

The Mindset of Obedience

St Andrew's - 16th October 2022 - Philippians 2: 1-18

Recap of chapter 1

Before we look at chapter 2, let's recap chapter 1.

1v1

Philippians begins with an introduction that tells us who is writing and who they are writing to:

*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,
To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons*

So it's Paul and Timothy - though as we read the letter, it's obvious that it's mostly Paul, who talks in the first person throughout the letter. When we get to next week's passage, where Paul talks about how he wants to send Timothy, it's really clear that it's primarily Paul that's writing here - it's from Paul's perspective.

And it's to "the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons". The saints, the believers, the Christians, the church in Philippi. Interesting how he adds also the leaders of the church too - Paul is explicit that he's writing to the ordinary Philippian Christians, not just the people in charge. And it's the ordinary people that are described as saints. Why are they saints? Because they are 'in Christ Jesus'.

The whole letter is read through this lens - Paul is writing to those that are in Christ, those that are the church, the saved people Philippi.

1v3-11

Paul starts after the formalities with thankfulness to God for the Philippian church - for what he remembers of them and how they have been good partners to him. v3:

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

Then Paul writes about how he prays for them with joy that they would continue to grow. Paul has very high praise for the Philippian church - contrast this with for example his letter to the Galatians, where he's got a serious issue to address with them, or his two letters to the Corinthian church, where he has a laundry list of problems to answer. But the letter to the Philippians is known as the letter of joy. The words joy or rejoice come up 14 times in 4 chapters, it's a central theme of the whole letter.

1v12-18

Next, Paul tells the Philippians that his imprisonment - he's writing from prison in Rome - his imprisonment is no hindrance, but is serving the spread of the gospel. v12:

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel

He says that whilst some of this spread of the gospel is from the wrong motivations, he rejoices that Christ is proclaimed, whatever the circumstances. v18:

Only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

v19-26

Paul goes on to say that whatever happens to him, he will rejoice. His desire is to be with Christ - in life and in death. v12:

For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.

v27-30

Then the letter turns to the topic of obedience, of good works, of doing the right thing.

27 Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, 28 and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. 29 For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, 30 engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Chapter 1 ends things with Paul telling the Philippians to be of one spirit, one mind - a mindset of not being frightened, but ready for suffering for Christ.

v1-4

Now chapter 2, verse 1 starts with 'So' or 'Therefore' - we're following on from what we have just seen at the end of chapter 1, this is a continuation of the argument.

1 So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, 2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Again, it's a call to be of one mind - being united together in one mindset of love. What this mindset looks like is to be together - putting each other first. Verse 1 tells us the source of this unity of mindset:

- Encouragement in Christ - It's our union with Christ that encourages our unity - in Christ we're all brothers and sisters.
- Comfort from love - we love because we are first loved, by Christ (Galatians 2:20) and each other.
- Participation in the Spirit - the Spirit binds us together, gives us that fellowship between each other
- Affection and sympathy - unity and putting others first flows from having affection and sympathy for each other

In a word, we're looking at selflessness. And Paul next points us to the greatest example of this.

v5-11

5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,

Verse 5 connects together the exhortation to humility with the following exposition of Christ's humility. The example of Christ is not just something to look up to - it's not something to make us miserable about our inability to reach Christlike levels of humility. It's ours in Christ.

Verses 6-11 form what many think is a hymn or similar - the structure, the vocabulary in the Greek is quite different from the rest of Paul's letters. Maybe Paul is referencing something that the Philippians sung together.

6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

So this short hymn celebrates firstly Christ's humility (v6-8) and then his exultation (v9-11).

His humility is found in that He did not count equality with God something to be grasped - something to be used and held on to. He came to earth, set aside his power - He lived a very human life, of perfect obedience.

The hymn then tells us that therefore Jesus is highly exulted. It might not be obvious how this fits with the whole flow of the argument - is this just Paul finishing off the hymn, because he wants to? I don't think so - I think this related to the argument - the fact that Jesus Christ is highly exulted, that He is the one to whom all will bow, that He is the sovereign king of the universe, is very important to our obedience. It isn't merely that Christ acts as a really good example, it's not just that we look to Him to copy Him. It's not that His relevance to our obedience stopped at His death. His obedience relates to our obedience and we are those that bow the knee to Christ and confess Him as Lord.

v12-13

Paul goes on with another 'therefore' in v12.

12 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Therefore, on the basis of Christ's example and His being exulted, continue in obedience.

"Therefore, my beloved" - Paul is again, like we saw in chapter 1 verse 1, writing to those that are saved.

