

Serving One Another

Ps. 111: 1, 2

Ps. 111: 3 – 5

Ps. 133: 1, 2

Ps. 122: 2, 3

Ps. 134: 1 – 3

Scripture reading: Phil. 1: 27 – 2: 18

Text: Phil. 2: 1 – 8

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

The apostle Paul writes to the congregation in Philippi and exhorts them. He urges them to have the same mind as Christ and to serve one another in all humility. He emphasises this all the more as he is concerned about the unity and the harmony in the congregation.

Pride is a dangerous thing. When members in a congregation are driven by selfish ambition, when each one wants to elevate himself, such pride will soon cause envy and strife. It will break down the unity, and paralyse their work of service.

As a remedy for selfish ambition and vain glory, the apostle now puts Christ in front of them as an example of serving as a servant in humbleness and with self-denial.

One of the apostle's greatest concerns is their unity in Christ. They should **together** press forward to the same goal, and they need to do so in complete harmony – in one spirit, with one mind. And as there is nothing that breaks down the harmony in a congregation as pride does, he now points us to the example of Christ who became a humble servant for our sake. Our Lord Jesus Christ is put in front of us as an example of self-denial as He stripped Himself of all glory and humbled Himself for our sake.

Jesus said:

“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Mt.16: 24).

The apostle is now saying the same thing. He instructs them to be followers of Christ. And here in our text he focuses in on Christ’s self-denial. Our Lord Jesus Christ stripped Himself of all honour and became a Servant of servants – the lowest of all.

And so that will be the theme for the preaching this morning:

Let *this* mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus

We will note...

1. Our call to serve one another in unity and love
2. Christ’s love for us
3. The call to follow Christ’s example

In the first place we note...

Our call to serve one another in unity and love

The apostle Paul exhorts the congregation in Philippi, together with their bishops and deacons, to behave themselves worthy of the gospel.

“...stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.” – 1: 27

Brothers, you are in this battle together, he says. You are not only facing persecution (chapter 1) but also false doctrine (chapter 3). In order to stand, you need to stand fast in one spirit with one mind.

We are indeed soldiers fighting together under one banner, united in one faith, in one Lord. We are fighting for the same cause; and so we ought to have our minds united in holy agreement, that we may speak, as it were, with one mouth; and act as one man with one spirit, one mind.

There was indeed some disunity among some of the members. At least one example is clear when the apostle says:

“I implore Euodia and I *implore* Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord” – 4: 2.

The implication is that there was indeed some kind of disunity. And we know how quickly the strife between two people in a congregation can spread to the rest of the congregation. We are quick to form factions: “I am for this one”, and: “I am for that one”.

How will the apostle Paul deal with this situation? First of all he reminds them of the comfort of the gospel. In the verses that precede our text he reminds them that even their suffering for Christ proves their salvation. Thus he encourages them to bear their cross joyfully, knowing the complete comfort that we have in Christ – in life and in death.

“Therefore, if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfil my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind” – verses 1 and 2.

In their suffering, in the midst of persecution and conflict, they have indeed tasted the comfort of the gospel, the consolation in Christ, the comfort of His love and the fellowship of His Spirit. This comfort and love has already worked tender care and mercy among themselves. And now the apostle urges them to continue and to grow in this comfort and mercy of Christ, in the tender fellowship of Christ’s Spirit.

If you know the comfort and the love and the mercy of Christ, if the gospel indeed has its fruit in your life – as it indeed has – fulfil my joy by being **like-minded**.

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While the apostle Paul writes this letter, he sits in jail. Possibly he will have to die. Yet, as long as it is well with the congregation of Christ, he rejoices. His own interests do not concern him. He is gladly willing to pour out his life for their sake. As long as it is well with **them, his** joy is full. **Their** wellbeing is his greatest concern.

And **this** he reckons to be a sign of their wellbeing: when there is mutual agreement amongst them and brotherly harmony.

We see then how high he rates the importance of unity and harmony within the congregation.

“...fulfil my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.”

Dear congregation, the Lord is also addressing us. Be like-minded, be of one mind. The rest of Scripture teaches us that this unity can only exist when we are together joined to Christ, through one faith and one Spirit. It is a unity in the truth of the gospel. It is a unity that can only exist in the truth. There is no true unity when a congregation deviates from God’s Word. There is no unity without bowing our necks together under the authority of God’s Word. But knowing this to be true, let us focus on the words of our text. We are exhorted to be of one accord, of one mind. We are exhorted to have the same views and the same interests – the whole congregation! Do we have that?

As we are driven by the same love, governed by the same doctrine, the proof that Christ’s love is indeed working in us, will be seen in this: when we are one in spirit and of one mind. We are to think alike as our thoughts are driven and governed by the same Word and Spirit. This is not that valse unity which the world seeks, but true unity which God works powerfully through His Spirit through the instruction of His Word, yes, through preaching of the gospel of Christ.

