

Philippians 1

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[0 : 00] Please do take a seat and turn if you would to our passage which is Philippians chapter 1 starting at verse 27.

! Page 980. Page 980. Just keep it open. But before we get into that text, I want to ask a few questions.

First of all, what does it mean to belong? What does it mean to be a member of something? A member of a family perhaps?

What does it mean to be part of a marriage? What does it mean to be a citizen? What does it mean to be a part of the church? Either the worldwide church or a local church?

I want to think about this because I think it's true to say that everyone wants to belong. To something. As people, we have this apparent need to want to belong to groups of others, of other human beings, other people that make up something bigger than ourselves.

[1 : 07] Everyone has it. And don't get me wrong. It's not like we want to forget that we're unique individuals and ignore that. But nevertheless, everyone wants to belong as well.

There's these two sides to being a human being, isn't there? There's being an individual, a unique individual, and being part of something with other individuals that is bigger than those individuals together.

But what does it mean to belong? What is the basis of our membership? And these questions are all around us at the moment, aren't they? We've just had two referendums in this country which are posed questions, essentially, about whom or who or what do you belong to?

What do you want to be a member of? And whatever else the results have shown, they've laid back considerable variation in the answers that people give.

It's not just a question for the British either. Many of you have made your home here. But this was not where you were born. It's not your country. But the question of where do I belong?

[2 : 13] What am I a member of? It comes up in different ways. And the point is that membership or belonging is being questioned as never before, what the basis of it is.

And it's important because I think it tends to be the bodies, those human natural communities that we've been a part of or are a part of, that have had the biggest influence on our lives.

It's curious, isn't it, that however much our culture talks about individual fulfilment or satisfactions, how much we make our own plans according to what we think is right, what we think is good, what we want, it is the groups, those human communities that we've been a part of that have had the biggest influence probably on our lives up to this point and probably on our lives in the future and the future direction they'll take.

I am willing to bet that there's no more important factor informing our character, who we are, or you are, than your parents, whether they were both there or not.

Your family has shaped you, whether those relationships were good ones or bad ones. The schools we went to, the places we worked, sometimes an entire career working with the same people to the same ends, year after year, day after day.

[3 : 34] It has to have an impact, doesn't it? And of course, as we mentioned, this country where we live, what it is and what we'll continue to be has a big impact on the opportunities, the stability, the security and the material welfare of all of us.

So the things we do together, those things, those bodies we form together, we belong to, are very, very important. But I ask again, what does it mean to belong to them?

What moves us? What makes the difference from being just an individual human being to something, to human persons who form something greater than themselves? What's the glue that holds us together?

Now there's many answers we have. Some people say it's the brotherhood of man or something along those lines, that we share together a kind of, we're all part of one big family. Others might say equality is the basis, that human rights for individuals, as long as they're respected and acknowledged, that is the basis for forming communities, forming bodies.

Somebody much of a different generation, Evan Burke, when these things were first being challenged perhaps at the time of the French Revolution, said a community or a people is a contract or a partnership between the dead, the living and the yet to be born.

[4 : 53] But I want to talk about, just very briefly, as an introduction to what Paul is going to tell us, what God's word, I think, says to us. That was St. Augustine, the great Archbishop of Hippo, wrote in his book called The City of God, in the early 5th Century.

He was working at a time when people questioned their sense of belonging and membership like we can't really imagine. Because as Romans, or citizens of the Roman Empire, that had been shattered by the fact that this capital of the empire for 700 years, the Eternal City, had fallen and had been sacked by the barbarians, by the Visigoths in 410 AD, and the city destroyed.

This was an event that was shattering, quite obviously, for the cohesion of society within the Roman Empire. Many blamed the rise of Christianity for what had happened.

So Augustine wrote this massive work, about 1600 pages, called The City of God, firstly in order to defend Christianity against its critics, but also more importantly, I think, for us to point the way to a future community, a community that transcended, a people that transcended what he called the City of Man, which the Roman Empire was a part, a lasting community that he called the City of God, or we might call now the Kingdom of Heaven.

