

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, Philippians: Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ,

Session 6: Joy Rooted in a Shared Life, Produced by the Gospel - Philippians 2:1-4

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This is Dr. Matthew S. Harmon in his series on Philippians, Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is session 6, Joy Rooted in a Shared Life, Produced by the Gospel. Philippians 2:1-4.

Welcome to session six of our study in Philippians. This session is entitled Joy Rooted in a Shared Life, produced by the Gospel. We will be looking at Philippians chapter two, verses one through four.

Before we do that though, it's always good to remind ourselves of where we have been in the book, and so in our previous session we looked at Philippians 1, verses 27 through 30, which was the beginning of the letter body, and that section, Philippians 1, 27 through 30, focused on living as citizens of God's kingdom in a manner worthy of the gospel. We talked about how our citizenship is in heaven as part of God's kingdom, and that that determines our identity, our values, and that the gospel acts almost as a constitution against which we evaluate our lives, and the necessity of standing firm in the faith, and in the one spirit, in the face of opposition, and the fact that suffering and faith are both gifts that God gives us. So that sets the stage for Philippians chapter two, verses one through four.

So let's go ahead and read that. Philippians chapter two, starting in verse one. 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. So let's start with a little bit of an overview of the structure of this passage.

In verses one through four, although our English translations don't reflect this, since Greek sentences and English sentences work differently, in verses one through four, that is all one long sentence in Greek. And so our English translations rightly break that up into smaller sentences, but those four verses are all one long sentence. And it's in fact a specific kind of sentence.

It is a conditional statement. It is an if-then statement in Greek. And that sets the stage for understanding the structure of what's going on in the particular passage.

Now, in English we tend to just think of if-then or conditional statements as one kind of big giant category, but in Greek there were actually different kinds of conditional statements depending on what you wanted to communicate. And so this is what was referred to as a

first-class conditional statement. And whether you remember that or not is really not important, but what is important is that when an author uses a first-class conditional, the if part is assumed true for the sake of the argument.

So that when the author phrases it in the way that he does, using the grammar of a first-class conditional statement, even though it's perfectly good to translate it as if, the idea is if, and we know that there is this reality that is being talked about. So when Paul says if there is any encouragement in Christ, he's not doubting; he's not questioning whether that's actually true. In effect, he's saying if we have encouragement in Christ and we know that we do, then this is what follows.

So that's the force of this if- then statement here, that it's assumed true for the sake of the argument. Verse 1, then, in this if-then construction, is the if statement, and he's going to list four benefits of the gospel that we experience, and the then statement is found in verses 2 through 4. He's going to give the central command in the passage, which, as you will see, is complete mind joy, and then followed by a series of clauses that explain how we are to do that. So that's the basic structure of Philippians 2:1-4. Before we dive into the specifics, though, of those verses, I think it's important for us to step back and recognize that there is a tight relationship between 1 through 4 and 5 through 11, and we are treating them separately simply for the sake of convenience, so we can spend more focused time in each of those passages.

But as we do that, we need to keep both of those in mind as we are working through. So when you look at the relationship to chapter 2 verses 5 through 11, it's helping us ramp up towards the so-called Christian in verses 5 through 11, and really the things described in verses 1 through 4 are tangible actions that depict the mindset of Christ that Paul is going to mention in verse 5, and then unpack in verses 6 through 11. And again, we're doing them separately just so we can spend more focused time in each passage.

If you were to preach or teach on this passage, I think it would be perfectly fine to preach these two texts together as one coherent unit. The downside would be that it's just very difficult to cover that much ground because there's so much richness in these verses that I think most will want to linger a little bit longer over what we find here. So that background established, let's now dive into Philippians 2 verses 1 through 4, and what we're going to see here is joy rooted in a shared life that is produced by the gospel.

And so as I mentioned, verse 1 lays out four benefits of the gospel, four realities that we experience because of what God has done for us through the gospel. The first is the phrase, encouragement in Christ. And when we think of the idea of encouragement, the sense of it really is an emboldening.

So it's a sort of verbal empowering someone, and notice that it's not just general encouragement, which is good, fine, but Paul talks about encouragement in Christ. In other words, the source of that encouragement is the fact that we are in Christ, and we reflect on the reality of all that is true of us because we are in Christ, and that should bring us encouragement. And of course there's also not just the internal aspect of that, but there's the outward and external aspect of being an encouragement to others and reminding them of the benefits that come from being in Christ.

