

“IMITATION IS THE HIGHEST FORM OF GODLINESS” **Philippians 2:1-11**

Dr. John Crocker. Crossroads Church, Albert Lea, MN. October 2-3, 2010

Today I want to open God’s Word with you and look at something the Apostle Paul said would make his joy complete.

First, let me tell you a story by a 19th century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer:

On a cold winter’s day, a group of porcupines huddled together to stay warm and keep from freezing. But soon they felt the stabbing of one another’s quills and moved apart. When the need for warmth brought them closer together again, their quills again forced them apart. They were driven back and forth at the mercy of their discomforts until they found the distance from one another that provided both a maximum of warmth and a minimum of pain.

Human beings have an innate need of companionship. This brings people together, but their offensive qualities drive them apart again. The optimum distance that they finally settle into is based on an attitude of tolerance politeness. Because of this distance between us, we can only partially satisfy our need for warmth, but at the same time, we are spared the stab of one another’s quills.

Most of you could tell how you tried to find that optimum distance where you could coexist with some folk while avoiding as much pain as possible.

Maybe you’ve had to use such a strategy just to survive at work or to coexist with some of your relatives.

- Do you think this might have any relevance to church life today?

Is there anything a community of Christians might have in common with a colony of porcupines?

Are some Christians so prickly that if they get too close they jab and hurt each other?

Is that why some people deliberately keep to the edges of church life, choosing not to get involved?

Some of you could tell about bristly Christians who jabbed their barbs in your soul, and the memory still smarts.

If that were standard behavior among Christ’s followers in a church, then a porcupine colony would be an apt metaphor of the church. Wisdom would suggest that you don’t get too involved with one another and keep a safe distance from one another.

If you don’t, you might get skewered!

If that’s the way all Christians relate to each other, the church won’t be warm and loving. You’ll feel an uncomfortable chill, but it will be relatively safe for you.

Aren’t you glad our Lord never used a prickle of porcupines to describe his church? He chose sheep. They’re not prickly. They huddle together quite happily without jabbing one another. They have to, because they’re so vulnerable.

According to the Bible, God measures our godliness by our relationships. How we treat one another is a true sample of how we relate to God. (JDC. See John 13:35)

Unfortunately, it is possible to have right theology and rotten relationships.

Right doctrine is essential in the Christian life, and healthy relationships in the church are indispensable.

- It’s actually quite easy to get people to think we are very godly because of all the religious stuff we do. But that doesn’t impress God at all.

God knows who we really are inside. He can see how what we are governs everything we do, especially the way we treat one another.

- This is actually the number one way to know if a church is living up to what God intends it to be.

It’s not about the programs and classes we offer; it’s not about whether the preaching is good or bad.

It’s all about how we treat one another, because that reveals to people if Jesus Christ has made any difference in our lives.

Jesus said to his followers, *‘By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.’* (John 13:35)

- A compelling description of what a church is supposed to be is in the Apostle Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi in Macedonia. Let’s look at it.

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:*

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!*

⁹ *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,*

¹⁰ *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*

¹¹ *and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

In this paragraph we see some crystal clear characteristics that you will find in any healthy church.

I. GENTLENESS WITH ONE ANOTHER. Philippians 2:1-4

If there's one word that ties together everything in the first few verses, it's gentleness.

This is the mark of a church that Paul said made his joy complete.

Why gentleness? Because we're fragile.

It doesn't take much to injure us on the inside, no matter how tough or macho we try to be.

Truth is that most of those tough guys that project a cool exterior of unflappability are hurting on the inside.

If we were packaged up, we'd have a label slapped on us: *FRAGILE. HANDLE WITH CARE.*

This is why we should protect each other, and never ever look for ways to hurt each other.

- Let's look again at the first few verses of our text.

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.*

What should you expect to be obvious in a church that is what Christ intends his church to be?

Encouragement, comfort, fellowship, tenderness and compassion.

- We're not supposed to be like porcupines in the cold.

Lots of people are drawn by the light of Christ's truth, but they don't get close enough to feel the warmth.

Some don't get close because they're afraid that somebody will try to get them to open up and expose their hurts. They're not ready for that.

But staying at a safe distance doesn't satisfy. That's a cold and lonely way to live as a Christian.

What should we do? We respect people who are cautious.

We can't force them to feel safe. But we can try to make a connection without invading their space.

Then we pray that God's Spirit will draw them closer as they experience gentleness and respect in the church.

- The apostle Paul tells us how to help that to happen.

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.*

In his letter to the Galatian churches Paul gave a strong warning: *'If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.'* (Galatians 5:15)

Healthy relationships don't just sprout spontaneously wherever Christians happen to congregate.

People don't automatically get along swimmingly with one another just because they call themselves Christians.

We can be preoccupied with our own interests and what we truly believe is best for ourselves that we neglect others and may even hurt them unintentionally.

It takes a deliberate effort from everyone to be considerate of others.

You're probably acquainted with the lyrics of a song that says, "He 'aint heavy; he's my brother." Those are the only words of the song I know. Evidently there's a story connected to it about a boy who carried his crippled brother on his back so that his brother could share in experiences he would otherwise have missed.

When people asked, "Isn't he too heavy to carry around?" he answered, "He 'aint heavy; he's my brother."

If we are brothers and sisters "joined in soul" (By the way, that's the literal rendering of the clause "being one in spirit"—*sumpsuchoi*—in verse 2), then we're willing to suffer some discomfort and inconvenience for the benefit of others.

- Even for the most godly Christians in a church this means a big commitment. That's because our natural impulse is to put ourselves first—to "do our own thing."

