

The Importance of Divine Unity
Philippians 2:1-13

A. Introduction

[slide 1] Good morning, and once again welcome to Grace Community Church. We're glad you are here to worship with us this morning. My name is Neal Manning and I am one of the elders here at Grace. Brad, who is our teaching elder and normally up here Sunday mornings is away, having every moment away from us, suffering in the far away land of Hawaii. So pray for him and Alison as they visit with friends before travelling back next weekend.

As we try to forgive him for not inviting us, I want to remind you of our Independence Day celebration this evening. If you've not gone to the Moneypenny's 4th of July show before, please make plans to join us tonight. Bring a chair or blanket, some bug spray, and enjoy some fellowship along with a spectacular fireworks display and some Sunni Sky's icecream. You will not be disappointed.

Since we have star and stripes and fireworks on our mind it's a good time to recognize our service members. I'll ask if you've ever served in any branch of the military would you stand a moment as we say thank you for your service and sacrifice? [wait. applaud]. Thank you. You may be seated.

Military personnel know as well as anyone the importance of unit cohesion and the dangers of discord among the ranks. Serving long hours along people can be stressful. Living with the same people you work with can be its own kind of suffering. But when you face a common suffering together, like in a warzone, regardless of your interpersonal difficulties, there is a sort of bond that's not easily broken. A lot of times that bond simply revolves around a shared experience while you keep the peace until you get home and can go your separate ways. But there's a deeper type of peace, a unity of purpose and mind that I want us to consider this morning.

Christ has secured for believers unity with each other by bringing us into union with himself; into the family of God. But maintaining peace among family members can be hard work. I want us to look at a passage in Philippians 2 today to

find how we, here at Grace Community Church, can find the joy of unity that comes from God; having one mind as we serve God. As you turn to Philippians chapter two, as is our custom in respect to the Word of God, will you stand with me as I read from the ESV verses one through thirteen.

B. Reading & Prayer

[slides 2-4] **1** So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, **2** complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. **3** Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. **4** Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. **5** Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, **6** who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, **7** but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. **8** And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. **9** Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, **10** so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, **11** and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

12 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, **13** for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Father, we thank you for bringing us to this time of worship and study. Thank you for your Word. Give us eyes to see, hearts willing to obey, and lives that will conform to the image of Christ and bring you glory. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen. [slide 5]

You may be seated.

C. Transition

I have known for a while now that Brad would be out of town and I would be preaching today. So I tried to be diligent, work hard in preparing. Two weeks ago I had my sermon nearly complete. Then that Sunday, two weeks ago... Brad

preached my sermon. “Ugh. Patience. Forgiveness, yes I need to forgive Brad for stealing what I wanted to say.” No, I’m joking of course. I didn’t have that reaction, because I knew not only was there no wrong doing at all, but God must be doing something. Five or six weeks ago I posted a link to an article about differing preferences, opinions, and attitudes in the church. Two weeks ago Brad preached on church discipline from Hebrews 12 and Matthew 18 and I was blessed and challenged by it. Today we’re in Philippians 2 talking about unity, but could have easily been in a half-dozen other passages. Not exactly the same content, but they overlap. I think it’s a testament to the canon of Scripture that we should be hearing the same gospel message from every text. Not only that, but the fact that God brought unity to the minds of the elders recently may show us He’s trying to teach us something. We’ll see from our text and others as well that the pursuit of unity between believers can at times cut off the need for discipline within the church.

So, like Paul, I can say that to write the same things to you is no bother for me, and is good for you. Unity. It’s a wonderful thing to be in harmony with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Have you ever dreaded going to visit family, maybe the in-laws? Have you avoided the dinner table because you know the strife that is about to erupt from the same culprits? That’s not unity. That’s discord. Now contrast that with the feeling of harmony and peace when you’re with your closest loved ones. You don’t have to agree on everything, but they know you would do anything to help them. And you know they would do the same for you. [slide 6] In Psalm 133 David exclaimed “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” That’s what we’ve been given. That’s what we need to preserve. In God’s power, we fight to keep that kind of harmony in the church.

D. First Point - Answering the call to unity is too important to ignore

[slide 7] In Philippians, just a few verses earlier, in 1:27 Paul lays the groundwork for our text. He writes to the entire church at Philippi, whom he loved, “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, 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...”

Now look at the opening verses of chapter two [slide 8]. “1So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit,

any affection and sympathy,² complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”

The first thing I want you to see today is [slide 9] the call to unity is too important to ignore. We must answer it with humility. We must answer it for the sake of the gospel. Unity among the Philippians was important to Paul’s joy. And can I suggest that unity here at Grace is important to God’s joy? The same God who wrote these words through Paul then speaks to us today, calling us to work for the gospel in love for one another.

