**

5th MARCH 2016 **‘UNITED APPEAL FOR MISSION SUNDAY’**

Sermon notes

## Summary

Reading: Philippians 2 (focusing on v. 1–8 & 19–30).

Theme: Our caring fellowship with other Christians is shaped by Christ’s caring fellowship with us.

Application: Joyfully give from your strengths to supply what is lacking in others.

## Overview of Philippians 1–2

This overview is focused on what Paul is teaching about – joyfully partnering together in gospel ministry, in union, with Christ at the heart. This fits in with the Fit for Purpose theme of being a caring fellowship.

* Paul is writing to the Philippians as their partner in the gospel (1:3–11).
* Paul’s personal priority is the advance of the gospel (1:12–26).
* To see the gospel advance, he wants his partners to live lives worthy of the gospel (1:27–30).
* But Jesus is closer than a partner in the gospel – we are united with him! (2:1).
* If we are united to Christ, we should be united to each other (2:1–4).
* By uniting himself to us, Christ gave us a gospel to proclaim and an example to follow (2:5–11).
* The gospel must be lived out, especially because we are united to Christ, with him living and working in us, not us merely passively receiving something from him (2:12–13).
* The Philippians have some divisions and disputes which are holding them back from advancing the gospel (2:14, 4:2).
* Because the gospel is accomplished by union with Christ, it will advance when we live out our unity with other Christians (2:14–18).
* Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus are all examples of how to joyfully follow Christ’s example of sacrificial caring fellowship (2:19–30).

## Structure of sermon

**1. Fellowship with God and fellowship with Christians are inseparable**

***1A. Christ’s fellowship with the Trinity results in fellowship with us***

Paul writes a lot about being close to God, united to Christ, in fellowship with the Spirit. These things are fundamental to being a Christian (2:1).

But fellowship with God is inseparable from fellowship with Christians.

This follows Jesus’ example: He is God himself (2:6), perfectly united with the Father and the Spirit, but He chose to unite himself to us (2:7–8).

***1B. Paul and his companions followed this example***

Christ’s fellowship and love set the example for Paul to live out along with his companions, and for him to call the Philippians to follow (2:5).

Paul shows Timothy was motivated by a love of Christ – love for Christ and love for others is inseparable (2:21).

Consequently Timothy valued the welfare of others (2:20) and worked in union with Paul, so close that they were like father and son (2:22). It is very appropriate that when we are united to the Son who is Himself united to the Father, that we should then be close to one-another in a father-son sort of way.

***1C. Application to us***

We can’t simply love Jesus without loving other Christians. Loving Him means loving the one who loves other Christians. Loving Him means loving like Him.

As Christians we know the love of Jesus better than anyone and have the best motivation to love others.

We also have a special love for other Christians that comes from Christ’s love for us (2:2).

**2. This fellowship means we can do for others what they cannot do for themselves**

***2A. Joined to us, Christ could do for us what we couldn’t do for ourselves***

Christ’s love for us resulted in Him giving his life to serve God on our behalf, in ways we could not (2:8).

He was able to do this on our behalf because He had united himself with us (2:6–7).

***2B. Epaphroditus risked his life to do this for the Philippians***

We see great unity between Epaphroditus and the Philippians (2:26,28).

He then risks his life to serve Paul on their behalf, in ways they could not (2:30).

***2C. Application to us***

We posses a unity in Christ with other Christians, a unity within congregations as the local church, and a unity between congregations as Presbyterians. The Fit for Purpose theme this year is about expressing that unity as a caring fellowship.

What needs are there among the people we are united to, that they can’t meet, but we can? What costs to us hold us back from meeting those needs?

When we get opportunities to do this through things like United Appeal, do we focus on the cost to us, or the difference we can make to people we are united to?

**3. Fellowship with others makes it a joy to give our best for them**

***3A. God gave his best***

We know from many other places that the Father loves the Son, but joyfully sent Him to us.

We also know that the Son loves the Father, but He left the Father to come to us and gave His life for us.

God has given His best to help us.

***3B. Paul gave up his best companions to help the Philippians***

Paul valued Timothy greatly, like a son, but joyfully sent him to the Philippians (2:19–23).

