

Unity in Christ

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[0:00] This is a sermon from King's Church West Lothian. As you get towards the end of it, we have what's often called closing remarks.

The last sort of things that Paul, who wrote the letter, has to say. And often I think we can be tempted just to skip over these a little bit. But you probably won't be surprised to hear that I don't think we should do that.

I don't think we should just be skipping over them. Not just because it's my text today. But it says in the Bible that all Scripture is God-breathed and suitable for training, correcting, rebuking, training in righteousness.

But notwithstanding that, my experience is that in the closing remarks of all of Paul's letters, there is some deep theological truths, one of which I hope for us to get into today.

So we'd be foolish just to skip over them. And what I want to talk about today is the fact that what it talks about here is that the unity that we have in Christ has eternal consequences.

[1:28] So I'm going to read from Philippians chapter 4, verses 2 to 3. I plead with Iodia and I plead with Saint-Tike to agree with each other in the Lord.

Yes, and I ask you, loyal yoke fellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are written in the book of life.

Now your first thought might be, is that it? Two verses. Is that all we're getting today? But I want to remind you of the history of this.

It is my opinion that within these two verses, although they're short, although in some ways a little bit obscure, it is my opinion that within these two verses is actually what the letter to the Philippians is really all about.

So let me remind you of the history of this letter. Paul is in prison in Rome. Remember, what he used to do is practice. He would go to a city, he would preach the gospel, preach that Jesus is Lord, and he would generally get thrown into prison for his troubles.

[2:50] So he's in Rome, and exactly this has happened. And Epaphroditus, his friend in Philippi, walks 500 miles to give him some supplies.

And probably, as he went back, he must have walked, for the hands of the proclaimers, 500 more. So he did that. But when he got there, he gave Paul some really good news about what was going on in the church of Philippi, but he gave him some alarming news.

He said that these two women, Iodiae and Saintake, if that is really high pronouncement, I'm not totally sure, but that's what I'm going with, that they've in fact fallen out. And these were people that Paul dearly loved.

And so he writes this letter to solve this problem. Now, earlier on in his ministry, I think Paul would have gone at it with both barrels.

He would have told them in no uncertain terms that they were to be unified, and that having these silly disagreements, whatever it was about, is totally inappropriate. But Paul, in his older age, coming towards his death as he was, he goes for something a bit more subtle.

[3:55] He gets under the problem of disunity by focusing on the problem of pride. Because what always causes disunity is pride. It's thinking about my priorities above your priorities.

That's a proud thing. And, of course, the antidote to pride is humility. So he teaches humility, and he comes out with wonderful things like this.

He's saying, don't do anything out of selfish, ambition or vain conceit. But in humility, consider others more important than yourself. And he gives us the example of Christ Jesus. And here's what he says. Jesus, who, being in the very nature of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. But instead, he took the nature of a servant, made in human likeness, being made in appearance as a man, and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.

So Jesus, who was God himself, became humble, became even a slave, and obedient to death. That's the kind of humility that he wants us to imitate. Now, I think that having said all of these things, Paul, he gives us some of these rich theological truths.

[5:07] Then, having established that humility really is the only way to follow Jesus. He then says, oh, by the way, Iodian, Saintake, be reconciled.

Be reconciled. Now, it is actually quite a common thing to write a long letter and then just have the real meaning, just pinpoint it at the end. Now, I'll give you an example of that.

I'm not going to give you an example of that. But instead, I'm going to move on to something else. God can use evil for good. God can use evil for good. Isn't it the case that Saint-Akkie, in the early, whatever they had fallen out about, God uses it for good.

But Paul writes this amazing letter full of all these amazing theological truths, which thousands of years later, we can benefit from. Now, it may be that something tough is going on in your life.

This is just a side point, really. It may be that something bad is going on in your life. God can use that for good. Obviously, it won't be included in the Bible to encourage believers thousands of years from now. But nevertheless, God can work some bad things that are going on in your life right now for good in the long term.

[6:15] So, that's encouraging, isn't it? So, Iodia and Saint-Akkie, who are they? We don't know. We don't know anything more about them than is written in these few words in the letter to the Philippians.

But we do know that they contended at Paul's side for the gospel. That's what he says there. So, what does that mean? Well, it could mean a whole load of things. I suspect it probably means that they supported him in his ministry.

We know that in Philippi, there was women who gave practical and financial support to allow Paul to do his thing and preach the gospel. Maybe they preached and taught in the church at Philippi. Who knows what they did? But whoever they were, whatever they did, they were people that Paul respected, that he saw as equals. And he was keen to see them be united. Whatever it was, was the problem.

