

# Sermon: Imitators of Christ

“Imitators of Christ”

Phil. 2:1-18

1 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. 5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,

10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

12 Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose. 14 Do everything without grumbling or arguing, 15 so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky 16 as you hold firmly to the word of life.

## **I. Introduction**

Last week, when we caught up with the Apostle Paul, we found him writing to the church at Philippi about his present situation as a prisoner in Rome, and his hope and expectation that both he and the Philippians would have courage to stand firm in the face of their adversaries, whatever troubles that might bring upon them. We talked about what it means to desire and cultivate courage in the midst of our circumstances. And we discovered that, by God’s grace received through faith, Christian courage should manifest in our lives as conduct consistent with the gospel. When we conduct ourselves as those who live in the power of the Holy Spirit, who are no longer bound by sin, but free in Christ, we proclaim loud enough for all to hear that there is a new King in town, and that he runs the show. When we face our enemies – sickness, powerlessness, fear, sin, death, and all things opposed to the gospel – when we face these with courage born of faith, we help to usher in the kingdom of God and bear witness to the good news that Christ has already overcome sin and death, and they can have no more dominion over us.

As Paul continues his letter in chapter 2, he moves from talking about what it should look like for Christians to live courageously according to the gospel in public, amidst their enemies, to what it means to live according to the gospel as

members of Christ's church. In other words, if the church is to live without fear in the public sphere, exhibiting patience in suffering, how then are we to live out the gospel with one another inside the walls of the church, among friends and fellow believers?

## **II. What Does Unity Look Like?**

According to Paul, the greatest sign that the church is acting according to the gospel is that we seek to live in unity with one another. But what does it mean to live in unity?

Being unified means simply this: it means thinking the same way and loving one another completely. We are to regard everyone else as greater than we are, and view others opinions as superior to our own, doing nothing for our own benefit, but in all things seeking to do what is best for others. In other words, we are to always put others first, and ourselves second.

That sounds pretty incredible doesn't it? Do you think Paul is being realistic when he tells the Philippians to act this way? Is he describing an ideal that the church has no hope of achieving?

Anyone who has lived a day as part of a family will know that things aren't always peaceful. We don't always agree. Feelings sometimes get hurt, disagreements occur, and relationships become strained. As our family circles widen to include friendships built upon shared hopes, convictions, and mission the complexity of communal life only increases.

The English language is a strange and wonderful thing. We are constantly inventing new words in an attempt to adequately describe the realities of life. One recently coined word spells out the messy dynamics of shared life better than many others. You may already know where I am going with this, but

let me ask a question for those who aren't sure. What do you get when you have like-minded individuals with shared hopes and goals, that don't get along, because of personality conflicts or differences of opinions? The answer: **frenemies**. Friend-enemies. People who aren't trusting friends, and yet aren't enemies. They may have shared desires and experiences, but differ over how to best accomplish those desires or interpret those experiences. These disagreements often lead to arguments, which lead to bitterness and hurt feeling, which leads to the fracturing of relationships and the loss of... **unity**.

Folks, let's take a moment to be really honest with ourselves this morning. How many of you have someone you would call a *frenemy* in your family? How many of you have relationships like this in our church family? How many of you have ever uttered something like this: "Well, I love so-and-so, but that doesn't mean I have to like them"? Friends, it happens to us all. And if Paul's letter is any indication of the state of the Philippian church, it was happening there too. Disagreements are part of a shared life. They are found in every community, and every family.

So, what should we do about it when we realize we have conflicts in our church body? With all of the messy dynamics of family life, now compounded by relationships built upon spiritual ties, rather than blood, how might it be possible to live the way Paul indicates in verses 1-4? What is the best way to get people who don't agree to come together in unity?

Paul suggests in verse 5 that the answer is to direct their focus toward something other than themselves. If you want to be unified, he says, loving one another as God loves the church, and being of one spirit, you must set your focus outside of yourselves. You must instead set your focus on the only one, who is able to continue and complete the good work he has already begun in you. You must set your focus on Christ, and become his imitators.

