

PHIL. 2:1 – 3:6

By Ashby L. Camp

Copyright © 2006 by Ashby L. Camp (modified a bit in 2008). All rights reserved.

B. Live in unity, being humble and considering the interests of others (2:1-4)

1. Having made clear that living worthily of the gospel requires a united steadfastness in the face of opposition, Paul now focuses on the unity aspect. Given the importance of unity in living worthily, he now exhorts them to be united.

2. Paul bases his appeal to unity on their own experiences in Christ. "If" here means "since" or "if, as is indeed the case." It's the same as if I said to friends I've driven to many places, "If you've ridden in my car, don't make fun of it." Paul is saying, "If, as of course is true, you have experienced these certain things in Christ, then act in this way."

3. The experiences in Christ that he takes for granted and on which he bases his appeal for unity are:

a. comfort – Being in Christ is a tremendous source of comfort. Whatever this world may bring, one knows that the biggest issue in life has been dealt with.

b. consolation of love – Christ's (the Father's?) love certainly consoles one in dangers and hardships. Knowing that he loves you and hurts with you makes the pain more bearable.

c. fellowship (or sharing) in the Holy Spirit – All Christians share in the one Spirit, who lives in them and works in and through their lives.

d. affections and compassions – All Christians have been beneficiaries of Christ's boundless affection and compassion (see 1:8). We enjoy the fruit of that affection and compassion in our salvation and the many blessings of life in Christ.

4. Given the reality of these experiences, Paul asks them to "make his joy complete" (thus providing a further motive for their response) by:

a. thinking the same thing in the sense of having the same mindset – Not meaning uniformity of thought but unity in intent and disposition. We might say that they are all to be "on the same page."

b. having the same love – Certainly for the church, for one another, and probably more generally for Christ and the things of God.

c. [being] ones joined in soul, that is, being united in spirit – What we mean when we speak of "team spirit." It is a bond with the group that transcends the individual.

d. thinking the one thing, being single-minded – Meaning intent on one purpose, having a life directed toward a single, overriding goal. Paul undoubtedly is referring to "the gospel."

5. They are to do nothing out of selfish ambition or empty conceit. Putting self first causes factions. Note that "selfish ambition" is the same word used in 1:17 in reference to the competitive preachers.

6. Instead, they should, in humility, consider others as more important than themselves. Each should look out not only for their own interests but also for the interests of others.

C. Christ, the ultimate example of the right attitude (2:5-11)

1. The attitude or mindset he has just mentioned, an attitude of humility that exalts the welfare of others, is to exist among them.

2. This, after all, was the attitude of Christ Jesus, as vv. 6-11 make clear. Many believe that these verses were already circulating among the churches as a hymn or confession of faith and that Paul incorporated them into his letter. That does not alter the point Paul is making in these verses.

3. Before the incarnation Jesus was in the "form of God" because he shares the divine nature. The word "form" (*morphē*) expresses the characteristics and qualities that are essential to a thing. Jesus is, as the next clause specifies, "equal with God." That's why the NIV and the TNIV translate "being in the form of God" as "being in very nature God." Gordon Fee states in his commentary (p. 205):

What the earliest followers of Christ had come to believe, of course, on the basis of his resurrection and ascension, was that the one whom they had known as truly human had himself known prior existence in the "form" of God – not meaning that he was "like God but really not," but that he was characterized by what was essential to being God. It is this understanding which (correctly) lies behind the NIV's "in very nature God."

4. Despite being divine, he did not consider his divinity from a selfish standpoint. He didn't see it as something to be used for his own gain, but as a position from which to serve.

a. Verse 6b states that Christ did not consider equality with God as "*harpagmón*," which is a form of the word *harpagmós*. This is a rare word, and its

precise meaning has been much debated. Current scholarship tends toward seeing it as meaning a matter to be exploited or taken advantage of. Thus, NRSV translates it "something to be exploited"; TNIV translates it "something to be used to his own advantage."

b. But even if one opts for the translation "a thing to be grasped," it must mean "grasped" in the sense of "clung to" rather than in the sense of grabbing something not previously possessed. When *harpagmós* and similar nouns are combined with verbs like "consider" it always is an idiomatic expression referring to something already present and at one's disposal rather than something to be gained. Besides, the notion of Christ aspiring to equality with God, as though he was not God, is completely foreign to the New Testament.

c. The point is that in the incarnation, the Christ, who is in nature God, emptied himself, meaning simply that he poured himself out, becoming in essence a slave through being born as a human for the sake of serving others. Fee notes (p. 211), "[W]e are still dealing with the character of God, as that has been revealed in the 'mindset' and resulting activity of the Son of God. The concern is with divine selflessness: God is not an acquisitive being, grasping and seizing, but self-giving for the sake of others."