And in thinking about what this community would be based on, he thought about all communities. What are they based on? And he came to this conclusion. He said this. He said, a multitude, that is, a collection of individuals, a multitude becomes a people with an identity when they hold together common objects of love.

[6 : 32] A multitude becomes a people when they hold together common objects of love. And this, in a sense, is what Paul is addressing in these verses, from verse 27 of chapter 1 through to verse 11 of chapter 2.

What does it mean? What does membership of God's people consist of? What is belonging to that, to the Kingdom of Heaven, to the Citizen of Heaven? What is it? What is it?

What's the glue that holds it together? What is the common object of love in the Church for God's people? He doesn't use those words. Instead, you'll have noticed, as we read the passage, that Paul repeatedly uses another phrase.

The same mind, or one mind. Being of the same mind. Share one mind. He uses that four times in the space of what we've read, as well as other associated ideas with it, that really have the same connotation.

And this phrase, of the same mind, one mind, means something other than just thinking the same. Some sort of group think. That's not what Paul's about.

[7 : 37] He doesn't want us to all be the same. To think the same, to all say the same, to do the same. This is not about founding a cult, where somewhere the individual ceases to be valued or important.

No. And what he's talking about is a shared way of looking at the world. An inner disposition. A way of seeing and reacting that is the same based on a shared sense of what is good and what is valuable.

A shared sense of what life is really about and what its ultimate end is. And so as we look at this passage, as we go through it, keep in mind that key phrase. You'll see it crop up time after time. Be of one mind. Be of the same mind. And as we go, we'll see that this plea for the same mind is seen in three ways that God's people are called to be united in. Firstly, called to be united in a shared fight.

Secondly, united in a shared humility. And finally, united in a shared union. So look, if you will, at verse 27. You'll see, Paul begins his plea to the Philippians to be united in verse 27.

[8 : 45] It's not immediately obvious, but he's using the language of citizenship here by appealing to the Philippians' sense of pride and belonging. He says, 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.

And it doesn't really convey the sense in the ESV here. A better way of saying what Paul is saying is this. What really matters is that you behave as citizens of heaven in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Behave as citizens of heaven. Now this is important because Paul's deliberately using this language because Philippi itself had a strong association with Roman citizenship.

It wasn't part of the empire. It was what was called as a city a colony, even though it was stuck up in northern Greece. And this meant that it was counted as if it was Rome, a part of Rome, transplanted into this area.

And its inhabitants all had by-wise the right to be Roman citizens and were to be treated as such. And the Philippians would naturally have been justly proud of this status and the duties and the rights that went with it.

[10:03] And as Paul writes here, he's appealing to what these Philippians already have a pride in, a sense of belonging. And possibly also, we don't know, ironically, thinking about his own status as a Roman citizen.

He's writing this letter in chains in Rome, having travelled across the empire under God because he appealed to Caesar as a Roman citizen in Caesarea to be tried by Caesar in Rome as was his right as a Roman citizen, although he was also a proud Jew.

And so he's in this slightly predicament we read in chapter 1 because he was a Roman citizen, in effect. But really he's writing to the Philippians, he's trying to appeal to them, and charging the Philippine church to act in a manner not that is compatible with their citizenship of Rome, but that is compatible with their citizenship of heaven.

It is a sense, in a sense, an appeal to perform the public duties as members of a public body. And this idea of being in a... that what we are involved in in the church and the activities that we see here as being public things is also important, as we'll see as we'll come on.

One of the other reasons he appeals, I think, to this sense of citizenship, citizenship of heaven, is because also as a Roman citizen you had rights, but you also had duties.

[11:25] But one of the rights, both a right and a duty, depends on which, where you say it was, to serve in the army, to defend the emperor, to defend the empire. The backbone of the Roman army, which was huge and spread across the empire, was its legions, the heavy infantry.

And only Roman citizens could volunteer to join the Roman legions. So, Philippians would be able to join the Roman legions. And there was local recruitment.

It was part of the pride that they took in it. And this is important because, Paul makes clear, towards the end of verse 27, if you see there, that conflict and strife are what the Christian will need to be engaged in.