So that's the first benefit that Paul mentions here in verse 1. The second one is comfort from love. And another way of thinking about this is consolation or comfort that comes from God's love for us. And the idea here is that we have the ultimate consolation and comfort that comes from God's love for us, and that is a benefit of the gospel that we experience as a reality.

Third, participation in the Spirit. And we've mentioned before that one of the key ideas here in Galatians is this idea of fellowship or participation, and here's that same concept again. We saw it back in chapter 1 verse 5 where Paul talked about how the Philippians have experienced participation with him in the benefits of the gospel.

So if you look back at chapter 1 verse 5, he says, because of your partnership or your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now. And so here in chapter 2 verse 1, that participation, that fellowship, that partnership is experienced in the Spirit. That the Spirit is the one who unites us together to share in what God has done for us.

And that is part of our common ground. That even though in the body of Christ we are around people from different ethnic backgrounds, or different socio-economic backgrounds, or different ages, different experiences, what unites us ultimately is what God has done for us through Christ, applied to us by his Spirit, and the Spirit is the one who unites us together to share in the benefits of the gospel. And then lastly, he mentions affection and sympathy.

I think we can think about these in terms of the deep impulses of love for God and others, expressed in intangible concern for others. You'll remember that in chapter 1, Paul talked about the fact that he longs for the Philippians with the affection of Christ, and that is tied here to tangible actions that express that affection and care for one another. Now, one of the things that you may have missed as we went through this is that the first three elements of those actually have a Trinitarian structure.

So you have the mention of encouragement in Christ, you have comfort from love, and you have participation in the Spirit. And so I think you can apply a sort of Trinitarian framework for those realities. So those are the four benefits of the gospel that Paul lays out, and he's saying these are true realities that we know we have, and based on that truth, based on these four benefits of the gospel, Paul is then given a command, saying, look, since this is true, this should be the way you should respond.

And that response is found in verse 2, and he starts with the command, complete my joy. And that's a very intentional way of saying it because he's emphasizing that he already has joy. This joy is not something new.

He's not saying, I don't have joy, so please bring me joy. He's saying, complete my joy. Fill it up to the full.

It already exists, but you can do certain things to fill up the measure of my joy. And so this joy that he's talking about is rooted in this common participation in the gospel with the Philippians. And I think that some helpful comparative points can be found in John's gospel, as Jesus is walking through with his disciples in the days and hours before his death and resurrection, how he repeatedly comes back to this theme of he wants the disciples to share in his joy, the joy that he has experienced for all eternity with the Father.

And so this idea of completing Paul's joy should be a reminder to us that we are commanded to pursue joy. And I think in some backgrounds, some people come from contexts where they've been introduced to a version of Christianity where it's all about being austere and disciplined and almost grim. And this picture of the Christian life is really hard and difficult, and so that's what we should expect.

And there are certainly elements of truth to that. And yet God wants us to pursue joy. And in fact, I would say we naturally pursue joy.

We're wired to seek joy. We don't have to really tell ourselves to do that. I think that's part of how God has wired us.

Our issue is that we look for it in the wrong places. And so Paul is saying, complete my joy, and he links it to this idea of being of the same mind. So you notice there in chapter 2, verse 2, when he says, complete my joy by being of the same mind.

Now I don't think that Paul is saying everyone in the church has to think exactly the same on every single detail of life. He's not saying that. But I do think he is saying that we share the same broad outlook on life, values, our priorities, and our shared beliefs.

And in our first session in this course, we talked about how this idea of the mind or the mindset was a key theme that runs throughout Philippians. And here we see it again. This idea is more than just an intellectual worldview that just gives a certain set of answers to intellectual questions.

The idea is a shared framework for life that includes values and beliefs and practices. And that's what Paul is calling for the Philippians to experience. Now in light of that, he's going to give a series of means.

In other words, how do we do this? How do we pursue the completion of joy? And we've got several ways. We can list at least five here in this passage. Paul kind of gives a rapid-fire listing of them.

