

**Philippians 2:3-8 (NIV)**

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, <sup>4</sup> not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.*

*<sup>5</sup> In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:*

*<sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; <sup>7</sup> rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!*

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We're in the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians – the church at Philippi – this morning, if you'd care to turn back there.

We know this is one of what's called Paul's "prison letters." He's writing while imprisoned, most likely in Rome, to churches he's been instrumental in either founding or encouraging, trying to help them along in their development even while he's unable to visit them, personally.

Recognizing that Paul is himself detained while writing these words gives me, at least, a new appreciation for the many times he uses words like *joy*, *thanks*, *hope* and *rejoice* – about himself.

Because, let's face it: finding this sort of joyful, peaceful attitude in *that* sort of circumstance is not common in our day, any more than it was common in Paul's day. And it catches our attention because we know very well that when we find ourselves somewhere we don't want to be, and especially when we're placed there as a result of injustice or misunderstanding, joy, thanksgiving and rejoicing are often the last things on our minds.

We can instead become annoyed and frustrated and angry, and those, if permitted to grow, lead to bitterness.

And, of course, bitterness is not a happy place to live, either for the one who is bitter, or for those whose lives touch the one who is bitter.

Injustice, annoyance, frustration, anger, bitterness. You can see the progression, or rather the regression. No surprise there.

It seems to me that nearly always, bitterness arises from one's inability to overcome being, either legitimately or accidentally, wronged.

Life often deals tough things, and bitterness finds fertile ground when we start entertaining thoughts like, "Why me? I don't deserve this. This is unfair. I won't tolerate this. I demand justice."

Now certainly, there is nothing at all wrong with justice and fair treatment.

But because of the brokenness of our world, the fact is, we simply don't and won't always experience those things here.

The Church, the body of Christ, absolutely works to bring justice in every way it can.

But the fact remains, injustice will not be fully eradicated here until Jesus Himself returns.

So, likely there was a time when your parent or grandparent or uncle or aunt or whoever took you aside (that time when you were young and disappointed and upset, that time when you were unfairly treated), when they took you aside and said, "Here's the thing, kid, you just have to understand: life ain't fair."

Now, your person may have had better English than mine did and might have said, "Honey, life is not fair."

Mine didn't. Mine, my uncle, said, "Boy," (he called all of his nephews "boy"); he said, "Boy, life ain't fair."

*Whoever* it was who told *you* that, they were absolutely right. And if nobody ever did, well, I'm telling you today.

Life isn't fair. Sin has made our world that way. That's the fact.

But what we do with that fact and how we handle it in our lives actually matter far more than the fact itself.

Of course, we should be bothered – even righteously indignant – about life's unfairness.

But, if we allow it to embitter us, that bitterness will rob us of joy and peace and gratitude – for at least two reasons.

The first is that bitterness keeps our minds focused on what is *wrong*, which always leaves less and less room to dwell on what's *right* about life.

That why bitter people get "bitterer" and "bitterer" as they age.

I don't even know if "bitterer" is a word, but it ought to be, because this is a fact.

Bitterness focuses us on what is wrong, pushing out thoughts of what is right.

The second reason bitterness robs us of joy and peace and happiness and gratitude is that it elevates our own well-being to the highest place in our thinking. We wind up thinking only of ourselves, and when that happens, that self-centeredness – that pride – only feeds the brokenness that Satan began here in Eden just after creation.

And that pride – that preoccupation with self – always ends in destruction.

When we permit our personal well-being to become our first and foremost concern, that is as destructive a force as any in our world today.

It's that very temptation to pride that took down Adam and Eve.

“What do you mean, ‘I can’t have this?’ Of course I can—just watch me!”

It’s that temptation to pride that took down Adam and Eve, and it has been taking down people, leaders, marriages, families and even nations ever since.

The temptation to pride also, by the way, stops the reconciliation of persons in its tracks.

You see, pride not only goes before a fall (or to quote the Proverb accurately: Proverbs 16:18, “*Pride goes before destruction; a haughty [or conceited] spirit before a fall*”), pride not only goes before a fall, but also pride keeps the fallen one *down*, because *pride*—that state of self-exaltation—keeps us *firmly focused* on *ourselves*.

