

## Philippians 2:1-4 Pursue Unity by Practicing Humility

I usually start sermons with a good illustration, a warm story, or some short humor. Instead, I thought I would begin with statistics on church splits. I know that's not a great way to start your Sunday morning. But, I wanted to read a couple of stats just to remind us how prevalent division is and how temptation towards disunity is always lurking in our hearts.

<http://columbiadailyherald.com/sections/lifestyles/religion/splitting-hairs.html>

Studies indicate that there are about "19,000 major, scarring church conflicts in the U.S. each year — an average of 50 per day"

According to the Church Conflict Forum only about 2 percent of the church conflict was over doctrinal issues; 98 percent was over interpersonal issues.

Some have split over the color of the proposed carpet; one church split over a piano bench — that one was resolved by going to two services where the piano bench was taken outside for one service and dragged back in the church for the next service. **I bet Eric is glad we're not doing that.** One church split over the spelling of the word "hallelujah"

Those are a few examples of how a small disagreement can quickly lead to serious division. We know disunity in the church is a serious problem and that's why we need passages like Philippians 2. Last week's text is tied in closely to this week's. In 1:27-30 Paul says stand firm and have one mind as you strive side by side for the faith of the gospel. As opponents come after them they are to stand united as one solid unit, picturing an impenetrable defense.

However, in 2:1-4 Paul's concern is that they remain united as one, not because of outsiders, but within the camp. Not only does a military unit need a united front but they need a united home-base. Satan's two tactics to destroy the church are to assault it from the outside or implode it from within. Paul is continuing on with what he said at the end of chapter one by urging them to reflect the gospel in their oneness.

We do that together as the church by pursuing unity. In fact, the overarching message of 2:1-4 is that **we pursue unity by practicing humility**. If you take notes or if you tweet, that's the line you want to stick in your head this week. **Pursue unity by practicing humility**. We can't have unity without humility and humility naturally leads to unity. The idea is pretty straight-forward but it's one of the toughest things to live out. I hope you don't just hear me saying this morning be united and be humble. You already know you need to do those things or that they're good ideas. **I hope what you hear is that Jesus actually unites us, and therefore we can be united. I hope what you hear is that Jesus actually humbles us in a life-giving rather than personality-draining way, so we can be humble.**

In today's text I see a simple breakdown.

**Motivation: The Cause of Unity...Grace (2:1)**

**Exhortation: The Command of Unity...Oneness (2:2)**

**Application: The Cultivation of Unity...Humility (2:3-4)**

Normally we begin with the beginning, which makes sense right, but I actually want to begin with verse 2. We're going to start with the what, Paul's command to be united, and then we'll jump back to verse 1 to see the motivation.

### **Point 1—2:2 Exhortation: Paul's command for unity.**

Let's look at the text together. "Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind" (2:2). Like any good pastor, his joy is made full by the church's unity. The next four phrases tell us what it is that makes Paul joyful and how he describes unity. Let's look at each phrase in turn.

#### **1.1 Same mind**

First, we are to be of the same mind, or of one mind. The verb used here for be like-minded is used 10x in Philippians. It's mentioned in 1:27; 2:2 (twice); we're told we do have the same mind in Jesus in 2:5. In 4:2 Paul directly tells Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind. The repetition makes it clear this is a big deal.

How would you define or explain being of one mind? One person translates the phrase simply as "seek the same goal with a like mind" (G. Walter Hansen, *Philippians*, 112). It doesn't mean that we have to agree on every single issue, or that we see life in the same way all the time. Paul proscribes unity, not uniformity. There is diversity in the body. There are different gifts, different personalities, experiences, strengths, weaknesses, and so forth. Amidst those differences, none of the diversity is supposed to outshine or get in the way of unity. That's part of the beauty of the church and it's why Paul uses the metaphor of a body. A body has many and different parts but they work together for the larger purpose of the whole person.

Being of one mind means sharing one purpose. We can see how Paul had this single vision that acted like a north-star directing all of his life: the glory of Jesus through the gospel. He says in 1:21 that he can live or die because in either case Jesus will be glorified. His life wasn't about himself, his wants, or his plan. He could count his imprisonment and sufferings (1:12-18) and even his death (1:21) as gain because anything that led to the spread of the gospel of Jesus was his life's purpose.

