

Philippians 2:1-5 The Interests of Others

¹ So if there is any encouragement in Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being united in spirit, and having one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility consider one another better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look carefully not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

⁵ Indeed, let this attitude be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus. (EHV)

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, Lovers of God and Your Neighbor,

There are a number of different things we tend to focus on in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, which is found in Luke 10. Jesus tells the story in explanation of what, in today's Gospel, he called the second greatest commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself". It's a pretty simple story: A man traveling to Jericho is attacked on the way – he is beaten, robbed, stripped, and left for dead. A priest comes by later, sees the man, and instead of helping, walks by on the other side of the road. A Levite comes along, sees him, and does the same thing. Then a Samaritan passes by, and he goes out of his way to help the man.

Now, in that parable we tend to focus on the way the hated foreigner shows up the pious Jews – the Samaritan obeys the Lord's law better than the priest and the Levite. There's also the shame that two men, whose hearts should be extraordinarily well-aligned with God's, choose not to help a man in obvious need, and there's the surprise that an alien in the land, who certainly had reasons *not* to get involved, chooses to help, and spares no effort or expense in doing so. But it's helpful also to look beyond their actions to what is motivating the men in the parable: What did they *value*?

What did the priest and the Levite see when they noticed the man who had been beaten, robbed, stripped, and left for dead? They saw trouble – or at least, that's what we can reasonably infer. The thought of stopping to help might have entered their minds, but it wouldn't have lingered long, because almost immediately they would have seen that their own interests would not be well served by intervening: The gang that robbed the man might still be lurking around, and they wouldn't want to attract any attention. They had someplace to be, and who knows how much time it would take to help this man with so many obvious needs. And what may very well have been the deciding concern: If the man was dead and they touched him, or died while they were in contact with him, they would become ceremonially unclean, which would interfere with their official duties, which would certainly be ... a hassle. A pain. A drag.

But the Samaritan, when he saw the crime victim lying there, valued something other than his safety, his time, his resources, his other commitments. He valued the man and his life, and because of that he stopped, tended to his wounds, took him to an inn, and provided generously for the man's care – and committed to do even more if necessary. The Samaritan put the wounded stranger's interests far ahead of his own.

And when Jesus asked, "Which of these guys was a loving neighbor to the man who was robbed?", he put everyone who hears or reads the story on the spot: Whose interests do *you* put first?

Here in Philippians 2, the Apostle Paul points us to the prime example of selflessly putting others' needs and concerns ahead of one's own: Christ himself. It is his attitude that we are called to imitate in our dealings with other people.

And it's a very good thing we have Jesus to look to, because on our own we pretty much always value ourselves above others and put our interests ahead of everyone else's. That is failing to love our neighbor, and that is sin. It's not only selfishness, it's also a form of idolatry – placing yourself and your wants and desires above God and his, and centering your will and actions on yourself instead of him.

How might you be so self-centered? You learn something interesting about a friend, neighbor, or church member, it's not exactly complimentary, and no one said you should spread it around, but it's just so ... *juicy* that you've got to tell someone else, just to show that you're "in the know" about these things. You have a family member in the hospital, long term, and you know how much a visit from you could mean, but it's just so ... depressing, and troublesome, so you make up reasons not to go. You're at the store shopping for clothes, and instead of first finding the shirt you're interested in in your size, you pick up and unfold six shirts at random until you find the right one – and you leave the rest in a messy heap for other customers to dig through, and for the store's employees to refold for the sixteenth time that day.

Of course, there are much more extreme examples of putting your own interests ahead of others' – treating another person's body as just a thing to give you pleasure, arranging the death of an ailing relative to put her out of your misery, stealing the fruits of someone else's labors because it's so much easier than working for them yourself, even ending the life of another human being because his or her existence – on the street, next door, at your hospital, in your girlfriend's womb – has become bothersome for you. All of it is damning sin, whether it's simple selfishness or advanced unkindness, and what we deserve for it, as with all sin, is death and hell.

And so we thank God with everything we have and are that his Son was and is nothing like us in our selfishness, and was instead entirely and sacrificially *selfless*. In love, the Father had determined to save this world full of sinners, and in love, the Son consented to be sent and to suffer, to live and to die, all so that the guilty and undeserving could be made innocent and worthy of heaven. He could have just stayed on his glorious throne, undisturbed by the plight of sin-cursed, sin-practicing humans. And even if he came to earth, he could have simply demanded the glory and service that were due him and determined not to bother with people's problems.

But no, Jesus went all the way, setting aside his divine power and prerogatives to take the form of a servant – to be a man like us. He chose to suffer the pains and indignities that would pay the price of every sin every person ever committed. He put each of us and all of us together first; he humbled himself for the sake of sinners and rebels, and he succeeded in saving us. Because he went to the cross, and then refused to remain, dead, in the tomb they laid him in – because he died for us and rose to life again, all who put their trust in him and his selfless sacrifice have their sins forgiven, have a place in God's family, and have eternal life in heaven.

That is love – and it's a special kind of love. It's not the kind so common in love songs these days – "You make me feel good, so I love you" – a love that *seems* to focus on the other person but ends up really being only and all about the one doing the loving. No, Christ's love – God's love – is completely *other*-centered, which is why Jesus was willing to sacrifice himself to save us. It's why he is able to take your ugliest and most offensive sins – even things like abortion – and instead of saying, "How dare you do that to me!" he says, "Your life and soul are more important than how your sins have hurt me; I forgive you." And that kind of selfless, forgiving, giving love is what we are called on to show toward each other, and to show to everyone.

