

2023 NORTH AMERICAN MISSIONS EMPHASIS

Sermon Outline

United: Called to Be One

Theme Scripture Verse: Philippians 2:1-2

All scriptures are CSB unless otherwise cited.

NOTE: Before the sermon, show one of the Week of Prayer for North American Missions missionary video segments or the theme video “United—Called to be One” available at AnnieArmstrong.com/Resources.

One of the primary passions of every Bible-believing, New Testament church is to reach the world around them. We take the Great Commission seriously and desire to see disciples made from all nations. We take the promise of Acts 1:8 seriously and desire to see God empower us with His Holy Spirit, sending us to our own Jerusalems, Judeas, Samarias and to the ends of the earth. We take Paul’s exhortation in 2 Corinthians 2:14-16 seriously when we’re told that we are called to spread the aroma of Christ everywhere.

Yet, it can be easy to become discouraged in our efforts to take the gospel to the world around us. Everywhere we look, division is deepening, politics are becoming more polarizing and the gap between those who know Christ and those who don’t seems to be getting larger and larger. It is important for us to be reminded that God has not left us to navigate this on our own. No, He has graciously given us His Word which is able to encourage us and equip us for every good work. Into our current situation, Philippians speaks loud and clear.

Now, we might be tempted to skip over these first two verses of the book of Philippians like they’re the opening formalities. But if you read and study the entire letter and then come back to these words, you will begin to realize they show us the two-fold purpose for Paul’s writing to the church in Philippi. Paul says:

“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus: To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” Philippians 1:1-2.

According to Paul, this letter is a sign of grace and a catalyst for peace. You may be asking yourself, “Wait, doesn’t Paul start a lot of his letters in this fashion?” Yes, he does, and here’s why: not only the letters of Paul, but almost every book of the Bible, is written from a place of trouble, persecution or struggle. When Paul wrote, it was because a church needed his specific voice to speak into a specific situation. Philippi was no different.

The Philippian church is a faithful, exemplary church in an important city. Philippi, thoroughly Roman because of the large number of Roman soldiers that settled there after a famous battle, has a culture that is more “secular” than other cities. This meant it was less receptive to monotheism, including Christianity, than other cities. But God displayed His power there, nonetheless.

Probably the most important city in the region of Macedonia, Paul was brought there on his missionary journeys through a dream. Philippi is where he met Lydia, the dealer of purple cloth who probably went on to fund much of Paul’s ministry. Philippi is where a demon was cast out of a slave girl who could tell fortunes. Philippi is where Paul and Silas sang in jail and God delivered them through an earthquake, saving the jailer and his family in the process. Out of that miracle, a house church was birthed. And now, they’ve grown.

But like every other church in the New Testament, they have issues of their own: the creeping-in battle of legalism versus license, the challenge of living for Christ and transforming the culture around them, and most distinctly here in this letter, the issue of unity. So, Paul, as an apostle used by God like the other apostles, had the authority to speak God's truth into the situations and set things straight.

Paul's letter was grace to them because it was proof that God had not left them alone to battle disunity. It was proof that God loves them, cares for them, sees what they are going through and speaks into the situation. It was also grace because Paul reaches into their situation to remind them of the mind of Christ and the mission of Christ. And Paul's letter was peace for them because it gave them a way forward: toward unity, and especially toward joy.

Joy is the primary theme that runs throughout the letter to the Philippians. But what is joy?

Joy is such a thoroughly biblical word that I don't think it makes it into our everyday vocabulary as much as it should. In the Scriptures, joy is sometimes translated as gladness or cheerfulness. Have you ever studied an emotion wheel? They are often used in counseling to more precisely identify what someone is feeling. If you look at joy on an emotion wheel, you'll often find that words and emotions that flow out of joy are excited, energetic, cheerful, hopeful, optimistic, elation, glee and satisfaction.

Pastor John Piper says, "Christian joy is a good feeling in the soul, produced by the Holy Spirit, as He causes us to see the beauty of Christ in the Word and in the world."

Biblically, I think we get the best definition of joy in Hebrews 12.

"Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" Hebrews 12:1-2.

Joy is why Jesus could go to the cross. Joy is why we can lay aside every weight and sin and run with endurance the race set before us. So, what then *is* joy? I believe we can boil it down biblically to two words: calm delight.

