

PHILIPPIANS 2

COMMENTARY

1 Therefore if there is any encouragement in Messiah, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, 2 make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.

2:1 The Apostle Paul continues his exhortation to the Philippians, expressing a great desire that they be totally engulfed by the love of God in everything they do—resulting in them being united. He issues the directive, “Your life in Christ makes you strong, and his love comforts you. You have fellowship with the Spirit, and you have kindness and compassion for one another” (Good News Bible). What he proceeds to describe in ch. 2 should be considered in light of what he has previously addressed in ch. 1 about the Philippians possibly suffering for the Lord. While Paul has just addressed some of the external threats to the Believers in Philippi, he now begins to address internal threats. As Peter T. O’Brien summarizes, “He now deals with dangers that arise from within....the apostle looks for a steadfast resistance to all kinds of internal division.”¹

The kind of encouragement that Paul describes to the Philippians can only come by a person being one with the Messiah Yeshua, who is uplifted by Him as the supreme example of humility for Believers to emulate. If one is “united with Christ” (NIV) and has a relationship with Him, then the benefits of having a relationship with Him will undoubtedly flow forth. The ultimate dedication of a person’s service to God was demonstrated by Yeshua’s willingness to die, a theme seen repeatedly throughout the Apostolic Scriptures:

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Messiah died for us” (Romans 5:8).

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Messiah Yeshua our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

¹ O’Brien, pp 164, 166.

“We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (1 John 3:16).

“By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:9-10).

When Believers understand the great price Yeshua paid as their sacrifice, then they can truly receive the *paraklēsis* (παράκλησις) or “encouragement” that Paul talks about. This term is related to *paraklētos* (παράκλητος), used to refer to the Holy Spirit in John 14:16: “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper [*paraklētos*], that He may be with you forever.” The “encouragement” that the redeemed in Yeshua are to receive, comes from God sending His Holy Spirit, enabling them to partake of everything that He has intended—whether through good times or bad. This might be best summarized by Paul in 2 Corinthians 13:14 where he writes, “The grace of the Lord Yeshua the Messiah, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.”

When a man or woman participates in a union with the Messiah, “consolation in love” or “incentive of love” (RSV) comes as a natural evidence of His work. Consoling or helping people during times of distress is a major theme of the Tanach:

“Now when Job's three friends heard of all this adversity that had come upon him, they came each one from his own place, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite; and they made an appointment together to come to sympathize with him and comfort him” (Job 2:11).

“Then David said, ‘I will show kindness to Hanun the son of Nahash, just as his father showed kindness to me.’ So David sent some of his servants to console him concerning his father” (2 Samuel 10:2).

“‘I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will lead him and restore comfort to him and to his mourners, creating the praise of the lips. Peace, peace to him who is far and to him who is near,’ says the LORD, ‘and I will heal him’” (Isaiah 57:18).

The fellowship that Paul desires the Philippians to have—which involves an ability for them to comfort or console others—comes as a result of the Holy Spirit working within their hearts. In v. 1, Paul does not express an opinion that the Philippians were not operating in the power of the Spirit, but he did want to see that any serious disunity or discord be stopped before it could start. These are the wonderful traits in which Believers in Yeshua are to always be operating, and they exemplify how one is to live as a “citizen” of God’s Kingdom (3:20), properly representing His character in a fallen world.

What areas of your life do you need to improve, so you might be able to comfort or console others during times of distress? What issues is the world going to present to us as the Messianic community in the next twenty to fifty years or beyond that we need to be prepared to handle, and especially be concerned about to offer people sound advice?

The last area that Paul desires the Philippians to have is “affection and compassion.” He repeats his usage of the term *splagchnon* (σπλάγχνον), used previously (1:8) to describe the deep-seated feelings that he has for his Philippian friends. Paul desires the Philippians to have the same deep-seated, strong feelings toward themselves and others, as he has toward them. If they can do this, then he will have a total joy as they will have been faithful to the godly instruction that he has given them.

2:2 V. 2 expresses Paul’s deep desire as he writes, “complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (RSV). The NEB has a unique, paraphrased rendering of these remarks: “fill up my cup of happiness by thinking and feeling alike, with the same love for one another, the same turn of mind, and a common care for unity.” Gordon D. Fee describes these emotions very well:

“[T]hey will fill his cup of joy to the full as they return to full and complete love for one another, which by definition means to care for another for her or his own sake. As someone well said: ‘Love begins when someone else’s needs are more important than my own,’ which is precisely what Paul will urge in the elaboration that follows.”²

The first and easiest place for this kind of service to begin is within one’s own family. Husbands and wives are to serve one another as being more important. Fathers and mothers are to serve their children. Secondly, members of the local community of faith are to serve one another, and to see that their needs are being taken care of. If this is accomplished, then this will in turn result in the local assembly serving the needs of its community as a testimony for the Lord.

