

“WHY CHRISTIANS USE THEIR LIVES TO SERVE OTHERS”

**I. Introduction**

- A. Martin Luther opens his treatise *The Freedom of a Christian* with two statements that stand in tension with each other and might seem to be contradictory.
1. The first statement is, “A Christian is a free lord of everything and subject to no one.”
  2. The second statement is, “A Christian is a willing servant of everything and subject to everyone.” [29]
  3. In the rest of the treatise, Luther explains how it is that both of these statements are true.
  4. He sums up his argument near the end of the treatise, where he writes this: “Because every Christian has enough for himself [with respect to his salvation] in his own faith, and all other works and life are his, he serves the neighbor out of a freely given love.” [75]
  5. In other words, because we have all we need for our salvation through faith in Christ, we are free to spend our lives on others rather than on ourselves.
- B. This is closely related to the point that the apostle Paul is making in the verses that we are considering tonight.
1. That being the case, it is no surprise that Luther cites these verses in his treatise, noting that “Paul clearly defines the Christian life as a life directed toward all good works for the benefit of the neighbor.” [75]

2. As we study this text this evening, we will see what it has to say about why Christians are to use our lives to serve others.

## II. We Have All We Need in Christ

- A. Our passage begins with the words, "So if..."
  1. In using the word "if," Paul is not expressing doubt over whether the Philippians have received the things listed in verse 1.
  2. Paul is not suggesting that they might not have these things.
  3. Instead, he is saying that the fact that they have received these blessings should cause them to conduct themselves in the manner that he spells out in verses 2 through 4.
  4. Paul's basic line of reasoning can be expressed this way:  
"Therefore, since you have freely received all these things from God, you should live this kind of life."
  5. This is the pattern that the Bible consistently sets forth for the Christian life.
  6. Christian living is a grateful response to what God has graciously bestowed upon us in Christ.
  7. Another way to say this is that the legal imperatives of the Christian life flow from the gracious indicatives declared to us in the gospel.
- B. In verse 1, Paul lists four particular blessings that Christians receive through Christ.
  1. The first one is "encouragement in Christ."
  2. The term "encouragement" is derived from the same root as the word used by Jesus when he refers to the Holy Spirit as our

“Helper” or “Comforter” or “Counselor,” depending on the translation.

3. This is the same word that John uses in his first epistle when he refers to Jesus as our “advocate” with the Father.
4. These terms can convey the sense of legal counsel in a courtroom context, and this is probably what Paul has in mind here.
5. As we saw in the preceding paragraph, the Philippian Christians were facing opposition because of their faith.
6. But they had the Lord Jesus as their advocate in heaven, and he was sustaining them in the face of this opposition.
7. In other words, the encouragement that Paul is referring to here is especially focused upon the help and counsel that our Lord provides for us when we go through times of trial.

C. The second blessing listed in verse 1 is “comfort from love.”

1. This is referring to the love that God has for us in Christ.
2. It is an immense comfort to ponder what the Scriptures tell us about the various facets of God’s love for us.
3. The Triune God loved us before the foundation of the world, when he predestined us to be conformed to the image of the Son.
4. The Father so loved us that he gave his only begotten Son to secure eternal life for us.
5. Jesus loved us by taking on our flesh, by being made subject to the law, by perfectly doing the will of his Father, and by offering himself up as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.
6. The Holy Spirit loved us by entering into our sin-corrupted hearts, by making us alive together with Christ, and by continuing to

indwell us in order to sustain and sanctify us.

7. God's love for us in Christ is so great that there is nothing in the entire universe that can separate us from it.
8. Not even death itself will be able to do so.
9. What a comfort it is to know that the One who created and rules the universe loves us in such wondrous ways!

D. The third blessing listed in verse 1 is "participation in the Spirit."

1. The word "participation" is the Greek term *koinonia*, which is sometimes translated as "fellowship."
2. It is the same word that Paul used back in chapter 1 to refer to the Philippians' "partnership in the gospel."
3. *Koinonia* has to do with having a common share or common interest in something, like when an investor buys a share of a company.
4. As Christians, we all have a common share in the Holy Spirit.
5. He indwells each one of us.
6. By his power we are united to Christ, so that we can receive all the benefits that are found in Christ.
7. As John Calvin puts it, "the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually binds us to himself." [*Institutes*, 3.1.1]

E. Lastly, Paul says that we have received "affection and sympathy."

1. This is probably referring primarily to the affection and sympathy that God's grace produces within our hearts, though this is closely related to the affection and sympathy that God himself has for us in Christ.

2. When we come to Christ and take his yoke upon us, we learn from a Savior who is gentle and lowly in heart, and his gracious character begins to be formed in us.
3. These gifts of affection and sympathy are present in our lives as soon as we trust in Christ.
4. This tells us that the affection and sympathy that we extend to others is not produced by us, but is an expression of the power and virtue that we have already received in Christ.

### III. We Are United to Our Fellow Christians

- A. In the remainder of our passage, Paul focuses upon key virtues that should characterize the Christian life.
  1. It should be noted that these virtues have to be lived out in community.
  2. They have to do with our relationships with others, especially with our fellow Christians.
  3. This reminds us that being a Christian means being a part of the body of Christ.
  4. All believers are united together because we all share in the blessings listed in verse 1.
- B. The unity that exists between believers is expressed by Paul when he tells the Philippians that they will “complete [his] joy” by living in harmony with each other.
  1. Paul’s joy is bound up with the lives of the Christians in Philippi.
  2. His joy will not be complete until they overcome the strife that is presently plaguing them.

