

The Mind of Christ

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being 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 count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:1-5 ESV)

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

“What do you want?”

These are the first words of Jesus in the Gospel of John (John 1:38). What a challenging question! And to you and me, the reader, he asks it again and again—in a number of ways.

To a man in need of sight (Mk 10:51; Lk 18:41), and to disciples who struggled with spiritual vision (Mt 20:32; Mark 10:36), Jesus asks: “What do you *want* me to do for you?”

To a man who lay sick, unaware of the power (and the life that comes about as a result of that power) awaiting him, Jesus asks: “Do you *want* to be made well?” (John 5:6).

Hold up a spiritual mirror. How would you answer the Lord? What is that you really, really *want*?

“MIND” = “WILL”

To answer that question, it might help to know where to look. The ancients spent a lot of time trying to locate the center of our wills. Perhaps you know the Egyptians, before

embalming and entombing notables, would place most internal organs in special jars (for use in the afterlife). They kept the heart, of course, but the brain—well, the brain they threw out. What use do you have for that?

Before we laugh too hard, consider that—at least in one sense—this story rightly causes us to pause and reconsider where we think our desires chiefly reside.

We usually associate the heart with deep emotion; but Paul aims at the gut. In the first verse of our text this morning, Paul appeals to our “bowels of mercy” because, for those of his day, the intestines were the seat of emotion. The “heart”, more often, was the seat of reason. That is why the proverb teaches “guard your heart; for out of it flow the well springs of life.”

And when they went looking for the seat of the will—where rationality and emotion combine with one’s deepest intentions, attitude, and willingness to follow through—they often spoke of the “mind.” Did you catch that? In Bible terms, the “heart” is how you think; the “mind” is what you want.

You can simply exchange the word “will” or “desire” or “purpose” for “mind” in a number of key passages:

Nehemiah highlights what good can be done with a singular mind in the right direction. The people of God rebuilt the walls of the city in just 40 days, “for the people had a mind to work” (Neh 4:6). But Babel shows the chilling results of a singular mind in the wrong direction. God confounds their language to keep them from uniting to dominate, control, and, ultimately, to destroy. As one version puts it, God is concerned that “nothing that they have a mind to do will be impossible for them” (Gen 11:6).

Unity of “mind” reflects unity of purpose, intention, and desire. Have you ever been “of one mind” toward a certain goal? Have you ever wanted just one thing? The Danish Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said, “purity of heart is to will one thing.” What if the one thing you desired was simply to surrender to the will of God? This describes our Lord Jesus Christ.

“I desire to do your will, my God” (Psalm 40:8).

“Teach me to do your will, for you are my God. May your good Spirit lead me on level ground” (Psalm 143:10).

“Here I am, I have come to do your will, my God” (Hebrews 10:7-9).

“Your kingdom come, your will be done” (Matt 6:10).

“If its not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done” (Matt 26:42).

What if we wanted...only that?

NOT SIMPLY SIN MANAGEMENT & BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION

When I was just entering my teen years, wishing to be preacher, I cut my teeth on old “sermon outline” books. Somewhere along the way, I remember running across a 3-point lesson based on this line from Paul: “Touch not! Taste not! Handle not!” (Colossians 2:21 KJV). The exact points have escaped my memory; it was something like “don’t touch a woman before you are married, don’t taste alcohol, and don’t handle illicit drugs.” Who knows. It might even have been the old line “we don’t smoke, and we don’t chew, and we don’t go with girls that do!” I can’t remember. But I do remember the title, and thought the preacher was mighty clever.

I now think that whatever the merits of his lesson he was preaching from the wrong text. Listen to the passage from another translation:

You died with Christ. Now the forces of the universe don't have any power over you. Why do you live as if you had to obey such rules as, "Don't handle this. Don't taste that. Don't touch this."? After these things are used, they are no longer good for anything. So why be bothered with the rules that humans have made up? Obeying these rules may seem to be the smart thing to do. They appear to make you love God more and to be very humble and to have control over your body. But they don't really have any power over our desires [want ERV] (Colossians 2:20-23 CEV)

Paul here is saying that the gospel message and the Christian religion—rooted in the good news of the kingdom—cannot be reduced to what Dallas Willard calls “sin management and behavior modification.”¹ The good news of the kingdom is not “if you keep saying no to what you really want, and force yourself to do the right list of things, then you can win a ticket to heaven when you die.” If this is new for you, let this point sink down deep into your ears. Seeking to control my sin behavior by just trying harder to live by a new set of rules puts me in a hopeless and miserable position: constant awareness of my failures with no power to be different! This is the very definition of legalism. One is then forced into an endless cycle of doing the same things, using the same tools, and expecting a different result (a phrase some use to define insanity). Trying to change what you do, without having changed what you love, is insanity. It simply won’t work.

