“Consider Others Better Than Yourself,” Philippians 2:1-11 (Seventh Sunday After Pentecost, July 7, 2024)

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, **2**complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. **3**Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. **4**Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. **5**Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, **6**who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, **7**but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. **8**And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. **9**Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, **10**so 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.

***“This is the Word of the Lord.” “Thanks be to God!”***

The apostle Paul wrote this letter we call the book of Philippians to the church at Philippi. We aren’t entirely sure where Paul wrote the letter from (some say Ephesus, most think Rome), but we do know that he wrote it from prison.

Yet he’s gone out of his way in chapter one to assure the Philippian Christians that he’s fine. He’s content. He’s joyful despite his circumstances.

Now Paul’s is not afraid to rebuke churches in his letters. In other of his letters, he has some severe words for his churches, because of the errors they’ve allowed into their fellowships.

But the church at Philippi is perhaps the healthiest of all the churches Paul started. They are thriving. But they do have one issue they need to deal with: ***there are factions in the church.*** We read about them in chapter four. There is conflict among them, and it hurts Paul.

So, he writes them and says, “I’m in prison. But don’t worry about me. The Lord has made it possible for me to be content. Yet if you want to add to my joy, there is one thing you can do: don’t fight. Instead, love one another. Consider one another better than yourself.”

What’s the best gift children can give their parents? It’s not a nice vacation for their 25th wedding anniversary. It’s not an RV for their retirement years. You know what it is? That they love their brothers and sisters. That’s true when they are little, and it’s even more true once they are grown. The best gift adult children can give their parents is that when the whole family gets together it’s a time of rejoicing and laughter and good memories, instead of bitterness and jealousy and cutting remarks. But even worse than siblings in a fight are parents who can’t get along. ***No one, and I mean no one, wants to see mom and dad fight.***

***And everyone hates being forced to take sides when two people they love are in conflict: whether it’s family, friends, spouses, or fellow church members***. You have two friends who are mad at each other, and they come to you telling you what the other one did, and you want to stay out of it. And then what happens? ***They get mad at you because you’re not angry like they are***. They accuse you of enabling this other person’s destructive behavior, when the truth is you just don’t see it that way. You see plenty of fault on both sides.

Conflict is obviously so destructive to Christian fellowship, and Paul is obviously concerned with it. So, let’s look at it, and what can be done about it, under two headings: *first, the sources of conflict.* *Second, the cure for conflict.* Then I’ll invite you all to take the Lord’s Supper.

First, the sources of conflict. Paul warns us against two of them in verse 3. “Do nothing from ***selfish ambition*** or ***conceit*** …”. Philippians 2:3a. What does Paul mean?

Well, “selfish ambition,” is, I think, fairly easy to understand. It means the desire to get your own way in all things. You want what you want for selfish reasons, not out of consideration for anyone else. Selfish ambition is often easy to spot.

There’s the ambition that comes from greed, when you’ll do anything to make more money. There’s the ambition that comes from a desire to succeed, when you’d trample over your own mother to get that promotion.

There’s the ambition that leaders often have, where you think because you’re in charge in this organization you can’t be wrong, and woe to the person who gets in the way of your goals.

Then there’s the selfish ambition that results from social climbing. When selfish ambition takes this form, you find you’re going up and talking to people only because you think they have something to give you, and even when you talk to them you’re continually looking over their shoulder to see if someone even more important than them might be walking in the room.

We can all see that kind of behavior is wrong and we’re ashamed when we’re caught doing it. It violates gospel principles. Paul writes, “**16**Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.” Romans 12:16.

But most of the time, this ambition isn’t so obvious. It works almost imperceptibly, like carbon monoxide poisoning. The dangerous thing about carbon monoxide poisoning is that you don’t know when it happens to you. Carbon monoxide is colorless and odorless. You just breathe it in and get sicker and sicker until you succumb. Likewise, selfish ambition can sneak up on you.

