

Series: "Valuable Wisdom for a Church 'on the Move'"

Sermon: "Yokefellow"

Text: Philippians 4:1-3

RGJGR/FBCCS/11-8-20 **UNEDITED**

- Of all the teaching that I hope eventually makes up our own School of Tyrannus for missional living, only one course was started before the plague struck. That course was focused on exegetical Bible study.
- By exegetical Bible study, I mean learning the necessary rules of human written language communication and how to use some of the literal, historical and grammatical tools that unlocks language.
- By "unlocking language" I mean what the author—and in the case of the Bible that is Author with a big "A" as in God as well as the human author with a small "a" God uses to write down his living Word .
- If you have been in school lately, this means within the last say 25-30 years--interpretation of written works—at the highest levels of literature does not mean understanding what the author intended to say.
- Instead, interpretation, post-deconstructionism, means using the author's work as grist for your own personal meaning-mill. If you want to be slightly more technical, this is the difference between interpreting writings for by "authorial intent" versus by "reader response."
- If you listen to our culture now, "the water in which we swim," you will often hear the word "privilege" bandied about in many different contexts. You will also quickly conclude that "being privileged" is never a good thing to be.
- Some of you, who were schooled before the current culture had taken over, will find it hard to believe that many teachers and professors shaping the generations hold as a truth that no author should be privileged to tell us what he or she *means*. No author should ever have the *privileged* authority and thus control over a reader to expect that reader to have to understand their words with an author's intended meaning.

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- Many teachers today would teach that once an author or any artist releases their words or works into the world, the real meaning of what they have written lies in what I feel it means—what it does to me as I see it.
- You can feel the ambitious autonomy swirling through this philosophy, and now religion, of meaning in texts. No one can tell me what to think even if it is telling me what they think and have written down.
- Of course, reader response interpretation rules out any text like the Bible having authority to tell me anything. Instead, I get to tell the Bible what it means according to my personal viewpoint.
- BTW: That's why it scares me a bit when folks have what they call "Bible studies" and you hear them asking around the circle, "What does this mean to you?" You might honestly ask, "How does this apply to *your* life?" However, the only valid question of *meaning* at the basic, linguistic interpretive level is, "What did the author--A/a--mean by these words?" This is the basic premise of that first course in FBC's School of Tyrannus.
- Moving through the Apostle Paul's letter to the ***Philippians*** as I have this time, taking huge hunks at once and deriving wisdom principles for a church on the move—a church on God's mission, still requires me to answer the question what did "A" God through little "a", Paul mean here. If I don't do that, I believe I can lose the authority the Living Word brings to the table.
- So, to protect that authority in all of our minds, let's do a tiny bit of exegetical Bible Study together for the text we are going to look now. This is usually the backroom work I would do out of sight before presenting a sermon to you.

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- I am doing this today because few commentators or teacher and preachers would tie together the elements of Philippians 4:1 and following. Most interpret them as a sort of final laundry list of ideas Paul needed to get in before he finished and sent the letter.
- In other words, they would see them as individual bullet points under the heading of "Miscellaneous Stuff." I haven't been seeing them this way and I still don't.
- If you have been listening and can recall, I have been suggesting that the disagreement, we will see explicitly today, between two leading women in the church of Philippi is not a minor miscellaneous bullet point. Rather it is a courageous speaking of the truth in love meant to rescue the missional movement of that "good" church.
- The humble, sacrificial love Paul has been describing and illustrating as the very attitude of Christ is not a theoretical attempt at writing down practical theology. It is instead, a critical matter for God's mission going forward in that church at that time with the exact real people and their very real issues that were making up that church in real time and space.
- Exegetically, please let me show you why I believe this is the author's meaning and not simply what I want to say.
- We finished last week where someone concluded we should by making it the end of chapter 3 and the beginning of chapter 4. We have read these chapter and verse markings so long in our Bibles that they have naturally become a part of our understanding of the meaning.
- But, look at what 4:1 says after this break that shows up in our Bibles. **READ Philippians 4:1**
- There is a though connecting word there. What is it? ("Therefore") Put simply, what are we supposed to ask if we want to know the

author's meaning when we see the word "therefore?" ("What is the therefore there for?"—which is a grammatically sloppy question but it works!)

- Hang in here with me just a bit more. "*Therefore*" usually translates an inferential conjunction from the Greek that points us back to what came before as an inference from it. I think looking at the force of the English word "therefore" has pushed many teachers and preachers to conclude Paul is mainly looking back in verse 1 of chapter 4. Maybe the chapter break should have been after this verse and this means what follows isn't very tightly connected with what comes before.
- However, the word here is not the word that would push us mostly back to what was before and draw a line disconnecting what comes after. In fact it is a word that is usually translated "so that." It is a word that emphasizes *result*.
- Let me get out of the weeds a bit and tell you the "result" of this thinking.
- Paul has been talking to these missional folks that make up this "good" church about continuing on the mission even when tough times come. His most emphasized wisdom for doing this—the wisdom he has provided examples of in Jesus, himself, Timothy and Epaphroditus—is to have an attitude of loving, sacrificial humility that puts the true needs of others first on the mission.
- In the last verse of chapter 3, he is again emphasizing following this example of humble sacrifice. See, he says, "***Join with others in following my example***" and "***take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.***"
- Beginning in 3:20, he looks to the glorious future when the struggles with persecution and difficulties in relationships will be over. We will

all be absolutely perfected like Jesus in new earth suits (I believe now universe suits) and we will no longer ever live for our own selfish appetites at all.