Amid pain and struggle we can experience calm delight. With deepening division all around us, there is the possibility of calm delight. Though the world feels like it is becoming more polarized, we can enjoy calm delight. When stress is turned up, and when our control of our circumstances is turned down, because of the sovereign rule and reign of King Jesus, we can live in calm delight.

Paul wants the Philippians to know that joy is possible. And to prove it to them, he begins by telling them (and us) three things.

1. You are a partner

The church in Philippi is part of something much bigger than themselves. Their partnership with Paul means they are connected to a movement of the gospel that is taking the name of Jesus all throughout the Greek-speaking world. Their partnership has brought Paul great joy.

We, too, are part of something bigger than ourselves. Not only are we a part of the universal church, which Jesus promised victory to, but we are part of a family of mission-minded churches that is being used by God in powerful ways all over the globe. People are coming to know Christ, churches are being planted, and tangible needs are being met in the name of Jesus.

2. You are a work in progress

Watching their journey of sanctification has brought Paul great joy. He was there at the beginning, and he's heard and continues to hear about all that the Lord is up to in them and through them. The difficulties they face and roadblocks they encounter aren't enough to discourage Paul. No, what God began, God will continue ... and what God continues, God will complete.

We, too, are works in progress. God is constantly sanctifying us as individuals and as a church family. Yet, we can look back on the faithfulness of God to strengthen, grow and use us as evidence that He will continue to do this work *in* us, and we trust Him to do this work *through* us.

3. You are loved

Their partnership and their progress are both incredible blessings. But they are both rooted in this one truth: they are loved. They are loved by God, and they are loved by Paul. Paul holds them in his heart, and he says he yearns for them with the affections of Christ.

It is important to note that God's continual call for us to be on mission is rooted in the truth that we are loved first. God's love for us is meant to be our motivation to see others brought into this same love. When we look out at the world around us, we can despair. Our frustration can lead to apathy. And apathy can lead to hopelessness.

Into all of this, we're reminded of who we once were. And then we were loved by God. And though we've come to faith in Jesus, it happened by grace, and we are still a work in progress. And we have and continue to need partners in the gospel: those who were willing to reach out to us and those who are willing to continue to come alongside us for our growth and sanctification.

All of this is important in setting up chapter 2, as is remembering how Paul and Silas came to Philippi. Because of the small Jewish population, there was no synagogue. Instead, they went to engage a place of prayer outside the city. Day after day, they would go there, preach the gospel and people would get saved. And every day, as they would walk to the place of prayer, outside the city, this slave girl with a demon would follow them, crying out, "These men, who are proclaiming to you a way of salvation, are the servants of the Most High God." Paul got very annoyed (check it out in Acts 16) and casts out the demon. Her owner gets mad, drags him before the authorities, and claims they are "disturbing the city," when they are holding their meetings OUTSIDE of the city, and the only one making any noise was this demon girl and she's no longer an issue. But the angry masses won; Paul and Silas got beat with rods and thrown in jail.

And now, we have Paul, writing a letter to them from another jail for similar accusations. And while he's in jail, there are some who are starting rival ministries, not because they feel called by God, but because they want to show up Paul. And notice how Paul responds: "... And in that ... I ... rejoice."

How is joy possible, even in horrible circumstances and hard seasons of the church? How is joy possible in the climate we find ourselves in today?

Paul gives us three postures to live in calm delight.

1. My life is not my own.
2. My life is to bring Christ glory.
3. My life is to grow Christ's church.

Life or death, blessing or hardship, seeing Him or serving Him, Paul will trust Christ's leadership. And because Paul trusts Christ's leadership, he knows that if Christ has him here and now, it is to continue to do the work to which Christ called him: to make Christ known among the Gentiles. And part of this work is to help them progress in the faith and to do it with joy. This is God's will for us as well.

It is with this context and background that Paul then says:

“If, then, there is any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, make my joy complete by thinking the same way, having the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose” Philippians 2:1-2.

Paul says there is one thing he desires from them. He appeals to the Lordship of Jesus, the commandment of love, and the connection Christians share by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

This one thing is, to use the language of the Christian Standard Bible, “Sameness.” Paul is exhorting them to a multi-faceted oneness.

Oneness in thinking.

Oneness in love.

