



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Doctrine Is Practical

Philippians 2.1–16

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Introduction

As education minister in a congregation where we were both large enough and blessed with enough willing adult Bible class teachers to offer as many as eight elective adult Bible classes every Sunday, I watched the quarterly sign-up lists with interest. Both because of room sizes and the desire to make class numbers manageable for certain classes, we had a policy of capping enrollment in most classes, repeating them if interest demanded. What intrigued me was the topics of classes that needed to be repeated in comparison with the ones that never did. Classes that focused on family-related issues or similar helping needs were regularly offered two or sometimes three consecutive quarters. But we never had to repeat a course that focused on a section of the biblical text.¹

To clarify, our program was designed to always offer courses in four broad subject areas with text courses as the core classes. One of four areas planned for family and related themes to be taught regularly, a plan we pursued because we saw the challenges our families were facing and the urgent needs some had to learn better ways.

Understanding the reality of those needs, I was concerned at two levels. First, since we kept quarterly class rolls, I was able to track who attended which classes. What I noticed was that some of the same people *always* signed up for the family/helping themed classes; sometimes, they signed up for the same class in consecutive quarters. I wondered why.

Second, I was concerned that we weren't getting the message across that, while the Bible certainly has some things to teach about the family and related matters, when those ideas are addressed in Scripture, they are applications of broader and deeper teaching.² I wondered whether the ongoing need some apparently felt for those studies was tied to a failure to develop their family lives in the context of their *Christian* lives.

In addition, I wondered whether at least some who kept returning to the same classes were

looking for quick fixes that would “make everything better?” Not finding it in this class, or that one, they kept looking.

Looking for quick, easy answers is a human tendency augmented by current trends. As Richard Foster observed, “Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for *deep* people” (Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, in McKnight 1996, 119). The point is not that we need deep people for the sake of having deep people, but that it is when we sink deep roots that we are best equipped for life (cf. Ps 1). In Philippians 2.1–16, a text that confronts a real church problem and includes one of the New Testament’s most profound doctrinal statements, we see how practical doctrine can be.

A Problem in Philippi

As he begins to address the theme of being “worthy of the gospel of Christ” in 1.27–30, Paul refers to a concern about the Philippians’ progress: would they be “standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (v. 27)? As he continues in chapter 2, he confronts that problem directly.

How serious was it? Look at key words and phrases he uses. He calls them to be “of the same mind,” “of one mind,” “in full accord,” and again “of one mind” (v. 2). He challenges their rivalries (cf. 1.15–17), “conceit” (2.3), and self-centeredness (v. 4). He tells them to stop “grumbling” and “disputing” (v. 14 NASB). Such behaviors are typical in a “crooked and twisted” world (v. 15), a problem since Genesis 3 and 4. In their case, the problem was further complicated by the fact that they came from different ethnic and religious backgrounds (Thompson 2007, 306). Paul calls them to a different way.

They were to demonstrate a oneness many seek but seldom see. They were to demonstrate love, fellowship in the Spirit, affection, and sympathy (v. 1). They were to keep growing and work out their collective salvation (v. 12).³ In doing so, they will be blameless, innocent, and lights in the world (vv. 15–16), in stark contrast to their opponents (cf. 1.28).

Paul’s Solution

Obviously, the Philippians needed a practical solution to their problem. Perhaps a course on how to get along would help; or a seminar on the nature, causes, and management of conflict. Surely, the wise apostle Paul would give them some practical steps to follow so they could become one in mind. But Paul doesn’t do that. Instead, he gave something more comprehensive, and therefore better. He pointed to the example of Jesus.⁴

In Philippians 2.6–11, we read what many scholars think is a hymn, perhaps an older song that Paul adapted. Whether adapted or his original composition, this lofty statement about Jesus’s incarnation and exaltation points to the most basic, profound, and enduring solution to the Philippians’ problems, as even a casual review of the text shows. They should think like Christ Jesus (v. 5) who, even though he was in the form of God, emptied himself, lived the most humble of lives, submitted in obedience to the point of death (something that could only be

said of a divine being; for the rest of us, death is not a choice [cf. Martin 1959, 102]), and death on a cross no less. Then he was exalted as “Lord, to the glory of the Father” (v. 11).

That’s the big picture. But to fully appreciate what Paul does here, we need to look more closely at the specific ideas. First, he uses multiple forms of the word “emptied” (κενόω, *kenoō*; v. 7). In verse 3, “conceit” (NASB: “empty conceit”) is κενοδοξία (*kenodoxia*), “empty glory.” In verse 16, he uses κενός (*kenos*) twice to emphasize that the Philippians’ conformity to the ideal he sets forth would mean that he had not run or labored in “vain.”

Second, he repeats the idea of “humility.” Using a term that stands parallel to “emptied” (v. 7), he says that Jesus “humbled” (ταπεινώω, *tapeinoō*) himself (v. 8). Notably, he has already said in verse 3 that the Philippians are to act “in humility” (ταπεινοφροσύνη, *tapeinophrosynē*) and regard others as better than themselves.