3. It is a joy for those in positions of spiritual authority to see those under their shepherding care flourishing and growing in their faith together.
  4. This is why the writer of Hebrews exhorts Christians to “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with *joy* and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” (Heb. 13:17)
- C. The way the Philippians can complete Paul’s joy is “by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord with one mind.”
1. This tells us that Christian unity has to do with holding the same convictions, sharing together in God’s love, and living in harmony with one another.
  2. Sometimes, passages like this are referenced to call attention to how scandalous it is that there are so many different branches of Christ’s church.
  3. Shouldn’t Paul’s words cause us to set aside our differences and pursue a greater degree of visible unity across denominations and traditions?
  4. Certainly, we should look for ways in which we can express a measure of outward unity as the body of Christ.
  5. But we should not do this by setting aside the substance of what we believe.
  6. After all, Paul does not tell us to *discard* our minds, but to be of *one mind*.
  7. While we will not be able to achieve perfect unity of mind until we are in glory, we can affirm the things we have in common with Christians from other traditions.

- D. We should also remember that Paul's words in our text were originally addressed to the church that was located in the city of Philippi.
1. That is, when he wrote this, his point was not that the Philippians needed to pursue unity with the church in Rome or Corinth or Jerusalem.
  2. He was telling them to be united with *each other*.
  3. This is what this passage is saying to believers today.
  4. We are called to live in unity with those who are a part of our local and regional church.
  5. Even though we differ from one another in all sorts of ways, we need to be of one mind, always remembering that we are fellow recipients of God's love in Christ.

#### IV. We Are Free to Spend Our Lives for Others

- A. This brings us to verses 3 and 4, where Paul calls the Philippians to relate to one another in humility.
1. He writes, "in humility count others more significant than yourselves," and "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."
  2. In the Greco-Roman world, humility was not considered to be a virtue.
  3. It was seen as a shortcoming.
  4. There are senses in which this is true in our culture as well.
  5. People spend a lot of time, money, and energy in letting others know about their interests, activities, relationships, and accomplishments.

6. And in recent years, one of our society's key civic holidays has come to be what is referred to as "*Pride Month*."
  7. As we live in such a prideful culture, we need to be intentional about cultivating the virtue of humility.
- B. In order to do this, we need to understand the difference between genuine humility and things that are sometimes mistaken for humility.
1. Humility is not about being gloomily introspective and always thinking about your failings and flaws.
  2. Neither is humility a matter of telling others that you are humble, like those times when celebrities respond to some award or recognition by saying "I am so humbled."
  3. True humility flows from having a proper estimation of your position before God.
  4. Humility is one of the fruits that is produced in us when we have confidence that God has counted us righteous in Christ, that he has adopted us as his children, and that he has given us an eternal inheritance in his kingdom.
  5. Humility is the virtue that is produced in those who have been set free from being absorbed with themselves.
- C. C.S. Lewis has a wonderful chapter on the sin of pride in his book *Mere Christianity*.
1. In that chapter, he also provides a picture of what a truly humble person would look like.
  2. He writes, "Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call 'humble' nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in



what you said to him... He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all." [128]

3. In verses 3 and 4 of our text, Paul is telling us that we should strive to be that kind of person.
4. Be less taken up with your own interests, concerns, and opinions.
5. Be more interested in other people and what is going on in their lives.
6. That is what it looks like to count others more significant than yourself.

## V. Conclusion

- A. Of course, we all look out for our own interests.
  1. This passage is not saying that there is something wrong with this.
  2. Being concerned for our own interests is an aspect of what it means to love ourselves, and it is certainly not wrong for us to love ourselves.
  3. After all, Jesus did not say that we should love others *instead of* loving ourselves.
  4. He said we should love others *as* we love ourselves.
  5. It is natural for us to love ourselves, and it is natural for us to seek the things that are in our best interest.
- B. Having said that, we need to remember that our fallen nature has a dramatic effect upon our natural sense of self-interest.
  1. Our sinfulness causes us to turn our interests into idols, so that we have no regard for the interests of other people or even for the

interests of God.

2. The irony is that, when we live this way, we are not being self-interested enough.
3. Listen to what Jonathan Edwards has to say about this: "If you are selfish, and make yourself and your own private interests your idol, God will leave you to yourself and let you promote your own interests as well as you can. But if you do not selfishly seek your own, but do seek the things that are Jesus Christ's, and the things of your fellow-beings, then God will make your interest and happiness His own charge; and He is infinitely more able to provide for and promote it than you are. The resources of the universe move at His bidding, and He can easily command them all to subserve your welfare. So not to seek your own, in the selfish sense, is the best way of seeking your own in a better sense. It is the most direct course you can take to secure your highest happiness." [*Charity and Its Fruits*, 159]
4. Edwards is not talking about trying to merit God's favor.
5. He is talking about resting in the glorious fact that Christ has already secured eternal happiness for us.
6. When we do that, we are free to use our lives to serve others.