

“It is not about you!” Philippians 2:1-18

So, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise, you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Listen to this carefully: **“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that [...] I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the Gospel.”** [Phil 1:27] This is what the apostle wrote a few verses earlier.

A few years ago, I read something that quite shocked me. It was an open letter by the president of the LC-MS Rev Matthew Harrison to all pastors. In that letter he was quoting Dr Luther. You may remember that Dr Luther spent his life teaching and preaching mostly in the city of Wittenberg. That's where the Lutheran Reformation began.

However, at the end of his life Dr Luther was so disappointed with the Christians in Wittenberg that he wrote to his wife Kathy that he didn't even want to return there. Why? For the people of Wittenberg had not borne the fruits of the Gospel that he had hoped for.

Dr Luther was so disheartened that after they had weekly heard the most beautiful Gospel proclaimed and taught for decades by Dr Luther himself and all his fellow reformers, still... he was concerned that their manner of life was not worthy of the Gospel of Christ.

What do you think, if Paul the apostle or Dr Luther came to us... what would they find? What would they conclude? What about our lives? Are they worthy of the Gospel of Christ? What would they say? What do you think?

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Whatever we may think, we have the instructions from the apostle on what our lives should look like, so that they are worthy of the Gospel of Christ. Let's reflect, **first, on the unique purpose** of Christian instructions. **Second, on what exactly Paul the apostle emphasizes in his instruction.** Finally, **what directions** does he give us so that we would succeed and **our lives would be worthy of the Gospel.** Purpose. Emphasis. Direction.

So, first, **the unique purpose of Christian instructions.** Did you notice a unique detail in how Paul writes his instructions? And this is true for this particular letter and for the New Testament correspondence altogether and for Christian message in general.

That is something that separates Christian instructions from any other religious or moral instruction. To us these instructions are not given so that we could achieve, or merit or in some other way gain God's favor in this life or something good after this life.

On the contrary, they are given to us exactly *because* we already have God's favor, His love, His affection, His amazing promises of new life with Him in New Heavens and New Earth. They are given to us precisely *because* we already have been welcomed in God's family, we already have received the gift of eternal life, and we already have been made co-heirs with Jesus Christ of God's Kingdom.

That is why Paul the apostle begins with what you already have been given. **"So, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy..."**. The apostle isn't questioning whether Philippians may have received anything good from the Triune God. He states it. Rephrasing...

"As there is so much encouragement for you in Christ, as there is so much comfort for you from the love of God the Father, as you already participate and share in the Holy Spirit, who has created in your affection and sympathy, therefore..."

And how much this is true for us! There is so much encouragement in Christ. Take what Paul writes: **"Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."**

Why did He do this? Because of God's love. Because the Triune God would not leave you captive to sin, death and devil. Because no price was too high for Him to redeem those whom He loves. Because this is what kind of God your God is. Because this is how far He is willing to go to bring you to be with Him forever. How about that for encouragement?!

And where is this Jesus now? **God [the Father] has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."**

This Jesus is now the Lord of all lords. To Him all authority is given in heaven and on earth. And He wants to bless you more than you can imagine. That is why He has sent His Spirit to dwell in you. That is why He has created a new heart in you. That is why keeps showing His affection to you without stopping. How about that for comfort?! This is what Paul

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reminds you of first, and only then does he proceed. “As you have received all of this, this divine encouragement and comfort, **complete my joy by...**” and only then he lists a few instructions for us in what manner we need to lead our Christian lives.

This is the unique purpose of Christian instructions. To guide us in how to express our gratitude for the divine grace we already have so abundantly received. How to manifest our new identity in Christ in our lives. How to glorify our Father with how we live together as Christian community.

That brings us to our second point. What exactly does **Paul emphasize** as he speaks to us? **“Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”** He mentioned this already earlier - **“of the same mind, in full accord.”**

Unity of faith. Harmony of faith. Shared confession. We cannot overstate how important this is. We are a unique community; because what brings us together, what creates Christian community is the Word and the Spirit. We gather around the same faith, same confession, as the Spirit helps us to strive to be in full accord. This is so important.

