

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 15, 2008**

**LOOKING OUT FOR THE OTHER GUY**

**Philippians 2:1-4**

Have you seen the book *Good to Great*, the bestseller by Jim Collins? It has become one of the most popular and influential reads in the business world. The book is driven by one question: “Can a good company become a great company, and if so, how?” To find the answer, Collins and a team of researchers sorted through a list of over 1,400 companies, looking for those that made significant improvements in their business performance. They finally settled on eleven and discovered two distinct qualities shared by their CEOs.

The first was no surprise. These men and women were fanatically driven, infected with an incurable need to produce results. They are resolved to do whatever it takes to make the company great.

The second quality was something that caught the researchers by surprise. These CEOs displayed a compelling modesty, were self-effacing and understated. They consistently looked out for their employees and pointed to the contribution of other people. Even though they headed huge corporations, they did not like drawing attention to themselves, they never aspired to be put on a pedestal, they did not have gargantuan personal egos. Instead, they saw themselves as ordinary people producing extraordinary results.

Jim Collins discovered a principle at work in the business world that ought to be full-blown in the church. We ordinary people are involved in a divine and extraordinary work. We are called to be about the advancement of Christ’s kingdom, so, as Paul writes, we must look not only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Faith Church is a good church. If we want to make the leap from good to great, we have to look out for the other guy. We must be concerned about the interests of other people. This morning, I’d like us to explore this idea together.

We have been looking at Paul’s letter to the Philippians for the past few weeks, learning how the apostle Paul taught the Philippians to advance the gospel, and to do so despite their sufferings and difficulties. And through this study, we have been learning a little about how God is using you and me at Faith to work together for the gospel here in Northern Virginia.

We know that Paul was in prison in Rome. He had been arrested in Jerusalem for preaching about Jesus and brought to Rome to stand trial before Caesar. He could be set free or he could lose his life. But in the middle of his ordeal, Paul is overflowing with delight and satisfaction because he knows that Christ is being proclaimed all over Rome because of his chains. And he wants the Philippians to know and understand this.

We have also learned that the apostle and the little church at Philippi were partners in the work of the kingdom. That’s why he was able to exhort them to make the gospel of Jesus Christ the main

thing in their lives. You remember Paul's attitude, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." Paul wants the Philippians to conduct their lives in a manner worthy of the gospel. Today's passage dives right into that command – the importance of unity through humility.

### **AVOID SELFISH AMBITION AND VAIN CONCEIT**

Let's unpack our passage. Look first at verse 3. *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.* Here, Paul gives a pretty good idea of what the problem is when we fail to act in unity and humility.

He urges us against selfish ambition – that ugly self promotion that steps on the necks of others to lift up one's self. That's the way the unbelieving world operates. People are naturally selfish, they put themselves first, others second, and God last. Almost from birth, we are taught to look out for number one. To put our own wants and needs, our own hunger for comfort or importance ahead of other people – our family, our neighbor, our church, everybody else. That is the way fallen human nature operates.

That is why we have the problem of conflict in the world. James 4:1 tells us: *What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? Any time you and I have trouble getting along with someone, any time we are in conflict, it is because of our selfishness. Because we are putting ourselves first.*

And when we act like this, we are behaving like non-Christians. The gospel seems absent from our lives and people cannot even tell that we belong to Christ. Jesus said to His disciples in John 13:34-35: *A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*

The credibility of our message is the evidence of God's love in us. When we have conflict, the message of the gospel is obscured, our energies are diverted. We are moved off focus from the real purpose of our calling as Christians, to advance the gospel.

But, when we are engaged in the real work of the kingdom, we will gladly be involved with others, deal with our conflicts, and accept the fellowship of all who identify with Christ.

If selfish ambition is the problem, vain conceit is the root cause. The King James Version uses the word "vainglory." It is an appropriate translation. Tim Keller provides a helpful insight to this idea.

The word vain conceit or vainglory is a form of the word *doxa*, which means "glory." A few minutes ago, we sang the doxology, giving praise and glory to God. In the passage in Philippians, Paul used a form of the word that means "empty of glory, or starving for praise." There may not be a better word to describe us – that we strive for empty or vain glory. Keller writes:

Deep down inside our greatest fear is that we don't matter, that we are not important. The worse thing for you and me is not to be hated or opposed, not to be vilified and called bad. The worse thing is to be ignored, to not matter. The thing we fear the most is that we are unimportant, marginal. Every human heart tries to

manufacture glory. If we think we are marginal, we want to be in the center. If we think we are small, we act big.