¹ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*.

The good news of the kingdom of God involves an inner transformation of the heart, mind, and soul—exercised through the habits of the body—in a way that leaves us changed from the inside out. Christian living is not described well as trying real hard to do things Jesus said; instead, it can be described as “growing into the kind of person where the things Jesus said are natural and obvious.”² To become the kind of person who no longer desires to do wrong, who loves the right things, is an act of grace, produced by the Spirit of God as we submit to His leading. And it means a change of desire. It means a change of what you want.

Christianity is not self-help behavior modification, as if telling ourselves “do it, do it, do it” when we look at virtue that we don’t really want, or “don’t do it, don’t do it, don’t do it” when we look at sin we really do want, will lead to anything good. It doesn’t. It won’t work. It’s what Paul calls “will worship.” It is a spiritless gospel. It’s precisely what Paul is attacking in Galatians when he says “how can you who started with the Spirit, now proceed in the flesh?” No. That’s the first point—what Christianity is not. It is not trying harder on my own power to fight against the evil desires I crave. Fixing my behavior will only come about when I attend to what I actually want. And that leads me to my second point.

What Christianity is about is a Spirit-directed change of what I truly want, so much so, that living like Christ, wanting the kingdom and nothing else, welcoming the fruit-of-the-spirit kind of life becomes second nature. What we need isn’t a list of “do’s” and “don’ts” so I can be like Christ. What we need is the mind of Christ.

WE HAVE THE MIND OF CHRIST

I have good news. No...it’s *great* news. In fact, it’s gospel (which means “the very best news”). Are you ready for this? Do you remember how our Lord said to his disciples “whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have [already] received it and it will be yours” (Mk 11:24)? That the Christian life is often asking for more of, a better understanding of, a deeper connection with, an activation of what we already possess in Jesus Christ? Well, according to Paul, you believers in the Lord *have* the mind of Christ!

You want Bible for that? Try 1 Corinthians 2:16, where Paul assures the Corinthians Christians of their ability to discern spiritual things because “we” Paul writes, “*have* the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16). With slight variation, Paul will end his letter to the

² See Dallas Willard, “Anger, Contempt, and Cultivated Lusting,” Workshop of Spiritual Formation, Lesson 2. <https://web.archive.org/web/20150606035039/http://www.bethinking.org/human-life/spiritual-formation/2-case-studies>.

Philippians by assuring them that the peace of God, that surpasses all understanding, will keep your minds “in” Christ Jesus (Phil 4:7). And you see the idea once more in Romans the 15th chapter, where Paul is laboring to instill a sense of togetherness among a divided people, and he says “may the God who gives encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 15:5-6 NIV).

Did you catch that? In three passages, we are told we Christians have the mind *of* Christ, he’ll keep our minds *in* Christ, and God—by his power—will give us the same mind *as* Christ toward each other. And when Paul claims that Christians “have the mind of Christ” or challenges us to “adopt the mind of Christ”, he’s not talking about how high is your intellect, or how well your reasoning, how quickly you are moved to tears, or how moved you are by emotional appeals. He is asking about what you want; he is challenging what you desire; he is questioning what you will. Paul wants us to want what Christ wants. And so does Christ.

THE CALL TO CULTIVATION AS A CHURCH

All of this is essential background to understand our text this morning, Philippians 2:5. The New King James reads this way “let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.” If you crack open the commentaries, you will see there is a raging storm around the meaning of this verse. In fact, you’ll see it just by comparing translations. The phrase translated “in you” in the New Testament can mean one of three things: It can mean “within yourself” (talking to a person), it can mean “within yourselves individually” (talking to a group of people), or it can mean “among yourselves as a group.” Think of that passage in Luke’s gospel where Jesus says “but the kingdom of God is in you”—which is translated by some as “inside yourself” (a proleptic reference to the Holy Spirit), and by others as “among you” (a reference to Jesus and his work as the presence of the kingdom).