These “if” statements by Paul are not mere rhetorical nonsense. [slide 10] He’s pointing out what truly exists. We don’t have time to look further this morning, but the home group notes will point you back to chapter one where we find Paul points out that each of these “if” statements have been fulfilled by the grace of God. So he says, in effect, “you *have* to do this! You have to find a way to love your Christian brother or sister, yes, even the one you don’t like, or the one you think has done you wrong.”

But catch his tone. He doesn’t simply command them. He pleads with them from within the context of the love of God. The Philippians were Paul’s partners in the gospel, and he loved them. So he sends a heart plea to them. “It would make me happy if you came together and treat each other the way the family of God ought to treat each other.” Answering the call to unity is important because it is who you were called to be in the gospel of God. I can’t command you to love the guy two rows over from you. God’s already done that. But I can stand here and say, “please, come together in one heart and treat each other like you ought to.”

Note also that you cannot obey this on your own. This must be done in community. It makes no sense to maintain the unity of one. If you think you’ve been given the spiritual gift of individualism, think again. When God saved you, you were saved into the community of faith. You were adopted into God’s family. And in family, we know there will be strife and discord. We’ve been given unity. Now we need to work together to maintain it.

How do we do this? Look at verses three and four [slide 11]. “**3** Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than

yourselves. **4** Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

Humility. We need to set aside our self-importance. We need to realize that God loves, more than you can imagine, that brother or sister who annoys the mess out of you. And it is time to start treating him or her like a child of the King. To do that means we have to give up our pride and our rights; even our right to be offended. It seems everyone exercises that right in abundance today.

I like how Paul, even in his appeal to humility, demolishes the world’s notion of what humility is. We can easily fall into the world’s thinking here as well. “If you are going to call yourself humble, you have to forget about yourself because you’re worthless and good for nothing. You shouldn’t own anything because you should have given it all away. You can’t be happy because if you’re happy you were serving yourself instead of others.”

Look at what Paul says [slide 12]. “Let each of you look *not only* to his own interests, *but also* to the interests of others.” If you have ever fallen into the trap of the world’s way of thinking about humility, it’s time to set that aside. Actually, thinking so much about depreciating yourself is an affront to God and a form of pride. You too are a child of God, an image bearer, whom God has given gifts and responsibilities. So, he’s saying use those gifts to serve that worrisome brother as if he were more important.

It’s important to answer the call to unity for the sake of your own spiritual maturity, for the sake of others in the family of God, and because it’s what pleases God.

E. Second Point - Look to Jesus as your source and example for humility leading to unity & exaltation.

I can hear you thinking, “I know humility is hard already, but you don’t know what this guy said and did to offend me. How am I supposed to be of the same mind as him?” You’re right. I don’t know. I don’t have to know. The answer is the same to us all regardless of what went on. Look to Jesus. [slide 13]

That is our second point this morning. Look to Jesus as both the source and the example for your humility which facilitates or enables both unity *and* exaltation [repeat]. It's neat to see how Jesus serves as both the source and example of humility. Paul said [slide 14] we should be of the same heart and mind, and to have this mindset common among us. What mind? Paul's letter to the Corinthians says we have the mind of Christ. Here it's a little more complicated than that. Paul actually leaves out a verb in verse five that would clear up any question of translation or interpretation.

[slide 15] The two primary ways to interpret verse five are these:

“Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.” In this translation Jesus serves as our example. Think like he did, do things like he did them. We need to see Christ's humility and be of the same mind as him.

The second way is this [slide 16]. *“Act in this way, as it befits those who are in Christ Jesus.”* Here, Christ serves as the reason and source of our ability to preserve unity through humility. We need to be of the same mind with one another because of who we are in Christ.

There are contextual reasons to prefer this second interpretation, essentially saying, you were called into the family of God for humble, loving service. Now fulfill your calling. This follows Paul's pattern of first declaring who we are in Christ, and then saying this is how we live in Christ. Where God calls, He equips.

You can almost picture him there under house arrest, he dictates this letter to Timothy, addressing a church family who partnered with him in the gospel of Christ. He pleads, “be united because it's fitting for those who love Jesus. This Jesus who...” and as his mind settles on the beauty of Christ he practically breaks into song. And that's exactly what we have [slide 17]. Verses six through eleven make up what is known as the Christ hymn. There is poetic meter in this song of praise. Paul traces the wonderful work of Christ from his humility, service, and sacrifice, to the union we have with the Father because of him, the exaltation he receives, and the glory brought to God by Christ's obedience.

