

2017—what a year! From fidget spinners to natural disasters, to scandals to shootings, from racism and sexism to politics, we've seen it all this year. And in typical end-of-the-year fashion, it's time for that rare opportunity to look back and look forward at the same time. I'm sure many of us here are ready to leave 2017 behind and are hoping that 2018 will be different. I'm sure many of us here have our list of New Year's resolutions ready to go! In 2018 I'm going to (fill in the blank).

But, let's look back. In 2017 the New Year's resolutions were:

- Get healthy
- Get organized
- Live life to the fullest
- Learn new hobbies
- Spend less/save more
- Travel
- Read more
- Manage stress
- Land a new job
- If you're a follower of Jesus, you probably added a "read through the Bible in a year" plan

What's interesting to me is that only 8% of people actually keep their resolutions. 80% of people ditch their resolutions by February! All of these things on this list are good things, yet most of us give up after four weeks feeling like a failure and left empty. Why?

I know for me, I want more. This list has left me empty and I want to make resolutions that really matter. In our world of downers, disasters, setbacks, disappointments, tragedies and failures, I want to look back on 2018 and know that my resolutions made a difference in our world, in my friends and family, and to my community of faith. Maybe you are feeling that way too. So how do we do that? I know of only one way—to be more like Jesus. The apostle Paul writes to the church in Philippi and gives a stunning description of how they could be more like Jesus and it applies to us even more today. As we dive into this passage we will

find that to become more like Jesus, we will need to follow His ultimate example of humility.

**Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. (Philippians 2:1-4)**

What a passage to kick off the new year. No lofty new year's resolutions in this passage!

### **Paul Calls the Philippians to Unity**

Unity in the church; some would say that is an oxymoron. I know for myself I've watched on more than one occasion a church split due to a group's selfish desires. The sad truth is that many of the church's dangers come from within. Paul has just warned the Philippians about the outside dangers, but now he turns to the inside dangers. Paul is so compelling. He takes them back to what Christ has done in their lives. These verses were meant to move the Philippians to remember what Christ had done in their lives and would move them to do what was necessary for unity and mutuality.

If the Philippians were to live a life worthy of the gospel, it was absolutely necessary to live in unity. What were they to unify around? The Gospel. So the call here is to be like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind is a plea that the Philippians be "gospel-oriented as they relate to and care for one another."

What does it mean to be gospel-oriented? It's to be others-oriented. Paul does not mince words about caring for others. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility value others above yourself." Our whole world is about selfish ambition and vain conceit! All you have to do is turn on the TV show *The Bachelor*! You will see selfish ambition and vain conceit at its finest! We live in a world where we have to push others aside to get to the next rung on the ladder. The competition is high when it comes to work, grades, even driving down 101 or

the Costco parking lot at Christmas! It's human nature to be selfish and vain. The same thing can happen in the church. Like the Philippians, if we are to be gospel-oriented or others-oriented, we **have** to count others more significant than ourselves. This is so counter-cultural. But when we realize at our core what we really are—a sinner in need of grace—we will begin to count others more significant than ourselves.

Does any one know what the most difficult instrument to play is in an orchestra? The second violin. You can find plenty of first violinists, but to find someone who can play second violin with enthusiasm, that is a problem. And if we have no second violin, we have no harmony. The church lives in a manner worthy of the gospel when we are of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind and that unity shows itself in care for others.

### **The Call to Humility**

Paul transitions us to the ultimate example of being others-centered: Jesus. These seven verses are some of the most eloquent verses in the Bible. Volumes of books have been written about these verses and I could spend weeks preaching these verses. I wish I had the time to fully dive into these verses.

**In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:**

**Who, being in very nature God,**

**did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;**

**rather, he made himself nothing**

**by taking the very nature of a servant,**

**being made in human likeness.**

**And being found in appearance as a man,**

**he humbled himself**

**by becoming obedient to death—**

**even death on a cross!**

**Therefore God exalted him to the highest place**

**and gave him the name that is above every name,**

**that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,**

**in heaven and on earth and under the earth,**

**and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,**

**to the glory of God the Father. (verses 5-11)**

In verse 2 Paul exhorts the Philippians to unity and the way to unity is through having a common mind-set, which is one of humility, of being other-centered. Now in verse 5 he encourages us to have the same mindset as Jesus, who made himself nothing or emptied himself, took on the form of a man, and humbled

himself to die on a cross. Jesus is a contrast to the selfish ambition and vain conceit that defines our world and can pollute the body of Christ.

