

Text: Phil. 2:1-4

Title: "The joy of local church unity"

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Place: NBBC

Introduction: The recruiting slogan of the US Army is "Army Strong." As these slogans go, "Army Strong" has been relatively enduring, lasting just over a decade now as the phrase that encourages young men and women to volunteer to serve our country in the Army.

The Army slogan that is remembered as the weakest of recruiting-slogan history was used from 2001 to 2006. During that period, recruiters touted "An Army of One." Writing in October 2006 for [military.com](http://military.com), Tanya Biank explained that "An Army of One" took too much explaining. She wrote: "once the Army clarified what 'An Army of One' meant, it turned many active-duty soldiers and veterans off. But that wasn't the audience the Army was after. Military recruiting slogans are meant to attract the youngsters to enlist. 'An Army of One' was supposed to appeal to the 'Me Generation' by highlighting the individual over the group, and the reliance on oneself for achievement.

"'An Army of One' should have been reported to the Better Business Bureau as false advertising. Imagine a cocky recruit showing up to basic training and quickly learning the truth: military service is about teamwork, sacrifice, and serving a cause greater than oneself" ([www.military.com/opinion/15202,116671,00.html](http://www.military.com/opinion/15202,116671,00.html); accessed 8/16/07).

The slogan "A Church of One" does not work well in the work of the Lord either. Here in Philippians 2, Paul forcefully commands the Philippian believers to unify around a mission that is "about teamwork, sacrifice, and serving a

cause greater than oneself." That unifying mission is agrees with the doctrine of the believer's union with Christ, that we all are in Him and He is in us through the agency of the indwelling Holy Spirit in our lives. United to Christ, we are united to one another too. This theme appears three times in the passage we read this morning (v. 1 "in Christ", v. 5 "in Christ Jesus, v. 10 "at [in] the name of Jesus"). The cause to which we are called this morning has Jesus Christ, not ourselves, at its center. Together we are in Him, and so He is our unifying cause, which is greater than ourselves.

And it turns out this cause is one of great joy. Paul speaks of the joy of local church unity in vv. 1-4, the example for local church unity in vv. 5-8, and the future of local church unity in vv. 9-11. This morning we will focus on those first four verses that describe the joy of local church unity.

Local church unity is critical to the believer's joy. Philippians is a book about two simple results of our union in Christ: joy and unity. The noun and verb forms of *joy* appear on average twice on every page of Philippians. 2 John only has 1 page in your Bible and uses these words 4 times, but other than that little book, the next closest to the Philippians' 2-per-page tally is 1 Thessalonians with 1.2 occurrences of the word *joy* per page.

And again, Philippians is also a book about Christian unity. We have seen the theme emphasized a number of times in the first chapter of the book [the emphasis on "you all" in vv. 4, 7, 8 (no one left out); the term "brethren" in v. 12 (we are family, not just a group of neighbors), and the importance of unity to our public testimony in v. 27], and we will see it over and over again to the end of the book.

Chapter 2 is one of the key passages in all of Scripture regarding Christian unity. So, it is no wonder that when Paul says in verse 2, “Fulfill ye my joy,” that he finishes the command with a call to unity, “that you be like-minded.” He emphasizes two things about the joy of Christian unity in these first four verses of the chapter.

I. The joy of Christian unity must be valued correctly (v.1).

Illustration: Failing to value something correctly can lead to some poor decisions. We have seen the tragic results of the failure to value correctly a military base in Afghanistan recently. Loads of military equipment purchased with our taxpayer dollars has fallen into the hands of the Taliban.

But on the positive side, correctly valuing what is valuable can yield good results. In 1867 William Henry Seward was serving as the Secretary of State under President Johnson. He is best known today for the treaty he arranged that year between the United States and Russia, by which we purchased Alaska from the Russians for \$7.2MM.

Seward’s critics and most of America with them called the deal, “Seward’s Folly” and strongly criticized this government official for wasting taxpayer dollars. Back then, Alaska seemed like nothing worth paying a price for – a bunch of snow and ice in the far away north, something not worth bothering with. Today, of course, after the invention of the gas combustion engine and the discovery of oil in Alaska, that state is understood to be rich in resources and a blessing to our country. Seward was right after all. He valued Alaska correctly; his critics failed to do so.

Application: Paul argues in verse one of this passage that Christian unity contains rich resources that we must value

correctly. Disunity begins when we put a greater value on something that divides us than we do on the blessings of this verse. We live in a world that calls valuing these blessings a waste of time, or we might say “a Christian’s folly,” but Paul is telling us here why Christian unity is so very valuable after all. He mentions four rich spiritual resources.

1. Consolation in Christ. The word here is *parakletos*, from the Greek verb meaning *to call* and the Greek preposition meaning *along side of*. A literal sense of the word conveys the idea of having someone who has been called along side to help you. It means encouragement and advocacy from another. It means to have someone on your side.

Illustration: The insurance company Nationwide is well known for their slogan, “Nationwide is on your side.” They say that because they want you to know that when something goes wrong, they are going to be there for you to help you. They do so, of course, for a price.

The local church’s consolation in Christ is not a benefit that comes from paying your premiums on time, but rather encouragement and advocacy that comes to the believer from being in Christ with other believers. All in Christ are on one side. All that is against Christ and His people are on the other side.