*"The entire letter to the Philippians asserts that Christ is the one common Subject that unites and binds believers together. When Christians declare that to live is Christ (1:21), acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord (2:11), and desire to know Christ above all other things (3:8-10), then they will be of one mind because they will all be worshiping and serving together the One whom God exalted to the highest place (2:9). In other words, being like-minded and of one mind means more than simply being agreeable; it means agreeing that Jesus Christ is Lord and submitting to his Lordship (2:10-11)" (Hansen, *Philippians*, 113)*

**At College Park** we've expressed that overarching purpose in our mission statement. What's College Park about, what are our ministries about, what are we about? All of this is about **igniting a passion to follow Jesus**. We as a church can be of one mind when we see everything we are and everything we do through that lens of igniting a passion to follow Jesus. One of you might think children's ministry is what every person should do, or another think that we need to focus more on global, and it's okay to have things you care about...but all of us are working together to bring glory to Jesus. You might have had minor conflicts somewhere in the church, or there's that person in your small group

or ABF who just rubs you the wrong way every time they say something. None of that should get in the way of being of one mind and all of that should fall to the side when we think about what's most important: knowing and glorifying Jesus through the gospel. For a long time this phrase has gone around College Park and it captures the idea. **Let's keep the main one the main thing.**

We sometimes sing the song "One Pure and Holy Passion." Do you remember the way it starts? It says:  
"Give me one pure and holy passion  
Give me one magnificent obsession  
Give me one glorious ambition for my life  
To know and follow hard after You"

## 1.2 Same love

Next Paul tells them to have "the same love." We not only share a unified mind in Jesus but we also share the same affections. We're to love Jesus more than we love ourselves and more than we love getting our own way. Not only that, but the same love we all share for Jesus leads to loving one another in Christ-like ways. One commentary said: **"Only a common commitment of all to love as Christ loves will restore unity to the divided community."** (Hansen, *Philippians*, 112) It is having the same object of love, Jesus, that binds us together in love for one another.

Thankfully we all share the same example of how to love, and that is clearly pictured in 2:5-8. Jesus loves in a self-less and humble manner. He's more interested in the good of others than his own life and comforts. He's willing to suffer shame, suffer hurt, have his reputation smeared, and become a lowly servant for the sake of loving others well. We all share the same love for Jesus as our Lord, and we can then share in loving others in Christ-like ways.

## 1.3 Being of full accord

The third phrase is "being of full accord." The NIV translates it as "being one in spirit." So far we've seen that unity looks like being of one mind and having the same love, but it also means to be one in spirit. This phrase puts together the greek preposition "with" alongside the noun for "souls" so that it literally means, "'souls together,' people in harmony with one another" (Hansen, *Philippians*, 112).

We could probably think of a lot of different groups that have or need to have this type of harmony in order to function. You could think of sports teams having to actually play well as teammates and not just individuals, or an army that's strength depends on unity. A band or music group requires anyone singing or playing an instrument to all be on the same page. I think this is why music groups always try to have a name symbolizing harmony: one voice, one direction, N-Sync.

Have any of you had the awful but kind of funny experience where you walked into a band room when each person is tuning their instrument, or practicing on their own? It sounds awful, right? Or, just imagine if on a Sunday morning the musicians and singers were more concerned about their individual glory than working together. It would sound really bad if the drummer was trying to outdo the piano player, or the guitarists were trying to outdo the singers. You don't want a bunch of people up here saying, "Hey! Look at me! I'm awesome!" Instead, you want, and thankfully we have, a bunch of humble people working together to make it about Jesus. When together, there's nothing better than the harmony of the band, the instruments, and the voices. That's how the church is. When the

church is disunited and everyone is out of tune it's a bad experience, but when it's working as one it's a beautiful thing.

This is what Paul calls the church to be: to be united together in community as those one in spirit or literally, with souls together. When we have one mind, one love, and one spirit the church will create beautiful harmonies. Together we will be on mission, we will love one another in Christ-like love, and we will all have the same purpose of igniting a passion to follow Jesus.