It's what the church is about. He says in the second half of 27, So that whether I come and see you or are absent, I may hear that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.

And that first phrase there, standing firm, it's a military one. It's a martial one. It means stand your ground. It's the same one, as you might remember, that Paul uses in Ephesians 6 when he talks, that famous passage about the armour of God.

[12:36] Stand your ground, that you may take your stand against the devil on the day of the evil one. Because for Paul, to be a Christian was to fight, was to be engaged in a battle.

And if you read his letters, in fact, if you look at any epistle, really, in the New Testament, he constantly exhorts Christians to show fighting qualities, courage, tenacity, strength, standing firm. Paul is also reminding the Philippians that they fight together. And so surely, the first point that we need to realise here is that, as Christians, we are engaged in a fight, in a battle, every day, every hour.

Now, how does it manifest itself? Well, in many different ways. It could manifest itself in temptations, persecution, ridicule, frustrations, our own weaknesses, ill health, bereavement, loss. But there are also those that we will face as a body as well. Dare I say it, in one sense, you might say that our building project here is, in a sense, part of that battle too.

[13:49] You might not say that the devil cares much about the building and the bricks and mortars any more than God does, but I am pretty sure that the devil is not keen that there is a church here.

So as we engage together, we must remember that we are in a battle because there is nothing more dangerous, is there, than thinking you are at peace when war threatens or not realising you are in a battle that you are actually engaged in and you are not realising that the battle is actually going on.

Sometimes we tend to think that peace is the natural state of the world, I think. Peace is not the natural state of the world since sin has entered into it. Those many ways of viewing the world and relationships assume that it is.

And so for us it's not conflict and strife and war that we need to explain or think about so much, but peace. Why is there any peace or reconciliation at all?

Certainly the witness of the New Testament would seem to be clear. Strife, war, instability is the default, the normal state of this world. As Jesus said in Matthew 24 when talking about the period between his resurrection and his return, the last days, he says, you will hear of wars and rumours of wars.

[15:07] See that you are not alarmed. And isn't that the state we find ourselves in today? If it's not actual war, we hear about a war that might be about to happen. But we can use that analogy, I think, also in much more local senses too.

It is the miracle of God's love, the fact that his son came down as a human being, his death for us and the gift of the Holy Spirit that brings peace and reconciliation with God and with each other. That's what needs explanation. That's what deserves our constant reflection and appropriation. Paul says elsewhere in Romans 5, he says, for if while we were enemies, it's while we were part of this war against God, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his son. Much more now we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. So we're in a fight, a battle, a war. And my point again in stressing this is to say that if we do not realize this, if we're not aware of this, we're in a very dangerous place.

And more than that, we're in a very ineffective place as well. Paul's emphasis, as I've mentioned already, is not on the individual struggle so much, but on this 27 days, it's striving side by side, striving together.

[16:27] And here Paul uses a Greek word, but it's one that's made up, it's a composite word, *sin athleo*, striving side by side or striving together, *sin* from meaning together, things that work together well, there are words like synergy and synthetic and synchronized, etc.

an athleo, which you might think is rather apt, given that the Olympics is on, but we get our word athletics from it, obviously. But it has a slightly broader sense, in the classical world at least anyway, in that it's more a public competition.

So you can see how we get our word athletics, a public competition. And what Paul probably has in mind here is more a gladiatorial contest, a fight to the death, publicly in front of an audience, and possibly a hostile one at that.

And he puts these two words together, *sin athleo*. He says, I want to hear, above all things, that you fight together, that you contend together, *sin athleo*, with one mind.

And going back to Paul's point of the image of the armour of God in Ephesians, as we mentioned, it's not that we're equipped and therefore invulnerable with the armour of God as individuals, to be like an Arthurian knight, knight on a quest to go off on one's own, and fight battles, or a Greek hero, or a James Bond, or a sort of lone ranger, or whatever, who fights alone.