Admittedly, this is not always easy. Leander E. Keck describes that these words denote “more than mere thinking or feeling in general; it means to center one’s thinking on something and to steer one’s actions by this mind-set.”³ When you think about serving God in today’s world, have you put the needs of others ahead of your own? Have you recognized the sacrifices that you may have to make to be an effective witness to other people? How much of this requires service? How much of this requires time and effort? How much of this may require things that you have not considered?

When it comes to our service as Believers in Yeshua, Paul admonished the Philippians to be “in full accord and of one mind” (NRSV). Paul desired the Philippians to have unity, but this did not necessarily mean that they had to have uniformity. In the ancient city of Philippi itself, there were certainly Philippian Believers who were better qualified to minister to certain segments of Philippian society than others. There were some who were better called to be custodians of the assembly than teachers, and those who were better able to minister to the poorer classes and wealthy classes, respectively. However, all were to be united in the love of God and in serving Him to the fullest possible extent as able witnesses.

Each person will have a different venue of ministry outreach in life, which will often require a different technique of dispensing God’s love to others. One is certainly going to approach children’s ministry different than a ministry to adults. One will approach ministry to single men and women slightly different than to married men and women. Some will be called

² Fee, 185.

³ Keck, in *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, 849.

to inner city ministry, others will be called to missionary work in the third world. Messianic Believers can certainly testify to the challenges and rewards of Jewish ministry! Regardless of where we find ourselves in the Lord's service, whether we be in full-time ministry or not, **all of us are called to demonstrate God's love to others.** We are called to be united around the common hope of salvation that we have in Messiah Yeshua.

Would Paul's joy be made complete by the work that you are doing for the Lord today?

3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; 4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

2:3 The key that Paul gives the Philippians toward attaining a unity of purpose is, "There must be no room for rivalry and personal vanity among you, but you must humbly reckon others better than yourselves" (NEB). Paul encourages the Philippians to look out for one another in their community. But in order to do this, he first says that none of them is to have *eritheia* (ἐριθεία), which in a secular Greek context could mean "a self-seeking pursuit of political office by unfair means" (BDAG).⁴ Paul lists "disputes" (Galatians 5:20) among the works of the flesh that Believers are not to have. No one in the community of faith is to seek a position of service simply to "serve themselves" or gain some kind of fame. Unfortunately, the Biblical record and Jewish and Christian history are all replete with examples of people who have strived to attain positions of leadership for precisely this purpose. Today's Messianic community is not immune from the problem of "selfish ambition" (NIV), either.

The second negative trait that Paul wants the Philippians to avoid is *kenodoxia* (κενοδοξία), meaning "a vain or exaggerated self-evaluation, vanity, conceit, excessive ambition" (BDAG).⁵ A literal rendering of this term could be "empty glory." Gerald F. Hawthorne points out, "A person...who is motivated by *κενοδοξία* is a person who assertively, even arrogantly, claims to have the right opinion (δόξα), but who is in fact in error (κενός). He is a person who is conceited without reason, deluded."⁶ This is an adequate description of someone in the community of faith who thinks more highly of himself than he ought to, and is often unwilling to serve when called upon. Yeshua's description of the Pharisaical leaders summarizes these people best: "They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with *so much as a finger*" (Matthew 23:4). When it comes to the dedication required of being a true servant, these people are often unwilling to have it.

We need to consider how Paul's remarks would have been received in a Philippian community that was full of retired Roman soldiers and their relatives. These were men who fought with Caesar's legions, and who may have performed some significant achievements in their military careers. Some of these may have attained nice pensions for their service to the

⁴ BDAG, 392.

⁵ Ibid., 538.

⁶ Hawthorne, 69.

Roman state, and may have even been granted Roman citizenship. How many of them had a high opinion of themselves—and carried this into the Philippian assembly? How many of them really knew that service to the Lord Yeshua in the community was different than service to Lord Caesar?

