

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver St.  
Flagstaff, AZ 86001  
[www.fcfonline.org](http://www.fcfonline.org)

## HARMONIOUS RELATIONSHIPS

Philippians 2:1-4

By

Steven J. Cole

June 11, 1995

Copyright, 1995

June 11, 1995  
Philippians Lesson 10

## Harmonious Relationships Philippians 2:1-4

An ad in the Lawrence, Kansas, *Journal-World*, purported: "We will oil your sewing machine and adjust the tension in your home for only \$1." (In *Reader's Digest* [5/85], p. 190.) Who cares if they oil the sewing machine--if only someone could adjust the tension in our homes, I'll bet we'd all gladly pay \$100!

We all crave harmonious relationships, but they seem to be a rare commodity. We enter marriage with high hopes for harmony: "This adorable creature I'm marrying is so easy to get along with! We're in love, so we won't have any serious problems!" But then a few months into reality, I discover that she's not quite as adorable as I had thought! In fact, she's got a few problems that I need to help her work on. One of her main problems is that she doesn't see things my way! As I seek to help her with her problems, I discover that she has another problem, namely, that she is stubborn and won't change.

We want harmonious relationships with our children, and yet the alienation between parents and their teenagers is proverbial. We want harmony in our church, but those people at church are so unloving! "Why, do you know what so-and-so said to me? I don't know who she thinks she is! After all the times I've helped her, and then she acts like that toward me! See if I ever do anything for her again!"

I'm glad that the Bible was written to real people with real problems. It doesn't paper over their problems and offer superficial answers. The church at Philippi was a good church, but it wasn't perfect. None is. If its first three converts were any gauge, it was a motley crew that gathered for worship in Philippi: a sophisticated, wealthy businesswoman; a career Roman military man; and, a former slave girl who had been into the occult. It was a built-in formula for conflict, and some tensions were surfacing among the members (4:2). So Paul gently urges them to work through their

differences and he gives some principles for harmonious relationships that apply both to the church and to the home.

But, I'll warn you: It's a painful, difficult cure! Like chemotherapy, you may wonder at times if the cure is worth it. But it's the only cure and if you don't take it, the disease will ultimately cause great suffering and result in death. Briefly stated, the principle is:

The key to harmonious relationships is to put self to death and to regard others more highly than myself for Jesus' sake.

As Pogo observed, "We have met the enemy and he is us." The source of quarrels and conflicts is self (James 4:1-3). The cause of divorce, according to Jesus, is hardness of heart (Matt. 19:8). And, before you say, "Yes, my ex-mate really did have a hard heart," Jesus says, "You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Matt. 7:5). Alexander Maclaren put it, "To live to self is the real root of every sin as it is of all loveless life" (*Expositions of Holy Scripture* [Baker], 14:252). If we want harmonious relationships, each of us must confront self, put self to death, and live to build up others. In any conflict, I need to examine self from four directions:

1. In any conflict, I need to look to my own relationship with Christ: Am I motivated by His great love (2:1)?

The only force powerful enough to motivate us to crucify self (and it is a lifelong process) is the great love of God in Christ. So Paul begins his plea for unity with an appeal to think about their experience of the love of Christ. The word "if" which begins each clause is not, in the original text, a word of doubt or uncertainty. Rather, it can be translated "since." To paraphrase,

Therefore, in light of our mission to proclaim Christ, if you have ever received encouragement at a time of need because of your union with Christ, and I know you have; if Christ's love has ever given you comfort in trials, as I know it has; if you've known that common bond with God and others that comes from the Holy Spirit--in fact, we've known that bond together; if you've ever felt deep down inside the tender concern Christ has for you, as every Christian has; then, top off

my joy by working through any conflicts until you come out at the place of true oneness of heart.