Oneness in passion.

Oneness in purpose.

If we aren't careful, we can stop at verse 2 and believe that any thinking, anything we call love, any passion, or any purpose is a faithful application of this verse. But we would be wrong. Paul goes on in Philippians 2 to show us exactly what he means for this oneness.

“Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited. Instead he emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity. And when he had come as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross. For this reason God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow—in heaven and on earth and under the earth—and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” Philippians 2:5-11.

First, Paul calls them to a **oneness in thinking**. He exhorts to experience, together, the mind of Jesus Christ. And what was the mind of Jesus Christ? Jesus' thinking was that of humility. Jesus, who had every right to self-exalt, didn't. The Son of God instead emptied Himself and served us.

Next, Paul calls them to a **oneness in love**. Yet Paul makes it clear, he's not speaking to the ancient and modern shared sentiment that “love is love.” No, he appeals to what Jesus defined as “the greatest love” in John 15:13. He appeals to the sacrificial death of Jesus that atoned for and ransomed sinners. He exhorts them to treasure the gospel and make their love for Jesus and His gospel the love in which they unite. A love that stems from and results in sacrifice.

Thirdly, Paul calls them to a **oneness in passion**. The word Paul uses here literally means “co-spirited.” He is calling them to be united in God's desire for the world. What is God's desire for the world? He tells us

in verses 9-11: that the Lordship of Jesus would be proclaimed and confessed among every tribe, tongue, language and people. God's desire is that the whole world would worship Jesus. And Paul wants this to be their shared passion.

Next, Paul calls them to a **oneness in mission**. This call is more implicit than explicit in the text. But what Paul just described begs the question: how will every knee bow and every tongue confess Jesus Christ is Lord if Christians in places like Philippi don't make it their mission? So, Paul calls them to a oneness in mission, the mission from Jesus Christ: to go and make disciples of all nations. Paul is exhorting them to the Great Commission.

Finally, Paul calls them to a **oneness in purpose**. He exhorts them to the goal of Jesus Christ, which is the glory of God the Father (John 17:1).

Through Philippians 2, we can see how God not only called the Philippian church but calls every local church to a oneness in thinking, love, passion, mission and purpose. God calls us to share in the mind of Jesus, the gospel of Jesus, the lordship of Jesus, the mission from Jesus and the goal of Jesus. The question isn't *if* we will do these things—they are a command. The question is *how*.

The prayerful church must consider, "What are the rhythms, structures, and mechanisms of our church that help us obey this call?"

One of the great tools God has given us to share in this multi-faceted oneness is our strategic, cooperative giving through the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering for North American Missions. It gives us the opportunity to be united in one mind, one heart, one passion and one purpose. Our giving fuels evangelism in all its forms. It helps us plant churches everywhere for everyone through Send Network—the North American Mission Board's church planting arm. And it allows us to meet needs and change lives of those far from God through Send Relief—the North American Mission Board's compassion ministry arm.

The prayerful church must also consider, "How do we help those far from Christ experience this oneness as well?"

Apart from the gospel changing hearts and lives, there can be no oneness, no unity, with the world. Our minds are set on different things. Our hearts love different things. Our passions drive us in different directions. Our purposes often look and feel like polar opposites. But God has begun a good work in us, one He will see to completion. And this work is done *in* us, so that it might then be done *through* us. And when that happens, the walls come down, and unity, the only true unity that exists, is ours in Christ.

Questions to consider for closing

1. What are our (yours personally and ours corporately) greatest challenges to this oneness?
2. What practical steps is God calling us (you personally and us corporately) toward this oneness?
3. Who can you invite to meet Jesus so that they might experience the oneness only possible in Christ?

Ending

End with an intentional, crafted time of prayer, whether it is in the response time or as part of corporate worship.

- Ask God for a Philippians 2 type of oneness in your church.
- Ask God for a posture of joy in the purpose of each of these areas.
- Ask God to get glory in two directions: from unity among members of your local church and from unity found as God saves those far from Him and dividing walls come down.
- Thank God for our missionaries who serve throughout North America—for the well-being of their families and the effectiveness of their churches and ministries.

Sermon outline by Noah Oldham, pastor of August Gate Church in Belleville, Illinois and Senior Director of Send Network Culture and Care at the North American Mission Board.