**Point 1 Application** The central command Paul places upon the church here is to strive for unity. Paul provides a clear application for us in vv 3-4 so we'll go there soon, but how else might we apply this?

Texts like this are easy to understand but not always easy to live out. It requires us to ask ourselves tough questions when there's tension among us. Is my primary concern here the glory of Jesus and the good of this other person or am I really concerned about being right, getting my way, winning an argument? Have I made myself or a sub-agenda the main thing?

1) I see this a lot in churches and even notice my own tendency to do it. We feel strongly about a doctrine, an issue, or a ministry and so we elevate it to something everyone else has to be equally on board with. Pretty soon you're getting frustrated with others who don't cling to that issue. You've seen these people, and if you haven't then maybe you are these people. They've got the one controversial doctrine that if people don't agree with them on, then they're anathema. Or there's a specific social issue that gets brought into every conversation and they get mad if people don't realize how important it is. Fight against these things by keeping the main one the main thing.

2) A second application is to remember that the church consists of redeemed but not yet glorified sinners. Or, as Pastor Mark likes to say, the church is a beautiful mess. We need to remember our theology, that even people in the church are still sinful, messed up, and we will fail and frustrate one another. Our motivations are mixed, we don't always say things in a helpful way, we misinterpret what people say to us or how they treat us. Because of that we have to choose in advance that we will be forgiving, long-suffering, we will overlook wrongs, and we will absorb some body blows. Listen to Paul's exhortation to the church at Colossae.

"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body."

If your one mission, one purpose, and one love is Jesus and what you're concerned about his glory than it will make it a lot easier to let some personal issues go. Be united under the banner of keeping the main one the main thing.

### **Point 2—2:1 The Motivation for Unity**

We've now looked at the central command and main point of the passage: the exhortation to be united. Verse 2 was the "what" of the passage. Now let's go back to verse 1 to see the why. Here Paul gives the motivations or causes of the unity. If we've experienced these realities by grace in Christ and from one another in the church then we should be united.

2:1 “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy being of the same mind...”

These four “if” clauses aren’t ifs in the sense of hypothetical, or maybe you’ve experienced these and maybe you haven’t. They could be read as “because you’ve experienced these” or “as surely as” you’ve experienced these, then be of the same mind. Paul isn’t talking here about possibilities but realities.

These are primarily things we experience from God but it’s clear those God-given experiences often come through the body of Christ. The point is these will all four be realities we get by grace. These statements motivate us to unity by humbly reminding us we have nothing on our own.

### **2.1 Any encouragement in Christ**

First, “if there is any encouragement in Christ.” Surely there’s been a time in your Christian walk where you despaired, where you felt discouraged, where you were struggling. Can you remember a time when you were encouraged in the midst of that despair? Maybe it was a time when you were in the Word and you felt God speak to you or remind you that He is near. Maybe it was during a Sunday morning service when the Word hit you or you were encouraged by the faith of those worshipping around you. Maybe God has used other believers to encourage you through a conversation, a text, a call, an email, a meal, or a hospital visit. Such encouragement in Christ unites us together as those who’ve received encouragement from the same God and encouragement from another.

### **2.2 Any comfort from love**

Second, “any comfort from love.” Isn’t it astounding that God doesn’t just save you and put up with you, but that He actually pursues you to himself and loves you personally. Isn’t it great comfort to know that our God isn’t just sovereign but he sees us as his children and loves us. Think of the comfort you’ve rested in from God’s love, but then think also of the many ways God has brought comfort to you through another Christian. Maybe it was when you were grieving, or suffering, lonely, or beaten down with guilt. This comfort we need that comes from God and is often through others again unites us and humbles us.

### **2.3 Any participation in the Spirit**

Third is “participation in the Spirit.” The word ‘participation’ here is *koinonia*. It is the key word in Philippians that blends together a partnership, fellowship, and doing life together.

We individually experience God but the language in the NT emphasizes that all of us together share in fellowship with the Holy Spirit. All Christians are made alive by the Spirit, indwelt, transformed, and are being helped by the Holy Spirit. We all share in this same participation and it should create oneness.

