

Prayer

You have defended us, Lord Jesus, when we needed help; You have given us strength, Holy Spirit, when we have been weak; and You have looked after us, Father God, when everything around us has seemed to go wrong. Thank You, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; for we owe everything to You; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Manufacturing

Pray for the way manufacturing contributes to the world in which we live. Pray that goods now being invented will benefit the world and be used for good and not for evil.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for the carers who look after sick relatives
- Pray for those who suffer from Motor Neurone Disease
- Continue to pray for the turmoil in international banking

Meditation

Jesus, Your kindness touches every part of our being.

By Your love we find the courage to forgive others;
You faithfully assure us of Your presence in the future;
In Your love, we stand firm and persist through trials;
You sustain our joy with a great abundance of generosity;
You lift us up when we fall, with care and sustenance;
You care about our health and welfare as Your disciples;
You protect our souls when we experience painful things;
You comfort us with kindness when rejected by others;
You are there, in Spirit and power as we strive to do our best.

Jesus, Your kindness touches every part of our being. Thank You.

Bible Study - Philippians 2:1-4

¹ Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any empathy and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being of the same mind, having the same love, and being united in one spirit and purpose. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility think of others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Each of you should pursue not only your own interests, but those of others.

Review

In this passage of scripture, Paul moves skilfully towards what many believe to be the climax of the letter, found in tomorrow's famous verses about Jesus in Philippians 2:5-11. Because of the great importance of these verses to Christian theology, not enough attention has been paid to the preceding four verses in the chapter, which are remarkable in their own way. They take the form of an appeal by Paul to the Philippian church to live in a way that reflects the life of Christ and fulfils the call of God on His people for holy living.

The words are not difficult to understand, and although there is some complexity in the Greek, there is no doubting what they are intended to convey. Neither do these words tell us anything new; indeed, many of them have already been used by Paul in the first chapter of his letter. But the way in which Paul explains the self-effacing and humble characteristics of real Christian fellowship and discipleship is powerful, and deserves our close attention because of its unique characteristics, and the way it is conveyed with valuable and memorable brevity.

Paul asked the people of the church at Philippi to live a quality of spiritual citizenship which was radically different from the admired and accepted values of the Roman world in which they lived. As in our day, talk of encouragement, love and compassion, for example (2:1), would have been regarded as unnecessary for someone who was successful, self possessed and aspiring to the heights of Roman society. Unity of purpose was something for the military, of course, but Paul spoke about unity (2:2) not merely as arising from common purpose, but as shared fellowship and love amongst people who reflected every different social layer of society. He called on people who had nothing in common except their humanity in God to share together in intimate and loving ways; and their only unity was to be found in their common salvation and their Saviour Jesus Christ.

To Rome, such ideas were a social and religious scandal of the highest order, to which Paul added the offence of doing away completely with self concern and ambition, the driving force of human enterprise within Roman society as in ours. In our passage, his call (2:3,4) was to live a life based on the service of others, and this reduced all people to living a common morality of subservient slavery to Christ, the living God, and Paul knew what he was asking. Nothing would stop him extolling the values of the Kingdom of God which he knew from his own scholarship of the Old Testament (Gal 1:13ff), from his meeting with the disciples and the risen Christ (1 Cor 15:8), and the Holy Spirit within him which compelled him to pursue the cause of the Gospel with vigour.

How do we respond to this passage? It can be easy to talk of love and compassion, but far more difficult to live it, as we are asked to do here. It is easy to give lip service to the unity of fellowship in the church, but continue to insist upon our right to do things as we please, even though this is directly opposite to the spirit of what Paul says, and we all face the challenge to be more responsible than this in faith (2:3,4). Finally, living our lives by putting other people's interests before our own is controversial, and far removed from the standards we see within the life of many churches today, let alone from the way we often live our own lives. These words need careful thought and study!

Going Deeper

This passage splits easily into two halves. The first is Paul's eager call upon the Philippian Church to live in a visible and spiritual unity (2:1,2). It is a call that we have already commented upon in earlier devotions, so the purpose of our study today is to look more carefully at the words used here to make sure that we understand the full extent of what Paul says. We will also find that some of the words mean a number of different things, which can help us to see that God's Word is broader in meaning than we often assume when reading the Bible without the benefits of a commentary or study.