[17:50] We're equipped, the armour of God equips us to fight together, side by side, shoulder to shoulder, *sin athleo*. And as part of that we need to remind ourselves, and each other, that we are engaged in a fight every day, every hour.

But it is not a fight that we engage in on our own. And so Paul's message to the Christians is to emphasise unity as the key to successfully engaging in this battle, this fight that we're all involved in as a church.

But then we're reminded as we move on, in the beginning of chapter 2 there, of a shared humility, we're called for a shared humility. The battle is fierce that we're engaged in, tough though it is, but the weapons, if we look at verse 1 there, it reminds us that the weapons that we have, the weapons that we bring, are things that bring healing and restoration, that bring sympathy and peace with God.

Paul appeals to the things that Christians have already experienced and know, the benefits that they have in Christ and in the fellowship together. He says, 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. So you note the repetition there, same mind, same love, in full accord and of one mind. It's called the church to fight, but he's made clear that that requires unity, being of one mind.

[19 : 27] And then Paul now goes on to talk about how that unity, how is it possible? How do strangers, individuals, the multitude that the church of Philippi was before they were brought together in Christ?

How can they be united? And surprisingly, surprisingly, in Paul's age when humility was not valued at all, I would offer that still today it's surprising deep down for us, it is by humility.

We read in verses three and four, do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourself. Let each of you look not only to his own interest, but also to the interests of others.

So unity comes from humility and there's two aspects for Paul in this humility here. There is an inner disposition, a way of looking at the world. Remember he talked about that, to share that inner disposition, that one mind that we're talking about.

There is an inner disposition that has an outward expression. And in these verses Paul points to humility being the inner disposition that Christians should have to one another, the thing that guides our thoughts and actions, the things that we share.

[20 : 42] And then he points to looking to the interests of others, literally means look beyond your own interests, as the outward working out of that inner disposition of humility. And just to give a sense of it, the only thing I can come up with, I work in aerospace and we've done a project recently on jet engines.

And if you think of a jet engine, it takes in air from here, sucks it in, it then compresses it incredibly powerfully, adds fuel to it, sets that on fire, and in that intense pressured environment, a jet literally is forced out of the back.

And that is the power that then drives the vast passenger aircraft or jet plane or whatever it is, it drives it forward. So you get the sense, I think, of something that works internally, that is powerful and dynamic is really what I'm getting at.

But that has a result that helps, that is practical, that pushes forward. And we can see this also in what Paul contrasted with. We move back to the beginning of verse three, he says, do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit.

Now selfish ambition here is a word in Greek that literally defined means party spirit or factionalism. which is interesting. This outward expression of an inner motivation, so it's almost like the inner motivation here being conceit or vanity, self-vanity.

[22 : 16] A jet engine in that case is sucking in air, but then it also sucks in bits of metal, birds, whatever it might be, other things, into the engine.

And then instead of that being pressurized and pushing out a jet, a nice clean jet that pulls it, the energy is dissipated, the thing starts to break down and ultimately you get an engine that explodes and scatters bits of metal and debris all over the place.

And as an example or an image of what happens in a church when it's riven with splits and collapses, perhaps there's nothing more relevant than a jet engine being destroyed.

But in any case, this factionalism or party spirit, you might say superficially, seems to be talking about groups contending together. bodies of people. But in actual fact, they're nearly always indications of an inner self-centeredness.

I think that's what Paul is getting at here. Self-obsession of individuals with themselves or the people involved in those factions. And this is why Paul contrasts it with the unity that he's striving for.

[23 : 18] It stands in opposition to this one mind that he's talking about, that Paul insists characterizes the church above all else. this factionalism is an outward expression of the inner disposition of conceit, personal vanity, the desire to exalt oneself above others, to constantly compare oneself, always favorably, with other people.

Even and over, we might say, above God himself. For this individual vanity, to exalt ourselves in our own lives, is really the heart of sin, where God should be reigning in our lives.

So we get an external corporate expression in factionism and groups that foster disunity as a result of an inner selfishness or self-centeredness.

