

# MAKE MY JOY COMPLETE

Pastor Russ's Farewell Sermon

TEXT: PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11 (ESV)



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Oak Hills Presbyterian Church,  
Overland Park, Kansas

## Sermon # 285

On January 3, 2003, Lisa and I, together with our two children (Chris and Maggie, ages 2 and 1 respectively), and Dave Latty driving the U-Haul, pulled up to the Russo's house, unloaded a few boxes of clothes and baby stuff, and began what

we couldn't have known would be the best 8 years of our lives. What made them the best? The validation of God's call on our family into vocational ministry, the opportunity to serve such a grace-filled church who recognized potential in me and trusted me to preach the word and serve the body here, the way our family filled out with the additions of Kate and Jane, and the staff, leaders and church body I've had the privilege of living and working along side. These years have been rich. We're thankful.

Oak Hills, you've been so instrumental in shaping our lives by investing in us when we needed your help and in allowing us to help when you needed ours. You've shared your burdens with us even as you have carried some of ours. You've permitted my family to experience Oak Hills not just as the place I work but as the Body to which we belong. You have taught our children about Jesus. You have challenged us to grow in our grasp of the depths of the riches of the grace of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Early on, you encouraged me, a young and inexperienced pastor, to grow and keep at this work to which the Lord has called me. You have helped me see so many of my own shortcomings and blind spots. You have celebrated little victories in my life with me. You have called me out when I was wrong and lovingly contended for me to love, cling to and communicate the truth of God's word. And though there have been some difficult times, I have had the distinct joy of reporting to work every single day with an unwavering conviction that this work of Gospel ministry is the work to which I and my family are called.

To date, I have preached 284 sermons from this pulpit. That is almost 180 hours, more than seven full days! Today makes 285. Rather than spending today reminiscing, I want sermon 285 to draw from the same source as the others—the word of God, our only solid and infallible foundation. Our text comes from Paul's letter to the Philippians, a church that is at the same time growing in grace and facing uncertainty in the days ahead. And as Paul was so faithful to do, he drew them back to the only thing that matters—the Lordship of Christ over His Church.

## A Manner Worthy of the Gospel

The prevailing tone of letter is joy—a tone worthy of note since Paul is in prison awaiting a trial that just might result in his death. So why such joy? He writes that his imprisonment has really served to advance the Gospel. The soldiers watching over him are hearing the about Jesus and some are coming to faith. Also, Paul's imprisonment has actually inspired others to proclaim Christ with an even deeper conviction. (Phil 1:12-14)

Paul writes Philippians with such blunt awareness of his position. He says, "If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I don't know! I'm torn: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body." (Phil 1:22-24) Though he thinks he'll live, he doesn't know. Here Paul shows us again what we've been talking about for many weeks now—doctrine informs life. His circumstances are tough, but the Gospel is advancing through them, and for this he is filled with joy.

But this letter is about more than Paul posting a status update about his joy. He knows the same persecution that landed him in prison is headed the Philippians' way. He knows they need their doctrine to inform their lives if they're to know the joy of the Gospel in trials. Philippians 1 closes with a wonderful verse: "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ." (Phil 1:27) But when he says "whatever happens," they all know what he means. He means, "When the persecution comes, when the Romans soldiers with spears in hand show up on your doorstep asking if you are a follower of 'The Way,' conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

Times of uncertainty are not the times to set our faith aside. These are the times we're to lean into it more than ever. Paul understands Christ is on the move throughout Rome. He has seen the Lord use the persecution of the saints to galvanize their conviction. When your options are to renounce your faith or face trial, you figure out quickly if your profession of faith amounts to more than words. Paul delights in what he sees.

But he also knows the human condition enough to know his friends need encouragement. In addition to strength in the face of persecution, Paul appeals for more from these believers that he loves, saying what he wants from them would serve to make his growing joy complete. On this point Paul's pastoral heart isn't so much concerned with the harm those outside the church might bring. What he wants from them centers on who they are to each other. He wants **UNITY** and **HUMILITY**.

Oak Hills isn't facing persecution at the point of a spear, but we are facing uncertainty (*which is nothing new. What of our future have we ever known with any certainty?*) As I stand here today, what Paul wants from the believers in Philippi, and I want from Oak Hills—unity and humility. I want them because my greatest joys here have flowed through unified, humble servants of the Lord working together (*and there is no limit to the joyful moments yet to flow from this*), and my most painful moments have flowed from times when selfishness and arrogance have ruled—yours and mine. As Paul wrote to Philemon, "I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart." (Phi 20) Hear how Paul puts it.

