

How Christmas Heals Division

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- [0 : 0 0] Okay, good morning everybody. Great to see you. If you don't know me, my name is Kevin and one of the elders here. It's great to be with us together this morning.
- Now, let's see if you can finish this famous Christmas sentence. The Christmas sentence goes like this. Glory to God in the highest and on earth...
- Okay, sorry, I didn't hear that. Okay, try that again. Glory to God in the highest and on earth... And you got it. Okay, peace and goodwill to all mankind.
- Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace and goodwill. That means kind-heartedness, bigness of heart, generosity of spirit to all mankind.
- These famous words are spoken by the angels at the time of Jesus' birth. There are some shepherds out in the fields outside of Bethlehem. And an angel comes and says, I bring good news of great joy.
- [1 : 0 2] Today, in the city of David, the town of Bethlehem, a Savior has been born. And he is going to save the world. You'll find him lying in a manger. And then all these angels burst into song.
- Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace and goodwill to all mankind. We are three days away from Christmas, which is a wonderful thing.
- But we also find ourselves at a time in our city and a time in the history of our city when peace and goodwill amongst us as a city seems to be remarkably absent.
- Not only in our streets and our universities, but also in our homes, around dining room tables. If there was ever a time when we as a city needed peace and goodwill to all mankind, this would be a great time.
- Now this morning, what I want us to do is I want us to look at the book of Philippians, which Theo and Janet read to us. And I want us to see how Christmas gives us the resources that we need to heal the divisions in our hearts and in our lives.
- [2 : 1 3] How Christmas gives us the resources that we need to heal the divisions in our hearts and in our lives. Okay, so we've got one point this morning. That's the one point.
- That's all there is. Okay, let's go home. No, let's look at the passage and see if we can make sense of this. So, Theo and Janet read to us this amazing passage from the book of Philippians.
- And the book of Philippians is written by the Apostle Paul while he's under arrest in the city of Rome. The Apostle Paul is a missionary. He's a preacher. He's just left the city of Philippi.
- He's on his way back to Jerusalem. And in Jerusalem, he gets arrested because he's preaching the gospel, etc. He's disturbing the peace. And so he has this trial. And while he's on trial, he says, I'm a Roman citizen.
- I appeal to Caesar. I want Caesar to hear my case. And so he gets shipped off to Rome where Caesar is going to hear his case. And while he's there, he's under arrest for two years in house arrest.

[3 : 13] And while he's there, he writes these letters to the various churches that he started and founded around the world. And so he writes this letter to this small church in the city of Philippi that he had just visited recently.

And he writes to encourage them and to strengthen them in their journey. Now, in the book of Acts, we actually see how this city, how this church in Philippi founded.

And the way it started was this. It was Paul and his companions are traveling in the area, and they don't know where to go. They try and go up north. They can't go there.

They try and go south. They can't go there. To the west of them is the sea. And so they stuck. And one night, Paul has a dream. And in his dream, this man from the city of Philippi says, Paul, come over and help us.

And so the next morning, Paul wakes up, and he says to his companions, I think God wants us to go to Philippi. And so they go to Philippi. And when they get there, they don't know what to do. They don't have any contacts or friends.

[4 : 13] Paul just had this dream. And so they go down to the river where they expect to meet a bunch of men praying. Generally, the men would go down and pray at this area. But they don't find any men praying.

What they find is a businesswoman, a lady called Lydia. And Lydia is a trader. She sells cloth and material. And she's a businesswoman. And so they start to talk to her about the wonder of Jesus and the gospel.

And she believes. She becomes a follower of Jesus. And she gets baptized straight away as a sign of her following Jesus. And then Paul and his companions spend a few days in Philippi.

And they are followed by this young lady who's a slave girl. She's owned by some other people in town. But she is under the controlling influence of a demonic spiritual power.

She's kind of controlled by the spiritual power. And so she follows Paul and his companions everywhere they go. And she's calling out saying, these men, they come from the one true God.

[5 : 16] They're telling you how to become Christians, how to get saved. And she's causing problems for Paul and his companions. Because they're trying to have these real meaningful conversations. And while they're trying to have conversations with people, here's this lady that's calling out in the background.

These men are from God. They've got a message for you. And Paul gets so annoyed that one day he just turns around and he says, evil spirit, come out of her. And she's automatically brought to her senses.

She's no longer under the controlling power of this demonic spirit. And she's just this normal young lady. Now, it's possible that she becomes a follower of Jesus.

We don't know exactly whether she became a follower of Jesus. But the men that owned her are now very upset with Paul. Because she used to make a lot of money for them as a fortune teller.

She would go around town saying, here, this is what's going to happen to you. And he would give money. And they'd say, Ellen, I'll tell you your future if you give me some money. And so this lady made a lot of money for her owners.

[6 : 19] And now she can't do that anymore. So the owners go to the magistrate and they say, these guys, Paul and his friends, are causing trouble in our town. We better arrest them quickly. And so Paul and his friends get thrown into jail.

And while they're in jail, they start talking to the jailer. And the jailer becomes a Christian. And he starts following Jesus. And he and his whole family become Christians. And they get baptized that very day.

