

Sermon: Philippians 2: 1-11

Do We Have an Attitude Problem?

This morning I have a question for all of us.

When was the last time you heard someone say: “Hey, you have an attitude problem. You need to change your priorities.”

Perhaps this sounds like the sort of thing that a parent might say to a wayward teenager.

Well, let me suggest that if we take Philippians chapter 2 seriously today, we can see that it is not only some teenagers who have an attitude problem, but much of our community.

We are living in a society in which many of us devote our lives to promoting ourselves upward, and pushing others out of the way. We are encouraged to focus heavily on ourselves and to have little regard for the interests of others. Many people talk about:

- “Climbing the ladder.”
- “Being a person on the rise.”
- “Showing yourself to be an up-and-comer”
- Perhaps you can be described as being “upwardly mobile!”
- And if you are not making personal progress you might be “on the way down.”
- Some might even say that you are having a downer!
- Or maybe, to steal a boxing phrase, you are “down and out.”

In the advertising world there is an even stronger focus on satisfying our needs and wants as individuals:

One notable advertisement for Dell Computers says: “We don’t make technology for just anyone. We make it for only one. You.”

Burger King tells us to “Have it your way.”

Time Warner Cable promises to unleash “The Power of You.”

Ford Motor Company asserts: "Everything we do is driven by you."

YouTube encourages you to: "Broadcast Yourself."

And then there is the selfie craze. What does a selfie photograph or a selfie movie clip celebrate? Why do people do it?

What do you think about the priorities championed in these messages?

Well, while the technologies may have changed, the over-concentration on our personal needs and wants is, of course, not new.

In our reading from Philippians 2 this morning, that is printed on pages 4 & 5 of our Service sheet, Paul tells the new Christians in the recently established church in Philippi that striving selfishly to put one's own interests ahead of everyone else's is wrong.

What does he say?

"If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

Some other translations make it even clearer that in verses 1 and 2 Paul is saying that the new Christians in Philippi are now part of the same family in Christ. And while Paul is delighted with their new status as Christian brothers and sisters, he would be overjoyed if they now shared the same mindset, shared the same sacrificial love and put aside selfish ambition.

Now Paul is not suggesting that Christians should neglect their own welfare. Indeed, remember that in his first letter to the church in Corinth he says:

"Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies." (1 Corinthians 6:19-20.)

Paul clearly wants us to look after our physical bodies and certainly not to abuse or neglect them. But he implores the members of the church in Philippi to look beyond their own immediate interests and focus primarily on the interests of others.

Now just for a minute I want you to imagine that you are the member of the new church in Philippi receiving this letter from Paul. You know that Paul has written this letter from a prison cell, probably in Rome. You also know that Paul's life is in danger and that he is

almost certainly chained to a Roman soldier 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in a stinking air-less cell.

So in this situation what has driven Paul to write this letter? Notice, he doesn't talk about his own sufferings. This letter is not about the danger Paul faces.

No! Paul is writing primarily to encourage the members of the young church in Philippi to stand firm in their faith, to stand united in spirit and to follow the example of Jesus by putting the interests of others before their own. In the very act of writing this letter of encouragement, the Philippians would realize that Paul has gone out of his way to put their interests and their needs before his own.

What a fabulous example to follow!

Now, I wonder whether you have ever been deeply inspired by someone else's selfless love? Have you been inspired by the boundless love of your mother or father? How about the extraordinary commitments made and kept by your husband, wife or special friend? Perhaps you have been inspired by Mother Terresa or maybe by the life of Billy Graham.

Well, let me suggest to you that God made us all to operate every day in a spirit of selfless love. We are all meant to humble ourselves and put other people's interests before our own.

The famous author, CS Lewis once remarked that "True humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less."

The approach of Jesus to this issue is summarized rather neatly when, in Matthew chapter 22 (vs34-40) we hear the story of how Jesus responded when the Pharisees asked him which was the greatest commandment in the law. How did Jesus respond? Well, we have the precise words in the middle of the first page of our service sheet. What did Jesus say?

Hear, O Israel,

The Lord our God – the Lord is one;

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'

Jesus said: 'This is the first and great commandment. A second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

Indeed our community used to refer fairly frequently to a slight variant of this second commandment. What did we call it?

Yes, we called it: “The Golden Rule.”

Treat others as you yourself would like to be treated.

But we all know that loving our neighbor as ourselves is not straight forward. It means developing a strong habit of giving the interests of others priority. It often means going where others prefer to go and spending time doing things that are not necessarily the things that we would put as our own first priorities.

The famous orchestral conductor, Leonard Bernstein, was once asked, which instrument in the orchestra was the most difficult to play. He paused, and then with a smile on his face, replied. “The second fiddle.” (Who likes to be second fiddle? Well, Bernstein continued) “I can get plenty of first violinists, but to find someone who can play second fiddle with enthusiasm - that’s a problem.”