A third theme he emphasizes is that their relationship problems existed because too many were acting from self-centeredness (vv. 3–4) and seeking to in some sense put themselves on the same plane as God, the thing Paul says Jesus did not do (v. 6).

Finally, notice that, as is typically true in his letters, Paul’s emphasis on Jesus doesn’t feature specific examples from his earthly ministry, although what he does say necessarily reminds us of many details from that service. Instead, he focuses on the broader, cosmic story of Christ (Holladay 2005, 375).

Learning from Paul

The doctrine expressed in verses 6–11 is by all accounts some of the deepest and most profound we encounter in the New Testament.⁵ Paul uses this teaching to urge his readers to pursue a calling that differs significantly from what we typically see in our world. He calls them “to think this in you, as also in Jesus” (v. 5, literal), a theme he repeats throughout the letter (cf. 1.7; 2.2, 5; 3.15, 19; 4.2, 10) where he uses the verb φρονέω (*phroneō*) ten times. Its basic meaning has to do with thinking, but “it has the nuance of insight, or inner reflection” and “was used in political or military contexts [like Philippi] for those who shared a common loyalty” (Thompson 2007, 301).

Where does this insight lead? First, in keeping with our culture’s love of the practical, let’s stress that all Paul teaches in Philippians 2.1–16 *works*, including the doctrine. Given the many failed efforts to get along that we’ve seen in both culture and church, we who are *Christians* ought to be willing to give it a chance.

Second, this approach is countercultural. In fact, partly because of the subtlety of the threat, it is more challenging than almost anything else we might do. To again quote Richard Foster, “In contemporary society our Adversary majors in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds. If he can keep us engaged in ‘muchness’ and ‘manyness,’ he will rest satisfied.... Hurry is not *of* the Devil; it *is* the Devil” (Foster, 13, in McKnight 1996, 120). While “stopping the world to get off” this speeding treadmill will require considerable commitment and determination, we need to see from Paul’s words that the effort will be worth it.

Third, notice exactly what Paul calls us to do: immerse ourselves in the deepest thoughts of

Christ and what he did. He is not calling us to indulge in deep thoughts for their own sake, but to take Christ's life as seriously as it can be taken. Regarding this, an observation by David Wells is worth hearing:

The gospel is the message of Christ's salvation; the church is its most important corporate expression. The truth about Christ and his death, therefore, should find tangible expression in the church. Thus the gospel that created the church should also be modeled by the church (David Wells, *God the Evangelist*, 54, in McKnight 1996, 122).

To say it another way, we are called not just to do what Jesus did (WWJD), but to be who Jesus was (WWJB).

Fourth, we must not minimize the fact that Paul does not intend for each of us to do this alone. The exhortation to “work out your own salvation” in verse 12 employs a plural pronoun and plural verb. Paul puts the responsibility on the *community*. We're called to do it together and it's important to understand that it is harder for each of us if all of us are not involved. And if, as many think, verses 6–11 are the words of a hymn, we learn that worship is vital for working together. As we ponder the depths of Christ's nature and mission and seek to imitate him, we go far toward resolving our differences.

Conclusion

From my childhood, I have a vivid memory of my dad stressing repeatedly that the Bible was sufficient to help with any circumstance or problem we will encounter. In recent years, it sometimes seems as if we think we need the “Bible plus”—plus this book, or that technique, etc., to manage our hectic and complicated lives.

We need to rethink that assumption; rethink the idea that doctrine is just the precursor to practicality and not practical itself. We need to return to the view that says Christ is all we need and think and live accordingly.

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Notes

- ¹ Our auditorium class was a Bible text course, so this is not a one-for-one classroom comparison.
- ² See for example the family teaching in Ephesians 5.22—6.4 within the entirety of the letter.

³ “Your own” translates the plural reflexive pronoun, ἐαυτῶν, *heautōn*; the verb “work out” is the plural imperative, κατεργάζεσθε, *katergazesthe* (2.12–13).

⁴ In an overview of a sermon series on Philippians presented at the 2007 Sermon Seminar at the Austin Graduate School of Theology, Bruce McLarty talked about an experience that illustrates an important point. He once delivered a sermon series on the family that did not go well. Later, after hearing a speaker point out that we ought to teach on the family from the biblical text, not from one of the family-emphasis books that have been written, he delivered another family series. This time, he based it in the text, and it was well received. When I comment about conflict management courses and the like, I do not intend to say that such themes are unimportant and should not be addressed, or that such special focus classes have no place. I do intend to express the conviction that they should be addressed from biblical exposition and crafted in a way that keeps Christ and his ability to change us at the center.

⁵ This text remains the subject of considerable attention among scholars who study the precise meanings of various words and phrases. See for example Martin and Dodd 1998.