But you can know it’s taking over when your default mindset becomes, “I deserve.” “I deserve to be treated better at work.” “I deserve more respect at home.” “I have volunteered so much in this church that I deserve more recognition than I’ve gotten.”

You don’t have to be a monster to have this selfish ambition. We are all plagued by it. I know one guy, a godly man, a pastor, who in a moment of honesty once told me, “You know, I don’t ask for much around my house. But I work hard the rest of the week so I just want on Saturdays in the fall for my wife and kids leave me alone so I can watch SEC football.” Now, does that make that man evil? No. ***But his selfish demand for time for himself, if he doesn’t get it, will inevitably lead to conflict.***

Paul says to never operate out of selfish ambition. Nor, *secondly,* can we operate from conceit. This is the only time this Greek word is used in the New Testament, and it literally means “empty glory.” But conceit, I think, is an unhelpful translation.

When I use the word “conceited” to describe someone, or when it’s been used to describe me (I hate to say!), it’s used as a synonym for pride. But “empty glory” seems to me to be something different. Here’s how I understand it: if people marked by selfish ambition think they are so important, then those who are empty of glory fear they aren’t important at all and that they don’t matter.

When your life is marked by “empty glory,” you might come off as stuck up, but it’s because you’re shy, not proud. Instead, you feel like you have a pit in the center of your soul, and you’re desperate for something to fill it so that you feel like you matter. You want glory.

There’s nothing wrong with wanting glory. You were made for it. Our first parents had it in the Garden of Eden. If we could see Adam and Eve as they were created, as they were in their perfect relationship with God before the fall, we would be strongly tempted to bow down and worship them. That’s how beautiful and glorious God made them.

You were made for glory, and this isn’t simply a Christian or even religious notion. Years ago, the director of the National Institute of Mental Health (the nation’s top psychiatric professional) gave an interview in which he was asked about the state of the field of psychiatry and specifically, the psychiatric medication so often prescribed. He replied, “You know, we psychiatrists have been given an impossible task by our culture. They want us to give them a pill that will cure all their pathologies ***and we just can’t do it.*** Our drugs can sometimes alleviate symptoms, but we cannot give people what they need: meaning and relationship.”

In other words, the most prominent psychiatrist in the country said, “The people who come to mental health professionals lack glory, and ***we can’t give it to them***. To have glory requires some kind of purpose in life, and we don’t know what that is any more than our patients do!”

When you are driven by a sense of “empty glory,” you’re so focused on all the deficits in your life that you’re miserable. And when you’re unhappy, you take it out people around you, and it leads to conflict.

One pastor I know was counseling a teenage girl in his congregation. She’d come to him because she was unhappy. The pastor said she was going through an awkward phase in her physical development. She was extremely self-conscious about her appearance. Boys were asking her friends out on dates, but not her.

She told her pastor, “I know God all-powerful. He created the universe and keeps all the galaxies spinning in their orbits. I know God loves me and he sent his son to die for my sins, and I know Jesus is my Lord and Savior, ***but what does any of that matter if boys won’t even look at you?”*** What’s going on? She’s totally empty of glory. That made her bitter, focused on what she lacked, and it made her miserable to be around in her house and among her friends.

We are called to love others, but at every turn we find our selfish ambitions and a lack of glory in our souls barring the way. It leads to conflict … in churches, between friends, between siblings (how many siblings feel like their brother or sister got all the attention, and it’s made them bitter?), and certainly between spouses (it’s so easy for the selfishness of husbands and wives to lead to irremediable conflict in the home). What can be done about it?

Second, the cure for conflict. To be honest, verses 5-11 alone deserve a sermon. Or, more likely, several. There’s a lot of material in these verses that we won’t cover this morning.

They contain what scholars call the “kenotic hymn.” That title comes from a Greek word in verse 7, which is translated by the ESV as “emptied.” Some scholars think that Paul didn’t write it, but instead he’s quoting it, and that it was written earlier and is, perhaps, the first ever Christian hymn. I don’t think there’s enough evidence to say for sure, but it’s possible.