The first, having the same love. So he's already talked about the fact that we have comfort from love back in verse 1. And now he's saying by experiencing that same love together, that love for God, that love for others, that is a way to maximize one's joy. So that's not a surprise that it starts with that fundamental idea.

Second, being in full accord. Now this language here, again, we struggle in English to try to capture some of the realities of what Paul is saying here in the Greek text. But regardless, the idea here, I think, is sharing a common life.

I think that's really the sense of what Paul has in mind here. That sharing a common life together is a way of fueling and intensifying our joys. Third, being of one mind.

Now you might hear that and go, wait a minute, didn't he almost essentially say the same thing, like, you know, four clauses ago? And it's similar, but not quite the same. His wording here could be translated as thinking the one thing. And what I think Paul is getting at here is a single-minded focus on the gospel and its implications.

And this is where I think it's fruitful for us to reflect on this, because ultimately it's easy for us to get distracted by the non-essentials. And so I think what Paul is saying is that thinking the one thing, having this single-minded focus on the gospel and its implications, is a way of bringing us together as believers and increasing our joy. Fourth, doing nothing from selfish ambition or conceit.

Because of the fall, we are bent towards looking out for number one, and in our view, number one is us, right? And so he's saying part of the way that you maximize your joy is by doing nothing from selfish ambition. And one of the ways this shows up is just evaluating everything in terms of how does this benefit me? How can I get the most out of this situation? How can I maximize or manipulate even this situation so that it advances my honor, my reputation, my priorities? And so the idea there is, Paul says, not doing that. The part of completing one's joy is to not be consumed by selfish ambition or conceit.

And then lastly, looking out for the interests of others. So Paul assumes we are going to look out for our own interests. That's basically natural to us.

But what he's saying is that we should be looking out for the interests of others and practicing a form of self-denial that looks for what is best for others in this context, not necessarily what is best for me. And so those are the five kinds of means or ways that Paul's calling us to complete his joy. I want to circle back and dig a little bit deeper into this idea of humility rather than selfish ambition.

So again, if you look at verse four, sorry, verse three, he says, do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. And here's where the King James brings out the sense of this word. The Greek word that's rendered here as selfish conceit or selfish ambition, the King James records it as vainglory.

And it's really a combination of two words in Greek. It's a combination of the word empty and the word glory. And so it's this striking combination of glory, but it's empty.

It's not based on anything. It's not actually real. And so this idea of vainglory or selfish ambition is pointing us towards the emptiness of pursuing our own glory in contrast to the true glory that belongs to God and to his son Jesus Christ.

This idea of counting others more significant than ourselves begins with the mind, and it issues forth; it produces certain actions. It has to start there, and it takes a conscious decision of the will to count others as more significant than ourselves. And I want to say a word about humility here, because we live in a context typically where that has been influenced by the Bible, by Jewish and Christian tradition, and we're just accustomed to thinking of humility, well, of course, that's a virtue, that's something that's to be applauded at some level.

Yet what's striking is that humility was not considered a virtue in the Greek and Roman world. Instead, it was perceived as weakness. And the thing that you wanted to avoid was showing weakness.

And so instead, you wanted to pursue your own honor and your own glory. You pursued it, and you avoided any appearance of weakness. And so, part of what was distinctive about Jews and early Christians was that they talked about humility and saw it not just as something good, but as a high value.

And of course, that's rooted in the Old Testament itself. It's not something brand new that the early Christians came up with. But as we'll see in the next passage, chapter 2, verses 5 through 11, we will see that it's embodied in the person of Jesus Christ.

And so he's anticipating what he's going to say there. Now sadly, in some parts of our culture today, humility is still a virtue that is lacking. And you think about the natural human desire to want to exalt oneself, to want to have people think highly of you.

And it shows up in so many different ways. And sometimes it's quite subtle. I think we need to be on guard against the reality of pride.

Because, you know, one of the things that the Old Testament says, and the New Testament picks it up, is God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. So Paul talks about looking out for others. He assumes that we're going to pursue our own interests.

And ultimately, this calls for self-sacrificial actions. This is not easy. I mean, just the phrase itself, self-sacrificial, tells you you're giving something up.

Or you're surrendering something that maybe even is, in one sense, rightly yours for the benefit of others. And this is something that should be characteristic of life within the body of Christ. And this should be something that should characterize us as believers, because, as we will see in Philippians 2, verses 5 through 11, that is embodied in the person of Christ himself.

