

The Reality of Church Life – Part 1

The apostle Paul really loved people. This is probably one of the secrets of his effectiveness in ministry. In the opening section of **Philippians** chapter 4, Paul reveals his profound and sincere love for the church at Philippi. This verse is filled with endearing names for believers. He calls them his *beloved brethren*, and speaks of them as his *joy* and *crown*. What's so apparent through this intimate expression of love is that he must have enjoyed a closer friendship with the Philippians than any other church. In many aspects this is Paul's most beautiful and poetic letter. It is loaded with tenderness, warmth and deep affection. Consider the terminology used "...**My beloved and longed-for brethren, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, beloved.**" (Verse 1)

Notice, after so powerfully articulating his affection for them, Paul asks the church to **stand firm**. This Greek word may also be used to describe them either *as soldiers who are to stand at their post irrespective of the pressure to abandon it*, or alternatively, *as athletes who must adhere without deviation to the course marked out by God*. But the underlying consideration for "**standing fast in the Lord**" is one of harmony and unity with one another. This should be the primary objective of every healthy community.

However, as we read on we get the distinct impression that there are many other spiritual irritants present at Philippi. Things such as depression, harshness of spirit, anxiety, and the failure to take prayer seriously, troubled minds, and thoughts filled with all kinds of junk. Does this sound familiar? For this reason, in the first nine verses Paul appeals for *harmony; mutual assistance; joy; patient self-control; prayerfulness; and a disciplined thought life*.

As for some specifics, Paul is appealing to a member of the Philippian church to reconcile two women who are in dissension (**verse 3**). These women could not agree and the church may have been in danger of taking sides and dividing. What was equally troubling to Paul was that the leaders within the congregation were not taking the problem seriously enough to become involved in resolving it. The apostle used the word "implore" in reference to both women to show that his warning is addressed just as much to one as to the other (verse 2)

Paul urges them **to be of the same mind in the Lord**. Please understand; it is impossible for us to be united and in agreement in all things regarding our daily lives. But, as far as the things of the Lord are concerned, it is possible for all of us to lay aside our petty, personal differences in order that the Lord may be magnified and His kingdom advanced. So stop trying to get other people to be of the same mind as you and start to be of the same mind as the Lord. This will quickly sort out any discrepancies, prevent skirmishes, and bring about unity. Don't expect to create harmony without the Lord being in the centre. And don't try to establish agreement outside of the unity that Christ has brought about. *In Him you live and move and have your being.* Acts 17:28

Nothing is known about these two women and their quarrel. But a possibility could be that one of them was Lydia of Acts, as we know that she had a prominent role in establishing the church at Philippi. In any case, the two women appear to have been important persons within the church. Probably among its most active workers; maybe within each of their homes a separate group met for worship and prayer. Most certainly, these particular people quarrelling had the potential to severely upset the harmony of the larger community; something that should be avoided at all times.

Now, Paul was a realist and he knew full well how difficult it would be for such strong women to reach agreement on their own. So he solicits the help of a third party, whom he addresses simply as *“true companion.”* Often when two people have been quarrelling, the situation can best be resolved by taking it to an independent third party - someone with mature, spiritual judgement. Its not that this person is expected to act arbitrarily and hand down judgement, but rather, he is able to provide those in dispute with a scriptural solution to their problem (one that’s perfectly in line with God’s word).

Together with this person, the Philippians are instructed to help these women reconcile their differences, and one very important reason for doing this is introduced in **verse 3** *“...Because they had laboured (fought) together side by side with Paul in the struggle to preach the gospel.”* What Paul is actually trying to establish here is that these two women should not in any way to be demoted because of their differences, but they are to continue to be respected highly for their energetic co-operation with him – when working at his side as esteemed members of his team. In church life, as with our personal lives, disagreements can happen. This is why Paul proceeds to give explicit direction concerning the attitude one should adopt in potentially hazardous circumstances such as these.

Let’s now read **verses 4, 5, 6** and **7**...

Turning to the entire congregation (**verse 4**), Paul repeats his favourite expression. And the secret of his exhortation is found in these three words *“In the Lord.”* No matter how troublesome the circumstances may be, it is always possible for a Christian to **rejoice in the Lord**. In fact, we are commanded to rejoice under all circumstances. But especially in church! And such obedience is possible because true joy is *in the Lord*.

Then Paul urges them to let their *gentleness* be known to all men (**verse 5**), because the Lord Himself is present. The difficulty is not in understanding how to be yielding, sweet and reasonable, but rather, how to be able to do this before all men (women and children included). The Greek word denotes a person who does not insist on the “letter of the law,” but is always fair, reasonable, moderate and considerate – with everyone. It is the exact opposite of harsh, abrasive, sarcastic, spiteful and contentious.

Is it really possible for a Christian to be anxious for nothing (**verse 6**)? It is possible as long as we have the resource of believing prayer. Prayer is both an act and an atmosphere. We come to the Lord at specific times and bring specific requests before Him. But it is also possible to live in an atmosphere of prayer. It is possible for the mood of your life to be a prayerful mood. Perhaps the word prayer in this context signifies the overall attitude of your life. Whereas, supplication represents the specific requests which you bring to the Lord. We definitely need both!

“...By prayer and supplication” which suggests a transferral of the burden of our souls into God's capable hands. *“With thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.”* Thanksgiving means giving God the glory in everything, making room for Him, casting your care upon Him and letting it be His care. The troubles that sit heavy on our souls will cease then to be hidden and bottled up. By speaking them, we lay them out before him, and spread them out for Him to deal with them. That's why we can be truly thankful! This verse is telling us to *...be anxious for nothing, prayerful in everything, and thankful for anything.* Very good advice – don’t you think?

If these attitudes are fully characterise our lives, both at home and in the church, then (and only then) will the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.