d. As Jesus said to the disciples in Mat. 20:25-28:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

5. The depth to which he humbled himself for the welfare of others is seen in the fact that, having become a man, he submitted, in obedience to the Father, to crucifixion. The death of the cross was the cruelest and most humiliating form of execution in the ancient world.

a. Roman orator Cicero called it "the most cruel and disgusting penalty." The Jewish historian Josephus, who witnessed crucifixions during Titus's siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, called it "the most wretched of deaths."

b. It was reserved for the lower classes, slaves, and the worst of criminals. In 63 B.C. Rabirius, a Roman nobleman and senator, was threatened with the penalty of crucifixion. In defending him, Cicero said:

How grievous a thing it is to be disgraced by a public court; how grievous to suffer a fine, how grievous to suffer banishment; and yet in the midst of any such disaster we retain some degree of liberty. Even if we are threatened with death, we may die free men. But . . . *the very word*

"*cross*" should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but his thoughts, his eyes and his ears. For it is not the actual occurrence of these things but *the very mention of them*, that is unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man. (ABD, I:1208).

c. Not only was the subject publicly abused prior to the actual crucifixion, he was usually stripped naked and then hung on a cross at a visible place. (We know the guards cast lots to see who would get the Lord's seamless undergarment, but it's possible they waited until after his death to claim it in deference to Jewish sensitivity.)

d. For the Jew, the shame was magnified by the popular understanding of Deut. 21:23, which says that anyone hung on a tree is under a curse.

e. It is this shame and humiliation of crucifixion that is in mind in Heb. 12:2, where the writer says Jesus "endured the cross, scorning its shame," and in 13:3 where he speaks of "the disgrace [Jesus] bore."

f. But the real price paid in the crucifixion of Jesus was not the physical torture or the shame, as great as they were. After all, many others had gone through that experience. No, the real price paid was that Jesus bore God's wrath against sin. He who had eternally known perfect communion with God the Father received from the Father the punishment for mankind's sins.

6. That God is pleased with such selfless service is indicated by his extreme exaltation of Christ.

a. He has raised Jesus to a position of unparalleled honor and universal authority (see Acts 2:33, 36; Heb. 1:3), bestowing on him his own name of "Lord" (used in the LXX to represent the personal name of the God of Israel – e.g., Isa. 42:8).

b. The purpose and/or result of this exaltation is that at the Second Coming every being shall kneel in honor of Jesus' name (of Lord) and every tongue shall openly declare that he is Lord. On the part of some, this will be forced reverence, a submission to one whose power they cannot resist. As F. F. Bruce comments, "Not only human beings . . . but [also] angels and demons, in joyful spontaneity or in reluctant fear, acknowledge the sovereignty of the crucified one - all beings, in fact, in heaven, on earth, and in the world below."

c. This lordship bestowed on Christ is to the glory of God the Father. It reveals his glory because he planned and brought about this ultimate reversal; it was he who took the faithful Son from disgraceful death to the greatest height.

D. Command to continue working out their salvation (2:12-18)

1. In light of Christ's example of extreme humiliation for the welfare of others, Paul calls them to continue working out their salvation by obeying his command to be united and humbly to seek the good of their brothers and sisters.

a. To continue working out their salvation means to continue working out the implications of their salvation, to make that salvation fruitful. They are not obtaining salvation by their works; they are working out what it means to be saved in a fallen world.

b. This outworking of their salvation is to be done with "fear and trembling." This is not a reference to their opponents because they are not to be intimidated by them (1:28). As they live out their faith, they are to do so with an attitude of reverence and awe towards God, with respect for and appreciation of who God is. Sanctification is something to be taken with the utmost seriousness, not some casual, I'll-make-the-effort-when-I-feel-like-it kind of thing.

c. The reason he can demand that they continue bearing fruit of their salvation, continue being transformed, is that it is God who is at work in them. The fruit is produced by God (through his indwelling Spirit); he is the one who enables them both to will and to work for what he wants. So we must cooperate – we must work to keep the faucet open – but God is the one who supplies the change.

2. More specifically, they are to do everything without complaints (grumbling) and arguments (disputes).

a. Paul is referring to griping or bad-mouthing that produces ill will instead of harmony within the church. This does not, of course, eliminate constructive criticism.

b. He demands this of them because he wants them to be faultless and pure (sincere), unblemished children of God who shine like lights against the blackness of a crooked and perverted world.

3. Shifting the focus back to the steadfastness with which they are to stand, Paul urges them to hold firmly to the word of life so that he may have grounds for rejoicing (glorying) on the day of Christ. They are the fruit of his labor in the Lord, and he urges them to steadfastness so that his efforts on their behalf will not have been in vain.