Paul first says continue in obedience as you were when I was there, but also when I'm not there. Paul's presence isn't a requirement for obedience - for us today, we can't use the excuse of church leaders being absent or incompetent or not perfect themselves. Our obedience is reliant on something other than the Christians around us.

Next, Paul says 'work out' your salvation. Now this is where we can get things very wrong if we're not careful. Read carefully what Paul says. It's not work *for*, or work *at*, but work *out* your salvation. We don't work to attain our salvation, we don't work at or for it, we work it out. Almost to make completely clear the point, Paul says in verse 13 'for it is God who works in you'. We work out what God worked in.

This working out is by fear and trembling - again, we can get this very wrong if we think that this means that we should fear for our salvation or that we must work to not lose it. In light of what we've already read, is Paul saying to be anxious and nervous about things? He is constantly telling them to rejoice in this letter, so this phrase might come as a surprise.

The word here for fear could also be translated as reverence or respect. The word for trembling is one that Paul uses to describe himself, in 1 Corinthians 2 (v1-5):

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. 2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 3 And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, 4 and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

So this is not fear as in terror, but it's fear as in weakness and awe and reverence and reliance on Christ. Christ himself is described as having a fear of God even, in Isaiah 11 verse 2-3. It's talking about the Messiah, Christ and says:

*And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and fear of the LORD.*

And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

In so far as we are fearing the Lord, we are imitating Christ.

Then verse 13 tells us that 'it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure'.

So God works in us - our working out is not alone. God first works in us, then we work it out. And God works in us in two ways here:

- First, 'to will' - God wills that we will be obedient, we work out because he wills it.
- Second, 'to work' - God doesn't sit idly by in our lives, we are filled with the Spirit, whose enabling power works in us - our outworking is also because he is at work. We're both working.

And it's all for His good pleasure - He wills and works for His good pleasure. The outworking we do that comes from His willing and working in, is pleasing to God. We're often very quick to emphasise that good works are not required for salvation, that Christ's work is all that is required, which is very true. But let's not then leave the works aside, because they are something that God takes pleasure in.

v14-16

14 Do all things without grumbling or disputing, 15 that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, 16 holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labour in vain.

Paul tells us what sort of obedience we should have - obedience without grumbling or disputing - again a mindset of humility. This is a life in contrast to those around that are not like this - the crooked and twisted generation.

Now the obvious way we can take this the wrong way is pride - we can think that since we're the shining ones, we're better than others. It almost doesn't need to be explained how this is wrong - it's the opposite of humility. Verse 16 tells us to hold fast to the word of life - far from being puffed up in ourselves, our shining is by our clinging on for dear life to the word of God, to Christ.

Notice that Paul says he wants to be proud - but not proud of himself, but proud of them, proud of their works, not his own.

v17-18

17 Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. 18 Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

Then Paul tells us this perplexing part - what does Paul mean here? He's using a metaphor of sacrifice, that refers to if he dies as a martyr.

A drink offering would, in the temple system, be offered on top of, in addition to, another substantial sacrifice. So Paul's obedience to death, is an offering to God, just as the Philippians obedience is an offering to God.

It's not that the obedience is a proper sacrifice that brings atonement - we know that Christ offered Himself as the final and complete sacrifice for atonement - Hebrews 10 verses 11-14:

11 And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12 But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, 13 waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. 14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

This sacrifice of obedience that Paul and the Philippians are offering is not something that makes them right with God, it's not something that atones, but it's something done in thankfulness.

Paul ends this section with another call to rejoice - he is glad of his obedience, his potential martyrdom. He rejoices and calls the Philippians, and by extension us, to rejoice in the face of opposition and suffering.

Actions or mindset?

So we've looked at this whole section on obedience - on doing the right thing. But notice what's missing. There's no list of commandments. There's no laws to follow, Paul doesn't tell us what to actually *do*. It's not practical, is it? We all want to know what's required of us, how much we should give, what things to avoid, what is a must-do thing. But this has none of that.

It's much more about thoughts and mindset and motivation. Paul tells us a lot about the mindset of our obedience - take the mindset of Christ as our example, obey without a grumbling attitude, be united in your obedience.

I think this is no mistake - our minds, our desires, what we love and worship and occupies our thoughts is what controls us and our actions. Jesus says in John 14:15:

■ *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments"*

Our love for Christ leads us to obey Christ - what's going on in our minds and hearts is what our actions, our obedience, flows from. We go from slaves to sin to slaves to Christ.

Erasmus and Luther

One example from the reformation - it's Reformation Sunday in two weeks, so close enough.