There are four facets of Paul's appeal here:

(1) *Encouragement in Christ*--This is the Greek word *paraklesis*, a compound word meaning "one called alongside to help." Jesus used it as a name for the Holy Spirit (John 14:16). Sometimes it has the meaning of exhortation, at other times encouragement. I think the context favors encouragement. Relational conflicts can be a source of great discouragement. Sometimes we feel as if we've tried everything, but nothing seems to work. At such times, our union with Jesus Christ, His all-sufficiency, and His promise never to leave us or forsake us, are a source of tremendous hope. Even if the other person is not responsive to my attempts at reconciliation, I can rely on Christ for the strength I need to live in a Christ-like way in the situation. The encouragement Christ gives motivates me to live to please Him.

(2) *Consolation of love in Christ*--"Consolation" is used of comforting someone in grief. When a relationship is strained, you often feel grief, a sense of loss. When you lean upon Jesus, He gives you comfort through His love. Since He loved me when I was rebellious and not deserving, I can extend that same love to others, even if they aren't deserving. When someone sins against God, He doesn't cut them off. Instead, He ups the intensity of His love by going after that person, as the good shepherd went after the one lost sheep. Even so, my love shouldn't depend on the other person's response; it depends on the comforting love of Christ for me. I need to allow His love to flow through me to the one who has offended me.

(3) *Fellowship of the Spirit*--The Holy Spirit indwells every believer and draws us into fellowship with God and with all who love God. The instant you believe in Christ, the Holy Spirit baptizes you into the one body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). This fellowship of the Spirit is always two-way: toward God and toward other Christians. In fact, John says that if we claim to love God, but do not love our brothers and sisters in Christ, we're lying (1 John 4:20). In any conflict with a fellow Christian, I must rely on the indwelling Spirit to be the "oil" to lubricate the friction so that I can love and get along with the other person.

(4) *Affection and compassion in Christ*--"Affection" is translated "bowels" in the King James Bible. It and "compassion" both point to the emotional element in God's love. Jesus looked on the multitude and "felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36). Thank God that He didn't look at me and say, "Stupid sheep! It serves you right to be suffering, because you're such a sinner!" Thank God He had compassion on me! And now, having received His compassion and tender mercies, I must show the same to other sinners, even if they don't deserve it.

We should view every relational conflict or problem as an opportunity to learn more of Christ. Did someone treat me in an offensive manner? Jesus was treated offensively, but He still loved. Did they run roughshod over my feelings? Jesus knew that kind of treatment. Did my friends desert me at my time of need? The disciples deserted Jesus at His trial and crucifixion. Did a close associate betray me? Jesus was betrayed by Judas. Maybe you feel mistreated, unloved, or betrayed by a family member or fellow Christian. Draw near to Jesus and enter into His heart of love for you, even though you put Him on the cross. In any relational conflict, I must first look to my relationship with Christ and ask, "Am I motivated by His great love?"

2. In any conflict, I must look to my attitude: Am I seeking unity or am I seeking my own way (2:2)?

The word "mind" is actually a verb that can be translated, "that you *think* the same thing." It occurs again at the end of the verse, "that you think the one." Ten out of 26 New Testament uses of this verb, which has the nuance of "attitude," are in Philippians. There is a direct correlation between attitude and joy (the other dominant theme of this letter)! Paul's joy would be filled to the brim, not if he got out of prison, but if he heard that the Philippians were minded toward love and harmony.

There is also a correlation between attitude and harmonious relationships. We sometimes err by thinking that good relationships happen by accident. We see a happy couple or a family where everyone seems to get along and we think, "They're sure lucky!" Or, a couple is having conflict and they think, "Maybe we ought to just find someone more compatible." But harmonious relationships

aren't a matter of luck or natural compatibility. They are built on a mind-set that works at seeking unity. There are four facets of this attitude:

(1) *The same mind*--literally, "that you think the same thing." Obviously, Paul doesn't mean that we all must see every matter exactly the same. Nor does he mean that we're supposed to set aside essential truth for the sake of unity. As we saw in 1:27, we must stand firm for the faith of the gospel. Rather, he means that we must have our minds geared toward Christian love so that we seek the highest good of one another; and, that we must be growing to experience what we possess--the mind of Christ, revealed to us in His Word (1 Cor. 2:16). As believers grow in their understanding of Scripture, they share a common way of approaching problems. The world offers all sorts of conflict resolution techniques to help people work through differences, but they're all built on self. They teach you how to get what you're after. But God's way is to teach us to deny self as we seek to please God and love others. If two people have this same mind, there is a basis for working through conflicts.