The second part of the passage is a brief series of commands from Paul about Christian living (2:3,4) in which he sums up discipleship under the general heading of humility and selflessness. This part of the text is often read as an introduction to the verses that follow, but is nevertheless a profound text in its own right.

Further Study

The fellowship of the Spirit (2:1,2)

Paul had just spoken to the Philippians about the importance of unity within the fellowship and the way that this exposed the failure of the Church's 'opponents' (1:28). So when Paul wrote as he did in these verses, he was asking the people to put into practice what he had already told them about living in unity of purpose and fellowship, under the headship of Christ. These verses were a personal appeal by Paul to '*make my joy complete*' (2:2). It is interesting that in making his appeal for unity, Paul talked of '*encouragement in Christ*' (2:1), for this was just what both he and the Philippian Church so much needed, and he knew that encouragement in their respective circumstances would not come by eloquence or fine words. Paul, although regarded by some as an orator, knew that raising people's expectations or appealing to their emotions and higher sentiments could only ever be a temporary form of encouragement. His appeal was to a higher cause, and the shared knowledge that they had each suffered for the sake of the Gospel bound them together in a common cause which was infinitely greater than their own interests. Through the love of God in Jesus Christ, they were saved for eternity!

In making this appeal, Paul used two words which I have translated as '*empathy and compassion*'. You will find that many versions of the Bible translate these two words variously as some combination of 'tenderness', 'compassion', 'sympathy', 'mercy', and 'affection'. The two Greek words involved relate firstly to deep feelings for someone else, and secondly to compassion for someone in difficult circumstances. I have used the word 'empathy' together with 'compassion' because although empathy is a relatively recent concept, it sums up what Paul was trying to convey in this text. In the world of counselling, 'empathy' refers to the non-judgemental quality of being able to enter into someone else's experience and effectively express that emotion or experience back to that person. This sounds rather abstract, but we all know what it is like when someone talks to us and genuinely seems to understand what we are saying because we can hear from their response that they know what we feel like. That is empathy, and it is what Paul was talking about here as true of real '*sharing in the Spirit*'..

If, Paul said, there was any real empathy and Christian love between himself and the Philippians, then his '*joy would be complete*' because of their shared mind, love and unity of '*spirit and purpose*' (2:2). The first chapter of Philippians tells us much about the circumstances that led Paul to appeal for this sharing and fellowship in the Gospel, but these words reach out beyond this original setting, and remind us even now of the supreme value of real fellowship in the Gospel. Have you been inspired, as I have, by coming into contact with other Christians who, despite all differences of background and culture, believe the same Gospel and are committed to the same Lord as you? When I first went as missionary chaplain and teacher to a school in Zimbabwe, I was struck by the powerful enthusiasm for the Lord of the young people at the school. With little more than a few words and some simple sharing of beliefs, I was deeply encouraged and spiritually moved by the common heritage I shared with them in Christ.

Such fellowship and sharing in the Gospel is our true heritage today, not the divisions and strife we so often see between Christians in the churches of today.

A command to Christian living (2:3,4)

Paul went on to speak forthrightly of the consequences of real Christian fellowship, and everything he said was derived from the life of Jesus. In commanding us not to do anything from '*selfish ambition or vain conceit*' (2:3) Paul appealed to qualities of life which were exemplified by Jesus (see 2:5-11). It has often been commented that Paul did not spend any time teaching people the same things Jesus did during his life; what he did was to preach the salvation of Jesus through his life and death. For example, Paul did not comment on Jesus' teaching of parables, refer to the parable of the sower, or even mention the famous

miracles of Jesus. What was important for Paul was the quality of life Jesus lived, and the eternal consequence of this in his death and resurrection.

