

## THE MARK OF THE CHURCH

### PHILIPPIANS 2:1-4

If you could distill the Christian life into its most essential component—it would be *love*. You only have to be a casual reader of the New Testament to discover that love is the basic motive and the basic ethic of the Christian faith. Just before He left the earth the Lord said to His disciples, *“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another” (John 13:34)*. He went on to say, *“It is by this that all men will know that you are my disciples: if you love one another” (13:35)*. Not, “if you think and act alike.” Not, “if you say the right things.” Not, “if you have all your doctrinal ducks in a row.”

The badge of Christian discipleship is *love*. Love is *the* defining characteristic—the identifying mark of the child of God. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul said that we can have extraordinary gifts and talents, we can be brilliant theologians, we can make costly sacrifices and even be martyrs. But if we do not have love, none of these things count for anything.

But it’s one thing to know and agree with this; it’s quite another thing to live it out in real life. Because I hope you know that the kind of love Jesus and Paul are talking about is a love that we are expected to have and express toward people who are not easy to love—people who frustrate and disappoint us; people who have irritating mannerisms, people who have edges on their personalities, people who push our buttons or rub us the wrong way.

Which is precisely why the New Testament talks so often about our need to love and the need to keep on loving. Loving other people, including the ones we don’t like, including the ones who have offended us and hurt us repeatedly—loving them unconditionally—is *the* most challenging, *the* most difficult, *the* most unnatural thing for anyone to do.

Am I right? Think about it. It is not terribly difficult to be correct in our doctrine, or to be active in our service, or to use our spiritual gifts, or even to give our resources. But to love people who grate on us? To esteem and promote the welfare of that person who doesn’t respect me, or who keeps disagreeing with me, or who is a perpetual burr under my saddle?

That’s hard. But that’s what makes this a distinctively “Christian” virtue. By that I mean there are simply no other people on the face of the earth who are capable of doing this, besides Christians—and I’ll tell you why in a minute. But that is what is *possible*, and that’s what is *expected* of Christians. And that is the identifying mark of the church.

So, what does it look like in the church? Paul tells us in the second chapter of Philippians. He says in **verses 1-4**, *“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, <sup>2</sup> complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus...”*

Earlier in this letter Paul had commended the Philippian church as generous, caring, and affectionate. But they were like any church, comprised of people who had different personalities, different racial and ethnic backgrounds, different preferences, and different levels of education and understanding. Naturally, this results in different opinions and different perspectives. Some of them felt so passionately about these opinions and perspectives and held them so tightly that they became disappointed and frustrated with others in the church who disagreed with them. This led to some heated quarrels, some of which resulted in hard feelings and ill will, which then resulted in lines being drawn and sides being taken.

That is an innocuous way of saying that it caused division in the church, which is extremely serious. Church division is one of Satan's chief strategies in his warfare against Jesus and the kingdom, because he knows that a divided church is an ineffective church. And Paul was concerned that the Philippians were falling right into the devil's trap.

Paul had witnessed firsthand the devastating, paralyzing effects of division in churches, and so he addressed it with a sense of urgency. Listen, again, to what he says in **verses 1-2**. *"So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, <sup>2</sup> complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind."*

It is not apparent in my translation (ESV), but each of the four clauses in verse 1 begin with the word "if." However, they are *not* conditional clauses that are intended to be hypothetical. They are statements of fact, so the "if" could be translated, "since."

Paul identifies four blessings that the Philippians had experienced because of what Jesus did for them. First, *encouragement in Christ*. This refers to such things as the consolation that comes from the removal of one's guilt and shame, the peace that forgiveness provides, the joy of having a personal relationship with the King of kings and Lord of lords, the security that comes from His promise that He will never leave us nor forsake us, and the hope that we will one day live with Him forever in heaven. Paul says, "You've experienced firsthand the encouragement that comes from this intimate union with Christ."

Second, *comfort from love*, a love that not only includes Jesus' immense and immeasurable love, which Paul described elsewhere as being so long and wide and high and deep that it surpasses knowledge (Eph. 3:18-19), but *Paul's* love and the love of other brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul says, "You've experienced that comfort, that sense of security, that gratifying joy that comes from being on both the receiving end and the giving end of this love."

Third, *participation in the Spirit*. That mutual participation in the things of God in which the believer and the Holy Spirit are, wonder of wonders, joint participants (Wuest). Paul says, "You experienced that fellowship with the Spirit when God was pleased to use you to proclaim the gospel, and the Spirit simultaneously opened the spiritual eyes of those who heard it and enabled them to believe. You experienced that fellowship when the Spirit allowed you to be a tangible expression of Christ to someone who needed his touch or needed to hear His voice. And you know what a blessing it was!"

