

Philippians XIII – The Enemies and Friends of Unity (Phil 2:3-4)

Introduction – With the beginning of this long sentence (just one sentence, vv1-4 in the Greek) fully in mind, the love of Christ his starting point, Paul brings strong warnings and exhortations to the church. His language implies that these commands mean the life or death of a church communion.

The Text – *Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.*

The Two Great Enemies (v3) – These two mindsets or behaviors destroy the unity of the church. They must be excluded from any community seeking to grow in Christ.

Selfish Ambition – The Greeks used this word to describe the unscrupulous activities of someone to acquire a public office, particularly with a fractious spirit. This strife does not seek to obey the truth (Rom 2:7-8) even though it can appear to be zealous for that truth (Phil 1:16). It is a crafty attitude that sets itself out to look like wisdom, but is in fact quite the opposite (James 3:13-18). Because of this, it stands at the heart of our fallenness (Gen 3:1).

Conceit – Literally, this is ‘empty-glory’. It is the glory that one seeks for oneself, particularly to claim oneself to be ‘weightier’ or more important than others.

“Empty” and “Glory” – Paul’s word-play can be missed in the English. He will now contrast this ‘empty-glory’ to Christ, who ‘emptied’ Himself (v6), accruing the ‘glory’ of God in His divine vindication (v11).

How Serious Are These Sins? – Sinners are arrogant, self-seeking, selfish people. The problem is that we grow up with these two sins all around and in us. We tend to miss what a big deal these are for ourselves, and for a congregation.

Foolish Sins – To seek the praise of men is, ultimately, essentially useless. Righteous looking acts can appear virtuous (Matt 6:1, 5, 16) even when the heart is hard. These are men who seek to justify themselves before men (Luke 16:15). It is foolishness to seek one’s own glory (Prov 25:27).

Wicked Sins – It is wicked to seek the approval of men over the approval of God. One cannot do that and be a bondservant of Christ (Gal 1:10).

Subtle Sins – But these sins are very sneaky. They are internal, residing in the heart and can be hidden with outward works of piety and sacrifice. The very act that can be the fruit of humility can also be done out of selfish ambition and vainglory. We must not forget how much we seek our own way (Is 53:6) and how easily self-deceived we are (Jer 17:9). No one thinks they are proud or arrogant and no one thinks they are seeking vainglory.

Dangerous Sins – These sins make us worthless to men (1 Pet 5:5) and hateful to God (Prov 6:16-17, 8:13, Psalm 101:5). God promises to put down the proud (Matt 23:11-12). It is amazing how much we despise arrogance, politicizing, and vainglory in others and how quickly we justify it in ourselves – *good ends, good intentions, good of the people...*

The Contrast: Lowliness – In the Graeco/Roman world, humility was generally considered a shortcoming, not a virtue. But this biblical virtue is not easily understood. Humblemindedness does not have to lack zeal, nor assurance that one is right. Humility has to do with a proper estimation of oneself, utterly dependent upon the Triune God for one’s vindication in everything. The contrast is that humility is not self-focused at all (no belly-button examining, self-flagellations, that sort of false-humility).

Esteeming Others Better – Like humility, this does not mean that we have to lie to ourselves, considering others better at something than we may actually be. It is not that I am to always think ‘they are better at that’, but that their needs and concerns surpass my own.

The Law of Love (v4) – This is so simple, so much ‘the Golden Rule’ that, not unlike the vices listed above, it gets passed over too quickly. Here is how one esteems others better than himself. This is the way that Paul says we fulfill the law of Christ (Gal 6:2). It is not enough to simply stay out of one another’s way. We must bear burdens, practically, and as often as we bear our own. One ancient commentator wrote, “*For since we are all one body, we look out for ourselves when we look out for others*”. Notice we could also paraphrase, “*You will of course be looking out for yourself (you can’t help but do so). Do not forget to do the same for others.*”

“Each Of You” – This is the final important reminder and point. This message wasn’t for ‘him’ or ‘her’ as far as you go. This message was for ‘each of you’, including and most importantly, ‘you’ as far as you go. Like leaven, it only takes a peck or two of selfish-ambitioned vainglories to leaven the whole lump.

Conclusion – We take selfishness far too easily in stride with our “God is not finished with me yet” mentality. Paul says, let nothing be done from this motive. Not one thing.