### **2.4 Any affection and sympathy**

Fourth Paul says, “if there is any affection and sympathy.” Paul has already stated in 1:8 how he loves them with the affections of Jesus Christ. The affection is the inward tenderness, concern, and care for them. It’s not what you feel for your thousand facebook friends but for those you actually know.

Haven't you experienced affection and compassion from Christ? Hebrews talks about Jesus being our "sympathetic high priest" who, because he became man, understands our temptations and intercedes for us. Hasn't God acted tenderly, affectionately, and sympathetically towards you by giving you grace, by being patient with us in our sins and struggles, by comforting us in our weakness?

So, **what's the point of all four of these phrases** or how do they motivate unity? All four create a unity around receiving the same experiences through the gospel. All of us in Christ have been encouraged, comforted by God's love, participated in the Spirit, and felt the tenderness of God. Shared experiences lead to unity. Not only that but we've experienced many of these through the mediation of other Christians.

These realities also create unity because what we've received by grace humbles us. The gospel is the great humbler of the soul. It reminds us that we are in debt to God because of our sin. We're broken, we're guilty, and our sins against him have put us in a moral debt. Because of that we can never perform enough good works to erase our debt or change our hearts. We can never earn God's favor by our good works. If we could there would be room for pride and boasting because of what we've done. The problem with this is that our works are in God's eyes as filthy rags. We can't earn or perform to get righteousness which is why Jesus died on the cross to forgive us for the sins we couldn't erase and to offer his pure, spotless, and perfect righteousness. All of this comes by God's free grace when we put our faith in Christ, and it has nothing to do with what we've done.

Can you see how this type of grace smashes pride to pieces and refashions us as humble people? Christians, you know how stubborn and difficult you are, and yet God shows tender affections and encouragement to you. You know how quickly you run after sin, and yet God allows you to participate in His Spirit and is making you new. The gospel of Jesus Christ put all of us on our knees because we're undeserving sinners who have received amazing and undeserved grace. This is why Dieterich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Only he who lives by the forgiveness of his sin in Jesus Christ will rightly think little of himself."

Think about what motivates unity in either marriage or friendships. Performance in relationships leads to pride and tension. Grace in relationships leads to oneness and humility.

Occasionally my wife and I have been asked what's different about a Christian marriage. One of the clearest answers is that because my wife and I are both sinners who know it, and we also then know how much grace God keeps giving us, that creates a humility in our lives where we can treat one another not based on what we deserve but how we've been treated by God. A marriage with two followers of Jesus who daily apply the gospel creates an oneness because they can give the grace they've received. They can treat one another with grace regardless of whether the spouse has earned it. However, if there's no grace in the relationship than it won't be long before pride tells a married person I deserve better, or why don't they try as hard in this as me, or why don't they give me the type of attention, love, kindness I deserve. Because they don't give me what I think I deserve or have earned in the marriage I'm going to treat them based on their works.

**So, whereas grace leads to humility which leads to unity, a performance mindset leads to pride which leads to disunity.** No relationship can survive for very long if taken off of the life-support of grace. Grace makes us humble and humility unites.

### **Point 3—The Path of Humility**

Having now seen the cause or motivation to unity in verse 1 and the command to be united in verse 2, Paul leads us into how to cultivate such unity in vv. 3-4. Paul in these verses gives a couple of ways to walk in humility. These steps help in keeping the main one the main thing instead of making me the main thing.

2:3-4 “Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

### **3.1 No rivalry or conceit, but count others more significant**

In verse 3 it's clear there's an attitude to put off and then an attitude to put on. A key to fighting sin isn't just saying stop it but replace it.

“Do nothing from rivalry or conceit.”

Some synonyms to rivalry—just to help you conceptualize what Paul's speaking against—might be selfish ambition, a competitive spirit, being a glory hog, and “approval junkies.” There's healthy room for rivalries, like Patriots vs Colts, but when it comes to our relationships within the church we are to be characterized by a humble unity not a prideful rivalry. We shouldn't be trying to outdo or outmaneuver one another. Closely tied to this rivalry is conceit, which signifies vanity, self-superiority, or to be arrogant or prideful.