No wonder Paul stops to sing his praise. Jesus is the one that makes it so important that we serve each other in love and humility. Look to Jesus. Perhaps

you're here and you don't quite get the importance of church unity; you may not grasp who Jesus is, what he did, or are unsure of Jesus Christ's relationship with Christians. He was much more than a messenger bearing witness to the truth- He himself *is* Truth. He did more than show us the way to God- He himself *is* the Way. He did much more than give us an example to follow- by His death on the cross, bodily resurrection, and glorification He secured for his people union with Him and unity with each other. In short, God became man to purchase salvation for rebels who turn and look to Jesus. Jesus takes those who trust in him and brings them into communion with God the Father.

If Jesus is the source of our unity does that mean we toss out this first idea of him also being our example? Absolutely not! All throughout the NT we are told to follow him, to pattern our lives after Christ, be conformed to his image. We will never do the things he did because he was unique in his person and in his redemptive work. But he is our chief exemplar.

Jesus was both servant and savior. A lot could be said about what "form of God" and "form of a servant" mean, and exactly of what Jesus emptied himself. The simple explanation is that God became man. And in so doing Jesus divested himself of the prerogative and privilege of his power and position as God. While remaining fully God- remember back earlier to Hebrews chapter 5- he learned obedience. The Son submitted himself to the will of the Father. He set aside his rights for our benefit.

The implications for us should start becoming real clear. Are we willing to set aside our rights for our fellow believer? You know, the one you can't stand? Are you willing to lay down your right to be offended? Are you willing to give up the respect and love that an image bearer deserves from another follower of Christ? All too often we think we understand the situation and motive of the other person. We look out for our own interests instead of the interests of our brother or our sister. We forget how much we've been forgiven. I forget about the plank in my eye as I try to remove the splinter in his eye that seems to bother me so much more. In his letter to the Corinthians Paul scolded the church for their conflict and bringing one another to court! He told them it's shameful. "Why not let yourselves instead be defrauded!" for the sake of protecting the name of Christ? It's for Christ that we humbly serve our brother, and it's for her sanctification that we love our sister more than our rights.

For Jesus his humility, obedience, love, and service- you might say- *earned* him the right to be exalted as God. He remained God throughout, but his right to

be praised was validated because he went through complete sacrifice and triumphed. What about us? [slide 18] Again Jesus is our example. He sets the pattern we see all over Scripture that suffering produces glory, humility results in exaltation. “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord and He will lift you up.” We will not become divine, but we will partake in the divine nature. Our ability to enjoy the goodness of heaven is expanded through our work for unity. When we exercise faith & obedience we are investing in greater reward when our eternal hope is realized. We will be vindicated for *doing* what was right, not for asserting our rights.

Why do we preserve unity? How do we humble ourselves? Look to Jesus.

F. Third Point – Do the Work of Unity because God is Working in You

[slide 19] The final two verses of our passage, and our final point show the amazing way Paul progresses his argument, but the message remains the same. We are to work at this unity thing; to pursue love and humility, because God is at work in you to do it! [slide 20] “Work out your own salvation.” We’ve been saved *to* something. Now... make it a reality. “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance,” John the Baptist said. Or do the works that is befitting of your salvation.

Preserving and maintaining harmony will take hard work. In the family of God we have a responsibility to one another. We are all to work for our maturity, the sanctification of other believers, and the glory of God. Paul pleaded with the Philippians to answer this call while he was absent. You might say that the elders here at Grace, or your Home Group leader, or your accountability partner is pleading with you to work toward like-mindedness even in their absence.

What kind of work serves the cause of unity? Perhaps the most important work is prayer. Pray for the Christian brother or sister that annoys or offends you. And I’m not talking about the type of prayer that says, “Lord, you better deal with her before I do.” Or, “God, make him see how wrong he is, and fix him!” I’m talking about prayer for the blessing of your fellow believer. [slide 21] Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, “*I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me.*” Prayer for another person will bring about change in your heart and perspective. The Lord may even use you to

bring about the answer to your prayer for blessing and spiritual growth in your brother or sister.

After prayer, we get to the nitty-gritty. We may need to forgive, and seek forgiveness. Some of you may be familiar with the Westminster Confession of Faith. We read from there that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. In a later section dealing with sin these ministers encourage the church this way [slide 22]. “he that scandalizes his brother, or the church of Christ, ought to be willing, by a private or public confession, and sorrow for his sin, to declare his repentance to those that are offended, who are thereupon to be reconciled to him, and in love to receive him.”

We all have a responsibility to one another. Whether you are the offended or the offender, you have a responsibility to your fellow believer. If you don't believe me, look at these two passages from Matthew [slide 23].

Matthew 18:15 “If your brother *sins against you*, go and tell him his fault...”

Matthew 5:23-24 “Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother *has something against you*, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.”