How you translate the first part of this verse is only half the problem. The second half of the text has no verb, so you have to supply one. The Greek actually says “this mind in you which also in Christ Jesus.” So what should we supply for the second half? Which “was” in Christ (referring to his attitude in going to the cross)? Which “is” in Christ (referring to the power and purpose that is available as a resource for all who are in Christ Jesus)?

If you rely on the KJV, NKJV, NASB, or the NIV, the translators have decided that “in you” means “within you” as individuals, and then most of them supply “was” in the second half of the verse. Translated literally, the thought would be “have this mind within yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus.” This is called the “ethical” reading;

it suggests you should each individually adopt a Christ-like attitude, and act with humility toward God like Jesus did in going to the cross. And let me tell you, the conclusion of that reading is absolutely true—and can be supported with lots of other passages in the New Testament.

But if you go with the RSV or the ESV (as I do in this case), Paul is arguing something different here. Those versions read “have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus. “Within you” should be read not individually but corporately, referring to the body of Christ, and then supply the word “is” in the second half. A literal rendering would be “Think among you that which is [also your thinking] in Christ Jesus.” Or, in better English,

“This is how you should think among yourselves, with the mind that you *have* because you belong to the Messiah, Jesus.”³

“Cultivate this mindset in your community, which is in fact a community *in* Christ Jesus.”⁴

“Adopt then this frame of mind in your community—which indeed is proper for those who are in Christ Jesus.”⁵

Paul is saying “if you want to learn Christ, let’s do some work not only on what *you* want, but what this *church* wants.” What this *church* wants.

Churches have problems. Do you know why? Because its full of people. I once heard someone say “I don’t belong to any church. They are full of hypocrites.” And I thought, “well, why stay away? One more won’t make a difference.” Of course the church is full of hypocrites. Its full of sinners! As someone said long ago, the church is not a museum for saints, it’s a hospital for sinners. Christ drew prostitutes and tax collectors and other sinners just like me. And those habits don’t die quickly. If your church doesn’t have problems, I’d question if you are really a church!

And in some places, Paul really had his work cut out for him! In Corinth, for example, they were teaching that the resurrection had already past, that withholding from your wife but shacking up with temple prostitutes seemed like a good idea, and one member

³ N. T. Wright’s translation.

⁴ Michael Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul’s Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 11.

⁵ Moises Silva, *Philippians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005, Kindle) at 2:5.

was sleeping with his mother-in-law, and the people thought that was just great. Sounds like they needed a weekend seminar or two, don't you think?

So Paul tends to have crises that cause him to write letter to address the big problems facing the churches. So what was the big crises that moved Paul to write this letter from a prison cell? It must have been severe. Paul gives some good and deep theology and writes under torturous conditions. So what was it?

If you look in the letter, the only problem that surfaces is in chapter 4 verse 2. It appears that two older ladies who sit on the back pew on Sunday are having trouble getting along. That's it. And Paul thinks this is serious; so serious he has to immediately sit down and write a magisterial treatise. And he builds his case very carefully—with all the major pieces right here in our text.

First, Paul says the good of the whole trumps self-interest. In chapter 1, Paul says to depart and be with Christ is far better for me, but to stay is better for you. So I'm confident I'll be staying (1:25). That is, what's better for you all trumps what seems best to me. You see that right here in our text. To avoid selfish ambition in humility count others more significant than yourself (2:3). Look to the interests of others (2:4), and ultimately to the interests of Christ (2:21).

Second, Paul calls the church to stand together: in one spirit, having the same mind, the same love, being in full accord, working side-by-side (1:27; 2:2). My college roommate Jeremy Barrier once told a story of a man who fell overboard on a cruise ship. It's a tragic tale that ends in the loss of one life, but the boat returns to shore and life goes on. But now imagine that everyone on the boat were tied together with a rope. If one falls off, it affects us all. We either save the one or we all fall in. “Together” is the operative word.