We just celebrated the incarnation of Jesus last Sunday—the birth of Jesus. Jesus is humility incarnate. Paul tells us that Jesus emptied Himself. Jesus didn't empty Himself of His divinity, but it's more like He veiled His divinity. He laid aside His privileges. He became a servant. He humbled Himself in obedience even unto death. He submitted to God's plan. He accepted the most humiliating death: crucifixion. All of this to make atonement for our sin. That is the mindset of Christ. In this section of scripture Paul gives us the call to humility.

We are naturally self-centered. Let's be honest, these verses will always be difficult to live out. We find it difficult in our most important relationships both in our homes and in our churches. Even the disciples had a hard time with it. In the Gospel of Mark we find the story of James and John coming to ask a favor of Jesus. They wanted to sit at the right and left hands of Jesus in His kingdom. Their request was all about them. Mark tells us in 10:41 that *"when the 10 heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers."*

Tempers flared and Jesus' response was, *"Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."* You think they would get the point. Many of us know, hearing the truth and making it a part of our lives is a matter of six inches—six inches from the head to the heart, even when we are devoted to Christ.

Several days after this incident with James and John the disciples were to secure a room to celebrate Passover, but they neglected to make arrangements for a servant to wash feet as they entered the room. Not one of them would lower themselves to perform such a humble task, even after the words Jesus said a few days earlier. Yet, Jesus gets up quietly and starts to do the task of a servant—washing each of the disciple's feet! What a powerful picture of humility.

About six or seven years ago, we decided to have a second venue on Easter Sunday in our High School ministry space at the Foster City Campus. If you've never been there, we meet in a shopping center called Charter Square. We don't have bathroom facilities in the space; we use the public bathrooms in the shopping center. As I was helping set up the space one of our worship leaders had gone to use the restroom where they immediately found out someone had taken human feces and smeared it all over the walls, the toilet seats, the mirrors, the sinks, pretty much everywhere.

Without hesitation, this worship leader picked up the cleaning supplies and quietly went to the bathroom and cleaned it all up before service. That was a powerful picture of humility.

Paul knows that if we can have this same mindset, transformation of our hearts and lives will take place. These verses talk about Jesus' humility in heaven, in His incarnation, in His death. The humblest man who ever lived is Christ Himself, the God-man. What does Paul make of this self-humbling Jesus? *"Do nothing from selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests, but each of you to the interest of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Jesus."* The question facing us today is whether we will follow Christ's example of radical humility by voluntarily and joyfully humbling ourselves, becoming servants of others rather than serving ourselves. What does that look like? Let's start with the basics:

- Letting others go first, whether it's in line for lunch at school, or merging onto 101 in rush hour.
- Giving up the biggest piece of dessert.
- Giving to others instead of spending everything on yourself.
- Kids and students: how about cleaning up before your mom asks you to, or how about serving your mom, just because.
- Resisting the urge to take credit for something.
- Admitting you are wrong.
- Apologize when you've done something wrong.
- Listen more than you talk.

When we are humble, we are like Jesus.

**Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose. (verses 12-13)**

## **The Call to Obedience**

We see that call of obedience in the life of Jesus, obedience unto death. The Philippians have always been obedient in the past, and Paul desires them to be obedient in the present. He wishes he could be with them to head off any tension among them and to encourage them in their striving together for the advance of the gospel in a pagan-saturated Philippi. The question I've been asking myself this week in relation to this verse is: How far does my obedience go? Am I willing to obey the word of God if it means I lose? Am I willing to obey the word of God if it means someone else might not understand? Am I willing to obey the word of God even if I don't really like what it has to say?

As these verses tell us, the Philippians have always been obedient. But he can't be with them since he is in prison. So he challenges them to be obedient to God in his absence, to take responsibility for their own salvation. This phrase has caused a lot of difficulty and has been misinterpreted to mean that we must work hard, doing good works in order to be saved. This is not what Paul is talking about. He is not going back to the beginning. The Philippians were believers, saints in Christ Jesus, already.

Salvation here doesn't refer to the beginning of the spiritual journey or the end. It refers to the ongoing maturing or process of salvation. Paul is urging the Philippians to live out their salvation in Philippi—to work it out, to put it into practice. In appealing to obedience he is not referring to a specific set of rules. He is urging a complete and total surrender to the lordship of Christ, following His example of selfless living.