- **"So that"** the result is meanwhile, however, this attitude of humble sacrifice is how we will **"stand firm in the LORD."** This doesn't mean keep from losing our eternal salvation. It means stand firm as ambassadors on the mission of God rather than inadvertently becoming enemies of the mission.
- This is how the Philippian church will continue to be a church on God's mission even as things change all around them.
- This is then connected with verses 2 and following in verse 4. Now, rather than these points turning into a miscellaneous laundry list of nice ideas, they become further examples and practical instruction on how Paul's **DEAR FRIENDS** (not enemies—not disposable parts of a church machine but *"dear friends"*) are to do this "firm standing." They are to do this **MEANWHILE**, that is, while they all are still quite capable of sin and thus quite able to messing up relationships in the church.
- There is—one last point that tells me Paul still has his big idea in mind and hasn't switched to miscellanea here—one last indicator that the sacrificial humility was his target and not simply the result of joy—one final point about how he has constructed his argument as the author to tell us what God intends the meaning to be.
- Near the end of chapter 3, Paul is speaking once again about following examples of sacrificial humility. Move down to the last verse we will consider today, 4:9. Do you see what he is still talking about there? He is still emphasizing following examples. Paul has framed this section by example following. The examples point to

sacrificial humility. The anti-example—is that of two leading women fighting in the church.

- This all goes together and it helps me see how this wisdom is meant to work out. Paul even shares a rare "how to do it" instruction. Let's look at the rest of the verses now with that possibility of how they fit into the flow of the author's meaning and I'm, pretty sure, not just a "reader response" meaning from Raleigh.

- **READ Philippians 4:2-3**

- With love to dear friends and partners on God's mission Paul speaks the truth. Euodia and Syntyche are two women known in the Philippian church. They are involved in a disagreement that is somehow able to hurt the church. It is well-known enough, big-enough—angry enough that it needs to be addressed.
- Paul does not lay blame. He speaks even words to both women. He begs them to "agree in the Lord." Human agreement might not be possible here. Maybe feelings have been hurt. Maybe the difference of opinion is a gap too big to bridge right now with human reasoning. The agreement will need to come from something deeper they share—they are both in the LORD. They are both on the Lord's mission.
- BTW: if we end up leaving this location, we are going to need to make many choices and we won't all agree on all of those choices. In fact, it is fair to say someone will likely disagree with every choice. Will we be able to look deeper and "agree in the LORD" even if we don't get our personal preferences?
- This Euodia/Syntyche argument is not over doctrine—not about biblical truth. If it were, Paul would have said so and called out whomever was wrong. This is a disagreement over something that matters less than their unity in Christ and the mission.

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- Please note Paul does not talk to Euodia about Syntyche or Syntyche about Euodia. Doing this would have created an atmosphere of "triangulation" or as some call it personal "alliance building" in a negative sense.
- Humans love to be validated. We were created to be validated by only one absolutely true certain source and that is God. When we look for validation by the agreement of other humans against a common enemy—triangulation—alliance building, we open the doors wide open for power struggles that will destroy the mission.
- That was one of the Corinthian's carnal issues. "I am of Paul, I am of Cephas, I am of Apollos, and so on. "I'm on his side not that other person's side."
- The goal is humble sacrifice that puts us all on Jesus' "side." "Side" is the word by British friends we usually use for the word "team." When Paul asks his "loyal yokefellow" to help stop this disagreement he is emphasizing we are all on one side—all on one team. Euodia, Syntyche, Paul, Clement and the entire Philippian church are what we would call "teammates."
- They don't just work at the same religious brickmaking factory. They are teammates. No team wins. No team stands victorious when they are divided. When people are taking sides, they become separate teams against each other.
- Let me get practical for us again here. Paul was not without his disagreements with other believers. How did he handle them?
- When in Caesarea, the prophet Agabus took Paul's own belt and acted out being tired up and taken to Rome as a prisoner. The believers there begged Paul not to go. Paul disagreed with their reasoning and choice for him. In the end, they all said, "**The Lord's will be done!**" They "*agreed in the Lord.*" That was a loving situation

and ultimately seemingly an easily settled disagreement without lingering anger. Only God needed to win—not Paul or the Caesarean believers.

