

“Three Portraits of Unity”
Philippians 2:19-30
January 23, 2022

INTRODUCTION:

Today’s passage is one of Paul’s travel sections where he describes his plans for the future. These are not unusual in Paul’s letters, but what is unusual is its placement in the middle of the letter instead of at its customary location at the conclusion. It is likely that he did it this way because it suited his theme of unity in the church. It has been said that a picture is worth a thousand words, and Paul here gives his readers three pictures of unity.

There are many times when it is better to show someone a picture of something than trying to describe it with words. Whenever Wendy and I are planning some home improvement project, we have learned that verbal descriptions rarely work. Wendy will try to describe what she has in mind for this project, and I won’t quite understand what she is trying to say. So I will ask questions, and she often won’t understand my questions or she won’t be able to answer them. So we’ve come up with a solution that works very well for us, and it’s called “Pinterest.” It allows her to search the internet for pictures of what she has in mind, and then I understand what she is saying.

Paul here is drawing us a picture of unity. Of course, he has done that already in describing Jesus as the model for the kind of love and humility that leads to unity. There is no clearer picture of that than Jesus. But this letter is being written decades after Jesus, and probably none of his readers ever had the opportunity to see Jesus in the flesh. But they can see Jesus in the lives of his people, and that is what Paul is trying to do in our passage. By the way, that’s the same with us, isn’t it? The people in our lives who need to know Jesus will need to see him in us. Let’s notice in the three men appearing in this passage the Christlike qualities that lead to unity.

I. Paul, Good Communication

Paul understood something that every pastor has had to learn, usually learning it the hard way. Good communication is an essential part of church unity. Inadequate communication often results in significant problems in a church when people fill in the gap with negative assumptions. A church leader walks into a room with a few people in it, begins to greet them individually when one person he greets engages him in conversation. He gets sidetracked by that conversation and never gets around to greeting the last person in the room, who then concludes that this leader doesn’t like him. A gap in

communication was present in the lack of a greeting, and it was filled with a negative assumption.

Paul was facing a situation that was susceptible to misunderstanding. A reminder of the historical background of this letter is necessary to understand this. Paul was in prison in Rome, waiting for an audience with the emperor, to whom he had appealed his case. The Philippian church had been a faithful supporting church, and they determined to help Paul during the time of his neediness. They collected funds for his support and sent one of their pastors, Epaphroditus, with the gift and with instructions that he stay and help Paul in any way he could during his imprisonment. Epaphroditus gets seriously ill on the trip and almost dies. Upon his arrival in Rome, Paul decides to send Epaphroditus back to Philippi instead of having him stay to help Paul. It also seems evident, according to this text, that the Philippians expected Epaphroditus would relieve Timothy, who would then be sent to Philippi. So when Epaphroditus shows up, and not Timothy, many misunderstandings were possible.

One possible misunderstanding would be that something is wrong with Timothy and that Paul had lost confidence in him. Or they might assume that Paul and Timothy were estranged from one another. So Paul assures them of Timothy's proven worth and that his relationship with Timothy was a father-son relationship with deep love.

A second potential misunderstanding was that Paul didn't care for the Philippians because he had rejected their offer of help from Epaphroditus' service to Paul. Maybe Paul just wants their money but not them. Maybe he's been using them. So Paul makes it clear that he is sending Epaphroditus back for the opposite reason—not because he doesn't care for the Philippians, but on the contrary because of his deep care for them. Paul was aware that they had heard of Epaphroditus' illness and were anxious about him. So Paul is sending him back to relieve their anxieties.

A third potential misunderstanding concerns Epaphroditus. He returned sooner than expected. Perhaps it was because he failed in some way to be the kind of helper Paul needed. Or even more seriously, how do they know that he even delivered the money to Paul. Maybe he spent it himself or misappropriated it in some other way. So Paul assures them of the integrity of their pastor and tells the Philippians that they need to be sure to honor such men.

