

LIVE IN HARMONY AND HUMILITY WITH ONE ANOTHER

In the first four verses of our Second Reading today, Paul says, ¹ *Therefore, if you have any encouragement in Christ, if you have any comfort from His love, if you have any fellowship of the Spirit, if you have any tenderness and compassion,* ² *make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being harmonious, and setting your minds on the same thing!* ³ *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as being better than you are!* ⁴ *Each of you should look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others!*

If the Philippians and other believers are to stand firm against the enemies of the gospel that threaten them from without, they must first be firmly united among themselves

Paul has already spoken of “stand[ing] firm in one spirit” (1:27). Now he expands on that thought, turning his encouragement inward to the matter of believers’ relationships with one another. Paul’s appeal here is thoroughly evangelical, or gospel-based. He speaks to the Philippians’ hearts, reminding them of the gospel blessings that are theirs in Christ, and then appeals to them on the basis of those blessings. With four short, powerful conditional clauses, Paul reminds the Philippians that they have indeed been encouraged by Christ, comforted by His love, made spiritually new and alive by the Spirit’s work in their hearts, and blessed by the Spirit with the gifts of tenderness and compassion. So he has a right to assume that all he is about to request of the Philippians will naturally follow from their faith.

The Philippians had already brought much joy to the apostle. Their partnership in the gospel, their faith and love, their generosity all brought him joy every time he thought about them or prayed for them. But there was one more thing the Philippians could strive to do, Paul says, that would truly make his joy complete. That one thing was to seek a greater measure of harmony in their dealings and relationships with one another.

These words of Paul have led some Bible students to conclude that pride and internal strife were problems for the Philippian congregation. Perhaps they were. Later on, in chapter 4, the apostle mentions a specific personal rivalry between two of the congregation’s prominent women. Whether more of such problems existed in the congregation or not, the apostle felt that the Philippians needed encouragement in this particular area of their Christian lives.

But what congregation doesn’t? Where sinners are living and working together with sinners, pride and selfishness are always rearing their ugly heads. The devil works particularly hard to use those products of each member’s sinful nature to disrupt the congregation’s work through disharmony and strife. In flourishing congregations, where many members are knowledgeable and gifted, there is always the danger of the more gifted members looking down upon the less gifted and of the less gifted envying the more gifted. And it is always characteristic of human nature to minimise one’s own weaknesses and to exaggerate one’s own strengths, while doing just the opposite when observing the weaknesses and strengths of others. These things can severely stunt the spiritual growth of any congregation.

The apostle Paul regarded the selfishness and pride that disrupt congregational harmony as particularly troublesome and dangerous sins. This is evident from the fact that he issues warnings against them in just about every one of his epistles. Other examples of such warnings are found in Galatians 5:25-26; 1 Corinthians 1:10–17; and Ephesians 4:2-3. So, whether lack of harmony was more of a problem in the Philippian congregation than in others or not, the Philippian believers certainly needed Christ-centred encouragements, and so do we.

Paul encourages the Philippians to strive for greater unity of disposition, lowliness, and helpfulness. *Unity of disposition* is the common view of life that believers ought to share, because they have been united by the Spirit in a common faith in the Lord Jesus. Believers who are “like-minded” judge all things by the Word of God. They love one another with the unselfish kind of love that gives without expecting anything in return and finds its motive and example in the love of Christ. Furthermore, like-minded Christians agree on the great common goal of promoting Jesus’ kingdom in the world. Though they may be different in many other respects, believers think alike spiritually. And they ought to be working and praying continually for a greater unity of disposition.

Lowliness, or humble-mindedness, is also a key New Testament concept, a distinctive mark of the committed Christian. Lowliness is the opposite of the selfishness and pride of our corrupt sinful natures. First-century society placed little value on lowliness. In fact, it regarded lowliness as the equivalent of cowardice and equated pride and self-assertiveness with manhood. The non-Christian world today thinks in the same way. Books and classes offering assertiveness training and effective methods of exercising power and “looking out for number one” are tremendously popular and profitable. But the attitude of a heart changed by God’s grace is no longer “me first and everybody else after me, if at all.” Rather, it is an attitude that humbly and lovingly places the interests of others before one’s own.

When he urges believers to “*regard others as being better than you are,*” Paul is not advocating a false modesty. He does not want talented believers to deny their special gifts or to hide or neglect them. He is laying down a general principle that should govern believers’ relationships with one another. A humble child of God, no matter how many or how few his gifts might be, will strive to put the best construction on everything his neighbour does. He will happily acknowledge and respect whatever gifts the neighbour has, be they many or few. In everything, the humble Christian will strive to give the neighbour first consideration.

When each person in a community of Christians considers others as better than himself in this way, a marvelous harmony has to result. No one in that community is looked down upon; rather, everyone is looked up to, as all willingly give of themselves to show kindness to others. Paul himself had learned the grace of lowliness well.

Can the same be said of us? Or does our self-assertiveness show that our lives are not as Spirit-directed as they should be? It is difficult for Christians to put their faith into practice when it means adopting attitudes and actions that are radically different from those of the society in which they live. But right there is where true Christians show their colours and sham Christians are exposed. Only the gospel can give us, who are at the same time both saints and sinners, the spiritual strength we need to live the lives of lowliness that will clearly distinguish us as genuine followers of our lowly Lord.

Harmony becomes practical among Christians in *helpfulness*, when each believer strives to do those things that serve and help his neighbour in every possible way. The world’s way is to look out for oneself. It considers the needs of others only when it sees some ultimate advantage for itself, but believers’ concern for their neighbours’ interest will supersede concern for their own. And again, what a sure means that will be of promoting God-pleasing harmony among Christians.