

"Good News for Families"
Look to the Interests of Others
Philippians 2:1-5
John Breon

When Nancy and I were getting married, we saw this passage from Philippians as a good guide for life together. We had verses 3-5 read at our wedding as a witness to our commitment to live this way. My brother did the service and when he announced that he was going to read a passage of Scripture, a little child in the congregation sighed very loudly. Hopefully, today we can be more patient and open to what God says to us in the Scriptures.

The apostle Paul wrote this letter to a church, a group of believers that he was close to and who were supporting him. Almost all of the New Testament letters were written to communities of faith, not to individuals. And Paul wasn't writing about marriage and family, he was writing about relationships in the church. But what he says about relationships among Christ followers can apply to all kinds of relationships. The church and families need each other. And, the church and families resemble each other. Ways we relate in one are similar to ways we relate in the other. So we can learn something from this passage of Scripture that can guide us in how we behave and how we treat each other in our families. As disciples, followers of Jesus, we learn to be less selfish, to serve, to forgive, to love. What we develop as disciples is important in our families.

Paul begins with describing what Christians have in relationship with Christ. We have encouragement in Christ, comfort from God's love, and community, partnership, fellowship in and with the Holy Spirit.

Encouragement goes a long way doesn't it? We can encourage faith, love, right behavior, and all kinds of good things in each other. We can also discourage each other. Two buffalo were roaming one day, grazing. A prairie dog popped out of a hole in the ground and said to one of the buffalo, "You're the ugliest animal I've ever seen! You're mangy, you smell bad, and you're dumb!" The buffalo turned to his friend and said, "I just heard a discouraging word."

When I was a kid, I mowed yards in the summer. One day, I accidentally mowed a flower or something that wasn't supposed to be mowed. The reaction I heard was, "Can't you do *anything* right?"

I knew a man one time who said he brought home a test paper and showed it to his dad. He had made a 99. His dad said, "What's the matter? Don't they give 100s anymore?" That's more discouraging than encouraging.

But Jesus encourages us. And he helps us encourage each other. He gives us the power of his Spirit and he gives us each other so we can do what needs to be done.

We have comfort in love. For Paul, God the Father is the source of love. Comfort means to give strength by being with someone. Knowing that our loving God is with us gives us strength. God's love flows through us to each other and we give comfort, we help strengthen each other.

We have fellowship, communion, partnership with the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit creates partnership and community among us. The Spirit of God draws us together and unites us—as a church, as a family.

We see the Trinity at work here: encouragement in Christ, comfort from God's love, sharing in the Holy Spirit. Family is one way to talk about God as Trinity. God is a community of love, while being one God. We can learn something about relating to each other when we see how the Persons of the Trinity interact, love, and honor each other. God invites us to share life together with God and each other in dynamic, lively, loving fellowship.

In those kinds of relationships we find tenderness and compassion. Not harshness and hardness of heart. But we feel what another feels. We deal gently with each other in struggles. I love this description of how God relates to us:

As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. (Psalm 103:13-14)

God knows what we're made of and God deals with us in compassion and patience. And God enables us to remember who we're dealing with in our

relationships, to understand something of their struggles and to treat each other with compassion.

Paul goes on to encourage the Philippians—and us—to be united. Of course the church and families are made up of individuals. We have unique personalities and interests and gifts. It's interesting how members of the same family can be so different sometimes. That's a good thing.

But the church, and healthy families, also have a unity of attitude and purpose and love. Paul says to have the same mind. The mind we're to have is the mindset or attitude of Christ that he introduces in verse 5. We need unity in our commitment to our common purpose. In the context of Philippians, that means contending for the faith of the true gospel (1:27), living as God's people in the world (3:20), and standing firm in the Lord (4:10). Those are good goals for families as well as for the church.

We're to have the same love. We love one another with the love of God shown to us in Jesus and poured into us by the Holy Spirit.

I came across a book on my shelf that I hadn't paid much attention to before. It's by Walter Wangerin and it's called *Little Lamb, Who Made Thee? A Book About Children and Parents*. In one chapter he tells about his godson, Brandon Michael Piper. He says that was a big name for a two-year-old. The family just called him "B" or "Baby B." During Sunday School each week, Brandon's parents had duties. But, Walt says, "I have two arms free and a large heart, and I am your godfather, and I love you." So Walt watched Brandon and carried him around the church.

Brandon started limping and walking became difficult. One day Walt was holding him and when he shifted him from one side to another, Brandon said, "Ow" and started to cry. Brandon's parents had already planned to take him to the doctor. X-rays revealed a growth in his leg, up near the hip, against the thighbone. The parents agreed with the doctor to schedule a biopsy, but also said that in the meantime they would pray for their son.

Walt writes about this as a letter to Brandon. This section is good enough to read to you:

We all prayed for you, then, Brandon Michael Piper. You won't remember. But the aunts and the uncles, your parents and grandparents and godparents and the whole congregation of Grace commended to heaven both your big name and your little leg.

Someone worried about the intensity of your parents' praying. He said, "But what if the boy's too sick? What if he doesn't get well? Doesn't it scare you that you might lose your faith if God doesn't answer your prayer?"

But your parents said, "We will pray for our son."