And Paul contrasts that with a strong internal corporate awareness, humility, counting others better than yourselves, not comparing them and finding them wanting. He contrasts that internal idea with an outward expression that is focused on what?

You see the symmetry, it's focused not necessarily on the group and the institution as a whole, but on individuals, isn't it? The interests of others. So that's the first dynamic we should notice, that if we're inwardly focused on ourself, if we are self-obsessed and we're all prone to that, our outward actions, Paul suggests, tend to be expressed in dissatisfaction with the bodies, the natural communities that we belong to.

[24 : 52] We've probably seen this in our own families, maybe in our own marriages, certainly other peoples. It happens in the church too, that when we're self-obsessed, when we're self-centered, we tend to take it out on the things we belong to.

We begin to demand that those things we belong to conform to our desires and our wishes. We might say things like, my needs aren't being met. This isn't relevant to me.

This church or preacher does not emphasize what I think is most important. And so on and so on and so on. But if our inner disposition is one of humility, that thinks of others first, our first thought is outward, as other centered, not self centered, on the needs of the body that we belong to, then it will focus in what it does and the actions, I think Paul is saying here, of following these sorts of lines. If that person is in need, how can I serve them? That individual is discouraged, how can I build them up? That person is confused in doubt, pressure, etc, etc, what can I do?

And so on and so on. So you see how the dynamic works. We call to have a strong, firm, internal, corporate disposition of humility to the body that we belong to in the church.

[26 : 11] It expresses itself in ministry to the individuals within them. look beyond your own interests. We're called to be humble, not to think of ourselves as bigger than others or bigger than we ought, but as we really are, sinful people, saved by Christ alone.

Paul elevates this theme further by spelling out where this one mind, this same mind comes from. Where can we find this humility, this other sentence? Isn't it the hardest thing?

Verse 5, he writes, Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus. So we come to this other shared union that we have, this shared union.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus. Paul is going to go on in one of the most famous and rich passages in the New Testament to explain what Christ has done and how that is our example.

But first, I think we need to note here that when he says this is yours in Christ, he's using one of his favourite phrases, in Christ. It's throughout all of his letters. And he's talking about our union with Christ.

[27 : 23] He's saying that this is yours when you are in Christ. And what's more, this one mind, this shared mind, is the only mind that is compatible with being united to Christ.

And what is this mind? Well, let's read, we see in verses 6 and onwards, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God something 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, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. And remember we saw in the previous verses how Paul warned against selfish, self-obsessed ambition and conceit that led to this outward corporate expression of fractionalism and disunity and party spirit.

Here we see the heart of Christ, what Christ is motivated by as God. As God, he had every right to think only of himself. Because all honour and glory belong only to him.

There isn't any left for anybody else. He had the highest privileges and authority. He lived the most glorious, perfect and loving existence in the community.

[28 : 51] Union, as we might say, three in one of the Trinity. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And yet, it says he did not insist on these things. He did not grasp them. It means he did not cling to them.

He did not insist on them. We can almost say he did not want to be only defined by these exalted aspects of his Godhead.

Christ was not defined by his status as God. Because God is something even more than those things. God is love. And so Christ's first thought, we might say, God doesn't have a first thought, but his instinct, his reaction, if we talk in human terms, was an outward expression of his inner being as God.

His love was expressed in humbling himself. And although he did not cease to be God, he did not abase himself in that sense. He humbled himself by taking on human nature. And not just human nature.

Human nature marred by sin. Under the curse of God. Sin that carried with it the inevitability and the punishment of death. Even though he himself is of course sinless.

[30 : 01] And all of which, death, Christ's twin natures of God and man, perfect man, who is obedient, sinless, but also God at the same time. Both his twin natures absolutely rebel and are in conflict and reject death.

Christ as our Saviour and as God has nothing to do with death. He doesn't deserve it. He is life in himself. And so every fibre of his being cried out about death when he was on this earth.

But it's not just death that he subjected himself together. As you see there, Paul emphasises this.

He says he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death. Even death on a cross.

Now for Paul as a Jew, before he was saved, as Saul, perhaps even for a time after, crucifixion was deeply shameful as a punishment for criminals.