Earlier Paul defined the manner of life worthy of the Gospel as – **“with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the Gospel.”** This is why we are here. To strive for the Gospel. With one mind. This is the Mission of the Church. And we can't possibly carry it out without unity of faith.

If there is no unity of faith in a congregation, what are we going to proclaim to those outside? What are we going to teach to those whom the Lord brings to us? What are we going to discuss when we gather together? Our differing personal opinions? If a congregation loses the unity of faith, what even remains?

They can't offer the life-giving words of God anymore. At best they can offer company of friendly people, who gather together to satisfy some social needs. Then we cannot possibly live in a manner worthy of the Gospel. But that's not all.

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.” This sounds so contrary to what we hear in society around us.

It is all about you. “Be yourself! You have to do what's right for you! Prioritize yourself! Never apologize for who you are! Live life on your own terms!” Sounds familiar? And I wonder - how much we all have been influenced by this kind of mindset?

How often Christians choose a congregation where to belong based on “what I like”? How often our actions and participation are guided by “what I prefer”? And when things don't happen the way “I want them”, we vote with our feet and off we go.

It doesn't come to us naturally - to count others as more significant and to look for the interests of others. That is exactly what the Spirit of Christ helps us to do. He gives us the mind of Jesus Christ. Then we begin to see others as the apostle instructed.

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Just look around! Every single one of you has been invited by God the Father, every single person here is a miracle of God's grace and love. Jesus gave His life for that person. For each of you who are here. The Father has called you by the Gospel.

The Spirit of God dwells in you. You are so, so significant to the Triune God. Now, how can we care for all and every one of these God's beloved who are here, how can we look for their interests, how can we bless them with everything that we have been entrusted with?

What a wonderful way of seeing one another! That is a gift that the Holy Spirit grants you, when He opens your eyes and makes your heart alive and tender. Then you have the mind of Jesus, where you gladly humble yourself in the service of God's chosen ones. This is what the apostle emphasized.

Finally, **what directions** does Paul the apostle give us so that we would succeed and **our lives would be worthy of the Gospel**. Very simple - live in such wonderful Christian unity and humility **"that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life."**

Remember, the apostle doesn't write this so that we would earn God's favor. You already have encouragement and comfort and affection from the Triune God. You already are children of God and as the apostle puts it – you already do shine as lights in the world, in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation.

You may not even realize that, nor see it in yourselves, but that is true. You are different. You are not of this world anymore. You do not have the same mind as the world anymore; yours is in Christ. As Jesus Himself said: **"You are the light of the world."**

Yes, you are! But... we may wonder, and rightly so – how are we the light, how do we shine like lights in this world? It is certainly nothing of our doing. You are right. The apostle makes a helpful note. How do you shine? By **"holding fast to the Word of life."**

That is the key. We are not the source of light. We are not the source of new life that we could share with others. We are recipients and vessels of divine life and light that shines through us. But the source of the light and life is... **"the Word of life."**

That is where the apostle directs us. To the Word of life. He directs us to Jesus. He directs us to sit at His feet and to feast on the words of life that He speaks to us. In the Divine Service, in Bible Classes, in home devotions, in Christian conversations.

Hold to the Word, feast on the Word, for that Word is so powerful, He transforms you, renews you, makes you wise, fills you with grace, empowers you, grants you peace, and more and more, and as He does all those things in you, you shine as lights in this world.

And that's what the manner of life worthy of the Gospel looks like. So simple. The good and gracious Lord has richly provided for us everything that we need to live in this manner. May He bless us and use us, so that when Paul the apostle and Dr Luther finally sees us on the day of Christ, they **"may be proud that they did not run in vain or labor in vain,"** but that your life in unity of faith, humility and mutual love has been worthy of the Gospel. And for that all glory be to our God! Amen.