Finally, *affection and sympathy*. The word translated "affection" (*splagchna*) is the strongest word in Greek for intense feelings of compassion. Paul is saying, "You have experienced profound compassion for each other as you have walked with each other through pain, heartache, loss, tribulation, as well as victory and blessing. You know what it is like to feel deeply for each other."

These are four profound blessings that you have experienced from being in Christ. And because of this, says Paul, there are some things expected from you in return. He says in **verse 2**. *<sup>2</sup> ...complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind."*

Paul had already told his Philippian friends that he was filled with joy whenever he prayed for them (1:3-4). Now he tells them that they could make his joy complete by *being of the same mind*, or, literally, by "thinking the same thing". This is the *sole* imperative in verse 2, and all the other things he says, which are participles (or verbal adjectives), reinforce or describe how this can be done. So, if we could diagram verse 2 it would be like this:

*"Think the same thing"*

*"having the same love"*

*“being in full accord” (being united in soul)*

*“being of one mind” (thinking the same thing)*

Do you see the repeat words in this verse? “One” and “same.” You’ll recall that before Jesus even established His church, He prayed that all those who would believe in Him might be one, even as He and the Father were one (John 17:20-23). And then Paul, in Ephesians, described Christians as those who were identified as *one* body, indwelt by *one* Spirit, called to *one* hope, and having *one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism, *one* God and Father of us all who is over all and through all and in all (Eph. 4:4-6). Oneness is a fundamental characteristic of the church.

So, what does Paul mean by the phrase, “think the same thing?” Is he advocating that we should not have different opinions or that we should think exactly alike on every issue? Was he proposing a church comprised of automated clones?

Years ago, I saw a cartoon in *Leadership Journal* of a pastor, with slick hair, standing behind an oversized pulpit dressed in a three-piece suit, with a smug smile on his face. On the left side of the pulpit there was a door, and people from a very diverse congregation were waiting in line to walk through, one by one. As each would walk through the pastor would pull a lever attached to the pulpit and when they walked out the right side, lo and behold, they looked exactly like him—same hair, same suit, same smug smile.

I assure you that is *not* what Paul had in mind when he said, “think the same thing,” and if you want to proof, read 1 Corinthians where he talks about the beauty and necessity of diversity within the body. “Think the same thing” is akin to what we call, “being on the same page.” It has the idea of having a unified center or focus, which, for us, is Jesus Christ. It is a similar admonition to the one Paul gave the Colossians, *“Set your minds on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God” (3:2)*, or the admonition in Hebrews to *“fix our eyes on Jesus” (12:1)*.

It means that we focus on who He is, what He said, what He did, why He did it, where He is now, who we are in relation to Him, and what He will do and how things will be when He gets His Father’s nod to return to this earth and gather us up to be with Him forever. To “think the same thing” mean to think about Jesus; to “be on the same page” means to be on heaven’s frequency. Paul said it another way in the first chapter of Philipians: “For to me to live is Christ” (1:21).

Paul goes on to explain *how* we are to “think the same thing” or “be on the same page.” Three things: First, “having the same love”—the love that comes from the same Source, the love that was so profoundly expressed to us by that Source, the love that changed our identity from enemies of God to adopted children of God, a love that transformed us into new creatures with new natures—Jesus’ nature—a nature that is capable of loving others as Jesus loves us.

So, thinking the same thing is not just about propositional truth or theological correctness. It’s about relationships with other adopted children of God. It is about the expressing the profound love of Jesus to our spiritual siblings.

Second, “Being in full accord” or literally “united in soul.” Paul is describing what we call “kindred spirits” or “soul-mates.” People who share the same values, passions, and aspirations—who walk on the same path, go in the same direction, cling to the same hope, and are headed to the same destination.

Third, “being of one mind” or “thinking one thing.” What is that one thing? I believe Paul may be referring, here, to the truth of the gospel—the truth that transformed each one of them and made them children of God. The essential truth that all of them believed, and that can never be diluted or altered or added to.

So, having the same love, being united in soul, and being of one mind are the ways in which we stay on the same page with each other. But what does this look like in real life? Paul tells us in the next two verses. <sup>3</sup>*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.* <sup>4</sup>*Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

I would submit to you that Paul has just defined *love*, for the essence of love is denying oneself and deferring to others.

*“Do nothing out of selfish ambition.”* In other words, don’t always try to be first; don’t push your way to the front; don’t strive to get the best seat or the biggest portion. Don’t concern yourself with getting the upper hand or insist on getting the last word.

Do you see how selfish ambition works itself out in everyday life? It is insidious. It is subtle. And because selfish ambition has been our default mode since we were infants, sometimes we are not aware that we are succumbing to it.