Do you know the consolation in Christ, and the comfort of His love, and the fellowship of His Spirit that joins us together in tender care and love for one another?

In our heart and soul, in our deepest being, we should all be one, as we are indeed one in Christ. The whole congregation has to act like one man, all together, following Christ.

What does this mean? It means, first of all, that **His** Word must be our only norm. If we want to know how to live as a Christian, there is only one answer – not ten! In the body of Christ there is no room for individualism, where everyone may do as he sees fit.

In every aspect we should become one, not only our mind and thinking should be alike, but he says we should also have the same love. The love of Christ should regulate our conduct and bind us together.

The apostle then continues and applies this exhortation:

“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteems others better than himself” – verse 3.

Selfish ambition and conceit are enemies to our unity in Christ. Selfish ambition is to seek your own honour and interest. Conceit, in this context, is vain glory. The opposite of seeking your own glory and your own interest, is to be lowly and humble, seeking the interests of others. In lowliness of mind you even have to esteem others better than yourself.

Conceit, or vain glory – that is: when we reckon ourselves better or more important than others. Such pride will destroy the harmony as each one will rush headlong holding to his own opinion and do his own thing, seeking his own interest. In vain glory each one is delighted with his own inventions and follows his own mind.

And so the apostle puts forward this remedy: Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or vain glory, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.

For both diseases, selfish ambition and vain glory, he prescribes one remedy: the humility that we see in Christ.

Now, he gives this description of true humility: it is to esteem others better than yourself.

If anything in our whole life is difficult, it is this. True humility is indeed a rare virtue.

We are all proud by nature. There is no one that is not eager to have superiority. Fooling ourselves with vain glory, we look down on others with contempt. We are quick to criticise others and to flatter ourselves. Our own pride is the cause of strife. Our vain glory, which by nature we all have in abundance, will destroy the unity in the congregation, except if we listen carefully to this instruction.

Someone may ask: But how is it possible to reckon myself lower than someone else when I know for sure that I received more gifts and honour than he has? Must I truly reckon myself to be the lowest in the congregation?

The answer is twofold. First we have to know our own damnable state before God. This alone should be enough reason to strip us from all pride: if you know your own depravity and your own corruption. When we know our own depravity and our own foolishness, then it is not so hard to see God's grace in the lives of others. If you truly know your own corruption and if you truly detest yourself as you should, then you will have no difficulty to esteem others higher than yourself.

The second part of the answer is this: we have to realise that we have no gifts or talents which we can call our own. We are only stewards of God's grace – stewards in order to serve one another, as the apostle Peter says:

“As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God” – 1 Peter 4:10.

The **more** gifts you received and the more abilities you have, the greater your responsibility to be a servant to your brother!

Did you receive more than your brother? Then you are called to **serve** him all the more!

The apostle continues this instruction in verse 4, saying:

“Let each of you look out not only for his own interest, but also for the interests of others”.

The interest of my brother should become **my** interest. We no longer live for ourselves. Love is the opposite of selfishness. Love wants to give. Love wants to serve. Love does not seek its own interest – 1 Cor. 13: 5.

But if you act with selfish ambition and in vain glory, if you do something in the congregation in order to be seen by men, then your service will benefit no one. Then all your talents and all your abilities and all your service will only arouse envy and strife.

To drive home the exhortation the apostle now puts before us the love of Christ. We note that in the second place:

Christ's love for us

“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a slave, and coming in the likeness of men” – verses 6, 7.

To exercise humility and to serve one another in love, we need to fix our eyes on Christ, he says. Now, the comparison is not equal. Christ's humiliation was infinitely greater than any man can ever experience. The Son of God is Himself very God, and we are only men. The humiliation of the Son of God was real, for He had to leave behind His divine glory. Our humiliation is almost nothing, for we have no glory anyway that can compare to the glory of God. The Son of God came down from heaven; we are of the dust of the earth already. What Christ has done is unique, and so the comparison is not equal between Him and us. He is God, and we are dust.

But for this very reason the example of Christ is all the more striking, and the command to follow His example is all the more compelling when we consider the divinity of the Son of God and the depth of His humiliation.

Now, while the humiliation of Christ was unique, the comparison that is placed in front of us is one in which we are called to have the same mind as He had and to humble ourselves after His example.

The Son of God humbled Himself, descending from His heavenly glory – even the majesty and glory of being God. He descended to become the lowest Servant of sinful men, bearing **our** shame, taking our guilt and punishment on Him, suffering and dying for us.