That's really true, isn't it? We all have a deep need to feel significant and important. The shelves of our bookstores are full of self-esteem books trying to satisfy this hunger in our souls.

Do you hunger to feel important? Pop singer Madonna is one who expressed this desire quite well. A few years ago, she talked about her own starvation for glory:

“I have an iron will. And all of my will has always been to conquer some horrible feeling of inadequacy. I'm always struggling with that fear. I push past one spell of it and discover myself as a special human being and then I get to another stage and I think I'm mediocre and uninteresting and I find a way to get myself out of that again and again. My drive in life is the horrible fear of being mediocre. That's always been pushing me, pushing me. Even though I've become somebody I still have to prove that I am somebody. My struggle has never ended and it probably never will.”

Do these words resonate with you? Do you ever feel like Madonna, looking for ways to feel adequate and important? Friends, only Jesus Christ can fill this deep hunger we have for glory! That is what the gospel does. All of us strive for a glory we cannot get. Because we are sinners, we fall short of glory, we fall short of the glory of God. But if you have confessed your sin to the Lord and have trusted in His merciful death on the Cross, you are united with Him and will be glorified with Him on the last day.

### **LOOK OUT FOR OTHERS**

If the root of our problem is vainglory and God has solved it through Jesus Christ, what does He want of us? God desires unity and humility.

Look again at verse 2: *then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.* Paul tells the Philippians – and us – to be like-minded, that they are to think and love the same things. We are to be in unity with one another.

This is not an intellectual activity in which Christians all have the same opinion on everything and in cookie-cutter fashion, act exactly the same way. It doesn't mean we have to enjoy the same music, belong to the same political party, or march in lockstep with one another on every issue.

We are all different and we all have different likes and dislikes. Look around you and you'll see how different we really are. Some of you are young and athletic, others a bit older. Some are outgoing, like social butterflies. Others are quiet and studious. We are all different, aren't we? No, Paul is referring to the overall direction of our lives, what makes us the same deep inside. Every Christian here is indwelt by the Holy Spirit and should have his or her thinking shaped by the Word of God. Unity means that each of us seek God's point of view on all of life. When we do that, we will be like-minded, one in spirit and purpose.

That point of view is what Paul has been getting at in his letter. We all have one primary goal in life, the advancement of the gospel, the proclamation of Jesus Christ. We are all headed to the same destination, made like Jesus Christ with an eye to spending eternity with Him. That's what Paul meant when He said to live is Christ and to die is gain. That is what life is all about.

So, the Philippians are to be like-minded in that they are to subordinate their desires and ambitions to the desires and purposes of God. To further the cause of Christ in our own lives and the lives of other people.

This is the opposite of selfish ambition and vain glory. Our focus is on what God desires. That is what is meant by humility. 1 Peter 5:5-6 says:

Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time.

The grace of humility comes for those who have humbled themselves under God's mighty hand. In his great little book *Humility: True Greatness*, C. J. Mahaney writes that "Humility is honestly assessing ourselves in light of God's holiness and our sinfulness."

Isn't that great? "Humility is honestly assessing ourselves in light of God's holiness and our sinfulness." The remedy for selfish ambition and vain conceit is real humility that is grounded in an understanding of God's holiness and our own sinfulness.

The practical result of real humility is our looking out for the other guy. In verses 3-4, Paul tells us to *consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.* That means to hold others up, let them stand out or rise up, to think them supreme. This is the attitude Christians are supposed to have toward one another and it is built upon our sense of need and unworthiness before God.

I want to point out that this is not a false modesty or servility that only sickens those around you. It is not constant belittling of yourselves, complaining about your looks or your ability or your opportunities. It is not failing to care for yourself or take responsibility for your needs. That is not humility at all!

Real humility is a proper estimation of who you are before your Creator. It is when you recognize your guilt and need for a savior, embrace God's forgiveness, and move on. You are not self-focused, but other-focused. Humble people look not only to their own concerns but also to those of others.

There is a story about Mother Teresa. The old nun was short, wrinkled, maybe even a little ornery – some say like a beautiful, wise old granny. But her feet were deformed and disfigured. One colleague said:

Her feet are deformed because we get just enough donated shoes for everyone, and Mother Teresa does not want anyone to get stuck with the worst pair, so she digs through and finds them. And years of doing that have deformed her feet.

Years of loving her neighbor as herself, putting other people ahead of herself, deformed her feet. But this is the kind of attitude – putting others first – that shows the love of Christ and advances the gospel.

This is hard! I admit that I have trouble having the heart for other people that Mother Teresa had. But if I am to consider others better than myself, I must have true humility. My motives must never have a hint of selfish ambition or desire for glory. How can I ever do this?