But in it Paul says the cure for conflict comes from looking at Jesus. I want to show you two things about him. *First, we are cured of the conflict caused by ambition by looking at Jesus.*

Paul writes, “**5**Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, **6**who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, **7**but emptied himself, by taking ***the form of a servant***, being born in the likeness of men.” Philippians 2:5-7.

Jesus was a servant. We know he did things like wash the disciples’ nasty feet. Washing feet was not a pleasant job. It’s not as if first century people wore socks and closed-toe shoes and walked on pavement. They wore sandals and walked on dirt paths where mules and donkeys relieved themselves. It was the job of a slave.

When I was in school at Ole Miss, I would go running on campus early in the morning on campus, and I would often run past the then Chancellor of Ole Miss, Robert Khayat. He was on his morning walk while I was on my run. And more than once I saw him bend down on his walk and pick up trash. He wasn’t making a show out of it. There was no one else there to see him. It looked to me like he just wanted to keep this campus he cared about clean.

Now I don’t know Robert Khayat personally. Some of you I’m sure know him better than I do. I’m certainly not comparing him to Jesus. I’m simply making the point that ever since I saw him pick that trash, I’ve never thought I was too important to bend down and pick up trash myself.

When we see someone humble themselves and do things that people in their position would ordinarily not do (because in the years since I’ve met university presidents who wouldn’t pick up the trash themselves but call up their head of maintenance and chew him out for the litter he found on campus) … when you see someone humble themselves and do something menial they aren’t expected to do***, it humbles you.***

Jesus Christ, Paul writes, is the Lord of Glory. He is very God of very God. He has no business picking up trash; he certainly has no business washing feet. He has no business being despised by the Pharisees and by virtually everyone else at the end of his life. But when you look at the example of Jesus’ life (the Lord of glory washing feet, associating with outcasts, healing the sick, spending time with children), ***it humbles you and you just can’t, in the same moment, feel selfish ambition about anything.*** It’s simply not possible.

But, of course it’s not just the example of Jesus’ life that cures us of conflict, but even more so his death. In verse eight Paul writes, “And [Jesus] being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

For all eternity, Jesus lived in heaven, full of glory, seated at his Father’s right hand. Jesus had complete command over everything in the universe and free from any form of discomfort. All the angels there did his bidding and worshipped his very existence. Most of all, he had with God the Father perfect fellowship. Nothing but love and affection flowed between them forever.

But at some point in eternity past, the Father came to Jesus and said, “Jesus, ***I want you to empty yourself.*** I want you to voluntarily divest yourself of all your divine prerogatives and become a human being. You’ll be fully God, your divine nature won’t change (it can’t change), but you’ll also be fully man. In fact, your divine nature will forever be wed to your human nature.

“Jesus, the Holy Spirit is going to place you in the form of an embryo in the womb of an unwed, teenage virgin. You’ll be born into poverty and there will be whispers about your parentage all your life, about how you are likely the illegitimate child of some unknown father. Then, you’ll grow up, you’ll start to preach to my people, the people of Israel. But ultimately they won’t listen. They’ll all abandon you. They’ll leave you hanging up on a cross all by yourself.

“And then I’m going to come, and I’m going to pour out all my wrath for their sin on you. You’re going to suffer ***because it’s the only way I can love sinners***. It’s the only way I can be both just by punishing evil yet also merciful by forgiving sinners. It will, for you, be hell on earth. Will you do it, Jesus, for these people? Will you allow yourself to be humiliated, so we can forgive sinners and welcome them into heaven?” And Jesus said, “Yes, Father, because I love you, I will always love them.”

In one of my favorite hymns, Samuel Crossman writes about this mercy we’ve been shown and fickle man is in his response to Jesus, and he writes: “He came from his blest throne, salvation to bestow; but men made strange, and none the longed for Christ would know. But oh, my friend, my Friend indeed, who at my need His life did spend.

“Sometimes they strew his way, and His sweet praises sing: resounding all the day Hosannas to their King. Then ‘Crucify!’ is all their breath, and for His death they thirst and cry.