Third, Paul grounds these two points in the story of Christ. What is better for you all trumps what is best for me, and we are to have the same mind as we stand together. This is what it means to have the “mind” of Christ. He tells of Christ choosing what was better for you over what seemed best for him (2:5-11), as he stood by the will of God. And all of us saints are “in Christ”, and thus we put on display his story, bearing the marks of the Lord Jesus. Words like humility, emptied, servant, obedient, death, and cross fill the beautiful poem in verses 6-11. If the church is the body of Christ, what do we learn about the body of Christ? The church of Christ chooses the cross.

Fourth, Paul contrasts the gospel of the cross with every other thing you could claim as its rival. Every “yeah, but” gets laid aside. Paul speaks of those who live as enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, who glory in

their shame, and who are fixated on earthly things. But we saints “in Christ” live out the story of the cross of Christ, our end is good in the day of Christ, our God is found on the cross, our glory is only in Christ Jesus, and we count every earthly thing as rubbish that we might gain Christ and be found “in” the body of the suffering Messiah. After all, our citizenship is in heaven—our salvation comes from there—and our savior will subject all things to himself. Thus we live out that story even now. The life we live out is the life of the one who has been exalted above every name that can be named. So we act out what it looks like for every knee to bow, and every tongue to confess (and every action to show) that Jesus is Lord, always and only to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, writes Paul, as he comes to chapter 4, put all this together. He calls them “my brothers” and “my beloved” as he emphasizes togetherness. “Stand firm in the Lord” reminds them to take their cues from Christ. He pleads with these two women—Euodia and Syntyche—to agree in the Lord. And the words he actually uses is, literally, “have the same mind” in the Lord. He pleads with another to “help these women” who have labored “side by side” in the gospel. Have the mind of Christ. Have it together. And whatever the argument, whatever the reason, count it as rubbish as you take up the cross of Christ.

Why in the world was this so important? I’ll tell you why. Because “in the world” there is no hope. “In Christ” is the answer to all our troubles. And Christ and Caesar are competing Gods. These are two competing views of life and directions for the future. One is about power and one is about surrender. If two saints in Christ cannot find peace, joy, and love, if they cannot have the same mind to strive together in the gospel, if they can sit in church and harbor bitter resentment toward one another, then the cross of Christ means nothing!

THE PEACE IN HAVING

So what’s the takeaway? Work really hard to get evil thoughts out of your heart? Focus on sin management and behavior modification? For Paul, the answer is more beautiful than that: remember who you are. Realize what you have. Because you are wrapped up in the Messiah, this community has the mind of Christ and is called to live out of that wonderful reality.

“They are to appropriate in practice what is already theirs by grace,” says George Hunsinger; “activate in your relational life what you already possess as a gift in Christ

Jesus.”⁶ He continues: “It is not something to be constructed but something to be appropriated. It is a gift before it is a task. It means becoming what they already are.”⁷

Tom Wright explains it this way:

“It is not a matter of surface-level ‘imitation,’ with people simply attempting to copy Jesus and so make themselves better people. It is a matter of the ‘mind of the Messiah’ which they already possess, and of them allowing this shared and transformed ‘mind’ to work out into actual patterns of thought and then behaviour.”⁸

You see the same inner logic in Romans 15:1-9. Be good to others, because Jesus didn’t please himself. You’ve come to a common mind among yourselves, in accordance with the Jesus Christ. So welcome each other as Christ has welcomed you.

God led us out of Egypt. We are now a new people in a new land. Why would you even think of going back to Egypt? Do you know where you are in the story? This is your story, your narrative. So let it become your life. And the reputation of this church.

*Lord my desire is to be like you
To say the things you say
And do the things you do*

*Oh, let me hear your still voice
Through all the other noise
So that I can be
All that you want me to be.*

⁶ Hunsinger, Philippians (Kindle) at 2:5.

⁷ George Hunsinger, Philippians (Kindle) at 2:5. He continues: “Humble-mindedness is not something to be achieved by the Philippians on the basis of their own unaided efforts. It is something to be received from Christ, partaken of in Christ, and renewed by Christ. It is an ongoing gift, not a possession, a gift that is new each morning. It is therefore not so much a settled disposition as the object of continual prayer with open hands. It involves a life of kindness and generosity in dependence on grace. The Philippians are called to live by a humility not their own, the prior humility of Christ. It is the one humility common to Christ and his church. In loving communion with him, the humble-mindedness he embodies and imparts is continually to be received day by day.”

⁸ Tom Wright, Paul and the People of God, Kindle, p. 1104).