Those who look out for their own selfish interests often want their rewards now, *this side of eternity*. They want to be recognized by others and receive some kind of “fame.” As O’Brien remarks, these attitudes stand “in stark contrast to God’s glory and is inconsistent behaviour from those whose commonwealth is in heaven and who will finally be transformed so as to be like Christ’s glorious resurrection body (3:21).”⁷ This is not limited to First Century Jewish religious leaders, Roman legionnaires, or any self-aggrandizing person of the Apostolic Era—it remains a reality even until today with people who want to be a “big name,” and not realize that true service to the Body of Messiah requires one to understand that the ultimate rewards come in the hereafter.

In the Messianic community today, how do we serve others? How do you serve the needs of your brothers and sisters? How do you serve those who make sacrifices for you? How do you serve the Lord in your local community? These questions often remain as difficult to answer today as they did when Paul wrote the Philippians two millennia ago.

Because of our fallen humanity, it is admittedly difficult to “in humility count others more significant than yourselves” (ESV). These were extremely important words for Paul to tell the First Century Philippians. The term *tapeinophrosunē* (ταπεινοφροσύνη) is a unique word used in a Bible, which some have connected to Paul’s words in Romans 12:16: “Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.” *TDNT* describes that “In Phil. 2:4 Paul asks for the humility which takes the form of unselfishness, i.e., concern for the welfare of others.”⁸ This would have been totally foreign to the prevailing Greek and Roman philosophy at the time, which largely advocated that service to oneself and one’s pleasures was most important.⁹ How many Philippians were not ready to hear this from Paul? But at the same time, how many Philippian Believers found Paul’s words liberating so they could perform their God-given callings?

Are you ready to apply these words to your own life? Having true humility means that you will recognize that your will is subservient to the will of God. This absolutely requires obedience to Him, something highly emphasized by today’s Messianic community in relation to Torah observance. But how many of today’s Messianics think of themselves better than they ought to, because they “keep Torah”? How many of us—in contrast to what Paul says in v. 3—do not think of ourselves *less than we should* by reading the Torah, because we fail to realize how often we fail to live up to its high standard?

I can only answer for myself, but I am continually challenged when I read the Scriptures where God is concerned about social justice, the needs of the poor, and how we are to demonstrate righteousness to others—and I find myself not always measuring up to the bar. I

⁷ O’Brien, 180.

⁸ W. Grundmann, “humble,” in *TDNT*, 1156.

⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 1154.

am reminded that I must continually fall upon His mercies for the personal faults that I am often not aware of. Most importantly, I am reminded that we need to strive to see the good and value of other people *that God Himself sees*, as Paul says, “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor” (Romans 12:10).

2:4 The need for God’s people to be concerned with others is apparent all throughout the Bible. As The Message paraphrases v. 4, “Don’t be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.” Paul tells the Philippians to be concerned “for the interests of others.” Of course, one of the challenges that some people have when reading this admonition is that they can often think that *they themselves* have no self worth and that they are totally meaningless to God and others. I do not believe that this is what Paul was attempting to communicate. Fee comments, “it is not so much that others in the community are to be thought of as ‘better than I am,’ but as those whose needs and concerns ‘surpass’ my own.”¹⁰ Paul himself, surely a great example of humility, had significant needs being incarcerated in Rome. Likewise, the leaders of the Philippian congregation also had needs that needed to be taken care of.

Being concerned with others, and other people putting the concerns of others ahead of themselves, would be expected in a congregation like Philippi that had a developed leadership. This is not to say that one’s own personal needs are unimportant—but more than anything else for people not to be concerned *solely about themselves*. In today’s world, there are three service professions that often take the same amount of study and academic work: doctors, lawyers, and ministers. All three require a great deal of dedication, and will require one to devote significant hours of one’s life, but only two often reap great financial rewards. The third, being a minister of God, often does not bring one financial success. If anything, a person who has studied the religious discipline and applies it in some capacity *often has to work more than a doctor or a lawyer*. That person often has to make the conscious choice to sacrifice financial security to serve others in the community of faith. **It is especially true of anyone in Messianic ministry.**

Putting others ahead of oneself is ultimately a manifestation of how we as individuals are to put God ahead of ourselves. If we do not love others—who we can see—how can we love a God whom we have not seen? The same is true of our service. God looking out for the lowly and honoring them for their service is a theme seen throughout the Tanach, which Paul is likely considering in composing these words:

“Light arises in the darkness for the upright; *He is* gracious and compassionate and righteous. It is well with the man who is gracious and lends; he will maintain his cause in judgment. For he will never be shaken; the righteous will be remembered forever” (Psalm 112:4-6).

“The proud look of man will be abased and the loftiness of man will be humbled, and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day” (Isaiah 2:11).

¹⁰ Fee, 189.