

Unselfish Joy (Phil 2:1-4)

Have you ever opened your bible to a passage you've read before—perhaps even read many times before—and you have certain ideas in your head about what you are going to find in that passage before you even start to read? But you read it and are surprised by what you find? I think somehow God by his Holy Spirit meets us when we pick up this book and He allows us to see things through a new lens or perspective. It speaks to us in a new way—perhaps because of something we are going through, or sometimes because God wants us to get a message so he grabs a passage of scripture and clouts us on the side of the head with it. That's what it was like for me preparing this message.

We're in a series called "Journey into Joy", and in week five we come to the second chapter of Philippians, one of the great Christ-centred chapters of the Bible. And yes, I've read it before—as many of us have. But this time through I noticed things I hadn't noticed before. So today's message is mostly me sharing my story along with a few things I noticed when I looked real hard at Philippians 2:1-4.

Before we get to our passage, let's review for a minute the whole letter. We have seen this letter is the Apostle Paul writing to say thanks to the church in Philippi for sending him practical help while he was in jail for preaching the good news about Jesus Christ. We have seen that Joy is a great theme of the letter even in spite of persecution; but what really popped out to me when I read the letter this time was how strongly it invites us to answer Jesus' call to live a life of purpose. Philippians is a book about Christians on a mission together, committed to Christ and living up to their calling in Christ and finding joy along the way. When I slowed down to look carefully at our passage in chapter two, I was thinking about that sense of calling, so my five points all relate to that calling. As do the five questions that come out of those points. Yes—I said five. But not to worry, they are short—and mostly review!!!

I should also note that these few verses at the start of chapter two are kind of a transition point in the letter—they are both a summary of what went before in chapter one, and a spring board for what will come next—the great Christ centered passage at the heart of chapter two that Pastor Jeremy will preach on next week. So let's start by reading our passage together:

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. (Eph 2:1-4 NIV)

1. Our calling is relational

The strongest thing I noticed as I read the first verse of our passage is how relational it is. So that becomes our first point: **our calling is relational**. To be honest, when I think about comfort I think of curling up in a comfy chair reading a book on a rainy day, and when I think of encouragement I think of good marks on a test or a good year end review at work. But there is no escaping how profoundly relational verse one is. Our calling as Christians is not primarily to believe some set of truths. It isn't some kind of dry academic "teach yourself joy in forty days." Nor is it a self-help individualistic live your "best self" emptiness. No—it is a calling into loving relationship with God and with each other.

Let's look together at the five nouns Paul uses in verse one—each time prefaced by the little phrase "if any...". The NIV translates them as follows:

encouragement – παράκλησις (from being called along beside—see John 14:16 'helper')

comfort – παραμύθιον (gentle words, lit. "speak towards")

common sharing - κοινωνία (fellowship, common purpose or mission)

tenderness – σπλάγχνα (affection of the heart / cherished)

compassion- οίκτιρμοί (patient compassion / kindness / mercy)

First, we are called to be encouraged by those who are "along side" us. This is the same word family that Jesus uses in John 14 when he is about to ascend into heaven and he tells the disciples that the Father will send another "helper" to be with them—the Holy Spirit, who lives in us and comforts and guides us.

Second, we are called to give and receive comfort—the gentle soothing words of love that come from knowing we are loved and seen by those who love us. Then we are called to participate in a common sharing—we've already met this word in Pastor Steve's introduction to this series where he defined it as "actively and sacrificially sharing together in God's mission". Finally Paul closes with tenderness and compassion – literally our upper guts / spleen (thought by the Greeks to be the seat of strong emotion) and a kind of patient compassion that isn't common in Greek or in the New Testament, but most likely means something like "not quick to anger".

The point is, all the words in verse one describe the way we treat or feel about each other—and this is no surprise, we have seen multiple times how relationships are important to Paul, and how they play a central part in our joy. So I repeat the question Pastor Andrew asked in his closing sermon of last year: **"Let us**

then assess the key relationships in our life: God, family, friends, non-Christians. Where are we at in each of these relationships?" if our calling is relational, then we need to examine our hearts and see how our relationships are fairing.