It was, no doubt, a lingering, dramatic humiliation in pain that led to inevitable death. But it was more than that for a Jew who knew the law. It was a cursed death.

[31 : 11] The law said, cursed is he who hangs upon a tree. It was cursed of God in the sense that the spiritual, the very center of the person, their spiritual value was cast into doubt.

Their destiny as that was cast into doubt. For the Son of God to die such a death as this was incomprehensible to a committed and pious Jew such a soul was.

And for Greeks, or Romans, that includes Romans in New Testament language, crucifixion was a horror, yes, but it was also designed, as you can probably imagine as we read some of the bystanders of Christ's crucifixion, it was also meant to ridicule and figure of humiliation, something to be laughed at, derision.

And yet Paul came to see how important it was that God was brought so low of what that signified, not just a death, but death on a cross.

And also what it meant therefore, in the light of what he's talking about here, the life of the church in one mind, what it means for God's people ever after. Because no one can stand on the dignity and grasp the status or their rights as Christians and deny it to others, because Christ had manifestly not done so himself.

[32 : 32] Paul saw this and wrote about it in 1 Corinthians chapter 1, he says, for we preach Christ crucified, not just dead, Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.

And you see, for Paul it's important for our understanding of our unity as a church, for our understanding of humility, to know that the Son of God not only humbled himself to death, but that he humbled himself to death on a cross.

It's important to be underlined as Paul goes on in Corinthians to say, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God.

The power of God in the cross. Wisdom of God in the cross. It confounds the world, doesn't it?

It stops all our boasting. It silences every tongue. All sense of inward, selfish or usurping pride.

[33 : 40] And it gives to us, his people, power and wisdom to show the world's character, sorry, the character of Christ to the world. Wisdom and power of God. So just to summarize, we are in a fight, a battle, every hour of every day of our lives we're engaged.

And to think that we are not is to act as if we are at peace with the world, with the devil and with sin. But we're in a battle, we must sin athlea, we must fight publicly together in this public contest.

We do not, we cannot fight alone. To fight together, God's word tells us we must be humble. To be of one mind, the same mind.

Further, Paul tells us that humility is found in what we share together, our union with Christ. When we understand, when we meditate, when we appropriate through the Holy Spirit who he is and what he has done for us, who he is and what he nevertheless did for us, this is the source of our humility towards one another, our other-centeredness.

As I say, his first thought, if we can say it, was for his people, not for himself. It wasn't that he thought he would put himself down. He didn't think about himself in wanting to save us, to save the people for himself.

[35 : 05] So he acted, so he humbled himself. Is this easy? For us? Not at all. It's a progressive thing.

It's part of our sanctification. It won't happen straight away, of course. Involves changing our very core as sinful people, doesn't it? But I think, I wasn't going to say this, but having heard Chuck's sermon, one of the best ways we can think about how we can be of one mind and with one script and of how the church works and that other-centeredness is, as Chuck said today, to think on who God is.

On who God is as one God, but as three persons in the Trinity. How they work together. Look at the verses or where they act together and what they say about each other.

If we lack our knowledge of who God is in one, three in one, then that is the best way to understand how the church should operate in humility and love together. By the example of Christ.

We have, we are made in God's image as individuals. But I think we're also made in God's image as a body, as one body. And we reflect who he is in that sense, in that very broad sense.

[36 : 25] And furthermore, I think we can make a start as we come to the Lord's table here tonight. Because it's here where we remember Christ and what he did for us. We remember his death and his death on a cross.

And together, as Paul says elsewhere, together we proclaim his death. And the significance of it for the whole world as we eat and drink together. In that sense, going back to what we said at the beginning, that's an act of fighting together.

It's an act of battle. So what does it mean to belong to God's people? What does it mean to be in Christ? What is it that unites us as a church, as citizens of heaven?

What is our common object of love? Surely we are reminded here, as we eat and drink together, that it is Christ.

Christ crucified. Before we come to the table and reflect on these things more, let us worship God, stand and sing.

[37 : 35] Amen.