

Study Guide for Philippians 2:1-11

1. In verses 1-2 Paul continues the admonition to the Philippian church he began in 1:27 (“Live in a way worthy of the good news of Christ...”). Here he makes the connection between Christ’s transforming presence with them and their transformed presence with each other more explicit. He writes “If, therefore, there is in Christ **any** comfort, if **any** consolation of love, if **any** communion of spirit, if **any** inward affections (*splanchna*) and feelings of pity, make my joy full, so that you may be of the same mind, having the same love, together in soul, minding one thing...” The connection Paul makes between the community’s transformative experience of Christ and a transformed way of living in community with each other that should take root in, and grow out of this experience is explicit and strong. The way he emphasizes this connection though, is pastorally perceptive, and rhetorically deft. To fully appreciate the masterful nature of Paul’s pastoral rhetoric here, it will help us to consider a few slightly less sophisticated forms of the admonition that he might have used:

Original: “If, therefore, there is in Christ any comfort, if any consolation of love, if any communion of spirit, if any inward affections and feelings of pity, make my joy full, so that you may be of the same mind, having the same love, together in soul, minding one thing—”

a. “Because, therefore, there is in Christ comfort, consolation of love, communion of spirit, inward affections and feelings of pity, make my joy full, so that you may be of the same mind, having the same love, together in soul, minding one thing.”

b. “If, therefore, there is in Christ comfort, consolation of love, communion of spirit, inward affections, and feelings of pity, make my joy full, so that you may be of the same mind, having the same love, together in soul, minding one thing.”

c. “If, therefore, there is in Christ any comfort, if any consolation of love, if any communion of spirit, if any inward affections and feelings of pity, be of the same mind, having the same love, together in soul, minding one thing.”

What do you perceive these respective constructions to be missing? What dimensions to Paul’s original admonishment do you see, now that you have considered other potential constructions?

2. In verses 1-2 Paul, as we have seen, deploys a sophisticated rhetorical feint that moves to place not an abstract *idea* about Christ, but rather the community’s living experience *in* Christ at the center of their attention. In other words, for Paul it seems, paying proper attention to Christ is less a matter of thinking doctrinaire thoughts *about* him, and more a matter of attending well to our ongoing experience *in* him. In this regard it would not be wrong to say that for Paul Christ as much a *person* with whom we have to do as he is the new and transformed *reality* (existence, world, horizon) in which we live and move and have our being. How is this vision of Christian life similar to and different from other visions of Christian life you’ve encountered? How does it compare, say, to the popular mid-to-late 20th century vision of Christian life as “asking Jesus into your heart”?

3. In verses 3-4 Paul’s rhetoric moves from centering the community’s attention on their experience in Christ, and the transformed horizons of their living communion together entailed in this experience, to more formally ethical admonition: “[Do] nothing according to rivalry or according to vainglory, but rather in humility esteeming each other as far better than your own selves, each looking not to his own concerns, but rather each to the concerns of others.” Very often in the church we focus on questions of Christian ethics (what should we do for Christ?) far more often than we focus on questions of Christian identity (Who are we in Christ?). Paul

consistency gets to the good news of our transformed identity in Christ *before* he gets to any instruction or admonition to transformed behavior. Why do you think this is so? Why not get to the ethics first?

4. Probing deeper into the question raised above, what implications does Paul's ordering of these two vital aspects of Christian formation suggest about how we should teach the faith to others? To kids?

5. In verses 5-11 Paul delivers yet another rhetorical masterstroke. In just a moment, in verses 6-11, Paul will take us up into a doxological rhapsody, a declaration of faith so poetically efficient and so musically resonant that many specialists think he may actually be quoting an early Christian hymn.¹ This passage is so rich it deserves its own week in bible study. In verse 5, however, he seeds a guiding question that will help us find our way more deeply into the doxology about to be unfolded. The verse is an imperative: "Be of that mind in yourselves that was also in Jesus the Christ, who..." In other words, Paul doesn't simply turn us over to the music of faith, he rather sends us into it on a mission to discern what we can of the *mind* that must have been in the one being sung about. Let us turn now to the hymn, to hear what we can together this evening.

¹ See, for instance, Luke Timothy Johnson's *The Writings of the New Testament*