It was the Gestalt Psychologist Fritz Perls who coined the phrase, "Doing my own thing" many years ago. It is part of his Gestalt Motto: *"I do my thing and you do your thing. I am not in this world to live up to your expectations and you are not in this world to live up to mine. You are you, and I am I. If by chance we find each other, it's beautiful. If not, it can't be helped."*

There are a few points of merit in that philosophy, but as a whole it's a way of loneliness. It doesn't inspire hope or trust or commitment.

The apostle Paul didn't write, "In the church do your own thing and hope that you find each other." So what did he say? To the Roman Christians he wrote, "*Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.*" (Romans 12:10)

- According to God's Word, gentleness is an indispensable characteristic of a healthy church. If you keep a safe distance from other Christians, then gentleness will mean nothing to you. Gentleness is essential only for those who are close to one another and are connected to one another.

II. HUMILITY WITHIN OURSELVES. Philippians 2:5-8

Humility is another indispensable quality in any church that is living up to what Christ intends his church to be. The Apostle Peter wrote, '*All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."*' (1 Peter 5:5)

Let's get this straight, humility is more than resisting the impulse to behave in proud manner.

Just behaving as if you're humble is as far from genuine humility as a lightning bug is from lightning.

- The apostle Paul presents Jesus Christ as our perfect example.

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

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!*

- Before we go any further I must say this. Jesus Christ is infinitely more than just a good example for people to follow.

Jesus Christ is actually an impossible example for everyone, except those who are his true followers.

It's futile to try to follow Jesus as your example until you have received him as your Savior and confessed him as your Lord and Master.

It's like a drowning man thrashing and struggling to keep from going under. In desperation he looks for a lifeguard on the shore. Then he sees the lifeguard. What goes through his mind at that moment? "Wow! Is he buffed, or what! I want a physique just like his. He's my example!" Of course not! A drowning man doesn't look for an example. He wants a savior. Once he's been saved, he can then begin to imitate his savior. But not before.

The natural spiritual condition of people is helpless. They are drowning. They are lost. They need a Savior. Jesus Christ said he came into this world "to seek and to save what was lost." (Luke 19:10)

- If you are a new creation through faith in Jesus Christ your Savior, he is also the example by which you order your life.

Jesus Christ is the consummate example of humility.

Oswald Chambers said, '*If we are growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, then any progress is in the area of humility.*' (Oswald Chambers)

Christ is our example, and the Apostle Paul says, literally, we should think among ourselves the way Christ thought. (v.5)

It's the attitude of a servant who is willing to set aside rights and privileges to serve others.

The Apostle Paul is probably quoting part of one of the earliest Christian hymns in this part of his letter.

It speaks of Christ humbling himself all the way, even to death on a cross—for us!

- At the Last Supper the disciples were shocked by what Jesus did. Luke's Gospel tells us that the disciples had been arguing among themselves which of them was the greatest, or most important.

John's Gospel reports that Jesus stood up, took off his outer garment, took a towel and a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet.

It was utterly unthinkable that a rabbi would perform such a lowly act for his disciples. The disciples were stunned, awkward, and embarrassed. This was humility to the extreme. It redefined the word.

Then Jesus gave the *coup de grace* to prideful attitudes and selfish ambition. He said, '*Now that I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done for you.*' (John 13:14-15)

- In a healthy church true Christians demonstrate genuine humility by serving one another, with Christ Jesus as their example—nothing less.

III. CONFIDENCE IN GOD. Philippians 2:9-11

How can we be confident that putting the interests of others ahead of our own is something God sees and honors?

I think the rest of our text proves it.

⁹ *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,*

¹⁰ *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*

¹¹ *and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

God exalted Jesus because he was humble and obedient. Jesus didn't worry about his reputation or his comfort. If we set aside our concerns about our image; if we obey God, and give ourselves for others, then we can have confidence to leave our future in God's hands.

- But nothing in the Bible ever suggests this is an easy thing to do.

In the Garden on the Mount of Olives before he went to the Cross, Jesus agonized about what it meant to go all the way in obedience to the will of the Father.

He prayed, *'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done.'* (Luke 22:42)

The sinless and undefiled Son of God was about to take upon himself—in a manner we cannot comprehend—all the vileness of human guilt for sin, and pay the penalty by his death on a horrible instrument of torture—the cross.

- But many of our fellow Christians get themselves into problems of their own making. None of us is sinless.

But we have no right to cop a self-righteous attitude, "It serves them right. They made their bed, let them lie in it." That is not the attitude of Christ.

The lesson for us in these last three verses is that God will acknowledge the attitude of Christ wherever it occurs among his people.

The apostle Peter wrote, *'Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.'* (1 Peter 5:6)

- And there's something huge here that we must not overlook. Christ wins it all.

The occasion is coming when every person will acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the Sovereign Lord over everything.

Every intelligent being in all creation will bend the knee to Jesus. Many or most will do it begrudgingly.

But Christ's followers have the delight of doing this every day.

It's up to each of us to decide how we will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Have you chosen to bow your knee willingly to Jesus now?

Crossroads Church exists to be a community that attracts people to Jesus Christ by the light of God's truth, where we feel the warmth of love—God's love, and our love for each other

A community where we don't behave like porcupines that measure their distance from one another and are afraid to reach out to one another and trust each other because we don't want to get hurt . . . again.

I'm not able to impress on you with sufficient urgency how crucial this is to our Lord's church here. This is what it takes to stay alive and to thrive.

- Listen to the first line of one of my favorite hymns. It is grounded in our Scripture text.

Let us all make this our prayer: *'May the mind of Christ my Savior live in me from day to day, By his love and power controlling all I do and say.'* (Kate B. Wilkinson)