It's what Paul is talking about in these verses from Philippians. He appeals to the spiritual and even emotional foundation each of us has as a redeemed child of God: "encouragement in Christ", "comfort from his love", "fellowship with the Spirit", "affection", and "compassion", and then he brings it all and all of us together, encouraging us to be "like-minded", to love with the same Christ-like, other-centered love, and to be "united in spirit" and to have "one mind" – so, not an occasional or merely organizational unity, but a true and thorough oneness. And if we take his instructions seriously – if we commit ourselves to being the kind of Christians we were called and created to be – then we will not do anything out of "selfish ambition" or be motivated by "empty conceit". We will follow our Savior's example of humility and valuing others above ourselves. We will look not to our own self-centered interests, but to the interests of others.

Now, that's a wonderful ideal, right? But how close is it to our reality? Each of us still has a sinful nature that constantly tells us the only interests that matter are our own, and even when we're doing a pretty good job following God's interests, desires, and priorities – when we're nurturing, growing, and living out our faith; when we're being good stewards of our health, life, and resources; when we're being effective and useful in our various vocations – even then we can easily lose sight of other people and their needs.

That's why the Bible is full of encouragements, even commandments, that tell us to look carefully to the interests of others. In the great marriage section of Ephesians 5, husbands are told to love their wives with the same kind of sacrificial love that Christ had for the church – which he died for. In the famous love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13, we are all instructed in a love that actively puts the other person first. And in many places in Scripture we are told to look out for those who are not able to look out for their own interests: the poor, the oppressed, the weak, the sick, the hidden, the abused. Proverbs 31:8,9 specifically tell us to "speak up for" and "defend the rights" of the voiceless and defenseless.

And you might say that that is the particular area of emphasis for my organization, *Christian Life Resources*. We educate, equip, and organize fellow believers who want to put the interests of the unborn, the unseen, the vulnerable, and the defenseless ahead of their own. We got started over 40 years ago working one-on-one with mothers in crisis to convince them not to abort their babies, while also pointing them to Jesus. That's still a huge part of what we do – we have a network of 11 pregnancy care centers – but for a long time now we have also provided a wealth of resources and assistance on a wide range of life and family issues. Because we want to actually engage with and persuade people, we are careful not to act or argue in ways that put up walls between us; instead, we use these issues as bridges to share the gospel, even as we work to speak up for and defend the people that we all, as Christians, know are most in need of that loving service.

Now, there are plenty of pro-life organizations that *fight* against abortion and other evils. They're usually engaged more in politics and the public square, and that's fine – that's what they do. But with CLR we don't normally use the language of "fighting": in the first place because it puts up walls when you treat "the other side" as the enemy, but also because our goal, as a Christian, Christ-centered organization, is not scoring points in a contest or winning a battle. *Christian Life Resources* is all about lives and souls, and love and service.

That's part of why, almost 30 years ago, we started *New Beginnings*, a home for single mothers, which is located now in Milwaukee. It wasn't enough to be working to make sure babies were born; we needed to be working also to support mothers who have kept their babies but who needed to unlearn the bad habits of generational poverty and learn the parenting, social, and occupational skills they need in order to give their children the best possible start on life.

All those things, and more, are things we do we do on behalf of and in the name of our supporters, but since all believers are called to look out for the interests of others, you know there are many other things you can do in your own life and your own situations. The simple humility of not assuming you know everything (and others know nothing), can be a game-changer in all sorts of relationships and circumstances. Not insisting that whenever you have a need or desire it must be met immediately is a huge first step in putting the interests of your spouse, children, or parents first, and loving them better. When you follow Christ's example and apply these words of Paul to all the areas of your life, you'll find it changes a lot, or at least changes how you think about a lot of things: how you deal with the people above you, below you, and at the same level at work and at school; how you drive; how you date; how you deal with your neighbors; how you communicate; how you use social media; how you behave in public; and even how you vote.

Now, to our old Adam, our sinful nature, all that sounds like a drag – a pain, a hassle. And frankly, in our society today, being pro-life on issues like abortion, assisted suicide, embryo experimentation, and euthanasia can seem like a recipe for nothing but anger and conflict. But it's a lie to think that the only way to be happy or have fun or know peace is to put ourselves first, do only what feels good, and ignore the needs of others. Being like Jesus is actually and always the best way to be. And Paul's language here in Philippians reminds us of all the blessings that come with living, and loving, as the people we were saved and created to be: things like encouragement, comfort, unity, affection, compassion, and ... joy.

You know, so much of what is anti-life, anti-family, anti-marriage, anti-health, and anti-truth in our culture is supremely self-centered – what Paul calls “selfish ambition” and “empty conceit”. But valuing others above ourselves, valuing their lives no matter who or what or where they are, or how big or how small they are, and putting their needs first will be a breath of fresh air to the people around us. It makes Christians stand out for all the right reasons – as witnesses to the life of love that Jesus gave and modeled for us, as witnesses to the value of every life, and as witnesses to the salvation we offer to everyone we can. It also builds exactly the kind of relationships everyone longs to have.

So make it your life's goal and your everyday practice: let this attitude be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus. Look to the interests of others.

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