JOY THROUGH REDUCING CONFLICT

The story is told about a small, country church where the pastor called a special meeting of the congregation to approve the purchase of a new chandelier for the church. After some discussion of the pros and cons, an old farmer stood up and said, "Buying a new chandelier may seem like a good idea to some, but I'm against it for three reasons. First of all, it's too expensive and we can't afford one. Second, there isn't even anybody around here who knows how to play one. And third, what we really need in this church is a new light fixture."

Today we are continuing in our series on joy from the book of Philippians. Last week we talked about the secret to joy. It is Jesus first, others second and then yourself third. Today I want to look at some things that can rob us of our joy.

One of the major causes of unhappiness in our world is strained relationships. Conflict kills joy. When was the last time you were having a great day when all of a sudden someone came along and said something or did something that ruined it for you?

Unity is a key ingredient for success and fulfillment in life. To have a successful business the employees must work together. To have a successful football team the players must work together. To have a successful family the members must work together. To have a successful church we must work together. Very little is accomplished in life by yourself. When there is unity there is tremendous power and potential. The problem is that often people do not get along.

The following question was asked: "When you have fifty people all of different opinions, what do you have?" Someone replied, "A CHURCH." Unfortunately that is sometimes true.

How do you reduce conflict and increase cooperation? In Philippians 2 Paul shows how to have unity.

Phil 2:1 If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. 4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Paul says here that joy comes out of like-mindedness. Unity depends on four practical steps which come out of verses 3 and 4:

1. DECREASE COMPETITION

Phil 2:3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit …

The word in the Greek for vain conceit is the word KENODOXOS from KENOS (empty) and DOXA (glory). Together it is the picture of a person running for political office who is willing to do anything (even cheat) to win. They win, but it is an empty victory, an empty glory. Too often we compete with people on our own team. Instead of complementing each other we compete with each other. This leads to disunity and conflicting desires.

Selfish ambition means that you place your plans and your goals first. You push your agenda at the expense of everything and everyone around you. You see your goals as most important.

For me, this is the picture of someone stuck in traffic. You always have that one person who thinks that they should not have to wait like everyone else. They honk their horn and drive on the shoulder and do anything they can to get in front of the cars ahead of them.

Maybe as a kid you were involved in sibling rivalries. You fought and competed with your brothers and sisters even though you were from the same family. Sometimes the same can be true of the church. Even though we are brothers and sisters in Christ there can still be fighting and competition. One person says we need to do this and someone else has a different opinion. We all try to push our own agenda and needs at the expense of the whole. The result is disunity and frustration.

Martin Luther said, "We need goat sense." He tells of seeing two goats meeting on a path on a mountain ledge. Instead of butting one another, one of them laid down and allowed the other one to pass over him. That is real humility and is what we need in the Church.

James 4:1 What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? 2 You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God.

Conflict is the result of competing desires. Our society teaches us instant gratification. Do whatever to get your needs met. When my needs conflict with your needs, we have trouble. We live in a very competitive world. If you want to have unity you've got to decrease competition.

When F. B. Meyer was a preacher, he was in his study one Sunday morning before church. He was looking out his study window. There were throngs of people on the way to church that morning. What he learned was that Charles Spurgeon was preaching in a church nearby. The people he saw were not on the way to his church, but to hear Spurgeon. So, F. B Meyer prayed in his study, Lord let there be a blessing in the church that Charles Spurgeon speaks at this morning. That is why F. B Meyer could write books about living the selfless Christ Life. He was ready to serve, and he put his self-interests aside and became interested on Christ being lifted up.

John Wesley and George Whitefield were good friends in their earlier years. Wesley began his outdoor preaching ministry at Whitefield's encouragement. As time went on the men disagreed on issues of theology. When Whitefield died, Wesley was asked if he expected to see Dr. Whitefield in heaven. In exaggerated but honest respect he answered, “No”. The person was shocked and asked if he felt that Whitefield was not saved but Wesley said “No, he'll be so near the throne of God that men like me will never even get a glimpse of him!" Though differing, they knew that they were on the same team. They did not lose their sense of oneness in Christ. We need to decrease competition.