Before the reformation really occurred, the corruption, the problems, in the church were very apparent. There was no shortage of complaint about what was going on - the problems of sin in the church, the way church leadership was complicit in this sin, the way there were aspects of the theology that lead to problems, for example the insane moral hazard of indulgences. Just pay your way into God's graces, what could go wrong?

Erasmus was one of a group known as 'humanists'. The name might confuse - these are not the humanists of the last century, in fact Erasmus was an ordained Roman Catholic priest. The group sought reformation in the church, they wanted, like most, the church to change and for the sin to be rooted out and everyone to do good. Erasmus at the time was possibly the most respected living philosopher and theologian - he was a big deal across Europe at the time.

Now Erasmus and co wanted to give the church a good moral bath, to wash off the bad. "Let's all just do better" was roughly the idea. Try harder. This was taking place before the reformation of the church that we know about, which really kicked off with Luther starting in 1519.

Just asking for people to do better didn't make anything happen. What then was it about Luther that his reformation attempts succeeded where Erasmus and his friends didn't? Maybe the exchange between the two men will make clear what the difference was.

In 1524, as the protestant reformation is getting going, Erasmus writes to Luther his work "The freedom of the will". In it, he examines the arguments for free will, because Erasmus believes that we can choose to do better, so let's just choose to do better.

Luther writes back in a work entitled "On the bondage of the will" in 1525. Luther said to Erasmus that he had really got to the heart of the matter in a way that his other opponents hadn't. Luther said that, yes, he agrees we can do what we want. In fact, he goes further - we can *only* do what we want. This is the problem - we can do what we want, but we can't change what we want. And when we want the wrong thing, we do the wrong thing.

So the reason why Luther changed the world, where a famous learned man like Erasmus couldn't, is because Luther focused people on the gospel - he pointed people to Christ. He did not tell people to do better (in fact, he occasionally told them to do worse, as a way to show how serious he was about salvation by grace alone, tongue in cheek I'm sure). The transforming of minds is what changed the world, rather than moralising.

(Now God did use Erasmus for great good however, because it's Erasmus' Greek New Testament translation, that allowed so many more people access to the original language, that Luther read and found his great insight in the book of Romans. This insight, the rediscovery that we are counted righteous because Christ's righteousness is given to us, that changed the world.)

Obedience comes from salvation

So back to the first verse of Philippians - who is Paul writing to? To the 'saints in Christ Jesus'. He is writing to those that are already saved - who have already found salvation in Christ. Our obedience, our mindset shift, occurs because we are 'in Christ'.

All these calls to obedience we've read would be wasted in a letter to non-believers, in fact that would serve to complicate matters - it would give the false impression that works are required for salvation. But Paul says that our works are the working out of our salvation - the consequence of our salvation.

Paul says in chapter 3 verse 12:

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

It's only because Paul belongs to Christ, because the Spirit has so transformed him, that he presses on. This is the way round it is - we are first saved, in order to do good works. Verse 5:

Have this mind among yourselves, that is yours in Christ Jesus

To be totally clear, we are saved completely apart from our works. Our works are the outflow of our salvation.

Two possible obstacles

When it comes to good works, there are some major traps we can fall into.

Pride

First, the trap of pride, of self-righteousness, of salvation by works. We think that we can earn some kind of credit by what we do, that really we're pretty good.

The answer to this is the attitude of humility that Paul talks of - the mindset that is ours in Christ. Remind yourself of Christ's obedience and perfection, see yourself in contrast to Him and recognise that you're nowhere near as good as you thought.

Laziness

The second trap is laziness, anti-nomianism, thinking good works don't really matter. Salvation is not by works after all, so why bother?

Again, the answer is to look to Christ - see His obedience, see what He did, see His example for us. It's in recognising that we are united to Him, understanding Him, that our mindset is changed to will our good works. When we see clearly what Christ has done for us, we are motivated to offer ourselves in thanks.

Not measuring up

A third trap is when we work hard, we try our best, but we still don't feel good enough. Neither lazy nor prideful, but still not satisfied. Again, the answer is to look to Christ and recognise that in Him we are righteous enough - that His righteousness is given to us on the cross and our imperfections and disobedience and sin are all taken from us. Look to Christ to turn from guilt to rejoicing.

Paul puts it well

Paul puts it very well in 1 Corinthians 15:10:

I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

Paul's attitude, the attitude of humility that he commends us to causes us to work very hard, rejoice in whatever happens and give all the glory to God. And it's Christ who made all this happen. All obedience flows first from Christ's obedience, all obedience is reliant on Him.