Much disunity in churches, marriages, and other human relationships comes from false assumptions. Two applications arise from this. First, be careful not to make assumptions. For example, a co-worker reports in sick one day, and you happen to pass her house as you're running an errand. You notice that her car is not in its customary place and assume that she isn't really sick, but is claiming a sick day just because she wanted off and didn't

want to use a vacation day. That assumption may be true, or it may be false. There are many possible explanations for her car to be gone that would be consistent with her sickness. Perhaps someone borrowed it, or maybe she had to go to the doctor or the pharmacy to deal with her sickness. Satan loves to sow discord in our relationships by whispering to us false and negative assumptions. Be on your guard for this.

A second application is to be mindful of the potential for false assumptions and to communicate in such a way to prevent them as much as possible. That is what Paul was doing here. We attack the disunity from false assumptions from both ends, both from the one making the assumptions and from those communicating so as to minimize the possibility of such. I note that this is the way God communicates to us. He is the most misunderstood being in the universe, with false assumptions abounding. So God has communicated clearly to us in Jesus, who is referred to by John as the “Word of God.” How could God be more clear about his love for us than by what Jesus has done in living and dying for us. He lived to earn a righteous record now given to us, and he died to remove our unrighteous record and the judgment it deserves.

II. Timothy, Looking to the Interests of Others

Timothy is also an example of the humble, loving person who promotes unity. Paul had said earlier in the chapter, **“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also the interests of others”** (v. 4). Now he says of Timothy, **“For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ”** (v. 20-21). Note that Paul equates the interests of Jesus with the welfare of the Philippians. The foundation of caring for others in the church is to grasp the extent to which Jesus cares for them. We look to the interests of others because Jesus says that the interests of these others are of deep concern to him.

We learn a couple of things from this passage about looking to the interests of others. First, it is uncommon, seen in Paul’s statement that Timothy’s concerns for the interests of the Philippians was unique. Paul said that all the others sought only their own interests. We’re not sure who these others might be, but it is clear that Timothy’s love for the Philippians stands out as unique. It is unique because it is energized and enabled by God.

Second, we learn from Paul that looking to the interests of others doesn’t mean ignoring your own. That truth was included in his earlier command where he said to “look not only” to one’s own interests. He acknowledges the fact that we will be looking to our own interests and doesn’t attempt to forbid that. He only wants us to employ the same devotion we have to self-interest to the interests of others. Paul himself exhibits an appropriate self-interest in this

passage. It seems that the Philippians wanted Paul to send Timothy to them, but Paul refuses. He refuses on the basis of his own interests. He wanted to send Timothy and hoped to do so soon. But he also insisted that Timothy stay with him until he could **“see how it will go with me”** (v. 23). In other words, Paul needed Timothy until his hearing before the emperor. So looking to the interests of others doesn't require us to be unconcerned for our own interests. Nor does it mean that we must give others exactly what they want from us. The Philippians wanted Timothy to come, but Paul didn't send him as soon as they wanted him.

We learn here that looking to the interests of others doesn't nullify self-interest. In many ways, looking to our interests is a necessary part of caring for the needs of others. We take care of ourselves and our personal affairs that we may have the ability to care for others. All along, we guard our hearts against the sinful nature we all have that makes us prone to self-absorption.

III. Epaphroditus, Dying for the Work of Christ

Paul has high praise for Epaphroditus. He calls him **“my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need”** (v. 25). Paul was obviously held in high esteem by the Philippians, and he is here sharing that esteem with Epaphroditus, referring to him as a fellow worker and fellow soldier. He then concludes by reminding them to honor such men (v. 29). The reason for such honor is that **“he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me”** (v. 30).

Os Guinness has observed, “The trouble is that as modern people we have too much to live *with* and too little to live *for*...In the midst of material plenty, we have spiritual poverty.” Church unity is greatly strengthened by sharing a common mission, a mission given to us by Jesus and a mission for which we are called to be willing to die. Epaphroditus provides an example of just such a commitment, willing to die for the work of Christ.