2. DELETE CONCEIT

Phil 2:3 … but in humility consider others better than yourselves.

Pride destroys relationships. Pride means that you place your value above the value of others around you. You see yourself as better than everyone else. You do things to receive glory.

People with pride issues refuse to admit it when they are wrong. That just breeds quarrels. If you could eliminate ego, you would solve most of the people problems in today's world.

Two taxidermists stopped in front of a window where an owl was on display. They immediately began to criticize the way it was mounted. Its eyes were not natural; its wings were not in proportion with its head; its feathers were not neatly arranged; and its feet could be improved. Both believed that they could have done a better job in putting the bird together. Just when they had finished with their criticism, the owl turned his head...and blinked. They realized it was a pet store.

The cure for pride is humility. The word for humility is TAPEINOPHROSUNE and comes from 2 Greek words TAPINOS (low to the ground) and PHRANE (understanding) means a low to the ground understanding. When Paul says to consider others as better than ourselves, he is not saying that others are superior. He says you are to treat them better than yourself. This is a radical concept. That's the exact opposite than our culture in America. We are full of people who think they are better than everybody else. We have elevated selfishness to an art form, a character quality.

People have weird ideas about what humility is. Humility is not putting yourself down. Have you ever tried to compliment someone and they just would not receive it because somehow, they thought that made them proud? That is not humility. Humility is seeing yourself the ways God sees you. Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but rather not thinking of yourself at all. Your focus isn't on you but on other people. You're other centered rather than self-centered. The person that thinks he's humble, usually isn't. The humble person doesn't even know it because he's focusing on everybody else. He sees the best in others. Don't focus on the things that divide you. Look for the best in others.

Two pilot joined and airline. One was Jewish, and the other was Chinese. On their first flight together, it was obvious by the silence that they didn't get along. After 30 minutes, the captain finally spoke. The Jewish pilot said "I don't like Chinese." The co-pilot replied, "Why is that?" The pilot said, "You guys bombed Pearl Harbor." The co-pilot said, "No... the Chinese did not bomb Pearl Harbor, it was the Japanese." The pilot answered, "Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese... it doesn't matter. They're all the same." Another 30 minutes of silence. Finally, the co-pilot said, "I don't like Jews." The pilot replied, "Why not?" The copilot replied "because the Jews sank the Titanic." The pilot tried to correct him. "No, no. The Jews didn't sink the Titanic. It was an iceberg." "Iceberg, Goldberg, Rosenberg, it doesn't matter. Their all the same!"

We need to decrease competition and delete conceit.

3. DEMONSTRATE CONSIDERATION

Phil 2:4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

In other words, don't just be interested in your own affairs. The word look in the Greek is the word SCOPOS from which we get the word SCOPE -- like the scope on a rifle. In other words, telescope in on the needs of other people.

1 Pet 3:7 Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

This says we need to be considerate of others including our spouses.

It is interesting here that it says that the way you treat your spouse affects your prayer life. Be considerate of each other so that nothing will hinder your prayers. Look to the interests of others and not only to your own wants and needs.

What are some ways that today you can show consideration? Before you leave here today can you scope out anyone that might need a word of encouragement or just simple consideration?

In Kuwait we had a large dirt parking lot. Because of construction, the entrance and exit were limited to a single point. It caused traffic jams every Friday. I would preach a sermon about loving one another and then see people honking and shouting at each other in the parking lot. Most of it came down to the simple consideration. You think about other people first. Decrease competition, delete conceit and demonstrate consideration.

4. DEVELOP CHRIST-LIKENESS

Phil 2:5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

The secret to joy is Jesus, others and yourself. I said last week that if you reverse that order – yourself, others and then Jesus you will be miserable. Let me also say that if you get the first 2 reversed - others, Jesus and then yourself you will also be miserable. Jesus must always be first. You can only give what you have first received. Joy doesn't come from just giving, it is God directed giving.