## Philippians 2:1-11

*<sup>1</sup>So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, <sup>2</sup>complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

*<sup>5</sup>Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup>but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup>And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. <sup>9</sup>Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup>so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup>and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

## Unity - Phil 2:1-5

We know from the tone of this epistle that Paul and the church in Philippi were fond of each other, and that the church had sent Paul a gift to help in his ministry while he was in prison. (Phil 4:14-19) They were in real ways ministry partners, working together toward the same goals. So Paul's appeal for unity is to a church where disunity does not appear to be a chronic problem. He knows, however, that disunity is never that far off. He also knows great trials are coming as Rome is beginning to form some rather unfortunate opinions of Christians.

I want unity for Oak Hills' future. It is important and wise to note that when Paul appeals for unity here, he does not point to their need for survival as the primary motive for it. When the basis for our unity is found in what we're all trying to keep at bay, we're not unified by what we are, but rather by what we don't want to become. Paul's appeal for unity rests on who they already are and in what Christ has done for sinners like the worshippers in Philippi. Unity here leads to humility.

I have so enjoyed the unity and love this church has extended to my family. May Oak Hills ongoing unity flow not from a posture of defense and fear, but from a living, daring confidence in God's grace. Or as Paul said, "*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.*" (Phil 2:1-4)

## Humility - Phil 2:4-8

Along with unity, I also want humility to flow from your love for each other. Unity fosters humility. In our text, Paul identifies two things that destroy unity: selfish ambition and vain conceit. They are two sides of the same coin really—ambition holds others down while conceit builds the self up.

This is the model of humility Paul offers: imitate Christ. We can't control what external influences affect this church, but we can address before the Lord what we bring in ourselves. Look not only to your own interests, but to those of others. Deal honestly with your agendas, rivalries and preferences. Ask the Lord to search you for selfish ambition and vain conceit—that tendency to look down on others, regarding yourself as the wisest person in the room. No one can make another humble, but Paul gives an excellent technique for how to apply humility to ourselves: we should consider others above ourselves.

Paul wants these Christians to remember Christ and what He has done for sinners. Christ's incarnation is the purest expression of humility ever known. Jesus took on the nature of a **servant**! Think about this: the God of all creation became the servant of those He created for relationship with Him! Jesus was humiliated when He came down from Glory—where He is forever enthroned as Lord of All—and He became a man. But not just any man. He became a servant to the ones who have sinned against Him! This is the model of humility Paul offers. Remember what Christ has done, and from that model humility.

## God's Call is to Himself - Phil 2:9-11

Our text concludes with a beautiful, soaring hymn about how God exalted Jesus Christ from dying a sinner's death to an eternal position of rule and authority over all creation. Jesus is forever the only recipient of one title: Lord. Every knee will bow before Him. Paul doesn't say they'll all bow willingly or happily. And this ought to break our hearts and drive us to regard to Gospel as a matter of life and death for everyone.

Confessing the Lordship of Christ is the distinct privilege of the believer. We will spend eternity casting our crowns at His feet. This is the true worship of the One who loves us so dearly. Martin Lloyd Jones put it this way, "*I do not accept the Christian philosophy primarily; I accept Him, I believe on Him, I bow my knee to Him, the Person. I make a statement about the individual: Christ MY Lord; it is a personal relationship and a personal confession.*"

God's call on the lives of His people is to Himself—wherever that leads. We're tempted to think life is supposed to unfold a certain way. So when seasons of uncertainty come, we can see them as a time to get through, as though they are an anomaly to what is otherwise supposed to be a stable, predictable life. When this is what we think, we squander precious time and opportunity to draw ever nearer to Christ. With a storm building over the Philippians' security, Paul, the pastor, writes this letter urging them to pursue unity and humility among each other as they cling to the Lordship of Christ over all things.

Oak Hills, make my joy complete by pursuing unity, humility and deepening faith. These are precious days ahead. Embrace them. Lean into them. Ask the Lord to give you teachable hearts. I am excited for Oak Hills' future. I believe the Lord is building His church, and this season ahead both for the Ramseys and Oak Hills is part of that glorious purpose. I will miss you so much. I will cherish these years of ministry in a way that will leave me jealous for this congregation. But in the end, I remain a marathon guy—and the only finish line that ultimately matters is the one where we all bow our knee in that great cloud of witness before His eternal glory for our eternal joy. I trust the Lord for Oak Hills. I know that He is telling His story through His people here, and I am grateful to be a part of it.