

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.

(Philippians 2:3)

Introduction

On 16 June 1858 more than one thousand delegates met in the Illinois statehouse for the Republican State Convention. At 5:00 PM they chose Abraham Lincoln as their candidate to run for president. At 8:00 PM Lincoln delivered this address to his Republican colleagues:

Mr. President and Gentlemen of the Convention,

If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do, and how to do it.

We are now far into the fifth year since a policy was initiated, with the avowed object, and confident promise, of putting an end to slavery agitation.

Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only not ceased, but has constantly augmented.

In my opinion, it will not cease, until a crisis shall have been reached, and passed.

Then came his famous words:

“A house divided against itself cannot stand.”

I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free.

I do not expect the Union to be dissolved – I do not expect the house to fall – but I do expect it will cease to be divided.

It will become all one thing or all the other.

This was before Lincoln was elected president.

Lincoln understood that a house divided cannot stand. A house—a community, a fellowship—must be united in order to stand, otherwise constant tensions, bickering and fighting will tear that house apart and keep it from being useful for anything.

What many people do not realise, but what I trust is obvious to regular readers of the Bible, is that Lincoln’s famous quote is actually a second-hand quote from Christ in the Gospels. This is part of the reason for the One Others series, which we have been enjoying.

Christians realise that, apart from living out these one another exhortations, our house will be divided and it will, assuredly fall.

An important fact about Mr Lincoln, which drew my attention to him for our consideration in this study, is that, after he was elected president, he built his cabinet using his political rivals. Instead of being insecure and seeing the presidency as a thing to be jealously guarded, he was humble enough to realise that his political rivals were actually assets. They were gifted men who would promote the cause of the country and therefore he surrounded himself with them. In fact, it was largely his humble confidence that forged his administration into one of the most memorable that the world has yet seen. Whether Mr Lincoln was a believer or not, I do not know enough to say. All I can say is that, in God's common grace, he understood something of the passage we are going to consider briefly in this study.

Paul writes to the Philippians:

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. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

(Philippians 2:3–8)

Setting the Scene

Philippi was actually the first place in Europe where the gospel was preached. It was preached under interesting circumstances by Paul and Silas. Paul had been called by a remarkable vision in Acts 16:9 to go into Macedonia, and the first place where he preached was Philippi, the capital. Lydia was converted. Later, as a result of Paul casting out a demon from a young girl who used to practice divination, her masters lost their source of income, the populace was stirred into an uproar, and Paul and Silas were thrown into prison.

At midnight, God shook the prison with an earthquake and their bonds were loosed and the doors of the prison burst open. The jailer wanted to fall on his sword because he thought that his prisoners had escaped but, in fact, they didn't escaped and their jailer was converted along with his family.

At the time of writing this letter, Paul was imprisoned in Rome. The reason for the letter was largely to thank the church for their kindness and practical care and to comfort them with the hope that he would soon be freed.

It is one of the most affectionate epistles, written in the language of a father or a tender friend, rather than the commands of one in authority such as we see at times in the letters to the Corinthians. Now, he did not shrink from either praise or rebuke where it was necessary, but on the whole the letter serves as a model of affectionate counsel and advice.

In the immediate context of our passage, Paul is encouraging the Philippian believers with the glorious truth that, for a Christian, to live is Christ, and to die – well – that is gain! There was no danger of loss for himself, and by extension, for every believer.

With that truth in mind, he turns to what living for Christ looks like. Believers are to build their lives around serving Christ. And the way we do this is to look at the example of Christ himself.

If you are familiar with the epistle, you will recall his words in 1:27: “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Then, in 1:29 he writes, “It has been granted that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.”

So, based on those truths, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” For our purposes, we will consider this verse under three broad headings.

How Not to Live Together

We must remember that living together in Christian community is not a competition. In the first part of v. 3 Paul writes, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit.”

“Do nothing” – that’s quite a sweeping way to state something! Not, “do almost everything,” not “do all important things,” not “do some things,” but “do *nothing* from selfish ambition or conceit.”

Nothing we do as Christians ought to proceed from a desire to glorify ourselves. Nothing we do as Christians should be done in order to make us look or feel superior to our brothers and sisters.

Let me pause here and ask you to examine your own heart. Is that how you live your life in your local church? Is that the approach you take in ministry? Are you willing to wash the disciples’ feet or do you only put your hand up for the more important tasks of which you think yourself worthy?

Does hosting your small group make you feel superior to those in your group? Does being a leader in children’s or youth ministry attract you because it is somehow a position of prominence, or are you willing to be the person behind the scenes supporting the brother or sister doing that prominent work? Are you willing to put up your hand and do the work

no one wants to do? Are you willing to be a nothing and a nobody so that Christ may be glorified in the body? Are you willing to be a nothing and a nobody so that the lives of your brothers and sisters in the body might be built up and edified? Are you willing to be a nothing and a nobody and have no one even notice your contribution, knowing that your reward is from the Lord alone?

Not only does Paul, time and again in his letters to the Corinthians, tell us to jettison worldly wisdom, which would have us get ahead and promote ourselves, but we read the words of Christ telling us that the one who would be first in the kingdom of heaven, and would be greatest among you, must be a servant of all! In God's economy there is no place for self-promotion and pride. It's God's economy after all. When we take our eyes off the goal, we inevitably make life about ourselves.

How to Live Together

But the text also tells us how to live together.

The Latin phrase *nosce te ipsum* means "know yourself." Do you know yourself or are you deceiving yourself?