That is the heart of our world’s problems.

And it is a cycle that keeps going and keeps intensifying, you see? In an unfair world, pride feeds bitterness, which feeds more pride, which feeds more bitterness, which just makes us more self-centered and prideful.

Round and round and down and down it goes.

That’s the way it works.

We see this very thing happening in our nation today because of her rejection of God and of Jesus.

From every corner, we hear the message shouted, “I want things my way, period.”

We’re becoming precisely what Satan wants us to become: a culture full of self-centered, defeated, angry and miserable people.

So right now you’re thinking, “OK, I get that. I see that. That makes sense. But what on earth does that have to do with laughing and humor and joy?”

Well, here’s what: proud people do not experience real joy, because proud people cannot laugh at themselves.

Proud people will always lack joy because they cannot laugh at themselves.

Now, proud people will quickly laugh at others, usually at the misfortune and expense of others, which is not laughter rooted in any sort of godliness or godly joy, by the way.

There are very different sorts of laughter, aren’t there?

But proud people cannot laugh at themselves.

They take themselves too seriously, you see?

Proud people cannot, or will not, admit error, which means that proud people cannot receive forgiveness.

Proud people will actually go to great lengths to deceive even themselves about themselves, which makes proud people easily offended and even more easily threatened. Since they love self above all else, self-protection is their greatest goal.

That’s why proud people cannot laugh at themselves: they cannot risk self-diminishment.

We all know this is true, because we all know people like this, don’t we?

They take themselves so seriously. They’re so concerned about their image, about what others think of them, and about their agenda, which centers around getting what they want.

They’re so self-absorbed, they can no longer laugh at themselves.

That is the sad *temporal* effect of pride.

Of course, the *eternal* effect of pride is far worse; but this is what pride does to people here on earth.

Pride, the love of self above all else, keeps a person from obeying God’s greatest command, which is to love *Him* above all else.

Is it any wonder the Bible condemns pride so soundly?

Just in Proverbs alone:

God says, “*I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech.*” That’s Proverbs 8:13.

Proverbs 11:2: “*When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.*”

“*The LORD detests all the proud of heart.*” Proverbs 16:5.

There are lots more in just that one book.

Beyond that though, the Apostle Paul just says plainly in Romans 12:16, “*Do not be proud... do not be conceited.*”

James quotes yet another Proverb when he reminds his readers, “*God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble*” (James 4:6; Proverbs 3:34).

I could go on, but you get the idea.

God opposes human pride because it gives both undue attention and credit to ourselves, exalting self above all else, above even the God who made us and who gave up His only Son to redeem us.

And for that reason, human pride stands as a wall of steel between us and God, and if left unchecked, it steels our personalities with self-centered defensiveness and bitterness and anger.

It makes us into people that God never created us to be.

You see, God created us to be “Him-centered,” which also automatically makes us others-centered.

He created us to see ourselves as we really are: modest, unassuming and dependent creations of a great and loving God, limited in our own powers and perceptions, but beautifully able to place our trust in Him, who is unlimited in both of those things.

He made us to depend on Him for our welfare and not to depend on our own creativity or ability or craftiness.

God created us to see that we are small, but He is big; that we are dependent, but He is independent;

God made us to understand that we are simple, but He is complex; that we are finite, but He is infinite.

And to be OK with all that.

In short, God made us to be His humble, but much loved, family—to live relaxed and joy-filled lives in light of the truth of who we really are and who He really is.

Because in that truth, we are set free to live and laugh and love God and others without threat, without pretense, without always being concerned with the self-protection and self-defense that loving self supremely requires, you see?

God intended us to be able to laugh at ourselves, realizing and accepting our limitations, even while

recognizing that His love and care for us will more than make up for all we may lack.

And that was all *before* the fall.

After the fall, it's all even more true.

We are, now, more limited, more finite and more ignorant than we were before, and so we ought to be even more humble and see more clearly our need to trust God.

But the fall turned that table of trust.

Before the fall, we were wary of self and trusting of God.

Now, we are wary of God and trusting of self.

The fall turned everything upside down.

That's why God the Father had to send Jesus to turn things right side up again, one person at a time.