Although both Christ (1 John 2:2, “advocate”) and the Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 26, 15:26, 16:7) are referred to as our Paraclete (capital *P*), this passage refers to the paracletes (small *p*) we have in one another in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Under the blessings of Christian unity, we never lack someone on our side. Do we value this resource correctly? Do we see our need for encouragement and advocacy from other believers, and their need for ours? If not, the joy of our local church unity will suffer.

2. Comfort of love. Dennis Praeger, a Jewish radio broadcaster, likes to point out that Christianity is the one religion for which there is no term in our language to identify discrimination against it. *Anti-Semitism* is discrimination against Jews. *Islamophobia* is discrimination against Muslims. What is the word for discrimination against Christians? There is not one.

Jesus explained to His disciples that since the world hated Him, it would hate them too (John 15:18-20). He also told them in that same passage that they were to love one another as they faced together the world's hatred (v. 12, "This is My commandment, that ye love one another as I have loved you").

Jesus is saying that in a world that hates us, Christians can find the comfort of love in a unified local church. This is a valuable resource that Satan has successfully stolen from many professing believers. He has taught them to love the world and hate the local church, but the love of the world brings no true comfort for the believer it hates. We must be sure to value the comfort of love we can minister to one another as a local church in a church-hating world.

3. Fellowship of the Spirit. One of the biblical pictures of the Holy Spirit is the anointing oil of the Old Testament. Prophets, priests, and Kings were all anointed with a special oil, signifying the truth that the ultimate Anointed One, the Messiah, was promised to come. *Christ* means *Anointed One*, and Jesus is our Prophet, Priest, and King, anointed not with oil, but with the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove at His baptism.

Psalm 133 pictures the significance of this work of the Spirit which we share in union with Christ. The pictures of the fellowship of God's Spirit there are the anointing oil and

the refreshing dew on the morning grass. The Psalm clearly teaches that this sharing in the blessing of God's Spirit happens where brothers and sisters dwell together in unity. It is as though local church unity is God's greenhouse for growing fruitful ministry. It is a place where the tender plants of new faith in Christ can grow in safety and nourishment. The Holy Spirit works mightily in this environment. Do we value that blessing? Have we known that blessing?

4. Bowels and mercies. *Bowels* refer to our emotions. When coupled with mercy, our emotions can make the bonds of unity stronger. However, our emotions can rip apart those bonds when they are not combined with God's mercy.

We all need heart-felt mercy and compassion, because we all offend in many ways. James says this about our tongues (James 3:2, "For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body"). The unified local church is a church that has learned to forgive one another from the heart in spite of the way we offend in many things. Forgiveness from others is one of our greatest needs, and the Lord desires we find that need met in our local church. Do we value this merciful disposition correctly? The joy of Christian unity must be valued correctly, or it will be lost.

II. The joy of Christian unity requires commitment and work (vv. 2-4).

Illustration: It was one thing for Seward to sit at his desk in Washington, D.C. and correctly value the rich resources of the Alaskan wilderness. It was quite another for the pioneers and settlers who traveled there and worked to enjoy the benefit of those resources.

White's Hardware is a small store in historic McCormick, SC, where my dad does some of his home-improvement shopping. Mr. White, the store's proprietor, posts some humorous wise sayings on the wall behind his checkout counter. One of those says, "Good work isn't cheap, and cheap work isn't good." That is right.

Application: When it comes to the joy of local church like-mindedness, we have good work to do that isn't cheap, and Paul lists some important tasks related to that work:

1. We need to work at *having the same love* in order to be likeminded (v. 2). Here Paul discourages the partiality of different kinds of love in the local church. At home, my love for each of my children needs to be the same kind of love, or my favoritism is going to create problems. In the local church, brothers and sisters in Christ need to avoid the cliques of better love for some and less so for others.

2. We need to work at *one accord* and *one mind* to be likeminded (v. 2). *One accord* is literally *together-souled*. It is the idea that our lives are connected together. No one has taken a position where they are on the outside looking in. Instead, we embrace our common identity in Christ together. For New England Yankees, this work runs counter to our commitment to personal independence and self-sufficiency.

*One mind* refers to *being focused on one thing*. Our one mission as a local church is to love Jesus Christ and to make Him known. Our church's covenant is a great place to read our mission. Local church members who are not focused on this one thing cause division that results in mission failure.

3. We need to work at eliminating *strife*, *vainglory* (pride), and our natural *own-things* orientation (selfishness) to be

like-minded (vv. 3-4). One of the most valuable lessons I was taught while in seminary was the introduction I received from Dr. Robert Bell in a class on Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel regarding a man named Baruch (Jer. 45:1-5). The Lord wanted Baruch to be thankful that he was alive.

Strife, pride, and selfishness destroy Christian unity when we seek greater things for ourselves. God wants us to be thankful and content with the blessings of life that He graciously gives one day at a time, and He want us to use that life and those days to serve others in our local church (v. 4).

Conclusion: I mentioned that the new Army slogan is "Army Strong." Paul is doing his best to help the believers of Philippi to become "Local Church Strong." Unity is critical on the battlefields of military conflict, and it is critical on the battlefields of Christian warfare as well. The joy of Christian unity awaits those who are willing to value it enough to work at it. Will we be a church that is joyfully unified and so strong for Christ and for souls?

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*