In our day when long-distance travel is relatively effortless, it is easy to forget the challenges Epaphroditus must have faced in his mission to bring this gift from Philippi to Rome. He would have travelled westward across Macedonia along the Via Egnatia to the Adriatic Sea. That's a distance of 360 miles and required the crossing of several mountain ranges. Where did he sleep for the many days such a trip would have taken? How did he get food? His journey would have then required a ninety-mile voyage across the Adriatic Sea to Italy's southeast coast. But before arriving in Rome, he would be required to walk another 350 miles along the Via Appia. And at some point along the way he got so sick that he almost died. It's never a good thing to be sick, but far worse when you're sick and away from home.

Since we're in the midst of a pandemic, and we've all been thinking more than usual about sickness, I thought it would be good to pause for just a minute here to think about the sickness of God's children. One of the questions that arises in this account is why God would allow his servant on such an important mission to get so sick. Here he was doing the Lord's work, and he almost dies. Can't God protect his servants from such things while they serve him? This account of Epaphroditus' illness while serving God does strengthen us against the common lie that an illness means that we must be doing something wrong. Yet Epaphroditus gets seriously ill while serving the Lord in a way that Paul says is deserving of great honor.

I like what Spurgeon says of sickness. "Even unto this day the body is under death because of sin, and is left so on purpose to remind us of the effects of sin, that we may feel within ourselves what sin has done, and may the better guess at what sin would have done if we had remained under it, for the pains of hell would have been ours forever." He also points out how every recovery from sickness is a pledge of the resurrection. Think about how you feel after recovering from a sickness. Perhaps it was a sickness that included a fever, and you just felt lousy. And then when you recover, your heart is filled with gratitude. You realize that you had taken good health for granted, and now you are so thankful to be feeling good again. That feeling is just a small taste of what the resurrection of our bodies will be.

Our missions conference will be here in a couple of weeks, and we will have the opportunity to do what Paul is commanding in these last two verses. We can "honor such men," and women. Those who have committed themselves in unique ways to the mission of the church are deserving of our honor. Our honoring of them furthers the unity of the church. This honoring involves our financial support, but it is more than that as well.

CONCLUSION:

We've come to the end of Philippians 2 today, and it reminds us of the beginning of the chapter. Jesus was offered there as the perfect picture of the kind of mindset that leads to unity. It was a mindset that gave up personal advantage in order to serve others and a mindset of humility. As the chapter ends, we are reminded that the only way many people are going to be able to see the beauty of Jesus is to see it through us, his church. May we be that outpost of the coming kingdom, showing people by our love and unity what Jesus is like, as well as the heaven where he reigns and where he lives with his people!

Small Group Discussion Questions
Philippians 2:19-30

1. Today's passage features three examples of people whose lives furthered unity rather than harming it. Can you think of people you know who are good examples of the kind of people who do the same? What is it about that person that makes him or her such a helpful example of unity?
2. Paul sets a good example by his clear communication. He anticipates possible misunderstandings and communicates in order to minimize these. When Epaphroditus returns to Philippi instead of Timothy, whom they expected, the Philippians could easily have misinterpreted that. (Something is deficient with Timothy; Paul doesn't value Epaphroditus; Epaphroditus failed, etc.) What do we learn here about loving communication? Can you think of any examples?
3. In your experience, what forms of miscommunication are most prevalent?
4. Another application of this is to guard our hearts against making false assumptions. Can you think of any examples of that and the harm done by those?
5. Timothy is an example of someone who pursues the interests of others. In practical terms, what does it look like to do that?
6. How do we balance a healthy focus on our own interests with pursuing the interests of others? Note that Paul was willing to be honest about his own needs ("I need Timothy with me now"). How might the lack of such honesty harm unity?
7. Epaphroditus became ill while pursuing this mission. Have you ever had something go wrong in your life while attempting to serve God in some way?
8. Do you have any response to Spurgeon's statement about sickness? "Even unto this day the body is under death because of sin, and is left so on purpose to remind us of the effects of sin, that we may feel within ourselves what sin has done, and may the better guess at what sin would have done if we had remained under it, for the pains of hell would have been ours forever." He also points out how every recovery from sickness is a pledge of the resurrection.