(2) *The same love*--The love of Christ, revealed in His incarnation and in His death, as Paul goes on to illustrate (2:5-8). It is a love that yields its rights for the sake of others. Christians must have that love in mind in every relationship.

(3) *United in spirit*--literally, "one in soul." True unity is not organizational or outward; it is a matter of the heart. This is not automatic or a matter of luck. I must deliberately set my mind on being one with those who truly know Christ, even if I don't particularly like them or agree with them on everything.

(4) *Intent on one purpose*--literally, "being minded on the one thing," which is the faith of the gospel (1:27). The corporate witness of the body of Christ rides on our outwardly visible love. If I am minded toward the gospel, I will also be minded toward getting along with fellow Christians, and especially with those in my own family. So in any conflict, I must ask myself, "Is my focus on happiness and pleasing myself, or is my focus on exalting Christ?" If both parties are intent on exalting Christ by honoring His Word of truth and by living for each other's highest good, there is a solid basis for resolving conflict.

Thus, in any conflict, I must first look to my relationship with Christ: Am I motivated by His love? Then, I look to my attitude: Am I oriented toward love or toward my own way?

3. In any conflict, I must look to my view of myself: Am I being selfish and conceited or humble (2:3)?

The world's way for resolving conflicts is to teach you to stand up for your rights, to be assertive, to negotiate for what you want, to have proper self-esteem, etc. Some of these techniques work by balancing one person's needs against the other's so that a working harmony can be achieved. Christian psychologists have imported this stuff wholesale into the church. But the problem is, the world's ways do not deal with the root problem, which is pride or self.

Several studies done over the past few years show that the American public consistently defines their ultimate goals in terms of self-fulfillment. They view marriage, work, and even the church, as ways toward personal fulfillment. It's not surprising that the general public is self-seeking. But David Wells did a survey of American seminary students that revealed that they "are oriented toward self-fulfillment, self-expression, and personal freedom to a degree that often exceeds" that of the general population. In his 1993 survey, "40.2% of the respondents affirmed that 'realizing my full potential as a human being is just as important as putting others before myself.'" Wells goes on to observe, "Had Christ held this belief, for example, it would have ended all prospects of the incarnation" (*God in the Wasteland* [Eerdmans], p. 201).

In contrast to these worldly ways, Paul says that Christians must "do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit" (2:3). *Selfishness* means to have a party spirit, or to campaign for office. A politician tries to build a following for himself by building himself up and, if need be, by putting his opponents down. It's the same word Paul used in 1:17 of those who were preaching out of "selfish ambition." In Galatians 5:20 it is a deed of the flesh, "disputes." Many churches suffer because some of the leaders view their position as a way of promoting self. Some husbands misuse their authority in marriage in the same way. But, Christians are not to do anything from this self-seeking motive.

*Empty conceit* is literally, "vain glory," to be puffed up with a sense of our own importance, to think that we're really great. A. B. Bruce, in his classic *The Training of the Twelve* (Kregel, p. 180) observed, "The whole aim of Satanic policy is to get self-interest recognized as the chief end of man." In the garden, Satan's appeal to Eve was to build her self-esteem by getting her to think she could be like God. All this self-esteem teaching that has flooded the church is not from Scripture, but from Satan. It does not help you to have harmonious relationships; it is directly opposed to harmonious relationships because it feeds pride.

Thus, we are not to act from selfishness or empty conceit. Instead, with *humility of mind*, we are to regard others as more important than ourselves. "Humility of mind" is literally, lowliness of mind. Our problem is not that we think too lowly of ourselves, but that we regard ourselves too highly. Even the person who goes around dumping on himself is too self-focused. He needs to get his thoughts off himself and onto the needs of others. The non-Christian philosopher, Allan Bloom, saw this when he wrote, "Everyone loves himself most but wants others to love him more than they love themselves" (*The Closing of the American Mind* [Simon and Schuster], p. 118).