Jesus is our example. He was a master at relationships. He is our model. If you want to know how to live a joyful life and get along with people, even those who are hard to get along with, look at Jesus. Get the same attitude that He had. What was his attitude?

Phil 2:6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8
And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!

Jesus was willing to sacrifice his life for the benefit of others. It's impossible to live a lifestyle of total unselfishness on your own. It is human nature to be selfish, to think only of me. We all have that nature to do what we want to do. I cannot live totally unselfishly with my wife or my kids or the people I work with, etc. I can't do it by myself. We need the help of the Holy Spirit.

I believe that true lasting joy is only found through a relationship with Jesus. It is only with the Spirit's enabling and empowering that we can do it. We have to be in tune with God.

One hundred pianos all turned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshipers meeting together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be, were they to become 'unity' conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship -- A.W. Tozer

Joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit. Jesus said that people would know that we are Christians by our love. Paul says make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love.

I said last week that people are longing for joy in their lives. Do people see joy in your life?

Bertrand Russell, the great atheist philosopher, once said that if Christians practiced what they believed they would change the world. Gandhi said he would have loved to become a Christian. He was just waiting to meet someone who sincerely lived out what Jesus taught.

Today we are entering November. In a few weeks we will be once again heading into the Christmas season. One of the Sundays of Advent is all about joy. Christmas is all about Jesus. The almighty God of eternity chose to humble himself, lay aside His majesty and be born in absolute weakness and dependence as a baby. At the birth of Jesus, the angels pronounced a great JOY that would be for all people. Jesus said it was for the JOY that was set before Him that He endured the cross. Jesus was born so that He could die on a cross for our sins so that we could live.

As we come to the communion table today, that is what we want to focus on. It is all about Jesus. It all begins with His birth and His sacrifice for us.

Father Maximilian Kolbe, was a Catholic priest and a prisoner at Auschwitz. On August 14 of 1941 a prisoner escaped from the camp. The rule was that if a person escaped 10 prisoners would be killed. All the prisoners were brought out. The commandant commanded that ten prisoners be locked in the starvation bunker without food or water until they die.

The prisoners trembled in terror. The ten were selected, including a prisoner named Franciszek Gajowniczek (Gah-yav-NEE-chek). When selected, he couldn't help but cry out in anguish. 'My poor wife!' he sobbed. 'My poor children! What will they do?' When he uttered this cry of dismay, Maximilian stepped silently forward and stood before the commandant and said, 'I am a Catholic priest. Let me take his place. I am old. He has a wife and children.' Gajowniczek was returned to the ranks, and the priest took his place.

The Nazis kept Kolbe in the starvation bunker for two weeks and then put him to death by lethal injection. Gajowniczek survived the prison. He lived to the age of 95 – some 53 years after Father Kolbe had saved him. But he never forgot the priest that laid down his life for him. Every year on August 14 he would go back to Auschwitz. He spent five decades paying homage to Father Kolbe, honoring the man who died on his behalf. In October of 1982, Franciszek Gajowniczek, his wife, children, and grandchildren gathered with 150,000 others in St. Peter's Square in Rome to celebrate Father Kolbe's victory over hatred at Auschwitz.

Another survivor of Auschwitz described the effect of Kolbe's action: "It was an enormous shock to the whole camp. We became aware that someone among us in this spiritual dark night of the soul was raising the standard of love on high. Someone unknown, like everyone else, tortured and bereft of name and social standing, went to a horrible death for the sake of someone not even related to him. Therefore it is not true, we cried, that humanity is cast down and trampled in the mud, overcome by oppressors, and overwhelmed by hopelessness. Thousands of prisoners were convinced the true world continued to exist and that our torturers would not be able to destroy it. To say that Father Kolbe died for us or for that person's family is too great a simplification. His death was the salvation of thousands. ... We were stunned by his act, which became for us a mighty explosion of light in the dark camp."