### **LIVE IN GOD'S POWER AND MOTIVATION**

Paul's starting point is where we come back to. At the beginning of our passage, he calls us to reflect on what God has done for us. That is what makes the unity and humility in the church so different than everything else. Christian unity and humility is an act of God for the purposes of God; it is supernatural and it advances the gospel.

It is here that we have the power and motivation to humble ourselves before God and consider other people better than ourselves!

Notice where Paul directs our attention – our union with Christ. By faith, we are united with Him in His death and resurrection. This gives us encouragement. We know God's peace and comfort because of our salvation in Christ. According to Romans 5:1, *since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*. Through faith, we set aside our competition with God for glory and can be at peace with ourselves and with those around us.

We have comfort from God's love. Our union in Christ gives us the reassurance that He is always there for us. He who did not spare His son, but sent Him to die in our place – what more must God do to get our attention that He cares for us?

We are made partners with God and each other through the work of the Holy Spirit. How can we live selfishly for our own ambitions, when the Holy Spirit joins us together? How can we follow after our own glory, our own status when we are made partners with the God of the universe?

From that we can see the fruit of God's grace at work in us. Tenderness and compassion and mercy flow from the lives of those who receive them. It is supernatural, produced in us by the Holy Spirit.

The grasping for glory that you and I so often do, the desire to make something of ourselves before God and others, was dealt with by Christ. Jesus emptied Himself, made Himself nothing. He shed His glorious throne for a manger and a cross, to be rejected and to die. Only because of this can we receive the glory we so desperately desire. It is in our union with Him that we find unity and humility and we find our real purpose.

Earlier I said that Faith Church is a good church. By that, I meant that we are a church that faithfully proclaims the gospel. Most, if not all of us here, believe on Jesus Christ and have made Him our Savior. As individuals and a church, we want to see Christ's kingdom advanced here in Northern Virginia and around the world. That's why we plant a church in Lorton, that's why we send out mission teams this summer, that's why your pastors – Neil, David, and I – work hard at

preaching and teaching Christ. Our motto, “to know Christ and make Him known” is not a statement of empty words.

But to be frank with you, sometimes, we hesitate in making that leap from good to great. We – you and I – often let our own selfish ambitions get in the way of advancing Christ’s kingdom. We seek our own glory and comfort, and fail to look out for the other guy.

Friends, if we want to be a really great church, we need to get radical. We need to humble ourselves before God and consider other people better than ourselves. Jeffrey Collins tells the story of his work with AIDS patients:

At five o’clock on a Friday, I was looking forward to having a quiet dinner with friends. Then the phone rang.

“Jeff! It’s Jimmy!” I heard a quivering voice say. Jimmy suffered from AIDS, was one of our regular clients. “I’m really sick, Jeff. I’ve got a fever. Please help me.”

I was angry. After a 60-hour workweek, I didn’t want to hear about Jimmy. But I promised to be right over. Still, during the drive, I complained to God about the inconvenience.

The moment I walked in the door, I could smell the vomit. Jimmy was on the sofa, shivering and in distress. I wiped his forehead, then got a bucket of soapy water to clean up the mess. I managed to maintain a facade of concern, even though I was raging inside.

Jimmy’s friend, Russ, who also had AIDS, came down the stairs. The odor made Russ sick, too.

As I cleaned the carpet around Russ’s chair, I was ready to explode inside. Then Russ startled me. “I understand! I understand!”

“What, Russ?” Jimmy asked weakly.

“I understand who Jesus is,” Russ said through tears. “He’s like Jeff!” Weeping, I hugged Russ and prayed with him. That night Russ trusted Jesus Christ as his personal Savior – a God who had used me to show His love in spite of myself.

Do you see what happened? The gospel was advanced. A man humbled himself before God and considered a sick and needy man as better than himself. The result? Another man learned about Jesus, came to faith in Jesus, because a Christian was willing to look out for the other guy. That is what it’s all about.

Paul urges us to conduct our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel. To do so, we must be willing to set aside our selfish ambitions and our hunger to feel important or comfortable – our desire for glory. We must set these aside and embrace God’s purposes and because of that, look out for the other guy . . . the guy who needs to hear and see the gospel in our lives.

That is how Faith Church will grow from good to great. That's how we will advance the gospel. When God's kingdom is so much on our minds that we humble ourselves before God and consider other people better than ourselves.

Friends, we need to repent of our selfish ambition and vain conceit. Let's agree together to humble ourselves and consider others as better than ourselves.