



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

The Joy of Unity

Philippians 2.1–4

David Anguish

Introduction

Remember the Titans is Hollywood’s telling of the 1971 football season at Alexandria, Virginia’s T. C. Williams High School. That was the year two segregated schools were first integrated. Tensions were high, but Herman Boone, the school’s new football coach, was able to get a head start on dealing with them when he took the football team to pre-season training camp.

As the team struggled with their own differences, Coach Boone awakened them one morning at 3:00 AM for a run. He led them to the military cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. As the early morning mists rose around them, Coach Boone tried again to make headway on bringing them together as a team. He told them to take a lesson from the dead and warned that if they did not come together then, on the hallowed ground of Gettysburg, they would be destroyed like those buried there were. He didn’t care if they didn’t like each other but would insist they respect each other. If they did, maybe they would learn to play football like men.

Paul’s exhortation to the Philippians doesn’t strike us as being so dramatic, but as that church faced pressure from their culture and strife within their ranks, they too were struggling to be united. Anticipating his treatment of the problem in 4.2, Paul begins the letter’s body by focusing on the related matters of unity and suffering; learning to deal with those issues was vital for living in a manner worthy of the gospel (1.27–30). He then exhorts them as follows:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others (Phil 2.1–4).

As the word “so,” or “therefore” (NIV; οὖν, *oun*) in verse 1 indicates, in 2.1–4 Paul is continuing the idea of being “worthy of the gospel” introduced in 1.27–30, an emphasis he will continue throughout the letter. After his appeal in 2.1–4, he illustrates the principle from the examples

of Jesus (2.5–11), Timothy and Epaphroditus (2.19–30), and himself (3.1–7). Especially fascinating is that he defines unity as behavior that will make his own joy “complete” (πληρώσατέ, *plērōsate*).¹ The verb is a plural imperative, a command for the group. The idea is startling and makes us stop and think. He then says that unity is an expression of joy. That tells us something about the importance of being one in Christ.

Joy is Different from “Happiness”

Philippians 2.2 marks the fifth time in the letter Paul uses the noun “joy” (χαρά, *chara*) or verb “rejoice” (χαίρω, *chairō*), words he uses 14 times across the letter’s four chapters (1.4, 18, 25; 2.2, 17-18, 28-29; 3.1; 4.1, 4, 10). Of its five appearances to this point, four have referred to Paul’s joy (1.4, 18 [2x]; 2.2). As many have recognized, this is obviously an important theme in the epistle and should be examined more closely, especially since the idea is often misunderstood in today’s world.

The primary misunderstanding equates joy with “happiness.” To state Paul’s contrasting point positively, joy is tied to the blessings of being a Christian and with the development of attitudes and behaviors that will be best for the church’s unity and well-being generally. Its connection with unity in this text alerts us to the fact that Paul does not see it primarily in terms of glad feelings or the like, but as something deeper and more substantive, a conclusion confirmed by other references in the letter (cf. 1.4, 18, 25; 2.17, 29; 4.4). For example, in 1.18, Paul speaks of his own rejoicing in the context of the preaching rivalry he had experienced and his imprisonment (vv. 15–17). In 2.17, he says he will rejoice even if he would have to endure the difficult situation of “be[ing] poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of [their] faith.” Given his use “joy” and “rejoice” in such a range of circumstances, we can say that if all we expect from joy is happiness as commonly defined, we will be short-changing ourselves relative to the blessings God gives.

Joy Grows from a Different Purpose

For Paul, joy was a community issue. As Gordon Fee writes, “His own life and apostleship are deeply bound up with his converts’ well-being, and especially with their perseverance so that they will themselves experience God’s eschatological joy (cf. vv. 16-18)” (Fee 1995, 183–184). Several passages illustrate this, all focusing on the Philippians’ concern for Paul and his corresponding hopes for them (1.12–14, 21–25; 2.16–19; 4.10, 14–16, 18). Indeed, when we look closer, we see that Paul is not selfish in his joy, but wants the Philippians (for his joy, cf. 1.4, 18; 2.2, 17; 4.1, 10; the Philippians’ joy, cf. 1.25; 2.18, 28–29; 3.1; and 4.4).

Chapter 2.2 shows that he understands joy in light of the Christian’s different purpose. Joy, he says, is found in “being like-minded” (NIV) or, as expressed in the Complete Jewish Bible, “having a common purpose.” Fee uses the term, “mindset” (Fee 1995, 175). The ideas of a common love and engaging in a “common sharing” (NIV)—ideas which again have to do with being of the same mindset rather than agreeing on every specific point—also express the different purpose Jesus-followers should have.