The attitude of the working out of faith in reality is one of fear and trembling. This doesn't mean that we are to fear what might happen to us if we don't obey. Rather, we hear in these words an echo of the Old Testament. This is the attitude of a person in the presence of God—the attitude of the fear of the Lord. In other words, it means to take God seriously, to have an attitude of holy awe and wonder. The Christ we follow is the one to whom every knee will bow and every tongue confess that this one is Lord.

We live in constant awareness of the One we are called to serve. We don't live our gospel lives casually or lightly. Everything we do makes a difference. Why are we to work out salvation in fear and trembling? Here is the ironic twist: it is God working in you. We have fear and trembling because God is in our presence, living, working, saving, blessing. He is the one who is both willing and working. First, God changes our willing, our desire for a new way of living. Second, He provides the power to put in motion our renewed understanding of life. He is the empowering presence that takes our willingness to serve and puts it into effect, giving energy to our desires. All of this takes place by God's will for God's pleasure, i.e., for His delight and glory.

How is the church able to stand the test under pressure and succeed in being what God has called it to be? It is because God is at work. Our life is God's working from first to last. And yet we are not totally passive. We are involved in working out our life in Christ, checking our heart and our attitude, but the burden is not on us to be successful, only to trust. The outcome is not dependent on our strength or effort. We are a work in progress, but it is God who is working.

Think of it like this: a little boy was taken to a piano concert by his mother. As they were waiting for the concert to start, the little boy wandered off to the stage where the piano was sitting.

He got up on stage and started playing Chopsticks! The roar of the crowd turned to shouts as hundreds yelled, "Get that boy away from there!" When the pianist heard the uproar backstage, he grabbed his coat and rushed over behind the boy. Reaching around him from behind, the master began to improvise a counter-melody to Chopsticks. As the two of them played together, the pianist kept whispering in the boy's ear, "Keep going. Don't quit, son, don't stop, don't stop." In a sense, that is how God is at work helping us to "work out our salvation." Although God is behind it all He does require our effort.

**Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation." Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain. But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me. (verses 14-18)**

### **Paul Calls the Philippians to Purpose**

Paul's desire for the Philippians and God's desire for us is to be distinct from the non-believing world. When we resort to bickering and quarreling and arguments, we become very much like the world. When we shrink back from God's call on our life, the light of the gospel fades. Again the concern is to be united and to strive together for a cause greater than ourselves: to live as citizens of heaven and be lights in a dark world.

This text in Philippians raises important questions for any church body.

- What would new people experience if they came here to CPC? Would they be drawn to Christ? Would they experience light and life?
- How is God using us to advance His gospel? How are people coming to Christ?
- Is our body characterized by unity or grumbling?
- Do the elders and pastors share a common mind-set and vision for the church?

- What pressures are hindering us from being the people of God?

I am not suggesting anything by these questions. They are just questions to ponder so that we can work out the salvation that God is working in us.

In the middle of verse 16, Paul changes gears abruptly and transitions to himself. There will be a great benefit for Paul if the Philippians obey, which might even be a further incentive for them. If the Philippians hear His word and seek a common mind-set for God's greater purposes, then Paul will have an occasion for boasting when it counts—when Christ appears. He will be encouraged that his life counted for something, that he did not run or toil in vain.

Here Paul uses two metaphors: likening his ministry to running a race or working strenuously. He has trained hard and worked hard for the gospel. He longs for the prize of seeing the fruit of his labors. "Make my joy complete." As believers, we want our lives to count! As a Student Ministry Pastor for too many years to count, I can totally relate to Paul. Like Paul, my joy is complete when I see students who I've invested in living out the gospel! It's a joy that is often unexplainable. Paul's joy doesn't fade with the rising sun because he lives for the day of Christ.

Paul reminds us that we are citizens of heaven. God is at work, doing things that matter. We are called to unity, called to humility, called to obedience and called to purpose. All of these callings revolve around one word: humility. How will your life be different this year? Who is it that God is whispering in your ear that you might serve this week, this year? What action can you take to literally empty yourself of your rights and become like a servant? What task do you routinely do that causes you to complain?

Let's make this year different. Resolve to follow the example of Jesus and let God be at work in each of us to shine His light in this dark world. When we are humble, we are like Jesus.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*