In Matthew 18 we should be aware of the steps of church discipline. If you are the one sinned against, or if you are aware of another believer's unrepented sin (you can study more about that in the Home Group notes), you have an obligation to speak to him or her. You have a duty to humbly and lovingly try to bring that brother back into harmony with the family of God. And every time they repent, you forgive.

In Matthew 5 your brother has something against you because *you* did something against him. If somehow you realize you sinned or wronged your brother in any way, you have a responsibility to seek to make it right. If you say something disrespectful or offensive, you have to admit it, apologize, and seek reconciliation. If you promised to do something and fail to see it through, you are bound to make restitution. If you do something which becomes a stumbling block

to your brother, I urge you to repent of it and seek to be rejoined to fellowship with your brother, and to Christ.

At this point you may be tempted to think that every difference of opinion amounts to sin. This is not true. God has created and gifted us differently, and there are areas in which those differences should flourish. *Biblical unity is not uniformity.*

Several years ago when I served in the military, I spent some time overseas. I served with folks who looked different than me, they grew up differently than me, they worshiped in a different style than me. But we read the same Scriptures together, prayed to the same God together. We were united in one faith and one Spirit. That year I began learning a good lesson- diversity is not a hindrance to unity, it's what makes unity possible and necessary.

God built diversity into His Church. We need each other. Diversity is something we foster, not force. Learn to distinguish between those non-sinful differences of personality, preference, and opinion and those differences that result from sin where one diverges from the faith and its practice.

[slide 24] If you have ever felt the need to apologize to your brother or sister in Christ, then thank God for His work in your life. If you have never actually sought reconciliation, then yield to what the Spirit is doing in your life. Do I work out my salvation or is it God? Yes, and be thankful for that. We have a lot of hard work to do if we are to maintain the unity God has given His church. We need to labor in the strength that only He can give.

G. Summary & Challenge

If you keep reading in Philippians, you'll see in chapter four Paul pleads with two ladies [slide 25], Euodia and Syntyche, to come together. We don't know anything else about them but what we read here. We know they loved the Lord and worked with Paul in gospel ministry. They worked well alongside others. But something came between them. We know it wasn't doctrinal, because Paul would have cleared it up right there. He was not afraid to call out sin and set someone straight. I'm glad we don't know any more about them because Euodia and Syntyche could be any of us. The issue they dealt with could be any issue that you

and I deal with. What got between them could have been anything, just like what could get between you and me could be anything.

So let me plead with you one more time. Don't fight a believer that offends you. Don't flee at the first sign of confrontation. Don't freeze at the thought of seeking forgiveness and reconciliation. The work of unity is too important. [slide 26]

H. Transition to the Table

In that Matthew five passage, the one who remembered his offense was at the altar about to offer his sacrifice. Jesus said to leave the gift and first be reconciled to your brother, then return and be reconciled to God.

Jesus is the Lamb of God, slain from the foundation of the world. When he invites us to his table, he invites us into communion with him and union with each other as we celebrate his sacrifice for us. As we prepare our hearts to come to the Lord's table if you remember that you have sinned or have an issue with a brother, can I suggest that you wait in taking the elements today? First be reconciled to your brother, then come together to celebrate reconciliation with your Lord.

If forgiving or seeking forgiveness is not possible in the immediate future and the Lord has placed the willingness in your heart, then come to the table where you can find freedom and forgiveness, and go in the strength of the Spirit to follow through on the works of salvation.

If you are here and have not yet come into communion with God through a relationship based on faith in Jesus Christ, this family meal is not for you. I would ask that you refrain from partaking. You may remain in your seat, or come through the line and not partake. If you want to experience this union, I say it again for you, look to Jesus.

Let's pray. As I pray would the elders, deacons, and worship team come up?

We are urged to examine ourselves when we come to the Lord's table so we don't partake in an unworthy manner. We should not cling to any sin or any behavior, the cost of which is at the expense of our brother or sister in the Lord. If

you have a broken and contrite heart, Jesus says come and drink freely of the waters of life. Commune with him and celebrate his sacrificial victory over sin and death.

Lord, we thank you for your salvation and the unity you purchased for your followers. Forgive our sin, and teach us to forgive. Thank you for dying our death. Enable us to live according to your power and example. Grant us oneness of heart and mind and we seek your glory. Thank you. In Jesus' name, amen.

When the servers are ready, ushers will have each row come forward. Please proceed down the aisles to my immediate left and right to the station in front of your seating section. You may partake of the elements up front or take them back to your seat. Please return to your aisle, outer sections along the wall aisles, and center sections up the center aisle. The bread is gluten free, and the juice is non-alcoholic. If you are unable to physically make it forward, let the usher know and we'll have someone in back serve you at your seat. Bert, will you ask the Lord's blessing on the Supper?