2. Our calling is rooted in Jesus

But second, **our calling is rooted in Jesus**. More than just some kind of generic relational healthiness that is available to all people who surround themselves with good and supportive friends and family, our calling is rooted in Jesus Christ himself. Let's read that first verse again and see –

"¹Therefore 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..." (Phil 2:1 NIV)

There it is—encouragement "FROM BEING UNITED WITH CHRIST" and common sharing "IN THE SPIRIT" The most common source of encouragement (παράκλησις) in Paul's letters is the salvation we have in Jesus Christ. Our calling is rooted in what? in Jesus—in the work that he did for us and the great demonstration of love he gave us on the cross, and in the present reality of the Holy Spirit who binds us to one another and to God himself. Always remember this is Paul writing the letter. In his younger years that same Paul had been a zealous member of an ultra strict Jewish sect – the Pharisees--who personally persecuted members of the fledgling movement of Christ followers, even as far as imprisonment and death. Until one day he was travelling to Damascus when Jesus knocked him off his horse, blinded him and confronted him with the question "Why are you persecuting me?". You can read all about it in Acts chapter nine, though he was using the Hebrew version of his name there—Saul. From that day on, Paul's life changes as he comes to understand that Jesus is the son of God, the saviour of the world, the one to whom we owe our allegiance.

So time and time again Paul starts his letters with kind of a review of God's excellence and of the work that Jesus has done to set us free, then he comes to a point in the letter where he says something like "if all that is true, then..." or "because all that is true, then..." then he starts writing about the *results* of those foundational truths—what our lives should look like *because of who Jesus is* and what he has done.

Because that is what our faith is all about. We do not answer the call of Jesus Christ in order to win his favour—we already have his love, what else do we need? No, we answer Jesus' call BECAUSE we already have his love, and we want that love to overflow onto all those around us. Every part of our live is rooted in the love of and for Jesus Christ. At least it should be.

So the question that remains is this—**are we rooted in Jesus or in someone or something else?** Image for a second you are a great big tree in a storm and the wind is lashing your branches to and fro. Your roots go down deep into the earth—but what are they holding on to? When times get tough, where are your roots? In the strength of your will? The number of friends you have in the real or digital worlds? The size of your paycheck? Don't get me wrong, I am as happy as the next person that the Stock Market is showing signs of recovering nicely. But is that where my confidence lies? Is that how I know my future is secure? Or do I know my future is secure because Jesus has said he will be with us until the end of the age, and beyond that into the age to come. Our calling as followers of Jesus is to make sure everything we do and everything we say and everything we are becoming is rooted in Jesus Christ himself.

3. (Answering) Our calling brings joy to others

Third, **answering our calling brings joy to others.** We have seen so far in this series that Jesus brings joy into our lives, and that is profoundly true. There is joy beyond what anyone can describe in knowing Christ, in knowing that we are loved, and in knowing that no matter what happens, we will ultimately see Jesus and rest in him forever. But as Pastor Steve said last week, this isn't to say that we will always have perfect circumstances—in fact the Christians in Philippi were being persecuted for their faith even while being called to rejoice. Nor is it to say that the joy that comes with knowing we are loved by God himself is the ONLY emotion we experience. We still know sorrow and pain and tiredness and horror and sadness and all the range of human emotion. It's just that we have something like a furnace burning with the joy of the Lord that keeps us going anyways. And that furnace of Joy never goes away no matter our circumstances.

But what is interesting in our passage this week is Paul's statement that answering our calling brings joy to others. Look at how verse 2 begins: "then make my joy complete...". We've passed out of the "if" part of the passage to the "then" part of the passage, which we will get to in a sec, but we have to pause at Paul's comment that what he is about to ask the Philippians to do will in some way "Make [his] joy complete". Yes, our joy is rooted in an unshakable relationship with Jesus, but it can be "filled up" or "made complete" by what others do. In this case, Paul's joy is increased by seeing people he loves living out the calling that he first brought to him—the calling to lay down their lives for Jesus sake.

So the question we have to ask ourselves is this: **"are we bringing joy to others by the way we answer Jesus' calling"**. Don't misunderstand me—I am not saying that we need to live out our faith in order to make people happy or win their favour or win our Father's favour. But I AM saying that as we live out our faith

in sincere dependence on Jesus, it will necessarily bring joy to people around us, and to our Father in heaven. Answering our calling brings Joy to others.

4. Our calling demands unifying love

Fourth, and here we are getting down to where the rubber meets the road, **our calling demands unifying love**. How are the Philippians going to make Paul's Joy complete? Back to verse two: "then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind." I won't belabour the point—Pastor Steve talked about unity last week, but Paul requires us again in this passage to stop and acknowledge that we need to intentionally put love first. To intentionally put unity first. Sometimes our enemy prowls around like a roaring lion, but sometimes he sneaks around whispering lies into our ears—because he is also a liar and a cheat who seeks to distract us from our mission of love and our calling to unity. So my question to you here is: **do we allow anything to drive a wedge of disunity or lack of love into any of our relationships?** Is love our highest priority, or has it ever taken a back seat to something else? Because our calling demands unifying love.

5. Our calling requires unselfishness

Which brings us to verses three and four. And here, my brothers and sisters, is where I run into real trouble—because **our calling requires unselfishness**. Like someone walking along reading something in a cell phone and plowing straight into a wall or another person. Boom. That's me reading these verses, but here goes:

³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."