Verse 3a adds to the idea, pointing to what the purpose and life of joy should not be. The

Philippians were to rid themselves of “selfish ambition,” the “rivalry attitude” (ἐριθεία, *eritheia*) that is so prevalent. Focusing on self-interest and glorification at others’ expense, this attitude lies at the heart of sin. It is caused by “vain conceit,” literally, “empty glory” (κενοδοξία, *kenodoxia*); this word was used “throughout the Greco-Roman world to describe those who think too highly of themselves, not those who might appear to have ground for ‘glory,’ but those whose ‘glory’ is altogether baseless” (Fee 1995, 187). Significantly, Paul uses a form of the word again in Galatians 5.26 in the context of warning about people who were “bit[ing] and devour[ing] one another” (v. 15) and the works of the flesh (vv. 19–21).²

Verses 3b–4 urge the Philippians to replace self-centered attitudes with the those exemplified by Jesus, starting with “humility,” literally “a lowly mind” (ταπεινοφροσύνη, *tapeinophrosynē*). Contrary to popular understanding, humility is not “the kind of abject servility that only repulses, wherein the ‘humble one’ ... gains more self-serving attention than he or she could do otherwise.” Rather, it involves the development and expression of “a proper estimation of oneself, the stance of the creature before the Creator, utterly dependent and trusting” (Fee 1995, 188). The idea is well stated in the NEB’s translation of Matthew 5.3: “How blest are *those who know their need of God*; the kingdom of Heaven is theirs.” Humility is a uniquely Christian virtue which, like the message of the crucified Christ, was at odds with the values of the Greco-Roman world where humility was generally viewed as a shortcoming not a virtue. It was something “shameful, to be avoided and overcome by act and thought” (Esser 1976, 260).

It is this proper self-assessment that allows us to consider others as more significant and seeks to see their needs addressed first. But the point is not to focus on our *estimation* of others, but on *caring* for them as we put their needs ahead of our own. Notice that verse 4 stresses that this is a conscious decision that results in action. Think how much healthier our churches will be as more people adopt this outlook and act accordingly. Think also how different this practice looks in comparison with the enlightened self-interest we see so often.

Joy Comes from Deeper Realities

To overcome and temptation to live self-absorbed lives that make unity impossible, we must practice what Paul calls “the encouragement in Christ” (Phil 2.1). To do that, we must remember two things. First, what Paul says in verses 1–4 is the logical extension of what he says in 1.27–30. We know this because of the appearance of connecting word “therefore” (οὖν, *oun*) and the conjunction translated “if” (εἰ, *ei*) in verse 1. Although the phrase is typically translated “if therefore,” the idea that it conveys is “since therefore” (cf. Fee 1995, 177). It is likely that Paul dictated the letter, and it almost surely would have been read aloud to the group, not copied to be read by individuals. Thus, Paul’s intention in verse 1 may have been to create a rhetorical effect that was calculated to motivate the Philippians to follow the course of action he recommends (Fee 1995, 178, n. 23 and 24).

As we reflect on his words, we are reminded of several great blessings the Philippians shared. That the first three, found in verse 1, are mentioned in the order they are is reminiscent of the language in 2 Corinthians 13.14 and the conceptual development in Romans 5.1–5; this may indicate that Paul had a trinitarian blessing idea in mind (Fee 1995, 178–179).

First, against the backdrop of suffering and the Christ-centered focus already established (cf. Phil 1.21), he reminds them of the “encouragement they had in Christ (παράκλησις, *paraklēsis*) (v. 1). Second, he calls attention to the comfort, or solace (παράμυθιον, *paramythion*), they had in love; he leaves the idea open-ended, but his focus appears to be on the love they were receiving rather than that which they were sharing. If that was his intention, the idea fits with his reference to God’s love being poured out in Romans 5.5.³ Third, he emphasizes the fellowship (κοινωνία, *koinōnia*) they shared in the Spirit, the same Spirit by whom they had entered the body and who had made their community possible (cf. 1 Cor 12.13).

Also in verse 1, the words “affection and sympathy” (σπλάγχνα καὶ οἰκτιρμοί, *splanchna kai oiktirmoi*) are a puzzling addition, but are probably to be best understood in terms of the different community life they were sharing with Paul and each other (cf. Col 3.12 where the words also appear together, and the reference is clearly to community life).

We can express the point to be taken from these ideas as a question: how can you risk and live in opposition to the wonderful blessings you’ve received just to have your own way? Real joy, for Paul and them, would be found in staying the course, realizing the blessings and imitating the mindset of Christ (vv 5-11).

Conclusion

How valuable is unity, especially when a church is faced with questions of survival? The T. C. Williams Titans illustrate. Having survived the rigors of training camp and been thrown back into a world where tensions remained high, the Titans approached their first game. In the movie, Coach Boone challenged them to let *nothing* come between them and tear them apart. There were hard times to come, but ultimately, they did what he asked. They finished with a record of 13–0. They won the state title and were ranked second in the nation.

Paul teaches us that for us to be who we are intended to be, we must learn to think community first, to humble ourselves in the interests of others. That is as out of step with today’s world as it was in Paul’s time. But, as disciples, we are pledged to follow Jesus’s way, not the world’s.

www.davidanguish.com

Works Cited

- Hans-Helmut Esser. 1976. “Humility.” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. vol. 2. ed. Colin Brown. Zondervan Publishing House.
- Gordon D. Fee. 1995. *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Notes

¹ *Plērōsate* is from πληρόω (*plēroō*). In the Greek text, verses 1–4 constitute one sentence. “Be of the same mind” (φρονέω, *phroneō*) is a plural active subjunctive that follows the conjunction of purpose, ἵνα (*hina*). The remaining verbs in the sentence— “having” and “being of one mind” in verse 2, “counting” and “surpassing” in verse 3, and “looking” in verse 4—are all participles that explain the main verb, “make complete.”

² Fee points out that eight of the fifteen works of the flesh in Galatians 5 are sins of discord, one of which is *eritheia* (Fee 1995, 187 n. 69).

³ Fee points out that the Philippians might not have immediately made this connection, but what is important is that Paul had it in mind (Fee 1995, 179 n. 26).