

The Epistles of Paul

Week 3: Philippians

Purpose:

As we continue to move forward in our series, we encounter what is likely the first church Paul started, the Church at Philippi. While the letter dates later than I Thessalonians or I Corinthians, this was likely the first church community that Paul started. This letter, in contrast to others, serves as a “thank you note” of sorts in which Paul appreciates their ongoing support. The main theological issue centers around imitation of Christ and what “reconciliation” means in a larger context.

1. Have you ever read Philippians? Have you studied it?
2. What in your mind does it mean to ‘reconcile’?”
3. Assuming this was Paul’s first church community, what makes that relationship unique and special?

Key Verse of the Week, Philippians 2:1-2:

“¹If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”

Opening Prayer:

God of love, you who have shared wisdom, peace, and grace with us, overflowing our hearts, we praise you on this Easter day.

Introduction and Background:

The Epistle to the Philippians is a rather brief work, more in line with the length of I Thessalonians than Corinthians or Romans. However, it is rich in subtext and community. The letter likely dates from the mid-50s CE, most like around 55 or 56. This places the letter about 5-7 after I Thessalonians and 3-4 years after I Corinthians. As noted above, the Church at Philippi was likely the first community started by Paul and they almost certainly had an ongoing relationship. That relationship was both financial and theological.

The biggest debate among modern scholars regarding Philippians is regarding whether this letter is a single composition or an amalgamation of two or three separate ones. This debate, however, does not affect our discussion or the main purpose. Paul writes to the church at Philippi for two main reasons. First, to express his appreciation for their continued support. Second, to exhort and lift the community regarding the nature of community and fellowship. Paul exhorts them to remember they are in a partnership with each other for the sake of the gospel and the message of Jesus.

1. What does it mean to be in community?
2. How do we share in community today that may be different than the early church?
3. Assuming Paul wrote many times to the church in Philippi, how would that help and support the church?

Today’s Focus Passage, Philippians 2:1-11

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

1. What is the main point of this passage?
2. What does Paul point to as the most important aspect of Jesus' ministry?
3. How is humility and a servant heart key to understanding the gospel?

Discussion:

In opening his discussion regarding community, Paul focuses in on the nature of Jesus' ministry on earth. While it is easy to only focus on the crucifixion, Jesus' humility and servant nature becomes the primary motive. The cross becomes the natural fulfillment of all else that Jesus has done prior. In the passage above, Paul encourages the community at Philippi to have the same mind that was in Jesus. This extends to how they not only follow Jesus, but how they spread the idea of "koinonia" within their own community and town. Paul points to this nature of humility and community as something not done to gain favor or precedence, but to be more fully obedient and following Christ.

1. How do we have the same heart that was in Jesus?
2. What are the primary barriers to humility?
3. How does their situation connect to the church today?

Conclusion:

In Philippians we find a church committed to the work of God, seeking to do the things of Jesus, and is even supporting their own mission through Paul. The length of their conversation has led them to a point where Paul points them back towards Jesus, reminding them of the power of humility. Jesus' own heart was one that was focused on service and others. This led him to the cross. While Paul does not say that their end will be the same, he does tell them that if they have the same mind that was in Jesus, they will experience the new things of God in innumerable ways.

Close in prayer