Seriously right now? "In humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others". Let's get one thing straight right now. This is not one of those sermons where the expert on the topic teaches those less knowledgeable. No no. This is definitely not that. Let's rewind a bit.

I met Jesus when I was a teenager—probably about 14 or 15 years old, though I am terrible with dates, so take that with a grain of salt. I had heard of Jesus since I was a kid. I grew up in Canada. So Jesus' name was woven through our national holidays—we got breaks to honour his birth at Christmas and his death and resurrection at Easter. But those were distant realities—kind of relics of history that formed the fabric of our country more than they were current realities that had anything to do with me.

But my mom started bringing us kids into church—first the local Anglican church, then a little Pentecostal church in the next town. And I started to see that God wasn't some distant reality, but a real person who was here, today, and he noticed me. This Jesus who I thought was a remote historical figure was actually present in the church with us. He was present at home in my bedroom and with me when I went to school and walked along the road to and from the bus stop. I started to feel uncomfortable as his Holy Spirit started calling my name and showing me that because of what Jesus had done for me, I owed him everything in return. Until one day I decided to place my life in his hands—and in that moment I knew peace like I had never felt before. And I began to put roots down into Jesus.

And I remember reading another letter from Paul to the church in Ephesus. I was reading an older translation that's a little more literal and has stiffer language, and I ran into this passage that just glued itself to my heart from that day on:

⁴But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in our wrongdoings, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), ⁶and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:4-6, NASB)

What struck me in these three verses (and you've probably heard me say it before) was those first two words—"But God". This is our life story – we who were lost would have remained lost **BUT God** was unwilling to leave us there and sent Jesus to bail us out. And since then everything has changed. We have new hearts, new minds, are set free from the tyranny of self, are overflowing with love for God himself and all our neighbours and are free from sin and.... The list goes on. How is that possible? But God.

Except sometimes it doesn't seem like that. Sometimes, for me at least, there's another "but" that is warring with God. Maybe you've also heard this in the quiet places of your heart and mind--"But I". "But I am too tired". "But I have already done so much". "But I don't even like that person". "But I am not qualified". "But I don't have enough time". "But I can't afford it". "But I can't see God". "But I don't understand why that happened". "But I have needs too". "But I feel so insignificant". "But I just can't!!!" We get buried under a landslide of "but I".

Where do these thoughts come from? Partly these thoughts come from within—yes we have been saved and filled with God's Holy Spirit, but we won't be perfect until Jesus returns, so in the meantime there is a war in our hearts and minds. And some of these thoughts come from the world around us. Let's be honest—we live in a world that is constantly telling us we need to "look after number one". So our

thoughts curl inwards. And sometimes I find myself slammed between these competing forces in my heart and in my mind. I know I am not alone in this—take a read through Romans 7 and you will see that even Paul, even though he was knocked from his horse, blinded and confronted by Jesus himself, fully committed to Jesus and his mission to spread the word of Jesus to the world outside the Jews—even that Paul sometimes felt like he was at war between God and his old self.

So let's go back to our passage and see what it is asking us to do.

³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”

It seems to me the calling itself is clear. We need to put down our need to defend ourselves, our need to advance our own agenda, our need to look after ourselves. In fact, we need to take our eyes off of ourselves and look around at the world that desperately needs to see and feel what it is like to be loved by God. We are called to take our eyes off our own needs and look around at the needs of others. And fulfill those needs. Pretty clear.

And you say “But I can't”

And I say “Yah, I know—and maybe that's the whole point”

I am going to suggest that our road to Unselfish Joy begins with two choices we need to make:

1. We must choose to accept that we can't... that we aren't strong enough... that we are too tired... that there are limits to our love.
2. We must take our eyes off ourselves and let Jesus have the last word. This is the critical point. We cannot get stuck with our eyes focused on our own limitations or sins or disappointments or whatever it is about ourselves that we fold inward on. We must let Jesus have and be the last word. **I can't... It's true, but Jesus** can and will do the impossible. **I am not strong enough. It's true, but Jesus**—who created the entire universe with a word—is definitely strong enough. **I am soo tired. It's true, but Jesus** is calling me to walk on so I will put one foot in front of the other as long as I have breath. **There are limits to my love. It's true, but Jesus** will fill my heart until it overflows with his love on my family, my friends, my neighbours and all those I come in contact with.

I honestly believe today that God is calling us to let him have the last word. So that's the last question for us this morning—“**Who gets the last word—us or Jesus?**” We have to take our eyes off ourselves and “Fix

our eyes on Jesus (see Heb 12:2). And as we let him have the last word, our hearts will overflow with unifying love as we care for one another's needs and share Humble Joy with our eyes fixed firmly on Jesus.