**Walter Hansen wrote, “Paul challenges his friends to do nothing to obtain empty glory—the glory of position, prestige, power, and possessions”** (Hansen, 114). I know what you're thinking, “this doesn't happen in the church, right?” I mean come on, you mean to tell me that we in this church might be tempted to rivalry or conceit? Well we've already mentioned some ways people might become divided and those are examples of where rivalry and conceit has taken root. Where else might we see it in the church?

It might happen among leaders and staff as we try to prove ourselves and show how competent we are. It might happen among anyone in the church if we try to impress others with our spirituality or our knowledge. It could mean that we become conceited and think our ministry or the things we're involved in are somehow about us.

It's obviously not just something that happens in church but it happens in homes, in friendships, and in workplaces. Many of you are trying to prove yourself as the most successful child in the family, or you want to have the “glory” of coming off like an amazing parent. It might be that you're in a group of friends and your heart is tempted to talk about others out of a spirit of rivalry.

Paul says have nothing to do with this rivalry or conceited attitude that constantly tempts our performance-based hearts. Instead, he says, “but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” Wow. Did you hear that? Count others more significant than yourselves, esteem others higher than you, put others before you. John Calvin says of this verse: **“Now if anything in our whole is difficult, this above everything else is so.”** That's the truth isn't it?

Humility is both counter-cultural and contrary to our self-seeking fallen natures. You can see how counter-cultural it is by the massive heap of self-focused books and the music that's all about

individual promotion. For example, one of the most popular songs out there has the chorus: “You can tell everybody, I’m the man, I’m the man, I’m the man.” You can just imagine a gym full of people listening to that thinking they’re the man.

We also know it’s contrary to our nature because it’s so incredibly difficult to not be all about me. When Joe Wittmer and I talked about this passage I recommended the title at first be: “The Joy of pursuing unity through the painful process of humility.” You can tell Joe is a much better man than me because he said, “Well humility doesn’t always have to be painful.” To be honest, humility is almost always a painful process for me, which is probably why I was assigned this text. [Don’t judge. He who is without pride cast the first stone. But it’s true, humility is painful because it’s so unnatural to our sinful self.]

We don’t want to lay our agenda aside to help others out we want to stick with our plan. We also throw up all these questions to justify why we shouldn’t count others more significant than ourselves. “I’ll be mistreated.” “They’ll abuse it.” “People need to know I’m not a doormat.” Humility and being a servant takes a miracle of God in changing our minds to think through Jesus-following, gospel-centered lens.

### **3.2 Look to the interests of others**

Let’s move into verse 4 which carries on the same theme of humility. “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interest of others.”

Count others more significant by taking their concerns into mind. Instead of living with your eyes solely focused on your needs and wants care about others.

Look means pay careful attention too. Look to their needs, their desires, how you can lift up or build them up, or what encouragement they need. LOOK to how you can treat them not as someone who can serve you but as someone you can serve, not as an impediment to you getting your way but as your priority. In general it’s saying to put them before you.

In a church setting this might mean thinking through how I can be a servant to others. A small group needs a place to meet, well instead of thinking I don’t want to clean before they come you think of their interests. Or, someone at the church has a need and we ask how can I help? When you serve you’re reminded that God didn’t put you on the earth or in the church to consume but to serve.

What would it look like in your **marriage** to consider your spouse’s interests before your own. For me, that might mean going grocery shopping with my wife instead of reading, and having a good attitude about it.

If you’re a **parent**, what would it look like to put your kids before you on a weekday evening or on a Saturday morning?

If you’re **single** and have roommates, how can you look to their interests? Maybe you know they have a busy week or are stressed, so instead of getting annoyed by the dishes they’ve left out this week you serve them by washing them. When I lived with guys it was like we were playing a game of chess to see who could avoid chipping in with chores.

What would it look like to look to the interests of the people at your **workplace**? How do you listen to what they’re going through and show them you care?



How could you do this as a **neighbor**? Maybe it means offering to help neighbors with house work or yard work when you'd rather be relaxing. Maybe it means offering to watch their kids so they can get out.