By rejecting ambition and all forms of selfishness as nothing more than 'vanity' (a word used frequently in the book of Ecclesiastes), Paul made it quite clear that such behaviour was not acceptable for a Christian. You cannot read verses 3 and 4 without concluding that the only way of life for one who wishes to follow Christ is to put the interests of others first. This is not very easy for us to put into practice, for, as many have pointed out, we cannot be in a position to help others if we do not look after ourselves properly. It is important, however, to remember that nowhere in scripture does it say that we must neglect ourselves, and this scripture asks us to live a life in which we are always willing to be generous both spiritually and practically to others; to value their comments, to consider their circumstances and interests, and act in a manner that demonstrates our empathy and understanding of whoever the Lord gives us to meet. It is a message that calls us to cut across all cultures, creeds and prejudices, and that is why it is so important.

I have written in this way to try and put some flesh on what may be a difficult passage for some. I have heard people say, referring to Phil 2:3,4, 'I am not doing that, because people will walk all over you and make a mockery of the Gospel.' Criticisms such as this can be answered, and in this case, the text does not ask us to submit ourselves to irrational, inappropriate or dominating behaviour. However, some will use any excuse to avoid the scriptural injunction to live the Gospel life of putting others first, and we must constantly be reminded that it is our Lord who is the one who we take instructions from in such matters, not our natural selves which always tend to plead vanity and self interest. This is the 'self' which needs to die in the baptismal waters if Christ is to have his place of honour in our lives and our Christian fellowship.

Application

The challenge of these words is to put them into practice. It can be profoundly hard for us to be empathetic towards those people within our own Church with whom we disagree, and yet this is a fundamental part of Christian fellowship. If we all believe in the same Gospel and the same Lord, then our differences must surely be of lesser significance than that which binds us together. Whilst people struggle with problems and disagreements within their local churches, I strongly suggest one way in which they can overcome such unrest and unhappiness is to start looking at the Gospel of Christ on a larger map. Paul, in his day, ventured far beyond the experience of most of his peers, and could grasp both the Gospel and the Church of God on a universal scale. We need to do the same.

If we follow his example, we can explore the experience of different Christians in many different ways. We can visit others Christians in their place of worship, or trawl through the internet to read the experience of Christians who we would never normally meet, and this is without even moving too far away from our homes! If we can travel to other parts of the world and spend time (preferably more than a few days!) with Christians who have to live in circumstances very different to our own, then we will soon learn some important lessons. In particular, the difference between the true Gospel of Christ which binds us together and the irrelevance of the problems which too often beset us when we are unable to get things in perspective.

There are many ways we can widen our experience of the Church of Jesus Christ; even studying God's Word and reading the history of the Church will help as well. There are some exciting stories! Any means that help us to get out of our own limited experience and see things from other people's perspectives will help us enormously in our spiritual journey. This does not mean that Satan does not use even these experiences to try and distort the work of Christ in us, but we should always be on guard against that. It is fashionable today

to talk of thinking 'outside the box' when asking people to make the effort to go beyond their current experience and consider things from different perspectives. That is no small part of what scripture asks of us here, but only as it applies to the Gospel and to our call to live for others.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Which words within this scripture speak to you most? Discuss this within a group and see whether any words dominate your responses. Why?
2. How can Christian unity best be expressed today, and are we neglectful of our calling if we do not pursue it?
3. How does thinking '*of others as better than ourselves*' (2:3) help us to be better Christians?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I find these words in scripture deeply moving. There is a poetic feel to them which helps us build up to the verses which are coming next. Nevertheless, they speak about values of Christian faith which are very precious, love, compassion and joy, and those qualities which make fellowship in Christ more important than a thousand other things in life. One of the great features of scripture is its ability to remind us of what we value so much in each other within the body of Christ.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Spend some time thinking about how you put into practice the call to put others first in your life. Do you do this in the family? In church? With your work? With your neighbours? How can you live your life so that you are able to live for others and not collapse under the weight of other people's problems?*
- *Pray and fast about whether you can indeed work to put someone else's priorities higher than your own, as bidden by this text! Let the Lord guide you as to how you can respond to this great challenge!*

Final Prayer

Jesus, fill our minds with Your knowledge, our feelings with Your compassion, our bodies with Your strength, our spirits with Your power, and our hearts with Your love. Complete in us the work that You have begun, and bring us in Your time, to Glory. AMEN