- There was that time earlier when John Mark had become afraid on a church planting mission with Paul and Barnabas and left them along the way for safety.
- When Paul thought it was time to retrace the dangerous steps of that church-planting mission, John Mark, who, by the way, was a relative of Barnabas wanted to go along again, Paul said "absolutely not!" Barnabas and Paul could not agree over John Mark going along. Acts 15:39 says, ***"They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company."***
- There is no way to soften "sharp disagreement" here. They could not agree. As a result, they split up that team and worked apart on different aspects of the mission of God. Paul went back to the churches on that dangerous route. Barnabas took John Mark to Cyprus.
- There are no absolute confirmations by Luke, written in Acts, about who was right and who was wrong. There is also no suggestions ever in Scripture that Paul and Barnabas made this a win/lose matter.
- Only God had to win. Paul encouraged the churches in his part of the mission. John Mark grew up as a leader ministering in Cyprus to the point that, later, Paul recognized his growth and wanted him back on mission together.
- Paul (and Silas for reasons I won't go into here) were built perfectly for that return to those churches in dangerous territory. Barnabas, an encourager of people, was built perfectly to take John Mark to a place and help him grow. In this dividing, there was multiplication of the mission and God won.

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- It would likely have been a different story if either Paul or Barnabas had felt the need for validation by "winning" and then triangulating to get people to see they were right and the other person was wrong! Most church fights I have seen are about winning and losing and that destroys churches on mission.
- The third example I would raise is the disagreement between Paul and the Corinthians. You can study this one in some detail in the two long letters we have in Scripture.
- I would summarize that some of the Corinthian believers cared more about winning than they did about the mission so they could never agree with Paul "in the Lord."
- Paul tried over and over to help them see what really mattered and to recognize that their connection in the body of Christ did away with the need to "win." He used nice words, strong words, critical words, sarcastic words, examples, metaphors, commands and so many other means. He wrote and he sent messengers. He even visited them personally, but some of the Corinthians continued to fight for power and significance by making Paul an opponent rather than a teammate.
- Paul yelled. Paul cried. Paul cajoled. Nothing changed with these folks. No matter what he did, they turned it into a power struggle even though Paul made it as clear as he could that he never ever wanted the power and affirmation they said they were fighting over with him.
- After years of trying to resolve this disagreement, these Corinthian believers continued to judge Paul's motives as being evil and continued to garner support for this negative judgment of his heart.
- Paul's answer was, finally, I will not come see you again because you only want me to come so you can have more fodder for your

strawman fight over power. I will not fight with my Corinthian teammates in God's church. This is not about winning and losing. God must be the only winner.

- In the Caesarea and Barnabas disagreements, as tough as they may have been, it seems no one was in them "to win." It appears from what we know that, no one was in them for personal gain. No one was in it for the power trip. These were disagreements over the next steps in the mission but the common ground was that God's mission is most important.
- In the Corinthian disagreement, clearly, the Corinthian believers wanted to "win!" "Their god was their stomach." That is their appetite for always being right and always getting their way ruled their hearts. What they thought was about the glorious victory of beating Paul's power was ultimately their shame. Paul wanted nothing to do with the power struggle the Corinthians had concocted.
- It seems like, sometimes, on God's mission, after being patient and longsuffering, after trying to explain and convince, sometimes the answer is multiplication by division.
- When God's reputation will be sullied because some folks still demand to fight, it is time humbly to walk away in love. But what Paul is telling the Philippians is not to let it come to this. This sort of resolution seems to be the exception in the NT. That would make sense because it is our love for one another that makes us visible to our world as disciples of Christ.
- Lord, willing a couple of weeks from now we can continue with the rest of this section that I am convinced is all tied together and teaching the Philippians how to stand together on the mission even

when they have personal disagreements about the details of carrying out that mission.

- What if God does allow us to sell our property and gives us a wonderful opportunity to re-focus and re-tool for the mission ahead ***together?***
- The mission now will be in a different world than FBC was in when it started decades ago. I am convinced we will need to know how to *disagree* without neglecting the unity we have in Christ and the oneness of mind that his mission matters more than our personal sacrifices.
- Some of you may find this strange and think it naïve. BUT, since Monday morning of last week I purposefully have not watched any news programs. I have not read any of my news feeds. I have not engaged in arguing politics. I believe I'm pretty sure I know who won the election but I am trying to tell my "appetites" my desires—even if they may have been decent desires, my personal preferences that, RIGHT NOW, I believe something matters much more than what I want in politics.
- It always has mattered more but sometimes I am caught up in earthly things that can bring division not over clear principles of right and wrong but division over mere winning and losing.
- We will absolutely shine like the stars in the darkness of the night sky if we can humbly and, yes, sacrificially remain unified as we move forward as FBC. God can win every time if we decide we don't need to win.
- Thank you my sisters Euodia and Syntyche for being examples of—hope—examples of what could still change in a church of imperfect human beings. Thank you Apostle Paul for the courage to speak truth in love in the tough place of hard relationships on the team.