4. Speaking of his efforts on their behalf, he adds that even though he, through his apostolic suffering, is being poured out as a kind of drink offering added to complete the sacrifice that is their life of faith, which life includes its own suffering for Christ, he is glad for their offering (not resentful) and rejoices with them in their joy of salvation. He urges them likewise to be glad for his having contributed to their faith and to rejoice with him in his joy of his salvation.

IV. Plans to Send Brothers (2:19-30)

A. Plans to send Timothy in the near future (2:19-24)

1. Paul's hope to send Timothy in the near future is "in the Lord," meaning that Jesus is the one on whom human expectations depend and by whom they are realized.

2. The reason for sending Timothy is that, just as they will be cheered by news about him, he also will be cheered by news about them. As spiritual family, they are keenly interested in each other's welfare.

3. He wants to send Timothy in particular, even though he cannot do so right away, because Timothy is the type of "other-centered" Christian he is urging them to be.

a. Timothy is the only one available who will be genuinely concerned for their (spiritual) welfare. The others all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. In other words, being concerned for the welfare of others is contrasted with seeking one's own interests and compared with seeking the interests of Jesus Christ. Christ's interest is in seeing Christians strengthened and matured.

b. They have personal knowledge of his proven character, defined in terms of his having served, in close association with Paul, as a slave in the cause of the gospel. From what they knew of Timothy, his commitment to the things of Christ was beyond question. His character had been proven under pressure.

4. Paul does not want to send Timothy until he finds out about his circumstances, probably meaning until his pending appeal is formally resolved. It may be that he had particular need of Timothy while he was confined.

5. Paul is confident that he also will personally visit the Philippians before too long.

B. Plans to send Epaphroditus immediately (2:25-30)

1. The Philippians had sent Epaphroditus to Paul to deliver their financial gift (4:16-18) and to act on their behalf in ministering to Paul's needs. It seems that Paul is sending him back prematurely and wants to make sure that Epaphroditus is not criticized for failing to complete his assignment.

2. Paul makes clear that the decision to send Epaphroditus to them was his; in other words, Epaphroditus did not insist on returning. He speaks of Epaphroditus with warm feelings and with much praise, calling him "my brother, fellow-worker, and fellow-soldier, your messenger and minister to my need." He was a credit to the church in Philippi.

3. Paul chose to send him back before expected because:

a. He was longing for all of them; he was homesick for his brothers and sisters in the faith.

b. He was in anguish because they had heard that he was ill. He so loved his brothers and sisters that it tore him up to imagine the pain that knowledge of his illness had caused them.

4. What the Philippians had heard about him becoming ill was true. In fact, he had become so ill that he almost died. But God had mercy on him by sparing his life, and in so doing also had mercy on Paul, sparing him the great grief he would have experienced over Epaphroditus's death.

5. Because of the anxiety produced by Epaphroditus's illness, for both the Philippians and Epaphroditus, Paul decided to send him back as soon as he otherwise would have. He did so in order that, by Epaphroditus's safe return, this hindrance to their joy might be removed and his sorrow at being the involuntary cause of their anxiety would disappear. (Paul would, of course, still have the sorrow of captivity and of being surrounded by adversaries.)

6. Since Paul is sending Epaphroditus back so that they might rejoice again upon seeing him, he urges them to do so, to welcome him "in the Lord" (i.e., as a brother) with *all* joy. There was to be no particle of disappointment or resentment.

7. Even more, they are to hold Epaphroditus and all those like him in high esteem. He is to be honored because of his service in the cause of Christ. He nearly lost his life in his effort to minister to Paul in prison, in his effort to fulfill the service that they wanted to give Paul. So Epaphroditus is also the type of "other centered" Christian Paul is urging them to be.

V. Warning About Judaizers (3:1-24)

A. Watch out for the evil workers (3:1-4a)

1. 3:1 is a transition in which Paul urges them to rejoice in the Lord.

a. The opening phrase is better translated "And so," suggesting a connection to the preceding paragraphs. Those paragraphs provide joyful news, namely that Epaphroditus has returned after praiseworthy service and Timothy and Paul likely will be coming soon.

b. The exhortation to rejoice is linked to what follows in that the Judaizers threatened to rob them of their joy by denying that they were saved.

2. To write the same things he previously taught them, to remind them of his former teaching (see 3:18), is not a bother for him; rather, it is a safeguard for them.

3. Paul warns the Philippians about the Judaizers in very strong terms. He says, "Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workmen, beware of the mutilation [group]."

a. "Dogs" was applied by Jews to Gentiles and to lapsed Jews who were ritually unclean and thus outside the covenant. Paul turns the tables and applies it to the Judaizers – they are "the dogs" who stand outside the covenant blessings.

b. "Workmen" was used not only to designate workers generally but also to designate Christian workers in the context of missionary activity. Thus, Paul refers to Judaizing missionaries as "evil workmen."

c. "Mutilation" is a derogatory play on the word "circumcision," the rite which the Judaizers insisted was essential for salvation. By this reference, Paul identifies the Judaizers with the practice of pagan mutilation that was forbidden by the Law. Circumcision, the Judaizers' source of pride, is interpreted by Paul as a sure sign that they have no part in God's people.

