity here, a unity that the world can see and on the

basis of which people can believe in Jesus. This unity must be expressed in deeds, gestures, and speech, in the way we think about, talk to, and act with other Christians.

Can you accept the fact that this is the type of unity that Jesus desires for you? Can you accept that He actually encourages you to achieve it and offers to support you in the attempt? If you struggle with this, it may be because you're more interested in your own desires than in His wishes. You must ask Him to correct that fault in you.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> reality of the Christian life bearing on unity is the incentive of love. Paul knew that Christians are hard to get along with (What!). But he also knew that Christians have a duty to see more than another Christian's faults. Christians must also see the person, and they must love him or her with a love patterned on the love with which God the Father loves us. The person who really loves the other Christian in this way will not seek to separate from someone because they are cantankerous or because they hold some minor doctrinal differences. He'll seek to know them, to learn from them, and to help them on spiritually as they advance together in this Christian life. The Greek word rendered comfort here means more than just a soothing sympathy. Its *paraklesis* and carries with it the idea of strengthening, of helping, of making strong. The Latin word for comfort is *fortis* – brave. The love of God in our life makes us strong and brave and our love for each other should have the same effect.

Always remember that your love is to be patterned after God's love. In fact, your love is to be an outpouring of His love through you as you are transformed by the indwelling presence of His Spirit. Jesus taught this to his disciples just before his crucifixion. He said, "A new command I give to you, that you love one another, as I have loved you, that you also love one another" ([Jn 13:34](#)). There is no room for qualification here. Your love for other Christians must be like Christ's love for you.

Have you experienced this love? If you are a believer, you have understood something of its meaning. Does God cast away the one who offends Him or makes a doctrinal mistake or sins? No! His love reaches out even farther as He seeks to draw the sinner to Himself. That love must flow through you, and it must be your pattern. It must be your incentive as you live with other Christians – to seek their good, to contribute to their spiritual growth to

maturity.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> thing Paul mentions is Christian fellowship. This is not just a human fellowship, like the fellowship between friends who have a lot of things in common. It's not man-centered. The fellowship that exists between Christians is a fellowship created by God. It exists, not because we may have things in common, but because by grace we have been made mutually dependent members of Christ's body. This aspect of Christian fellowship is taught clearly in the opening verses of **1 John**. John says, "that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ" (**1:3**). This means that because you've been brought into a vertical fellowship with God by grace there must also be a horizontal fellowship that extends outward to embrace other Christians. I would even go so far as to say that it is impossible to claim one aspect of this fellowship unless there is evidence that you have the other. John says as much in **vs6-7**.

Are there other Christians that you're not on speaking terms with or on bad terms with? If so, then on the authority of these verses, there's something lacking in your relationship with God. Your lack of fellowship with other Christians is not God's doing. It's your doing and it reveals a lack of fellowship with Him. His Spirit seeks to draw you together with other believers. The Greek is *koinonia* – sharing of things in common. What do believers share in common? "One Lord, one faith, one baptism," (**Eph 4:5**) but we also share life with the Spirit of God that we never knew before. The Holy Spirit fills and guides and moves in our lives in a powerful and precious way. Clearly, participation in the Spirit is one of the strongest incentives for Christian unity.

Paul's last rhetorical question assumes that every Christian knows something of the affection and mercy of God. Affection is a word that is used both of humans and God but the Greek word used for mercy (or tender mercies) is always related to God. We see it in **Rom 12:1**, I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God or in view of God's mercy. We see it in **2 Cor 1:3**: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort," and in **Jam 5:11**: "The Lord is very compassionate and merciful."

What is clear from these verses is that Paul is appealing to the believer's

own personal experience of receiving mercy from God. If you're a believer in Jesus Christ, then you have experienced God's compassion in a great and mighty way. You deserved hell, yet God loved you and died for you. He now leads you in this life and will continue to lead you to heaven. You have known great mercy. How, then, can you fail to show compassion to those who also confess Christ's name, even though they might have offended you or disagreed with your interpretation of Scripture?

Paul's exhortation for Christian unity is based on what the Philippian believers had already received and experienced from God. They had already received the consolation of Christ, the comfort of love, the fellowship of the Spirit and the affection and mercy of God. Now, Paul exhorts them to respond positively and appropriately to all the blessings they have received and if they do, it will result in them being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. If they do that – then they should know that Paul's joy in them will be fulfilled.

But what does this type of unity look like? How is it worked out in the practical, every day lives of believers? Unity is the goal but what follows is a description of how to achieve and practice this unity within the Body of Christ.

**3-4** – Now, it is a proven fact that no one on this earth likes me better than I like myself. I can say the same for every other person – a universal statement that can't be refuted. The concern each person has for themselves is so well ingrained in human nature that almost no one contests it. It's accepted everywhere and even expected everywhere. In fact, the policies of governments and the conduct of billions of people flow from this truth. In stark contrast to this undeniable fact, **v3-4** are the Christian refutation this principle. It says that the one who has believed in Jesus Christ is first of all to look out for someone else!