This is why we had to be born again. This is why we had to be given a new nature (a new operating system) and why the Spirit lives in us. We are by nature selfish. Selfish ambition is the M.O. of the old operating system, the flesh, and it is the antithesis of who Jesus is and what He wants us to be. The Christian life is about a life of *selflessness* in which we are mandated to crucify our selfish propensities and ambitions so that we are not dictated by their impulses. And because He gave us His nature and indwelt us by His Spirit, we are now enabled to put Jesus and others first, and ourselves last.

This means that we can (and must) treat other brothers and sisters in Christ with honor and respect, even if they are acting immature, even if they have mannerisms and idiosyncrasies that rub us the wrong way, even if they have opinions and views that get under our skin. It means that when we have disagreements with such people, we are quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to get angry, and quick to forgive. It means that when they are struggling, even though some fault of their own, we rally around them and assist them and help restore them.

But there is more. Paul also tells us in verse 3 to “do nothing from...conceit.” Conceit describes someone who is full of himself, who does things in order to attract attention to himself, who is intoxicated with her own self-importance.

Again, that is part of the old nature and is just the opposite of who Jesus is and what He’s called us to be. Remember, He said, *“Whoever wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all”* (Mark 9:35). We are called on the one hand to deny ourselves and, on the other, to serve and exalt and esteem others. And so instead of being selfish and vain, Paul says, **verse 3b**, *“In humility, count others more significant than yourselves.”*

When I was a child, I would occasionally get to go to a department store in the city and ride on those mysterious, moving stairs called *escalators*. I never could figure them out. They seemingly came out of the floor from nowhere, carried a person to a higher level, and then quietly disappeared.

That is a description of what Paul is talking about in verse 3. We are to be spiritual escalators. We are to elevate other people to positions of honor, carry them to greater heights, make sure their feet are on solid ground, and then quietly disappear.

Considering others as better than ourselves means treating everyone we meet like a VIP and considering *ourselves* their servant. It means that when we are talking with someone—no matter how young or old, rich or poor, attractive or unattractive, pleasant or unpleasant, educated or uneducated—we give that person our undivided attention. It means communicating, through the way we listen and respond, that they are important and worthy of honor.

I think it also means that we literally let others go first, that we let others have the best piece or the best portion, that we let others have the best seat, that we give others the benefit of the doubt, that we refuse to speak uncharitably about another brother or sister, even about someone who has hurt us or offended us.

It's not hard to know how to treat others as better than ourselves; all we have to do is think about the respect and honor and dignity with which we like to be treated, and then treat others accordingly. There are dozens of ways in which we can apply this command each and every day with each and every person we meet.

Finally, Paul says in **verse 4**, *“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”*

There is a story in Genesis about Abraham and his nephew Lot. Their livestock and possessions had become so great that the land could not support both of them, and so they were forced to divide their herds and part company. And Abraham, who was the heir of God's promise, took Lot to a high place where they could see the whole land, and he said, “Look, here is the land before us. You choose which you prefer. If you want to go to the right, I'll go to the left and vice versa.” And Lot, not surprisingly, chose the “better” land—the well-watered land, the land that was most favorable to his own prosperity.

We read that and we say, “But Abraham, God made his covenant with *you*, not Lot. *You* are the heir of God's promise. *You* are the one who is to inherit the land.”

It shows you how much Abraham loved Lot. For the essence of love is denying oneself and deferring to others. Of course, the greatest example of this kind of love is Jesus Himself. And Paul goes on to describe how Jesus expressed that love in the most profound way possible. He says in **verses 5-8**, <sup>5</sup> *“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”*

This is the most profound illustration of someone who denied himself and deferred to others—who put others ahead of himself at great personal cost—which is the meaning of love. Paul gives us this illustration because he wants us to follow Jesus' example. We are “Christians,” which means “little Christs,” and the implication is that we are expected to think like and act like Jesus. Someone said it this way: “A Christian is someone who has a mind through which Christ thinks, a voice through which Christ speaks, a heart through which Christ loves, and a hand through which Christ helps.”

That is our job description on this earth. And we CAN do it because when we were born again He gave us His nature and indwelt us by His Holy Spirit. The predominant characteristic of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christ-followers is love, which means that love is the identifying mark of the church. “By this will all men know that you are my disciples,” said Jesus, “if you love one another.”

## The Mark of the Church Philippians 2:1-5

Main Idea: Love is the identifying mark of the church, and it is expressed by denying oneself and deferring to others.

Profound Blessings from being Related to Christ (1)  
Encouragement in Christ

Comfort from love

Participation with the Spirit

Affection and sympathy

The Practical Expression of being Related to Christ (2-4)  
The focus of our attention—Christ

Having the same love

Being of full accord

Thinking one thing

The eradication of our flesh—Selfishness (3a)  
Selfish ambition

Vain conceit

The exaltation of our brothers and sisters (3b-4)  
Considering others as more significant

Minding others' business