So, what was the problem? Well, again, we just don't know. Paul doesn't get into it. He just encourages them to agree in the Lord.

[7:24] That's the phrase that he uses. Agree in the Lord. So, what does agree in the Lord mean? That's an interesting phrase to use. Does it mean that because we're all Christians, we should just brush our issues under the carpet and pretend that they don't exist, even though they've had a fallout?

The problem is, as any parent knows, is that when things are brushed under the carpet, like toys and Lego and things like that, they have a tendency to appear over in other places, don't they? No, no.

Paul doesn't want them to just forget about their differences and pretend as if there's no problem between them. He wants them to agree in the Lord. So, what does that mean? Well, what I think it means is to follow the teaching that Jesus gives us as to how we should overcome differences between us.

And that, happily enough, you will find in Matthew chapter 18. So, if you have a Bible, you can turn to it. It will come up on the screen. But I'm just going to quickly read and go through some things that Jesus says we should do when we disagree.

Okay? So, Matthew chapter 18, verses 15 to 20. If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you.

[8:39] If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.

If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church. And if they refuse to listen, even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. Truly, I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.

Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly, I tell you that if two or three of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. So, this is Jesus' teaching about how we should disagree and overcome our differences. Now, the first thing that I notice about that is it's really proactive, isn't it? It doesn't allow festering to go on underneath and think, Oh, I just hate that person because they always do that.

Or, she's always like that to me. And you just, you know, sometimes when a problem just festers and it just grows inside you. Jesus says, don't do that. If somebody sins, go and speak to them about it.

[9:54] Don't gossip. Don't do it to tell anybody else about it. If you've noticed something's going on in their lives, whether it's a problem between the two of you, whether it's something else, go and speak to that person about it. Now, the interesting thing about this is that, you know, I've had a few occasions in my life where I've thought, I need to speak to this person about this.

But, whatever it is. But the interesting thing about that is that if you're going to speak to somebody about something that they're doing, you really have to think about what you're going to say. You can't just say, you know, you're always like this.

Or, you generally do these things. You're really going to be specific when I think about these things that you're going to say. And the interesting thing about this, I've noticed just in myself over the years, is that when I've had to do that, often, not all the time, but often, the real problem that I've had to come up with is this.

I just find that person quite annoying. And, you know, being annoying isn't actually a sin. Right? Just to reassure you of that. I find that quite reassuring myself. Because one or two would have said I'm quite annoying.

And really, if I find somebody quite annoying, the problem isn't really with that person. The problem is actually really with me, isn't it? And I need to repent of that and learn from God to be a more patient person.

[11:08] But nevertheless, there is times when, you know, people are in the wrong and you do need to speak to them about something. And most of the time, if you were to speak to somebody about something that you think they've done, maybe against you or against somebody else, whatever it is, most of the time, that's as far as it will go.

You'll speak to that person and they will say, oh, I'm terribly sorry. I didn't realise what that will say. I'm really sorry. I won't do that again. Or maybe they might say something like, oh, actually, the reason why I do that is because, and you look at it from another perspective, and they might just explain themselves.

And again, you might see things from a different perspective. And most of the time, that's as far as it goes. You're reconciling, oh, no, that is correct. And you come back together again. Occasionally, very occasionally, it might be that the person says, actually, I don't think I'm doing anything wrong there.

And then Jesus says, you should bring somebody else in to act as a sort of mediator. And get a third perspective. Now, if this ever happens to you, I would encourage you to choose somebody who you know equally well.

I think that's fair. And it might be helpful to use an example. And I'm going to pick on Regan for a moment. So let's just say Regan has fallen out with his brother Daniel.

[12:32] Now, where's Daniel? Now, the reason I'm saying that isn't because Regan, particularly argumentative people or sinful people, the reason is because they're brothers. Every pair of brothers I've ever known fall out about every 10 minutes, right?

So I'm sure that's happened many times. So let's say Regan and Daniel fall out about something. So they need to find, they can't be reconciled. So what they should do is they should find somebody who's equally close to them both.

And so, of course, I thought of Ben, Ben, the third member of the Three Stooges, you know, who's in the middle of them. Now, Ben, and so they will explain to Ben, like, I think this. And then the other person, no, Ben, I think this. And Ben would say, well, Daniel, you know, actually, maybe you should look at it from Regan's perspective.

Or you might say, Regan, actually, maybe Daniel has a point here. And then between the three of you, hopefully, you'll be reconciled. Okay? Now, this is where I think real wisdom is required on the part of that third person, whoever they might be.

And it's interesting, the context of this letter. This is getting a little bit Bible geeky here. I'm going to do this. But do you notice it has this interesting phrase? I appeal to you, loyal yoke fellow.