But of course, the most powerful reason for humbling ourselves and making a daily habit of putting others first is spelt out in verses 5-11 of our reading this morning. It says:

5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

6 who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

7 but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

8 he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.

9 Therefore, God also highly exalted him

and gave him the name

that is above every name,

10 so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Paul is reminding us here, in what were probably the words of an early hymn, that Jesus, as the Son of God, had the power, and every right, to rule the whole world without messing with the challenges faced by us human beings. But, he didn't do that.

Jesus humbled himself. He came to earth.

And he consented to dying a horrible death on a cross.

Why did he do this? He did it to wipe away the penalty for our sins and to transform believers into fully cleansed members of God's family for ever.

What an extraordinary thing. Jesus denied himself, put his own interests behind him, debased himself to live among men and women and then die a terrible death, demonstrate clearly that he had power over death, and then he rose to new life. And he put himself through this so that we could be redeemed in God's sight and be able to live with him forever.

Jesus became the true Servant King. Indeed, there are many other elements of this servanthood described in the gospels. Remember Jesus washing the disciples' feet?

Matthew records Jesus addressing these issues directly. What did Jesus say?

“Whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:26-28)

And so Jesus and, of course, Paul also, ask us all to become servants.

Well, what might this mean in practice for each of us this morning? Do we have an attitude problem? Or do we have strong habits of helping others in Jesus' name?

I know that many of you already give generously of your time to help others. That's great! But let us all give some thought this morning to how we might do better.

Let's consider what we might be able to do this coming week to practise our servanthood in helping others in Jesus' name. What practical things might be possible?

Well, in order to help us consider possibilities, here's a few simple suggestions.

1. First, we could ask some people you meet: "What can I do to help you today?" And we could really mean it when we say this and take the time to give them a hand.
2. Second, we could forgive someone who has wronged us.
3. Third, we could give a significant amount of money to a worthy Christian cause.
4. Fourth, we could tell someone that you care deeply for their situation, and that we will pray regularly for them. And then we do pray for them, as promised, and stay in touch with them to track progress.
5. Or fifth, we could visit someone who is lonely or sick.

. Yet another possibility would be to volunteer to help with one of the church's outreach activities.

I am sure that most of you will have other practical ideas. Everyone is in a different situation and our priorities for helping others need to be tailored to our skills and talents and to our individual circumstances.

While we ponder the specifics of what we might be able to do this coming week, let me try to stimulate some further thoughts by briefly sharing two short stories, both of which happen to be true.

Story #1

A few years ago, a scruffy young street kid called Bill gave his life to Christ. And Bill was told that he would always be welcome in the Church and in God's family.

Well, next Sunday morning Bill decided to go to the 11.00am church service. He arrived a little late at the start of the sermon and the church was stacked. So this scruffy young man walked down the aisle looking for a spare seat. However, he couldn't find a seat and so he walked to the very front of the church and sat on the floor immediately in front of the pulpit.

This caused some murmurings and considerable uneasiness in the congregation. Bill wondered whether he had done the right thing.

But then an elderly warden at the back of the church grabbed his walking stick and limped down the aisle to the front of the church where, with some difficulty, and creaking joints he laid his stick aside and sat down on the floor next to Bill.

The warden wanted to keep Bill company, to ensure that he felt welcome and to join him in listening to the sermon.

Perhaps this is a lesson in spontaneous servanthood.

Story # 2

There was a man named Robert Schuller, who was ordained by the Reformed Church of America in 1950. Five years later he headed west at the urging of his pastor and mentor, the rather famous, Norman Vincent Peale. Schuller set his sights on California but arrived there with only \$500 in his pocket.

Schuller immediately noticed that in Orange County, just south of Los Angeles, that the drive-in theatre was deserted during the day, even on weekends. So the entrepreneurial Schuller did a deal with the proprietor and preached his first Sunday service to 100 people all sitting in their cars. The location was affordable, available, and unconventional. It was perfect – church at a drive-in under the canopy of the California sun. And heaven smiled on this strange beginning.

Now, fast forward sixty years, and many thousands of people had come to Christ through this church's innovative outreach programs. Indeed, this church had developed into one of the mega-churches of the modern era.

Recently Robert Schuller was asked by a senior journalist, what was the key to his church's success?

Schuller replied: "Anybody who succeeds is helping people. The secret to success is to find a need and fill it; find a hurt and heal it; find a problem and solve it, in Christ's name."

What did he say? "Find a need and fill it; find a hurt and heal it; find a problem and solve it in Christ's name."

Surely, this is truly following in the steps of the servant king.

Let us Pray

Lord, we want to thank you for your loving care for each one of us. Thank you for reminding us today that we can never out-give you.

We ask that as we go from here that you will help us to strengthen our humility, develop stronger habits of sacrificial service, and to be obedient to your prompting to help others in our daily lives. Show us how to follow your example and grow a servant's heart – always open and willing to assist others in your service.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. AMEN.