



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

## When Christians Collide

Philippians 2.1–18

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### Introduction

We often favor the New Testament use of the figure of a household, or family, to describe the church (cf. 1 Tim 3.15). Its use reminds of two important truths: (1) Out of respect for the family name, properly functioning families care for and are loyal to each other. (2) But even the best of families will likely experience times when strains develop; they must rely on their family love to remain tolerant of each other (cf. Rom 14).

In properly functioning church families, the experience will be the same. Its members will care for and be loyal to the family name and one another. But at times, they will need to rely on the fact that they are God's family as they deal with strains that occur in relationships between people with independent minds, ideas, and personalities. Even in the best of times, there will be occasions when the ideal of unity becomes strained.

How bad the strains become largely depends on how well we understand their causes and how to correctly address them. Philippians 2, rightly studied as a great theological text, helps us understand how unity can become strained and what to do when it does. This fusion of doctrinal and practical is no surprise to those who have studied Paul's writings. As William Barclay writes,

To [Paul] theology and action were always bound together. Any system of thought must necessarily become a way of life. In many ways this passage is one of the greatest reaches of theological thought in the New Testament, but its aim was to persuade the Philippians to live a life in which disunity, discord, and personal ambition had no place (Barclay 1975, 37–38).

Ralph Martin summarizes how Paul does this with respect to the strained relationships that had developed in the Philippian church. He does not offer “superficial advice that they should sink their differences and live together in peace, [but] turn[s] their minds to the high themes ... [and] lofty motives of the Lord's own will for His church,” as well as to his oneness with the Father (Martin 1959, 92). We need to internalize the principles in Paul's advice.

## Evidence of Strained Relationships

We begin at the end of the passage where Paul names behaviors that show there were tensions. Some of them were “grumbling” (γογγυσμός, *gongysmos*) (v. 14), a word used here to refer to the “expression of discontent’, *murmuring, grumbling, complaint*” (Danker 2009, 81). We can see what grumbling looked like in real life by looking at other texts where *gongysmos* is used, notably Matthew 20.11; Luke 5.30; Acts 6.1. We are reminded of God’s view of the behavior by reviewing occasions when the Israelites grumbled (Exod 16.7; Num 11.1), cases Paul drew on as he admonished the Corinthian church (1 Cor 10.10; citing Num 16.41 [LXX]). From these texts, as well as our own experience, we know that grumbling typically occurs when we are overly focused on our own circumstances and lose sight of the blessings God has given us.

That their grumbling was connected to their relationship problems is evident from the fact that Paul says they were “disputing” (διαλογισμός, *dialogismos*) with one another. At times this word refers to a “process of turning things over in one’s mind in response to a problem or challenging event,” but Paul uses it here in its primary sense of a “verbal exchange involving clash of ideas’, *dispute, bickering, wrangling*” (Danker 2009, 91).

It's not hard to see how grumbling and disputing would contribute to relationship strains. But in verse 15, Paul goes deeper, emphasizing how grumbling and disputing caused them to fall short of specific behaviors that are expected of God’s people: blamelessness, innocence, and being without blemish. To be “blameless” (ἄμεμπτος, *amemptos*) was to be “irreproachable, living a life at which no finger of criticism can be pointed” (Martin 1959, 114). To be “innocent” (ἀκέραιος, *akeraios*) was to be “unmixed, pure” (Bauer 2000, 35), like an undiluted wine, or metals that had no mixing alloys, the opposite of the agenda driven interpersonal politics that often cause strains. To be “without blemish” (ἄμωμος, *anōmos*) is to be absent of defects, or to be morally blameless (Bauer 2000, 56). Paul’s point is not that the Philippians should have achieved perfection, but that they should have been seeking to be like God. By failing to do so, they were dimming the light they were shining in the world (v. 15).

Verse 16 expands on 15b to highlight the seriousness of not resolving their relationship problems. Grumbling and disputing are characteristic of “a hostile world which envelopes the church, ‘a society morally warped, spiritually perverted’” (Martin 1959, 115). Such a world is “crooked and perverse.” So, when we are characterized by grumbling and disputing, we become like the world (cf. John 17.15–16) instead of being lights in the world (cf. Matt 5.16).

## Causes of Strained Relationships

Verses 1–5 explain why this so often occurs. Failing to follow the example of Christ (v. 5), we come to be characterized by “selfish ambition” and “conceit” (v. 3). “Selfish ambition” translates ἐριθεία (*eritheia*), one of the works of the flesh (Gal 5.20, where the word is translated “strife”). The word is indicative of party (or personality) squabbles and petty conceits (Martin 1959, 93). When people work to “advance themselves” (Barclay 1975, 31), relationships are in trouble. “Conceit” translates κενοδοξία (*kenodoxia*), literally “empty glory.” Barclay labels it, “the desire for personal prestige,” including the ideas of wanting to be admired and respected. It is the characteristic of a person who wants to have a platform or

special place, have his opinion solicited, and be known by his appearance and name. His focus is on himself (Barclay 1975, 32). This trait is the cause of many other problems, as illustrated in Galatians 5.26 where the word is also used.

Self-focused people are, by definition, the opposite of those who are extolled in verse 2: those who are “of the same mind,” that is, people who are “like clocks that strike at the same moment,” possessing “perfect intellectual telepathy” and “identity of ideas and harmony of feelings” (Robertson n.d., Phil 2.2). They are people “having the same love” (αὐτὴν ἀγάπην, *autēn agapēn*), that is, people who seek only what is good for others, regardless of how well they are liked. They are “in full accord and of one mind,” being one in spirit and purpose. When we share goals, healthy relationships will more likely exist.

### The Cure for Strained Relationships

Thus, healthy relationships are possible only if we all aim to have “the mind of Christ” (v. 5). That mind was one characterized by humility. For the sake of all others, Jesus had “emptied himself” (v. 7), an expression that in context refers to giving up the glory and privileges of deity for the servanthood of humanity (Martin 1959, 102). Descending to what we might call the ladder’s bottom rung, the human Jesus took “the form of a servant” and became “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (v. 8).

Notice that verses 5–8 are more than a statement of praise for God; they present us with the point Paul intends in verses 1–18. A life of complaining, disputes, and poor attitudes is the opposite of the life we are supposed to imitate, the life of Jesus. But we can still go deeper. When we see Jesus as he was, we begin to see ourselves differently. And when we see ourselves differently, we are capable of practicing Christ-like unity, exhibiting his love, participating (κοινωνία, *koinōnia*) in his Spirit (v. 1).

Verses 12–13 show how to do this: we must work with God. In the context, “work out your [plural] own salvation” (v. 12) refers to the shared task of the church to imitate Christ’s example with the goal of unity. Verses 12–13 are reciprocal: God cannot work without our cooperation; we cannot achieve the goal without his help. We must, therefore, surrender ourselves to his goals, not ours. Otherwise, unity and healing relationships will not occur.

### Conclusion

We’ll conclude with Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of verses 5–11, a marvelous summary of the ideal we must seek if we genuinely want strong relationships.

Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human*! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that: a crucifixion.

Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead

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and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father (MSG).

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