Humanly speaking this has been the filthiest job that you can imagine. If you walk in a shopping centre and see a servant cleaning the floors, or cleaning the public toilets, you may think: I am glad this is not my job. And you may even reckon that such a job is below your dignity. But the Son of God took on Him a task much filthier as He was covered with our filthiness and bore our shame and even the bitter and frightful wrath of God – for us. Yes, He became the lowest servant of all.

Over against such true and enormous humiliation, our humiliation consists only in refraining from exalting ourselves by a false estimation. He gave up His rightful honour; all that is required of us is that we do not think more of ourselves than we ought.

We are nothing anyway, and so when we are humble, it fits our natural state; but He who is the Lord of all glory emptied Himself of His rightful glory and came down to serve us.

That is divine love and humility of such enormity that we cannot even comprehend the extent of it. What do **we** know of the glory which He left behind? What do we understand of the humiliation for God to become a man, and for the Son of God to die a cursed death?

He who was in the form of God, and **equal** with God, made Himself of no reputation. He stripped Himself of all His divine glory, and came down to serve us – as if He, the Lord of glory, is our servant.

Since the Son of God descended from such a height, how unreasonable will it then be if we, who are nothing, should lift ourselves up with pride!

Dear congregation, when Christ was on earth He did not stop being God. But He concealed His glory. He underwent His humiliation and suffering not only as man, but also as God. **God** was manifested in the flesh – 1 Tim. 3:16. His humanity and divinity cannot be separated. Because Christ is fully man and fully God at the same time, the apostle Paul rightly says that Christ is the Son of God and equal to God.

With these words he wants us to understand from what infinite height the Son of God came down to serve us.

What a divine love! What a humility! He even died the shameful death of one who is cursed by God – **He**, the Lord of all glory!

He became the suffering Servant foretold by Isaiah.

He was despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him (Isaiah 53:3).

He was too disgraceful to look at.

We have to understand clearly that He did not do this for His own sake. He had nothing to gain by doing this. He had all the glory and all the splendour of God to which nothing can be added. He did not do this for His own sake, but for our sake. It is the most perfect example of self-denial and humility and love.

Because we by nature shrink away from such humility and self-denial, the apostle reminds us also of the glory that **followed** Christ's humiliation.

“Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name...” – verse 9.

Christ also applies this to us, when He says:

“...whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” – Mt.23:12.

And again:

“...whoever humbles himself as this little child, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” – Mt.18:4

And again:

“...whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve...” – Mt.20: 26 – 28.

The Son of God did not humble Himself in order to receive a new exaltation, for what exaltation could **He** receive if He was already equal to God in glory and majesty? The apostle refers to the Son of God **before** He descended. While He was already exalted and crowned with infinite and perfect glory, He was willing to descend and humble Himself. While He was still in His divine glory, He denied Himself and willingly left that glory behind. Being equal with God and above every other name, what could He have gained by doing this? Could He have been striving for a higher glory than that which was already His? No, He humbled Himself not for His own sake, but for our sake. He took our interests on Him.

This example is now put in front of us. And to make us all the more eager to follow His example, we are also reminded of the exaltation that followed His humiliation. Whoever wants to share in His glory, first has to share in His humiliation.

What then does it mean to follow the example of Christ? We note that in the third place:

The call to follow Christ's example

There are some who are very afraid to listen to preaching that exhorts us to follow Christ's example. There is a history behind it. It is a reaction against humanistic and exemplary preaching where man is seen as good and able to improve himself. The idea is then that man needs nothing more than a good example to improve himself. Such teaching is of course against Scripture. It does not reckon with the total depravity of man. Man is then encouraged to pull himself up on his own boot strings, so to speak. And the examples of

Christ and of other good men are then used for this end. It is then almost presented as if Christ saves us by His example, instead of by His substitution.

In reaction to such heresy, many do not want to hear **anything** about following the example of Christ.

Yet, brothers and sisters, we need some discernment. By rejecting one error we must not fall into another error. We are indeed called to be followers of Christ, and to follow His example – not in order to save ourselves, and not in order to exercise the supposed free will of man like Pelagius, but as children of God who are being renewed by the grace of God unto the image of Christ.

While we have to be on our guard against humanistic and exemplary preaching and against any idea that man can in any way be his own saviour by improving himself, we are not to react against such teaching by rejecting **the rightful exhortation** to become followers of Christ. As people who have been saved by the grace of God – people who are from day to day renewed in Christ by His Spirit through the instruction of His Word – we are called to be imitators of Christ who is the very image of God.

Scripture everywhere clearly teaches us to follow Christ, and to follow His example. His work of salvation is of course unique, and we are not called to imitate or reproduce **that**. Yet, we **are** called to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus.