Maybe you're wondering how we can practically apply verse 3. You think, "I study my Bible and try to obey it. But the person I have conflict with doesn't know the Bible or live by it. How can I honestly regard him as better than myself? Am I supposed to see myself as a doormat?"

First, we all need to recognize that all that we are and have is due to God's grace (1 Cor. 4:7). I deserved hell; He has shown me mercy. If I am intelligent, it is a gift from God to be used for His glory, not mine. If I have money, even if I earned it by hard work, I am not to boast in it, but to use it as God's steward. If I am not enslaved to various sins, it's not due to me, but to God's grace. I must use my gifts to help others, not to boast.

Also, I need to recognize the awful depravity of my own heart apart from God's grace. If you're not growing to see your own sinfulness more and more, you're not growing. Apart from God's grace, I could be a murderer or be enslaved to sexual sin. Rather than condemn another person for his sin, I need to deal with the

log in my eye; then I can come alongside and help the other person with his sin (Matt. 7:5; Gal. 6:1).

Just as I need God's grace, so does the other person. Maybe his problem isn't one I struggle with. But, I have problems he doesn't struggle with. Rather than proudly looking down on my brother, as one sinner to another I need to show him God's grace and help him toward victory in Christ. And, not thinking too highly of myself (the tendency) but truthfully, I also need to recognize the other's unique giftedness (Rom. 12:3-8). Thus, in any conflict, I must lower my view of myself and esteem others.

4. In any conflict, I must look to my view of others: Am I putting their interests above my own (2:4)?

Why is it that when the other guy in front of me in the express check out lane has five items over the limit and writes a check instead of paying with cash, he's inconsiderate, but when I do it, it's because I'm in a hurry and have a good reason? When my wife is late getting ready, it's because she didn't plan her time well, but when I'm late it's because of circumstances beyond my control. When my kids lose something, it's because they're irresponsible, but when I lose something, it was because I had a lot on my mind.

We're so selfish that we're like fish in the water who don't know they're wet! I read of a new husband who went up to a ticket counter and only bought one ticket. When his new bride pointed it out, he made a quick comeback by saying, "You're right, dear, I'd forgotten myself completely!" Yeah, right!

Paul does not mean that we are never to say no to the demands others place on us. Jesus sometimes said no to the needs of the crowds so that He could spend time alone with the Father (Mark 1:35-39). At times, He drew away with the twelve so that He could train them (Matt. 15:21; 16:13; 17:1). We all have responsibilities that demand our time (Gal. 6:5). So Paul does not mean that we let others walk all over us.

But he does mean that we need to think about the other person and his needs and interests rather than just think about things from our own perspective. It's the golden rule principle--how would I feel if I were him? How would I want to be treated? That's

how I need to treat the other person. Consider others, not just yourself.

### Conclusion

A secular psychologist did a study in which he asked his subjects to list ten people he knew best and to label them as happy or not happy. Then they were to go through the list again and label each one as selfish or not selfish, using the following definition of selfishness: "A stable tendency to devote one's time and resources to one's own interests and welfare--an unwillingness to inconvenience one's self for others." The results showed that all of the people labeled *happy* were also labeled *unselfish*. He wrote that those "whose activities are devoted to *bringing themselves happiness ...* are far less likely to be happy than those whose efforts are devoted to making others happy" (emphasis in original, cited by Martin & Deidre Bobgan, *How to Counsel from Scripture* [Moody Press], p. 123).

The key to harmonious relationships is not to esteem self, assert self, or stand up for self. It is, rather, to put self to death and to regard others more highly than myself for Jesus' sake. If we would apply this to our homes and church, we would experience much more harmony and much less conflict. It's a painful cure; but it's the only cure given by God's Word of truth.

### Discussion Questions

1. If my mate is living for self and I deny self, won't I get taken advantage of? Doesn't this only work if both parties do it?
2. How do I apply verse 2 with someone who is doctrinally wrong or who is not seeking to live by Scripture?
3. When does "holding to right doctrine" become a matter of pride? How can we seek to be doctrinally correct, yet be humble?
4. How do we know when to say "no" to the demands of others without being selfish?

Copyright 1995, Steven J. Cole, All Rights Reserved.