We are familiar with Jeremiah 17:9 which says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" The truth is simple, and yet chilling in its ramifications: You cannot trust your heart. When it comes to your sin, your heart will lie to you.

So then, how can you know yourself? Not how can you *find* yourself, but how can you *know* yourself? Let me ask you this: Who knows you better than you know yourself? Better than your wife (although asking her might help too). If you want to truly know yourself, go to your creator. Go to God.

How can you know what God says about you? There is no better place to hear from God than his holy word. Hear the following texts addressed to you:

None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.... For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

(Romans 3:10-19, 23)

Again,

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘you shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgement.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgement.” ... “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

(Matthew 5:21, 27–28)

James 2:10 tells us that “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.” Romans 6:23 teaches that “the wages of sin is death,” and Paul writes in Romans 7:18, “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right but not the ability to carry it out.”

Scripture pulls no punches, does it? In truth, you really don’t have much to be proud about. You don’t have anything to boast about. In your flesh, you want the limelight. You want to have the world look at you and applaud, but be careful what you wish for: The light will only expose the poverty of your heart in the sight of God.

So if we are to do nothing from rivalry or conceit, and we are to be humble, and not proud, then how should we live? The last part of v. 3 tells us: “Count others more significant than yourselves.”

The gospel turns everything on its head, doesn’t it? In fact, more accurately, the gospel restores everything to its rightful position. Instead of our default self-promotion, instead of our idolatry of self, we are called to consider others better than ourselves.

Knowing the poverty of our own hearts makes this a natural consequence. We know the sinful, corrupt motives and desires that lurk deep inside. We don’t have the same view of others. All we know of others is their outward behaviour.

As you look at your brothers and sisters, are you able to recognise their growth in grace and holiness with joy and encourage them with your observations? This is a vital function of the local church. We are called to encourage one another.

Immaturity is easily impressed. My daughters think very highly of their colouring skills. I know that, one day when they are older, they will look at some of the very same pictures they are now so proud of with utter disappointment.

Very often as we mature in the faith, we become more and more aware of our own sinfulness and shortcomings and, as a result, struggle to see our own growth—growth that is obvious to those around us. Someone else’s growth may be obvious to you but you haven’t

verbalised your encouragement. Let me challenge you not to leave it without doing so. The proud are self-focused and introspective. The humble will see the glory of God in others.

Self-knowledge ought always to drive out pride and make us put ourselves down and esteem others more highly. But that's not enough.

The Pattern for Living Together

How can we do nothing out of rivalry or conceit? How can we in humility count others better than ourselves? How can we look not only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others? Verse 5 helps us: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus." Hear the encouragement: "This mind" that you must have "is yours." You have it already, if you will but obey!

What is the mind of Christ that we must have? It is the attitude of one, "who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped."

Though the glory and honour and privilege and pleasure of God was rightfully his, Jesus didn't hold on to his position as all important. He didn't do what was only good for him. No, he "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 by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

Jesus is the model for us in all aspects of the Christian life. There has never been a clearer example of humility than our Lord, and so Paul points us to Christ.

Of course, there are some areas where we cannot be like Christ. We cannot be like him in his deity. We cannot be like him in his incarnation. We cannot achieve his perfect holiness or his miracles. We cannot die on a cross for the sins of men. But we can follow the pattern of his humility.

Jesus did not only give up what was rightfully his but became a man. There was no rivalry or conceit in the Godhead. His priority was not his own comfort but his Father's glory. Therefore, he was willing to take on human flesh. He was willing as the creator, who spoke Adam into being, to become one of his created creatures.

And then his humility didn't stop there! He didn't become a man only to rule the earth, as the Lord he rightfully is. No, he humbled himself further, taking the form of a servant. Looking not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others, he became a servant.

As the Lord of hosts, he was willing to wash his disciples' feet and heal the sick. As Jehovah Rophi, he was willing to touch the unclean leper, to touch the woman with the flow of blood, and to heal the demoniac of Mark 5! Is that not amazing?

Living Humbly With One Another

Philippians 2:3

Anton Beetge

But he didn't stop there. Not only did he empty himself, putting his glory aside, and not only did he become a man, and not only did he take the form of a servant, but he gave his life up, willingly, as a ransom for many.

He, the perfect, holy, sinless Lord, came to die in the place of sinners. He came to take the wrath of God that was justly directed at us and to give his people his life in exchange. And his was not just any death but the death of the wicked. He, the perfect one, died as a contemptible criminal on a Roman cross.

The wonderful, joyful, astounding conclusion of the matter is this: His death actually accomplished something! His death enables us—empowers us—as repentant sinners to do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility to count others as more significant than ourselves. And it does that for us here and now for those who are energised by the Holy Spirit. It does that for those who have first been humbled to bow their knee to Jesus, their humble, yet exalted Lord. If Jesus is not your Lord, if you have not yet acknowledged your sinful disobedience and pled with God to forgive you on the basis of Christ's death, you have no hope for humility or any other virtue. If that is your situation then I urge you to come to Christ!

But for those who know Christ as their Lord and elder brother, I say: Brothers and sisters, we have all experienced the love of Christ through his body, have we not? We have tasted of this heavenly gift, which makes the church so unique. Can you imagine how bright our light would shine, and what an influence we would have on the world, if we all had the same mind and operated in perfect unity?

But the price is high. It is nothing less than Christlike humility in the lives of each and every member.

We can't do it alone, so may God grant us the grace we need to follow Christ and to do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others as more significant than ourselves.

AMEN