Before we move on, it has also become necessary to guard this teaching of the apostle Paul against a new error that we find in our own day. To follow Christ and to follow His example, does not replace the law of God. To follow Christ is not a different law, over against the commandments of God. Instead, to follow Christ is to walk in the same love and righteousness that is demanded by God's law. Christ did not bring another law. To follow Christ, and to live "in the style of the kingdom" – if we want to use that expression – should be nothing else than a life according to God's law. The example of Christ is an example of complete obedience to God's law. To follow Christ should not become to us a mystic concept that replaces the clear revelation of God's law.

We need to emphasise this, because: there is a heresy in our day that tries to invent a new ethics for Christians. According to this new ethics God's law is no longer the only norm for right and wrong, for good and bad. According to this ethics a Christian in his daily walk of

life should not ask first of all: what does God say in His law, but he must simply ask himself the question: What would Jesus do? Do not seek first of all to apply God's commandments to your life, but simply follow Christ, we are told.

However, brothers, you will realise that this is a false contradiction. Christ, and His example, is then separated from God's law, as if you can follow Christ without obeying His commandments.

And how does this new ethics operate? You ask the question: what would Jesus do in my situation? And then you look for situations in the life of Jesus which is similar to your own situation and see how He has acted in such situations. But, and here is the catch, your situation will not be exactly the same as the situations in which Jesus found Himself. Within the framework of post-modernism this new ethics stresses that truth is subject to time and circumstance. You will then not be able to follow the example of Christ in a literal sense – you have to make a metaphorical jump to find **an analogy** between something that Jesus did and your own situation. And this requires a subjective interpretation of the believer: what do *I* think would Jesus do in my situation. The following of Christ is then turned into a following of your own subjective feeling and opinion, which is no longer regulated by God's law.

To follow Christ then becomes a mystic concept. You have to follow Him without clear instructions. This new ethics is then called the style of the kingdom. The style of the kingdom is not first of all determined by God's commandments, but by a vague following of a certain direction, which **we** think will be similar as the direction or style of Jesus' life.

The church then has to develop its own style in analogy to the style of Jesus – a **style** which is then subject to changing times, a changing culture, and the change of circumstances. A vague and mystic style which no longer acknowledges God's law as the only rule for thankfulness.

Brothers and sisters, such ethics is a total distortion of the gospel, and a total distortion of what it really means to follow Christ.

We must therefore remind ourselves that to follow Christ is a life in obedience to God's law, and not according to our own feeling or opinion or fancy.

After considering the heresies of past and present, we still have to give heed to the lawful exhortation to follow Christ's example.

Here in our text the apostle Paul applies this exhortation to a specific aspect of our new life in Christ. This teaching of the apostle is confirmed also by the rest of Scripture.

Christ washes the feet of His disciples and then He tells them:

“...I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you” – John 13: 15.

And a little later He adds:

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another” – John 13: 34.

The apostle Paul also says:

“...as Christ forgave you, so you also must do” – Col.3: 13.

Or to the Corinthians he says:

“Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ” – 1 Cor.11: 1.

Or think of the apostle Peter where he encourages us to persevere in persecution, saying:

“...Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps...” – 1 Peter 2: 21.

There is no doubt that this is fully Scriptural and part of the gospel. We are called to imitate Christ and to follow His example in all our conduct.

Here in our text, the apostle now focuses in on the humility and the sacrificial love of Christ, exhorting us to have the same mind and spirit, in order that we may serve one another with

a humble mind and with a love that removes all pride and selfish ambition, that we may not seek our own honour and our own interest, but become servants, serving one another.

While this teaching of the apostle Paul applies to each one of us, it also applies in a special way to the office bearers, who are to be an example in their imitation of Christ – just as Paul exhorts us in many places to follow his example, while he is following Christ. It applies to the elders who have to follow the example of our Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ. And that it applies also to the deacons, is easy to understand, as the very name deacon actually means servant. The deacons are called to be servants in the congregation after the example of Christ. It also applies to the minister, as the word minister too means servant. Actually, everywhere where we read of office bearers and their ministry, we may translate the work of their ministry with “work of their serving”.

In the Old Testament both priests and prophets were called servants, and even David in his office of king calls himself a servant of the Lord. Also when we read of the offices in the New Testament, the apostle speaks of their work of ministry; and again we may translate it: “their servant’s work”.

In the same way the apostle Paul calls himself a bondservant or slave of Christ, called for the work of ministry, the work of a servant.

For all office bearers Christ is their example, who emptied Himself of all glory to become a **Servant** for our sake.

But this teaching applies also to the rest of us. The love of Christ binds us together and makes us servants serving one another.

Let no one in the congregation do anything through selfish ambition or vain glory, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.

Let each of us look out not for his own interest, but for the interest of others.

Let **this** mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus. Amen.