4. Paul explains why he uses "mutilation" to refer to the Judaizers: It is Paul, the Philippians, and all like them who are the circumcision, meaning the covenant people of God. The Judaizers' claim to that title is false; they are "the mutilation."

5. Paul elaborates on qualities of the circumcision, implicitly contrasting that group to the Judaizers. It is Christians who:

a. serve by the Spirit of God – "Serve" in the LXX denoted the service rendered to God by Israel as his special people. Just as "the circumcision" now applies to the church, so "service of God" is now performed by the church. This service, in the new age, is rendered by the power of the Spirit.

b. glory in Christ Jesus – The new covenant people glory or boast in Christ rather than in their own performance.

c. do not have confidence in the flesh – This is a negative restatement of the preceding, rather than a separate and third assertion. They place no confidence for salvation in human privilege or achievement.

6. When it comes to "the flesh," however, Paul takes a back seat to no one.

B. Paul greater than the Judaizers in terms of the flesh (3:4b-6)

1. Paul draws attention to the fact that he possessed, before his conversion, even more reason than the Judaizers for placing confidence in the flesh (i.e., greater privileges and achievements) to show that boasting in Christ was all that mattered.

2. Privileges of his Jewish descent (his orthodox pedigree and upbringing)

a. With respect to circumcision, an eighth day-er. Not only was Paul circumcised, a sign that he belonged to the covenant people of Israel, but he was circumcised according to God's covenant with Abraham and in strict conformity with the law (Gen. 17:12; Lev. 12:3). He wasn't from a lax Jewish family or a proselyte from paganism who would have been circumcised when he converted.

b. Of the stock or race of Israel. Paul was not a child of proselytes; he was an ethnic Jew. Having been born of Israelite parents and subsequently circumcised, Paul inherited all the privileges of the covenant community (see, e.g., Rom. 9:4-5).

c. Of the tribe of Benjamin. The tribe of Benjamin was highly regarded in Israel because it gave Israel its first king (1 Sam. 9:1-2), remained loyal to the house of David after the disruption of the monarchy (1 Ki. 12:21), and contained within its borders the city of Jerusalem (Judges 1:21).

d. A Hebrew of Hebrews (i.e., a Hebrew son of Hebrew parents). "Hebrew" probably refers to Jews who normally spoke Aramaic with one another (while knowing some Greek) and who probably attended synagogues where the service was said in Hebrew. Paul is saying that he spoke Hebrew (including Aramaic), as did his parents before him, suggesting that his family was strictly observant of the Jewish way of life and maintained its links with the home country.

3. Personal achievements in relation to the law

a. With regard to the law, a Pharisee. His approach to the law was that of a Pharisee, the strictest sect of Judaism (Acts 26:5). He was devoted to obeying not only the Mosaic law but also the hundreds of commandments contained in the oral law. The Pharisees tried, by obedience to the law, to represent the pure community, the true people of God preparing itself for the coming of the Messiah.

b. With regard to zeal, persecuting the church. Zeal for the law was an important ideal among many Jews, and his extreme zeal for the traditions he had inherited from his ancestors was evident in his persecution of the church (see, Gal. 1:13-14; Acts 22:3-4). He saw a crucified Messiah as contrary to the law and thus ferociously sought to stamp out Christianity.

c. With regard to righteousness which is rooted in the law, being faultless. When it came to righteous living, to living in conformity with the O.T. as interpreted along Pharisaic lines, he was exemplary. He thus was "faultless" in the eyes

of men, "faultless" from the viewpoint of the flesh. So no one could argue that Paul's conversion to Christianity was attributable to prior failure in his Jewish lifestyle.

(1) This is the same sense in which Zacharias and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, were "faultless" (Lk. 1:6).

(2) This clearly does not mean "sinless" because that would be totally foreign to Jewish theology (e.g., 2 Chron. 6:36; Prov. 20:9), contrary to Paul's statements in Romans about the universality of sin, and contrary to Paul's admission that he coveted prior to his conversion (Rom. 7:7-9). More likely, part of his being "blameless" was his offering of sacrifices when he sinned.

(3) The Pharisaic understanding of the law, to which Paul was committed, in some important respects relaxed the divine standard. Note Jesus' critique of Pharisaic understanding in Matthew 23.

(4) The bigger issue involving this "righteousness rooted in the law" is whether such a way of life is identical with the righteousness God requires. As 3:9 makes clear, Paul, with painstaking effort, was able to make "the grade, only to discover that it did him no good" (Bruce).