[13:42] What on earth does that mean? I've read this many times, and I've kind of wondered, what is yoke fellow? And I sort of thought for many years, it's just, it's the church. It's the church.

It's just a bit of a weird name for the church in general. But actually, I found out this week that yoke fellow actually refers, the way it says, to an individual. It's to a specific person that Paul is talking to. Mr. Yoke fellow, or Mrs. Yoke fellow, of course. Who is Mr. or Mrs. Yoke fellow that Paul is saying? And it could mean a couple of things. So, again, I am getting a bit Bible geeky here, but if this is the kind of thing that interests you, the word in Greek is saizigus.

Okay? Now, that apparently can be a name. So, it might be that he is referring to somebody called saizigus. Saying, saizigus, you need to get in front of Ioria and Syntake and sort this thing out, right?

So, just going back to my illustration, I think we should start calling Ben saizigus, because he's obviously the reconciler of Regan and Daniel. There's also a theory it might refer to Luke, the gospel writer.

[14:47] But whoever it is, he is referring to an individual. It's just interesting, in the context of what Jesus was talking about, don't tell the whole church, get an individual to help you sort this out. He's talking to an individual.

And this is, in fact, the only time in all of the letters that Paul does to the churches that he ever appeals to an individual. Okay? You can keep that one. That's just something just to consider.

Now, I heard a brilliant story. You know, to be that third person, that reconciler, takes real amazing wisdom.

I heard an amazing story a few years ago from a dear pastor, a guy called Arnold Bell. And he told this story of two women in his church who had fallen out.

And they were just totally irreconcilable. So he got them together and the three of them were kind of going through it. And no matter what he said, no matter what he did, he just couldn't get them to see it.

[15:46] I said, it's your fault. No, it's your fault. And just back and forth it went. And poor Arnold Bell, he was getting nowhere with them. And eventually he just, he kind of just went, God, I need your help here.

I'm getting nowhere with these two. These two dear women in the Lord, I need help here. And this is how he tells a story. God sent a bee.

A bee flew in the window and stung on the neck. One of these women. Oh! Now the other woman happened to be a nurse.

And so of course she jumped up and she tended to her and the wound and made it all better, gave her the bandages or whatever it was. And of course in doing this together, they're all hugs.

Oh, I'm sorry. No, I'm sorry. And it's all hugs and kisses and they're all reconciled. Now, I mean, he says God sent a bee. I don't know if God sent a bee, but what he did do is he prayed for God.

[16:45] He had run out of wisdom. He'd got to the end of his tether. He couldn't do any more. So he needed God's help. And those of us who would hope to reconcile people, to be that third person, we need God's wisdom.

We can't do this on our own. It says in the Sermon on the Mount, actually, Jesus said, blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

Now, if that third person still can't reconcile it, what does Jesus say? He says, you've got to bring it to the whole church and let the church decide. Now, I've only ever experienced this once in my life.

And it was, so I've been a Christian for 27 years now, well over half my life. Might be surprised to hear. And I was actually a very young Christian.

I think I was about 16, 17. And there'd been a fallout amongst the elders in the church that I was part of at the time, City Church in Newcastle. And I can't even remember what the problem was, but I think basically one of the elders had a bit of a bullying, you know, manipulative sort of style.

[17:57] And the other two just got fed up with it, basically. So they came before the whole church and they talked about this. And it was really, it was really awkward, you know, you can imagine. And eventually, you know, they went back and forth.

They said, this is the case, no, this is the case. And eventually the guy who'd, you know, was, had been accused of these things, this is what he did. He, he, he got up and, and he said, do you know what?

You're right. I have been like that. And, and he, and he basically repented. In front of, I can't imagine how difficult that must have been for him.

He wasn't, you know, he was a guy, probably in his late fifties, I guess, at the height of his powers, amazing preacher, brilliant church, leader. And, and he, and he repented before everybody.

And, and it was, it was amazing humility. Probably one of the most humble things I've ever seen, actually. And, and, and, you know, it's, it's interesting that following that over the weeks, a month, and maybe even a year or two that followed that, there was an amazing outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

[19:07] It really was, there was just, amazing prophetic stuff, lots of people becoming Christians, lots of people being filled with the Spirit, even, you know, I was filled with the Spirit during this period as a, as a young Christian.

And, and, you know, it's, it's really interesting when you consider those next verses in, in Matthew. What you loose on earth, I will loose in heaven.

you know, the, the, reconciliation, forgiveness, repentance, they are so close to the heart of the Christian faith.