Okay, so, stepping back to the big picture, what's the big takeaway, what's the big idea from this particular passage? I'm going to state it simply. We must maximize our joy. God is calling us through this passage to maximize our joy.

And in this passage, we're going to see that, essentially, there are two elements to this. First, we maximize our joy by experiencing the benefits of the gospel. One of the ways that we experience joy, that we deepen our joy, is by reminding ourselves of, reflecting on, talking about, discussing, praying through, meditating on what God has done for us in Christ, and the benefits that we experience through that.

And remember, he had given us four of those right out of the gate here. Encouragement in Christ, comfort from love, participation in the Spirit, affection, and sympathy. Those are all realities that are already something we have because of what God has done for us, and those should be a source of joy.

And then second, we maximize our joy by pursuing unity in serving others. We maximize our joy by pursuing unity in serving others. We are tempted to think that the path to joy is us simply accumulating things or experiences or this very us-centered.

And yet, what Paul tells us here is that the path to maximum joy is actually others-centered. That the path to joy is found in self-sacrificial love and service to others, which is very counter-cultural. It was counter-cultural then; it's counter-cultural now.

And as long as Christ tarries, I'm sure it will remain counter-cultural. So that's the big picture. Let's conclude by thinking about some application.

First, think or understand. Let's start with truly understanding we are commanded to pursue joy. Again, I think sometimes we have this view of God that he's this cosmic killjoy, and he doesn't want us to be happy or have joy.

And that everything is just supposed to be really hard, difficult. And that's a misunderstanding of who God is and what he intends for us. And so it is right for us to pursue joy.

Our problem, again, is that we look for it in the wrong places. Believe. We believe that true joy comes from a life of Christ-like self-sacrificial love for others.

So it's one thing to think, okay, I'm supposed to pursue joy, I'm supposed to maximize it. But then, to believe the path to that is actually self-sacrificial love for others. That's a transition, a transformation, really, that has to take place in our hearts.

Third, desire or feel. Long to feel genuine Christ-like love for others. And when we talk about the idea of joy, we need to emphasize, of course, that joy is something that is deeper than a sort of surface-level happiness.

Because Paul regularly talks about joy even in the context of very difficult and hard circumstances. So joy cannot be dependent, ultimately, on how our circumstances are, or what is going on in our lives. It has to be rooted in something deeper than that.

And so when it comes to what we should desire, what we should feel, we need to ask the Lord to cultivate in us a genuine Christ-like love for others. Now, I want to be clear: sometimes you might hear someone say, well, if we don't feel like doing something, then God doesn't want us to do it. This is the idea that He doesn't want us to obey when our feelings don't align with it.

And that's just not biblical. That's not biblical. Of course, in an ideal world, our heart and our actions are aligned in obedience.

But I know from my own experience that I have plenty of times when I have to make a choice of the will to obey when my feelings are not aligned with what God wants. I don't want to do what God says I should do, but I do it anyway. And you know what's interesting? Oftentimes what I find is that when I do that act of obedience, God aligns my feelings as I'm doing this, or after the fact.

And so we can't be enslaved to, well, if I don't feel like doing something, then I'm not going to obey. That's not it. And so we think about this idea of, well, I don't feel this genuine Christ-like love for other people.

Well, then that's something to pray for God to give you. But that's not an excuse to stop showing tangible actions of love to those around you. If we're honest, and you're in the church long enough, some people are more difficult to love than others for a variety of reasons.

And it's not like God says, oh, well, she's really impossible to love. I'm going to give you a pass on that. No.

He says, die to yourself, show love to that person, and perhaps the Lord will give you that sort of desire and feeling along the way. Lastly, do. I would suggest identifying one tangible act of self-sacrificial love you can do for someone else this week.

It doesn't even have to be a grand gesture, but specifically identifying and saying, who is someone that I could bless this week by doing something that costs me something- time, energy, maybe even money- to be a blessing or meet a need to someone else. So that is Paul's message here in Philippians 2:1-4. And that's going to set the stage for what we see here in chapter 2:5-11, the so-called Christ Hymn. And that's what we will discuss in our next session.

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