Paul valued Epaphroditus – as a brother, fellow-worker, and soldier – but joyfully sent him to the Philippians (2:25).

His focus is not on the cost to himself, but the joy this will create in others (2:19, 28–29, see also 2:17–18).

***3C. What do we do?***

Sometimes advancing the gospel means giving our best, weakening ourselves, so that others might be strengthened.

Christ’s giving for us means we already have the best from God. This puts into perspective what we are giving – so when giving, consider what has been given to you and the joy Christ has given you.

Our fellowship with one another should help us to focus on joy for those we are united to.

If this is still a struggle the example of Christ should guide us.

What has God given you that you can give thanks for? What strengths in your personal life or your congregation could you give thanks for? How could these things then be put to use for the good and the joy of those who are lacking?

## Illustration suggestions

**1. Love for someone and their wife/children**

Have you ever had a friend who got married and you discovered that you don’t get on with their spouse? What happens to your relationship? It becomes hard to sustain. When two people are as closely bound together as a married couple, it’s not an option to love one and not the other.

Or imagine marrying someone who already has children. How would that work if you didn’t love the children and they didn’t love you?

There’s a triangle of relationships. Take one side out and the triangle falls to pieces.

**2. Fellowship and unity with other Christians**

Siblings can often be competitive. But for sand tiger sharks, competition begins in the womb. They are often pregnant with more than one shark at a time. While still in the womb, baby sand tiger sharks begin to develop their fangs and the strongest then devour some of their weaker siblings, ensuring themselves a better chance of survival amid the scarce resources of the ocean.

As churches, we may not be as predatory as sharks, but at times we act more like them than Christ. It’s very tempting to see sister congregations, brothers and sisters in Christ, as threats, fighting over the same resources. We don’t want to share our resources with weaker churches, lest we become weak. We may even despise the weakness of others.

**3. Paul sending away Epaphroditus and Timothy**

Take a look at what Paul calls him in verse 25: my brother, my co-worker, my fellow soldier. Do you get the picture? If Timothy was his right-hand man, then surely Epaphroditus must have been at his left side, close as a brother, sharing the workload, fighting alongside him in the trenches.

Thomas Stonewall Jackson was one of the greatest soldiers of the American Civil War. On the night of his greatest victory, returning from scouting, he was accidentally shot by his own troops and mortally wounded. Surgeons amputated his left arm to try and save him, but he died eight days later, a major blow to the Confederate army. His commander, General Lee mourned, “He has lost his left arm; but I have lost my right arm.”

Paul willingly cut off both his arms by sending away not just Timothy, but Epaphroditus, confident of the joy and the good this would bring.

Go back to the previous illustration about tiger sharks. We can be reluctant to share resources with weaker churches. Seems even more crazy to share with stronger churches. But that’s very worldly, even Darwinian, thinking. Jesus is profoundly counter-cultural, calls us all to become weaker, rather than stronger, just as he did.

## Some questions to help preachers further think about application

**1. Serving the church**

* If you have served on boards/councils/committees at congregational/Presbytery/assembly level, what positive experiences do you have of being able to influence the direction and witness of the church?
* What good have you seen come out of Christians working together, particularly across congregations?
* Where have you seen Christians struggle to joyfully and sacrificially work together? Could this inform any of your prayers during the service?

**2. Identifying with the weak**

* What is your relationship like with other local congregations (geographically or within Presbytery)?
* What steps could you take to improve fellowship and learn where they are weak so that you can help.

**3. Giving from our strength**

* Where is your congregation strong?
* Is there an attitude of joyfully giving from your abundance, or more of a tendency to make a name for being good at something?
* Where do you put your strength to work for the good of the wider church and how is this reflected in your finances?
* If you have multiple staff, how many do work that contributes to the wider church?
* What practical ways could your congregation use its strength to help other congregations who are weaker in that area?
* Do you sponsor work in other local congregations or in other ways partner with them?
* When families move or teenagers head off to university do you focus on losing them and you consequently becoming weaker, or on sending them on and another congregation becoming stronger?