When God sees them being acted amongst His people, God responds. God responds. And that is absolutely what happened there. He, He, He gave Himself to us in a new way.

It's interesting that verse where two of three of you come together, there I am with you. You thought that was just a proof text for when we had disappointing turnouts at prayer meetings, didn't you? It's not.

[20:13] The context is forgiveness. When you forgive one another, you are becoming like God. When you're reconciled, that's what God does for us.

He reconciles us to Himself. He desires us to reconcile one another to each other. You know, it might be that when I'm speaking about these things, somebody or something is just popping into your head and you think, hmm, maybe, maybe God wants me to be reconciled to that person.

Maybe I have to go through that process that Jesus speaks about in Matthew 18. If that is the case, I would encourage you to be, as well as being probably a little bit nervous about that, I would encourage you to be excited about that because I believe as you go through that, God will give Himself to you in a new way.

Now, there is, of course, a dark side to this teaching of Jesus and it's this. Well, what if I choose not to forgive that person?

And in fact, it's interesting because in the text, that is exactly the question that Peter asked Jesus. He says, how many times should we forgive somebody?

[21:36] And so Jesus, as He so often does, instead of answering directly, He tells a little story and it's a story which we often know is the parable of the unmerciful servant. I haven't got time to read the whole thing now, but it basically goes like this.

A master, a landowner, calls his servants to account and one of these servants owes him a vast sum of money, millions of pounds in today's money, clearly way beyond his capacity to pay back and he says, I want my money back and the servant throws himself as mercies.

He says, give me more time, give me more time and the master recognizes no matter how much time he gives him, he is never going to be able to repay that debt and so, he forgives him the debt,

he clears the debt.

So the servant, having been cleared of his debt, goes out and he finds somebody, a fellow servant who owes him a significant but relatively small some money, maybe a few hundred pounds in today's money and he says, I want my money and the guy says, I can't pay you, would you give me more time?

But he refuses and he has him thrown into a debtor's jail. And so, this is what Jesus says will happen to that person.

[22:54] He says, the master called the servant in. You wicked servant, he said, I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?

In anger, his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed. That is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.

Notice the truth of the gospel is that we have been forgiven much but as such we must forgive others the wrongs that they have done to us.

Remember the Lord's prayer. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. If we don't forgive those who sin against us we don't get to be forgiven.

It's as simple as that and Jesus makes it totally plain in this scripture. This is how my father will treat you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.

[24:01] That's a sobering truth isn't it? Now having said all of that you might say well you know that's all very well but isn't it better just sometimes to just to forget about it just to let sleeping dogs lie not to worry about it.

well you might know of family maybe your own family and there's lots of little bitter resentments bubbling away underneath and one way or another you kind of get through.

Well you know the family of God isn't like any other family. No other family on earth has been given a commission by God to take the wonderful truth of Jesus Christ to the world.

Friends the stakes are simply too high because our unity is the source of our evangelistic power. Remember Jesus said when two or three are gathered together so I am there with them.

He speaks of Iodia and Syntyche they contended with me side by side in the cause of the gospel. I've never been in a battle but I don't think you can contend in a battle but when you're facing one another hitting one another resenting one another you contend side by side by being at one together brothers and sisters together forgiving one another.

[25:41] Jesus said the world will know you are my disciples by your love for one another. There is too much at stake for us to allow bitter resentments to fester underneath.

I'm just going to finish by reading the words of Paul in another letter to Corinthians chapter five and here's what he says he says God has given us the ministry of reconciliation God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ not counting men's sins against them he has committed to us the message of reconciliation we are therefore Christ's ambassadors as though God were making his appeal through us we implore you on Christ's behalf be reconciled to God friends we if you are walking with Jesus if you put your trust in him you are reconciled to God and part of what that means is that we must be reconciled to each other so that we could be effective ambassadors for God in the world he has given us an amazing mission he has a wonderful kingdom of which we are members and that kingdom is growing and will grow out into all the world but friends if we want God to use us in the way that he has promised he will we got to be right with God we got to be right with one another why don't I just finish in prayer Lord Jesus I thank you for this amazing wise simple teaching that you have given us but also the massive stakes that are in place Lord you have given us an amazing message of reconciliation to God Lord I pray you would help us to be totally reconciled with one another I encourage all of us if you put just maybe a situation on our heart that we know is not quite right

I want to pray that we would respond in faith and I want to pray that we would speak to that person in love confront that person and hopefully see them repent and change their ways Lord we love you and we thank you that give us the power that we need and I am in anticipation of fresh outpouring of your spirit as you see repentance and faith take place within this church we love you Lord we bless you we thank you for your goodness hallelujah amen