It won't do any good for the church to be single-minded, if that single-mindedness runs contrary to the gospel. It won't be possible to truly love one another, unless that love is created and sustained by God's grace, working in and through the members of the church until it spills over. It won't do any good to go through the motions of trying to "get along" and work together if we are not first being transformed inside and out. In other words, Paul's charge to the church to be unified is impossible, unless that unity comes about as the result of lives focused on Christ and transformed by the power of the Spirit.

But how do we achieve a life together as the church that looks like Paul's description? What does it mean to have the same mindset as Christ? What does it mean to become imitators of Jesus?

### **III. Becoming Imitators of Christ**

Paul gives us a hint as to how we can become imitators of Christ in Philippians 6-11. This passage of scripture is one of the earliest statements of Christian faith in who Jesus was and what he accomplished, and it is a concise statement of the doctrine of the incarnation. If we are to be imitators of Jesus, we must first see him clearly for who he was, and this is Paul's aim here. Much more can be said about this passage than our time allows this morning, but let us take a few moments to briefly discuss what Paul says here about Jesus.

He begins in verse 6, saying that Jesus:

**6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;**

Paul's first statement begins by taking us back to the beginning, to Adam and Eve in the garden. Genesis 3 tells the story humanity's temptation and fall into sin. God had given

Adam and Eve all of the good things he had created, save one thing: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. "From this one tree," he said, "you must not eat, or you will surely die". But temptation came through the serpent, who presented the situation in a different way. "Surely you won't die!" He said. "No, God doesn't want you to eat that fruit because it will open your eyes to the truth about good and evil, and you will be *like God*."

The serpent created a vision in Adam's mind of what it would be like to be like God, and then he showed him that it was something he could grasp for himself. He became discontented with what he had, and sought out equality with God as though it was a commodity to plucked and used at random. The saddest part of this tale is that Adam and Eve were already like God in all the ways humanity could be. Genesis 1:27-28 tells us that God made both man and woman in his image to rule over all his good creation, and by reaching for more than what they already had, even that was lost.

Adam's sin resulted in a pattern that has repeated itself throughout history, with sinful humanity trying over and over again to become rulers of the earth and have themselves declared Lord and King. Through them, these wannabe rulers say, there will finally be peace. In Paul's day, the emperor of Rome was the latest in a long line of would be conquerors and kings. Through Augustus, a relative peace had indeed come to Rome, and so it was not long before he began seeing himself as a god, as though divinity is something that can be grasped.

Paul tells us in verse 6 that God's way of doing things is not the same way as we find in the world. Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, who was with God from the beginning; who was begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. This Jesus, who was, and is, and will forever be equal with his Father in heaven, did not consider his equality something to be used for his own benefit. Instead, he showed what it really means to be divine, through sacrificial love.

**Verse 7 continues: rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!**

What does it mean to be divine? Here Paul shows us that Christ's answer is directly related to God's nature as self-giving love. His is the kind of love that flows out of himself for the sake of others. Paul is in essence asking us, "Do you want to be like God? Well, then, you must become a humble servant, because that is who our God has revealed himself to be in Jesus Christ." If you want to be like God, then be like His Son, who humbled himself, who became incarnate as a man, and who suffered the indignity of a cross out of love for you and for me!

I have told you that I won't often trouble you with Greek or Hebrew, though I find them to be fascinating and useful to our study of scripture. I won't get too technical here, but something needs to be said about the way Paul has written this passage in the Greek. I told you that Christ's answer to the question of what it means to be divine flows directly out of his being; that the very essence of the Godhead is holy-love that manifests itself in humble sacrifice. Here is a little fun morsel that the Greek of this passage indicates to us. You might think that God's greatest act of humility is demonstrated in the Incarnation, in the Son of God taking on human flesh. That somehow becoming a man is what made him humble. But that is not what Paul is telling us here. He is telling us that Christ's great act of self-humbling happened **even before** the incarnation, and that his dwelling among us is a direct result of his humble nature. This is why Peter tells us in 1 Peter 1:20 that Christ was chosen to be a sacrifice for sin **before** the foundation of the world. His action flows out of his being, and it is the very nature of God to pour himself out in self-giving love. Now saying that Christ has shown his nature to be that of a humble servant does not mean

that God is not great, or that he should not be praised; rather it demonstrates that he is great and his name is worthy to be praised precisely because his divine nature is sacrificial and holy.

