

“Letters to Phil—A Study of Philippians. Joy in the face of Conflict”

Today we’re in episode 3 of the series called “Letters to Phil.” The Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the church in the city of Philippi. He wrote it from a Roman dungeon while waiting to be beheaded. In the midst of all the things he’s facing that could produce avalanches of anxiety, he talks over and over about joy. So, we’re studying a book of the Bible called Philippians, and we’re looking at what it can teach us about dealing with our own anxiety. Paul had a sense of God’s presence—Jesus’ presence, that we can learn from. So let’s learn! One of the biggest sources of anxiety today, and always really, is relational conflict. Paul writes about this, and there are important truths for us to internalize to move from anxiety to joy.

So thinking about conflict made me think about famous feuds. You know, like the Hatfields and the McCoys who spent 30 years in the late 1800’s killing each other’s family members, burning down houses, stealing cattle, destroying each other’s moonshine stills. Historians still don’t know what caused the feud in the first place, but their acts of aggression just kept the feud going.

There’s the more modern feud between the twin sisters Ann Landers and Dear Abby. The irony in this one is that both were advice columnists trying to help other people’s relationships! Their daughters continued their feud sniping at each other over the years.

There are sports feuds like the classic Chiefs vs Raiders or Joplin vs Webb City. Political feuds, of course you know what I’m talking about, Alexander Hamilton vs Aaron Burr. What did you think I meant?! And religious feuds over the ages between Catholics and Protestants, Calvinists and Armenians. And of course, the deepest religious feud of all, cat people vs. dog people! Let me settle it. The Bible says that the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Lions are cats! Any questions?!

One of the primary things in life that can rob us of joy and cause us anxiety is conflict. Conflict in our homes, in our work places, in our neighborhoods, in our families, and even in our churches. So let me ask a very general question this morning: How many of you have faced some sort of conflict in your life? Raise your hands. Did that conflict rob you of some of your joy? Raise your hand if it did. Conflict with a spouse, child, or parent can make home life almost unbearable. Conflict with somebody at work can make your job seem like a prison sentence. Conflict in your neighborhood can make you want to sell your house and leave! Conflict in the church can make you wonder if it’s even worth being a follower of Jesus. Conflict can rob us of our joy and make life hard in the very places that we most want peace, and comfort, and stability. Paul’s letter to the Philippians can help us with this. Really help us, especially now.

As kind of a side note, I’ve been learning a lot about something called liminal seasons. We have liminal seasons in life, in culture, in churches. **A liminal space or season is the time between what was and what will be.** What was is gone, what will be is totally unknown. What used to be is gone for good, what’s going to be is un-seeable. Liminal places are in-between places that are full of anxiety and stress, because the things you were sure of are gone and there’s nothing to replace those things!

Liminal places in relationships happen when there’s a divorce or death. It happens in cultures and countries when there’s a crisis, like what we’re going through now with the pandemic, economic issues, racial tension, and political divides. About every 500 years Christianity has gone through a liminal time. For example, how Christianity was understood, lived out, and celebrated is suddenly and radically shifted. Listen, it’s been about 500 years and I think Christianity is going through one of those times right now!

I bring this up because liminal times are times when anxiety is high, and one of the things that happens is that weak points in relationships show up, and in our fear and anxiety, conflict arises. By the way, liminal times are also times when God does wonderful new things! New ways of living,

thinking, and being come about. New and beautiful things, that nobody sees coming. We're in a liminal time now which means conflicts are common.

But back to Philippians. You need to know that when Paul writes a letter, it's a big deal. In that day and age, paper was rare and very expensive, so was ink. Sending a letter meant hiring somebody to make the journey to deliver it. It cost a lot of money, and took a lot of effort, to send one letter. So, when Paul wrote and sent a letter it was a big undertaking. That means that whatever he wrote about was important and he couldn't waste paper, ink and the time to deliver a letter, writing about stuff that didn't matter. Knowing all that should mean something to us, that Paul took some of that precious space in this letter to address a conflict. A very *specific* conflict.