You figure out what it means in your context to look to the interests of others.

I don't want to go into next week's text too much but you can see in verses 5-11 that Paul gives the greatest example of "counting others more significant than yourselves." The eternal Son of God gives up his place in heaven to take on the humble flesh of man. He comes to serve and to die for sinful mankind who rebel against him. If any act was ever selfless and others focused it was the incarnation and the death of Jesus, for us. If any act would be less deserved and more abused it is the cross of Christ by us. And yet, God became man in the person of Jesus and not only that, but he suffered on the cross not for his own sake but as the sin-bearing substitute for us. In humility, Jesus counted our lives more significant than his own.

This type of grace humbles us and it allows us to serve. So, when you think you have a hard person to serve, or you think you have to humble yourself in a big way, let your mind wander back to Philippians 2 and remember what Jesus did for you. You'll never humble yourself for another to the degree Jesus, the perfect God-man, humbled himself for you. This is why I said don't just hear me saying, "You should be united or you should be humble," as if you don't already know that. The question is how's that possible. The gospel tells us that Jesus actually unites us because we all come through the door of grace, and Jesus actually creates humility in us by reminding us we're all living on that grace of God daily. Jesus creates unity and humility and he exemplifies what it looks like to live out that humility.

### **Final application**

I've tried to provide applications related to unity and humility throughout this morning. The reality is there are hundreds of different ways this might apply, and we each need to do some honest soul-searching to figure out where division or pride might be taking root in our heart. Just like those weeds popping up in our yards this time of year, you need to completely rip up division and pride before it gets out of hand. Don't just trim it and don't just make it look okay on the surface, pull up the roots. Hopefully every time you see a weed or dandelion this week it will remind you to ask God to change our hearts by helping us fight for unity and die to self.

Paul desires unity desperately in the church at Philippi. He reminds them of the gospel in verse 1 to motivate them, he gives us the example of Jesus in verse 5-11, and in verses 3-4 he tells us how to walk in humility so that unity will be cultivated. Unity will not be achieved without the humility that leads to dying to self so that we might live for Christ.

What we've seen in this text is that it should be a great concern for our church that we are united. When the church is divided or it's full of people concerned with their agenda then the church will not reflect the worth of the gospel Paul mentions in 1:27. It will instead say Jesus is important and all but my agenda is most important. Paul's resounding message is **pursue unity by practicing humility**. Our unity through humility will not only help our own hearts in sanctification, but it will beautifully picture the gospel of Jesus Christ to a watching world. Jesus himself unites us and humbles us through a gospel of grace, and in our unity and humility we reflect the worthiness of that gospel.

In his book *Humility*, C.J. Mahaney says if pride is our greatest enemy and humility is our greatest friend, we need to daily be cultivating and grabbing onto anything that humbles us. Would you try with me to practice that this week? When things, circumstances, and people come into your life this week and you're humbled—even if you're wrongly humbled or it's because of a weakness—would you thank God for bringing this into your life to humble you. Don't get frustrated by the things this week that humble you and don't avoid opportunities to get below people and serve them, but really let God use humbling circumstances to root out pride, rivalry, or the idol of self-competency from your heart.

Here's just one easy way we can do this together, once in the morning and once in the evening, maybe as you lay down to sleep. In the morning, ask God to give you the heart of a servant on this day. Ask his help to see ways you can count others more significant than yourself and then to do them. Once you pray that, put feet to the prayer, by looking for small ways you can serve others well that day. How can you serve others at home, at work, in relationships and friendships, and among the church? Then, every evening before you fall to sleep, think of anything at all that might have been humbling in the day. Maybe it was the act of service you did, maybe it was an embarrassing moment, maybe it was a sin you committed which you need to confess. It could be a number of things. Whatever or whoever it is that humbles you that day, instead of being embarrassed or angry, take a minute to thank God for using something in this day to humble you. Allow God to humble you in these small ways or before long He will have to humble you in bigger ways.

Begin your day by going out with eyes to be a servant, and end your day by pulling up pride and letting God plant seeds of humility. College Park, the gospel is a beautiful thing to reflect, and we can reflect it this week as we pursue unity by practicing humility.