Jesus Christ, through his ultimate act of love, has done something that only God can do. As Creator and Sustainer of all creation, he has acted to reconcile all creation to himself. And in so doing has demonstrated that true divinity is not something to be grasped onto and used for his own benefit, but for the benefit of the world.

**Verse 9 continues: Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.**

Christ's death on the cross purchased freedom and life for all those who believe in him, and by his resurrection we have confirmation that he was who he said he was and did what he came to do. Verses 9-11 tell us that Yahweh, the Most High God, who will not share his glory with anyone else, has shared it with Jesus. And this proves his equality with God, and that his saving work of dying on a cross for the sins of the world, and his resurrection to life is God's most perfect self-expression.

#### **IV. Application: Working Out Our Salvation**

This is the Christ that we are called to imitate. We are called to live again as those created in his image, not because "being like God" is something to be grasped and used for our own benefit, but because God's true nature is self-giving. We are called to imitate him in this, denying self to take up our cross for the sake of the world. And the best way we can start practicing this is within our own church family



today.

So then, how can we become imitators of Christ right now? Here is the good news. Like all of the difficult things that God asks of us, he is willing and able to meet this need in our lives. God calls us to live lives transformed by his grace and mercy. He does not ask us to be or do anything that he is not willing to accomplish in and for us, by the power of His Spirit working in our lives.

So, the first thing we can do to become imitators of Christ today is to submit to His Lordship. When we recognize that he is God and we are not, that he is in control, and that he is the true King, we open ourselves up to the Spirit working in our lives, making us new creatures reflecting the grace of God and his nature in us. **This is our passive response to the call to imitate Christ.**

The second thing we can do is to take an active role in this process. This part may be more difficult, and it might not look the same for all of us. But if you want to begin actively pursue being like Christ, I have a suggestion for where you can start, but it won't be easy.

**If we want to actively pursue lives of humility and other-oriented love, we can start by asking God to convict us of any pride in our lives.**

Now I feel like I should give you a disclaimer in making this recommendation. The nature of prayer is not that it changes God, if we pray hard enough or long enough, or if we have a big enough team of people praying with us. The nature of prayer is that it changes the prayer. As we commune with God in prayer, we invite him to transform us to his way of thinking. I believe this is one reason, among many, that we so often feel like God isn't answering our prayers. You see, sometimes, we are praying for the wrong thing. Sometimes, we pray that God will do something we want him to do, when we

should be asking God to help us see things as he sees them. This doesn't mean we shouldn't pray for specific things like healing, or deliverance, or peace, or what ever you might be praying for. But it does mean that we should expect God to act as only he can in those situations, **as one who sees the whole picture**. If we spend enough time in prayer with him, God will begin to give us glimpses of his perspective. And that will **always** change us.

So here is my disclaimer: if you pray for God to convict you of pride in your life, essentially asking him to give you his perspective on who you are in relation to him and others, that is one prayer I can guarantee he will answer. But you may not like what he says. I know this from personal experience, because I asked God for this very thing several years ago, and he broke my heart by showing me where I was not yet fully his. Even today, I am still working out the implications of God's answer to that prayer, and everyday I have to allow him to work in me afresh to root out what pride remains, so that I might truly love as he loves.

The Apostle Paul charged the Philippian church to seek unity with one another through humble self-sacrifice; through thinking more highly of others than themselves, and doing nothing out of selfish ambition. Friends, are you willing to take these steps in your life? Are you ready to become fully sold-out imitators of Christ? If you are, then I can promise you that, as you allow the Spirit to enter in and rearrange your spiritual house, the words of Paul to the Philippians will begin to ring true for us as well:

**"Then you will shine like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life."**

## **V. Closing Prayer**

Let us pray. Gracious heavenly Father, we thank you that you

call us to unity as one body, your Holy Church. We thank you that you have not left us alone to figure out how to do this, but have given us your Son, Jesus, and have taught us that unity comes when we follow and imitate him. We thank you that you have sent your Spirit upon your Church, so that we need not labor in vain. We ask now that you would come, knit us together as one body, teaching us to love as you love, that we might bear witness to the good news of your Kingdom until Christ returns, and we sit at your heavenly banquet. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen!

### **Benediction**

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then be like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. Then you will shine like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life.