You see, Paul's heard about a concern in the congregation that he knows could damage that church and its mission. He hints at it throughout the letter but doesn't really state it until the very end. Look at chapter 4 verses 2&3. **"I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life."** (Philippians 4:2-3).

You might say, "Well, so what? What's the big deal about that passage?" Here's the big deal. This letter was meant to be read in front of that whole church. The church was small, maybe 20 or 30 people. They probably gathered in somebody's home, they ate, they prayed, they sang, then somebody stood up to read this letter from Paul. Everybody sat there listening intently to hear from the man they loved and respected. The pastor's standing there reading this letter out loud and when he gets to the end, can you imagine the reaction! Euodia is sitting over here and Syntyche is sitting over there, as far away from each other as they can possibly sit. Can you imagine their reaction *when they heard their names*? I see them sinking down in their chairs thinking, "Oh no! Paul, writing from prison, had to mention me! By name!"

This was a big enough deal for Paul to spend precious space in this letter to address this conflict. The typical scenario when there's conflict is that we rally our supporters. So Euodia had talked to all of her friends and convinced them all how she was right. And Syntyche had talked to all of her friends about how she was right. Can you picture what it looked like when they gathered as a church? Euodia's faction over here and Syntyche's over there! With one section of chairs in the middle where nobody's sitting! That's a problem for a church! But it wasn't uncommon.

As you read Paul's other letters you find out that Christians in those early churches sometimes had a tough time getting along with each other. Sometimes Christians *still* have a tough time getting along with each other. There are times when we might disagree, and as we disagree, we might stake out our territory and pretty soon we might be in a full-blown fight where we can't stand to be in the same room with somebody.

If that happens in a church, sometimes we decide to leave the church so that we don't have to see that person. Of course, here, if you're in conflict with somebody you have 3 different worship services, 2 different locations, and 4 online options to choose from. But those folks in Philippi, they couldn't go to another church. *There weren't any other churches!* So, they had two choices: leave the church which meant leaving the gospel; or staying connected to Christ and figuring out how to work through the conflict. The problem was that Euodia and Syntyche had not been working through it.

But check this out: Paul doesn't take sides in this issue. That's interesting. I guarantee you that if Paul knew that one side was right and the other side was wrong, he would have taken a side. I can guarantee you that, because Paul always just laid it out there. But he didn't do that here. If this were a theological issue, Paul would have settled it. If it was a matter of right or wrong, Paul would have settled it. But he doesn't settle the issue because neither was wrong. That's true in so many of our conflicts. They're just simply a difference of opinion.

But Paul also recognizes that sometimes, when we're in conflict, we can't resolve that conflict ourselves—we need someone's help to resolve it. So, Paul tells a close friend in that church and says, "Please help these two women get along, please intervene, don't let it go any further." We all know

what happens when we let conflict fester. It starts out with a little wall in between two people. Then the next day you add a few more bricks, and then a few more, and a few more. After a while, those two people can barely stand each other anymore.

You've seen it happen before, haven't you? Maybe in your own family, with your spouse. You have a fight, you don't settle the fight so the next day you don't talk to each other. And the next day you don't talk to each other. By the third or fourth day you're so mad at each other that you can't remember why you got mad in the first place. I've read that it takes about 30 days for a great marriage to fall apart completely under those circumstances. Just 30 days! I know people who haven't spoken to their parents for years and years, over something that nobody really remembers anymore.

My wife has this irritating little quality in her. It's that she is almost always right! A while back I remember sitting one evening and complaining to her about something that wasn't going my way. I don't even remember what it was, but I started complaining a little and before I knew it I was in a full-fledged whine-a-thon! Janet is so patient, so level-headed, love that about her...most of the time. She sat there for a while and listened quietly and then when I had paused for a moment. She interjected something. She came to the defense of whatever it was that I was complaining about! And what had taken me a good 20 minutes of complaining to build up, this magnificent palace of complaint, she tore down in one well-spoken sentence.

That ticked me off! I can always tell when I'm tired and stressed because my fuse is so short. And it was extra short that night. I was so mad that I did something I can't ever remember doing. I just got up and left the room. I just walked out! I went into my study and started doing something. A little while later she came in and asked me what I was doing, I said, "I'm avoiding you." She asked why—as if she didn't know! And I told her. And she kind of snickered and walked out.