The first necessary step towards Christian unity is the deliberate rejection of selfish ambition and conceit. These 2 characteristics of the flesh are, more often than not, what motivate us to act in this life. Much of what we do is not done out of love for others but out of our own desire for advancement or promotion (selfish ambition). Notice that Paul qualifies it as selfish ambition. Not all ambition is selfish. There is a good and desirable ambition that seeks to glorify God and serve Him with everything one has. Paul's statement in

3:13-14 is an example of godly ambition. I once had a local pastor candidly share with me that when he took a certain church in town that people told him he would never grow it to more than 200 people. The primary motivation behind his ministry was to prove them wrong! Sadly, this motivation is probably way more common in ministry than we care to know.

Conceit is simply thinking too highly of one's self, of having an excessive self-interest and self-preoccupation. The dictionary says it is an excessively favorable opinion of one's own ability, importance, wit, etc. When we walk around with the idea that we are important, or able or so talented, we are actually operating outside of God's will and even God's call (1 Cor 1:26-29). To live with this kind of false concept of one's self is to work against the unity Paul is exhorting all Christians to have.

The next step is completely contradictory to the attitude of the world. Lowliness of mind is about the least sought after thing in the thinking of the world and not just today. The ancient Greeks considered lowliness of mind to be a fault, not a virtue. Their idea of successful manhood was self-assertiveness – imposing one's will on others. If anyone stooped to others, he did so only under compulsion as the act was considered disgraceful. In ancient writings, the idea carried a negative connotation related to abject groveling. The Christian ethical concept of humility was unacceptable to the secular mind and shunned by secular society. In the NT however, the idea was ennobled.

Along with lowliness of mind, we should esteem others better than ourselves. This exhortation flies in the face of much of western culture's concept of self-esteem. The Bible knows nothing of the idea that we should always carry around an attitude of confident superiority in every situation nor does it teach that this is the foundation of a healthy human personality. Some psychologists may argue that this devalues human life but that it not the case. In fact, Christianity places a higher value on human life than everyone else because we know that Jesus gave His life for each one of us. That makes us the most valuable commodity in all of creation. But, unbelievers who walk around with low self-esteem come by it honestly. If we are in rebellion against God, our Creator, then it is fitting for us to have low self-esteem.

As we esteem others better, we will naturally have a greater concern for

their needs and concerns. This sort of outward looking naturally leads to a unity among God's people. If I consider you above me and you consider me above you, then a marvelous thing begins to happen: we have a community where everyone is looked up to and no one is looked down on.

In [v4](#), the thought is completed. As we put aside our selfish ambitions, our conceit, and our tendencies to be high-minded and self-absorbed, we will naturally have a greater concern for the interests and needs of others. Notice that Paul's not saying that it's wrong to look out for our own interests but that we shouldn't only look out for our interests.

The principle Paul is stating here is found throughout the NT. The unbeliever naturally puts himself first, others second, and God last. He thinks he deserves this order. The Bible insists we reverse the order: God's first; others are second; we come last ([Gal 6:2](#); [1 Cor 9:19, 22](#); [Rom 12:10](#); [Rom 15:1-2](#)). This is the heart of Christian conduct. Jesus gave Himself for others. Followers of Christ are also to give themselves for others.

Now, lest we are tempted to disregard this command as just one more in a long list of commands; let me assure you that this one is important. Caring for others is at the heart of a right relationship to God, and all rebellion against God is inevitably linked to a corresponding disregard for others. Look at the case of Lucifer: originally the highest of all created beings, he was the anointed cherub who was to lead all creation in worship of God. But that wasn't enough for him! No, he wanted to become *like the Most High* a name of God that means Possessor of heaven and earth. Old Lucifer didn't want to rule with God, but instead of God. He let his selfish ambition get the better of him.

While his plan did not succeed it did succeed well enough in that it has brought misery to millions of people and angels and still continues to do so today. The chief good of all creation lies in communion with God. In opposition to this fact Lucifer exalted himself and brought misery to those who followed him.

What a contrast we have when we look at the example of Jesus Christ. Instead of exalting Himself, which He had every right to do; Jesus emptied Himself of all outward aspects of His glory and became a man for our salvation. Jesus humbled Himself for the benefit of others. He refused to

hold on to those things that were rightfully His, things that would have prevented His coming to this earth, of walking with humanity as a human, of dying on the cross and purchasing our salvation with His blood. He didn't look to His own things, He considered the needs of others and thank God He did! This is the great battle of the Christian life – that we are becoming the kind of people who will love others and will give ourselves for them in the same sense that Jesus Christ gave Himself for us. God deals in quality, not quantity, and He wants people to reproduce the qualities of Jesus Christ in their life. Of course, you can't do that—not on your own. But God will do it in you as you yield to Him and seek the outworking of His own nature in your life. 😊