You see, Brandon, this was their faith: not that they felt God had to heal you on account of their prayer, but rather that they wanted never to stand apart from God, especially not now. Yes, they were scared for you. But they were never, never scared of God, nor ever scared to lose God. They took their Baby B to the steadfast arms of the Father so that *whatever* happened, the love of God would hold it. Might there be a healing? Then give glory to God. Must there be a worse hurt? Then let the dear Lord strengthen everyone when strength would be most needed.

Their prayer was meant neither as demand nor as magic, neither an ultimatum nor manipulation of the Deity. It was love. It was their highest expression of faith—not faith in your healing, Brandon (though they yearned for that) but faith in God.

Then he recalls being present at Brandon's baptism, "when they signed the love of God upon you." Then he concludes:

As it happened, the biopsy proved the growth benign. It shall be removed, together with all memory of a falling limp and the nighttime pain.

And I will continue, Brandon Michael Piper, a little longer to let you sleep on my shoulder in church. But you will grow. You'll pull back from such dependencies upon earthly fathers, godfathers first, flesh fathers second. Even then I will pray for you, my godson, my Baby B.

And this shall be my prayer: that you never pull back from the God who, since your baptism, is your Father forever. (81-85)

God wants to give us his love, ideally, in family and church together. Sometimes it may be in one or the other. Not all families are healthy. Not all churches are healthy. No church and no family is completely whole and pure. Even this church in Philippi, that was closer to the apostle in many ways than most of his other churches—even they needed some warning from Paul about how to get along.

He says, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.” It’s so easy to keep ourselves in the center. We can be selfish, self-centered. We strive for self-protection or self-promotion. We hope that faith and commitment to Christ and the church will help us be less selfish. Years ago, I read an article. I was kind of cruising through it, half paying attention. Then the writer used the phrase “religiously self-centered.” He was talking about how it’s possible to do religious things, spiritual things, in a selfish way. That got me. I’ve tried to avoid that disease ever since.

Becoming a parent can cause us to love in ways we didn’t know were possible. Those little ones can lead us out of ourselves and call us to care for another. Of course, parents can still be selfish. But if we take our calling as parents seriously, selfish ambition and vain conceit lose some of their power. We become a little more humble, we put others ahead of ourselves, we become a little less devoted to our own interests and we start caring more about the interests of others.

That can happen in lots of different relationships. It’s part of the process of following Jesus and being transformed by his Spirit. We really do start to put on the mind of Christ, we adopt the mindset of Christ, who emptied himself, revealed God’s nature in the nature of a servant, humbled himself, and gave himself on the cross.

When Paul writes about family in another letter and he uses that dreaded word “submit,” he’s talking about following Jesus. He’s talking about all of us together in relationship with Christ. He says, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21). There’s mutual submission to each other in the body of Christ. Paul tells the people in his

culture who had little power or rights not to be resentful and rebellious. Instead, they're to humble themselves and show honor and respect. To the people who had a lot of power and rights, he says to humble themselves and submit by loving and sacrificing themselves. In our families, how do we show respect and honor and self-giving love? It's through the power of God's Holy Spirit who fills us that we can live this way (Eph. 5:18-6:9).

Trusting the power of the Holy Spirit, we submit to Christ, we love and care for each other, we respect and honor each other. And that's how we have the same mindset as Christ Jesus in our relationships with one another.

In chapter 4 of Philippians, Paul applies this to a situation in the church:

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. (verses 2-3)

Over the years, I've sometimes done surveys asking a congregation to request sermon topics. I usually word it as, "I would like to hear what the Bible says about..." One time, in another church, the request was, "I would like to hear what the Bible says about *sisters fighting*." I never knew if that request came from a sister who was involved in the conflict or a parent who was observing it. I was tempted at the time just to make the message about family relationships in general. But I finally tackled the issue that was requested. I did broaden it out a bit to include sibling rivalry. We looked at Leah and Rachel, Mary and Martha, and these two women in the church at Philippi.

Paul begs them to agree as sisters in the Lord. They probably weren't sisters who belonged to the same physical family. But they were part of God's family, the church. And their disagreement was important enough for Paul to mention it in a letter that was read to the whole church.

Sometimes sisters or brothers simply disagree. Disagreement in itself isn't bad, but the way we disagree can be bad. And the poison of bitterness doesn't affect only the people in the conflict. It can spread all through a family or a church.

So Paul deals with this. He brings it out in the open. He appeals directly to each of these women. And he asks one of his close friends and co-workers to help Euodia and Syntyche. He doesn't want the valuable contributions they make to the church's life and witness to be hindered by their failure to agree.

It's easy to get caught in the crossfire when two people disagree. Each of them tries to get you on their side. The key is to deal directly with each person, instead of letting them get to each other through you. The person who gets caught in the middle of an unresolved issue between two people winds up bearing the stress of their relationship. And that makes it possible for them to continue the way they are indefinitely instead of dealing with the real problem and working it out together (see Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation* 11, 18, 19). We get out of that kind of "triangle" by talking directly to people and by not passing along negative things one person says about another. Instead, we encourage them to speak directly to each other.

What great resources God gives us for our life in families and in the church! We have the example of Jesus. We have God's love filling us and flowing through us. We have the Holy Spirit living in us and uniting us. We have the shared goal of being like Jesus. We receive encouragement from the Lord and share it with each other. Let's allow God to guide us and shape us and empower us to be the kind of people who look not just to our own interests, but to the interests of others, especially their need to know the Lord and live as his people in all their relationships.