“Why? What hath my Lord done? What makes this rage and spite? He made the lame to walk, he gave the blind their sight. Sweet injuries! Yet they, at these, themselves displease and ‘gainst Him rise.

“In life, no house, no home, my Lord on earth might have; in death no friendly tomb but what a stranger gave. What may I say? Heaven was his home; but mine the tomb wherein he lay.” ***To the degree you see what Jesus did for you in his death, the last thing you’ll feel is selfish ambition.*** You’ll be humbled, and you won’t desire one ounce of unnecessary conflict in your life.  ***You’ll want to be like Jesus: blessing and serving others, not fighting with them.***

It’s not just Jesus’ example and work from the past that cures our conflict. *Second, we are cured from the conflict that comes from a lack of glory by looking at Jesus’ future.*  Paul finishes the kenotic hymn in Philippians 2:9-11: “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, **10**so 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.”

The humiliating death of Jesus on the cross is not the end of the story. Three days later, God raised Jesus from the dead. Forty days later, Jesus ascended into heaven. And one day, Jesus will return. When he does, Paul writes, ***every knee will bow.*** All who worshiped him on earth will bow. All who opposed him on earth will bow. All his enemies, including the demons and even the devil himself, all who raised the sword against Jesus will one day bow the knee to him and acknowledge him as Lord. What is that? ***That’s Jesus getting the glory he deserves.***

And here’s how it applies to us: all who on earth have trusted Jesus and served in his name ***will share in his glory.*** Indeed, Paul writes in 2 Timothy 2 that if we endure with him in this life, ***we will reign with him in the next.***

Glory hungry people look to all kinds of things to satisfy their desire: new clothes, a new house, a new job, a new spouse, a new post on Instagram, hoping we get some likes. Anything to give us even the briefest taste of glory. ***But only one thing will fill that pit in your soul: the glory God means for you to share with Jesus when he returns.***

Friends, it will only take one word from Jesus to forever satisfy your heart: “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.” Matthew 25:21. When you hear those words, you’ll have glory.

Don Carson’s book *Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor* is about his dad, Tom Carson, who died about thirty years ago, and who was a small church pastor in Canada in the 1950-60s. He was not successful according to the world’s definition of that term: he only ever pastored small churches of forty or fifty people, he never wrote a book, and he was never invited to speak at conferences. In fact, his little church struggled so much that when he was fifty-two, he had to resign because the church couldn’t afford to pay him anything more than starvation wages. But in all those years he loved a lot of people, he taught the Bible faithfully, and kept looking to Jesus. He was a humble man who longed for the glory only God can give.

The end of the book is about Tom’s death, and because he kind of a failure from the world’s point of view, we read this: “When he died, there were no crowds outside the hospital, no editorial comments in the papers, no announcements on television … no attention paid by the nation… There was only the quiet hiss of oxygen, vainly venting because he had stopped breathing and would never need it again.

“But on the other side all the trumpets sounded. Dad won entrance to the only throne that matters, not because he was a good man or a great man – he was, after all, a most ordinary pastor – but because he was a forgiven man. And he heard the voice of him whom he longed to hear says, ‘Well done, my good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your Lord.’”

When you are convinced that one day you will share in the kind of glory that will make even the biggest recognitions this world can provide pale in comparison, ***the last thing you’ll want to do is feel sorry for yourself***. Your heart won’t be empty, but full, full of gratitude and love, and out of that fullness, you’ll bless others.

I want to invite all who acknowledge their sins and trust in Jesus Christ to the Lord’s Supper. You’re invited no matter your church membership, no matter how you’ve been baptized, no matter even if you started trusting in Jesus during this sermon: come and welcome to the Lord’s table. But take this bread and cup and as you do I want you to pray. Pray that God will give you eyes to see what Jesus has done for you in his death so that it will humble you and then pray that God will give you hope that one day you will share in his glory. If we’ll all do that, I promise we’ll be able to do what Paul says when he writes, “Consider others better than yourself.” PRAY