As I sat there and steamed for a while longer, I realized that I could go two directions with this. I could make it worse by feeding my anger, or I could take another look at what I was complaining about. I took another look. And I thought to myself, "This is the dumbest little thing to be irritated about!" Then I started to think, "You know, this is the woman who I would do anything for...I would lay down my life for her. And I'm going to be mad about this?" The longer I thought about it I came to the realization that I always come to...she was right!

Isn't that how it works in our lives?! The conflict brews over something that doesn't ultimately matter and we forget the really important things. Somewhere along the way we have to take a step. And Paul tells us what that step is. Paul gives one answer to conflict. It's not the only answer the Bible gives us to resolve conflict, but Paul gives us an answer. In some situations, this may not be the best answer, but this scripture was the answer for two women in Philippi and it may very well be the answer for many of your life situations when you're in conflict.

Here's what Paul says to Euodia and Syntyche. He says, **"If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care— then do me a favor: Be like-minded, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus..."** (Philippians 2:1-5).

This is a profound passage of scripture! The answer that Paul's prescribing for these two women, whatever it was they were fighting about, was actually very simple. "Please, when you look at each other, Euodia and Syntyche, please consider her better than yourself. Consider her claim to being right, higher than your claim to being right. Look at your sister and love her and recognize that Christ loves her. Put her needs before you own. Don't fight each other out of vain conceit or ambition, but instead, instead seek to serve each other. And have the heart of Christ toward each other."

What would've happened if they took that seriously? If they had got it? What if they'd looked at each other and said, "You are my sister in Christ. Christ died for you and I'm going to spend eternity in heaven with you. I'm going to try to be like Christ to you. I'm going to try to minister to you and bless

you, and if I can minister to you by seeing the situation like you see it, instead of becoming angry, then it's worth it."

Paul says, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Then he describes the mind of Christ. What does that look like? Verses 6-11 tell us. Paul says this, he's quoting something else. Scholars believe that he was quoting a poem or an early Christian song. In fact, this is the oldest Christian song, or hymn, that we know of. He says, "**Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human!*...He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion. Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever...**" (Philippians 2:5-9).

Paul's saying, "This is how it's supposed to work. Instead of digging in your heels and trying to make sure that you win and get what you want, try this out. Try following the pattern Jesus set out for us in serving the other. And if that means that you let them prevail with their ideas or thoughts, then understand that you're doing it for the sake of Christ, to minister to that person and bless them. When Jesus humbled himself and became a servant, when he died as a servant, God exalted him."

That's what happens to us too, when we humble ourselves before others and before God. When we let the other person prevail in matters that aren't a big deal, God has a way of lifting us up and honoring us. And here's the kicker, when you've been in conflict and you make the choice that you're not going to be in conflict any more, when you decide that you're not going to force your will on somebody else and instead choose to serve and bless that other person, *you begin to find joy*—no matter what they're feeling and thinking, you begin to find joy!

I feel like I need to say that not all conflict is bad. Especially when we believe something to be true and when somebody really is wrong, or both people are wrong. But we're expected to resolve that conflict with compassion and composure and love. The reality of conflict and the potential for conflict is everywhere, but if we know that in advance, and know how we're going to handle it when it comes, then we won't let it rob us of our joy.

We don't know for sure what happened to Euodia and Syntyche. I think we can be sure that if they chose to keep up their conflict, and stand on being right, the small church of Philippi would have been ripped apart and it would have died. *But that didn't happen.* This church that Paul started around 52 A.D. was a powerful witness for Jesus until the city was destroyed by an earthquake in the year 619. By that time, it had sent out thousands upon thousands of ambassadors and messengers, and role models, and apostles who started thousands and thousands of other churches that changed the world as we know it. These two servants of Jesus, they put the other person ahead of themselves, they listened, they humbled themselves, they served each other, they chose a relationship over being right and that church survived 600 years.

That's the key to joy that Paul was talking about. **In the face of conflict, to set aside your needs and consider others better than yourself.** You can find joy in the face of conflict. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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