You see, truly trusting God should allow us to realize and embrace our limitations, to understand and accept that we are not as good as we were born thinking we are.

Faith in God opens our eyes to see ourselves as we really are: limited, dependent and finite. And especially this side of Eden, we are broken, in need of correction, and all too often misinterpreting of situations and people around us.

Faith in God means that we don't just see this as reality, we embrace it and become OK with it.

Having faith in God – trusting God – means we can freely admit that we're just not that good, so we don't have to live these guarded lives behind walls of pretense and self-protection.

Faith in God sets us free to laugh – even at ourselves – because we live with and serve and love a God who *is* that good – and who takes care of us.

His love for us allows us to love and esteem Him and others more: to think of others more and of ourselves less.

We love because He first loved us.

You see, if we remain focused on ourselves, preoccupied with self and always doing what we do for the sake of self, we will never get to where Paul calls us to go here in Philippians.

Paul says followers of Christ should do nothing out of selfishness or vanity or conceit, but instead to value others above self.

Not to look to our own interests, but to the interests of others.

Because, you see, that's the character of God.

That's the character of Jesus.

That is what caused God to send Jesus to earth, and that is what took Jesus to the cross – not for His own sake, but for ours.

That is the character and the perspective that God created *us* to have, until sin had its way in our world.

But then that is the character and perspective that Jesus came to recreate in all who will follow Him.

Jesus came to set us free from preoccupation with self and the misery that brings.

He came to restore in us an accurate perception of who we are, and who God is.

He came to restore truth to the way we see ourselves.

Until we embrace that character, we are proud, self-focused, self-protective and self-promoting. And in this broken, unfair world, that kind of thinking always leads to frustration and anger and bitterness.

But, if we'll embrace the truth of who we are and who God is, we are set us free.

Free to be who God created us to be.

Free to live and love and work and serve and rejoice.

And we are free to laugh, trusting that our good Heavenly Father will care for us, even when we find ourselves true victims of this unjust, unfair world.

So, listen. Here are some hard questions to think about:

Are you all tied up in self?

Are you preoccupied with self?

With how you look to others?

With what others think of you?

Are you bound by the tension of keeping up appearance and reputation?

Are you caught in the trap of self-promotion?

Are you easily offended, and find yourself often defensive?

Can you laugh at yourself?

At the mistakes you make?

At your imperfections?

Are you living a lie about who you really are, or are you living in the reality that you are a broken person who needs the forgiveness and power of Christ?

God wants to set us free with the truth so we can discover real joy regardless of circumstance, regardless of injustice suffered.

We're broken. We're weak – we all are – and we're making our way in an unfair and often painful world.

Yet God, through His Spirit, sets people free from pretense and self-defense and anger and bitterness to *live* and *love* – and *laugh*.

Maybe you *don't know* Jesus today. If you don't, you need to meet Him, to experience His forgiveness and to let Him set you free.

Maybe you *do* know Jesus, but you realize that you need more. You need Him, you need His Spirit, to do a freeing work in you in some area of your life where you're still focused on self.

You need to give that place – that part of your life – to Him.

Why not today?

The fact is, maybe you need to give something completely different to the Lord today – something He's been speaking to you about, but you've not been willing. You've held on.

I'll tell you, it's hard to laugh when you're resisting the voice of God's Spirit.

But maybe you know that already.

God wants to set us free to laugh today. Would you let Him do that?

Closing Prayer:

Heavenly Father, would You come and set us free today?

Help us take our eyes off of ourselves. Set us free from the pride of preoccupation with us, so we can see You clearly; so that we can know and embrace the truth of who You are and of who we are; so we can be at peace, knowing that You are everything we are not, and You will make up for all we lack.

Father, help us to humble ourselves before You, so Your Spirit can take away the pride that kills, both in this life and in the life to come; so that we can have the very mind of Jesus – the humility that allows us to live the

lives You've created us to live, walking confidently and joyfully with You.

Closing Song: *Glorious Freedom*, vv. 1-3

Benediction:

May God the Father have His way in all of us, setting us free from pride and the bitterness it produces, so we might truly have the same mind as Christ – living in humble joy before our Heavenly Father, no matter the cross this life may bring to us.