And so here you have, in this town of Philippi, the two founding members of this church, and possibly a third one. You have this wealthy businesswoman who's a trader, and she knows how to make money.

You have this jailer who's pro-establishment, working for the central government. Remember, Philippi is a city in the Roman Empire. He's working for central government. He becomes a follower of Jesus.

And possibly the third member of the church is this slave girl who, until recently, had a demonic spirit controlling her. Now, I've been thinking quite a lot recently about church planting.

[7 : 25] At Watermark, we've spoken about it for a long time. And I would love for us as a church to plant a church sometime in the next couple of years. To take 20 or 30 people from Watermark and say, hey, why don't you guys go start a new church in Hong Kong somewhere?

We'll support you and encourage you. I love the idea of us planting a new church. But one of the things I've been thinking about is how do you get the perfect core team together, the right team that's going to start off a church, the team that you can train them and equip them and are on the same page and think the same way.

Because if you get your core team right, you have the most chance of success. Think about the core team of this new church in Philippi. You have this jailer working for the government.

You have this businesswoman that's a trader. And you possibly have this lady that was just demon-possessed, a slave girl, uneducated, who has just been delivered. One theologian, a common scholar, put it like this.

These early converts were the most diverse and unlikely group of people with which to ever start a new church. And so this is how the church begins. Right from day one, the Philippian church is diverse, it's multicultural, it's multi-socioeconomic from different backgrounds, different cultures, different careers, and they've come together because Jesus has worked in their hearts.

[8 : 49] Now, that's a wonderful thing. One of the most beautiful things about the local church is its diversity and its complexity and its multicultural and multi-ethnic component.

The church family is a family, but we're a diverse family. We're an eclectic family. And what unifies us as a church is not our personalities or our preferences. I like the soccer team.

You like the soccer team. Hey, let's join the same church together. What unifies us is that Jesus has worked in our hearts. But that diversity does come with its challenges, right?

There's misunderstanding. I think one thing. You think a different thing. I like this thing. You like that thing. I think we should do things this way. You think we should do things that way. So our diversity is a beautiful gift, but it does come with complexity.

It comes with challenges. There can be misunderstanding. There can be diverse views on how we should do things. Let's be honest. It's so much easier just to gather with a group of people who think like you and talk like you and act like you and dress like you and are just like you.

[9 : 54] But when we come together, diversity brings its challenges. Friends, isn't this what we see in Hong Kong a bit at the moment? Diverse opinions, diverse political views, diverse ways on how the current empire should be handled.

Diversity brings its challenges. And diverse opinions and views can lead to a lack of peace and a lack of goodwill amongst all mankind. When you look at the book of Philippians that was read to us earlier, one of the things we see is that this church is starting to experience a little bit of division in the church.

It's not massive. It's not huge. But there's people that have got different opinions. And Paul writes the book of Philippians to them to encourage them to be unified in their faith.

If you've got your Bible, turn to Philippians, and you're going to have to follow with me. There's a couple of verses I want us to look at. Look at what he says in chapter 1, verse 27. He says, Paul's emphasis here is on their oneness, their oneness of mind, oneness of heart, oneness of unity.

And he says, Don't be fighting against one another. It's not me against you. I want you to be standing next to each other, shoulder to shoulder, united for the cause of Christ.

[11 : 25] He appeals to them to be one. Look at chapter 2, verse 1 and 2. He says, If there's any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love or participation in the Spirit, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

So he says, My dear brothers and sisters, I long to hear that you are unified and one in the way that you are operating together. Look at chapter 2, verse 14.

He says, Brothers and sisters, do all things without grumbling. Without disputing. I know there's reason to have differences of opinions, but try and do things without grumbling and disputing together.

And then look at chapter 4. This is a very famous verse. In chapter 4, verse 2, he says this, I urge Yodia and I urge Sintiki to agree in the Lord.

Yes, I ask you, my true brother, to help these two women who have contended for the gospel at my side. Isn't that a remarkable thing? That for some reason, God decided to preserve for all time, for all cultures, for the rest of time on earth, these two ladies' names in the Bible who couldn't get along together and who are disagreeing.

[12 : 44] I'm so glad my name isn't in the Bible. I'm so glad my name isn't in Paul. Just Kevin and Theo, just sort yourselves out and get along better, right? And for all time, everybody's going to know these two guys.

Paul writes, and he says, Dear ladies, I know you've worked with me. I urge you to see it out, to be of one heart and one mind.

Paul writes this very warm and loving letter to this church to help them deal with the divisions and to restore the peace and the goodwill amongst each other. Now, here's the question I want to ask you.

Paul writes to encourage this unity. To what does he appeal? What is his argument? What is his flow? What is his reasoning that he gives them why they should be unified and why they should be humble and selfless and serving towards one another?

What's his argument? Well, look at chapter 2, verse 3 and 4. Remarkably, Paul appeals to Christmas. He appeals to the Christmas story.

[13 : 50] Look at what he says here in verse 3. He says, Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility, consider one another's more significant than yourselves. Friends, imagine living in a world like that.

Imagine living in a family or an office or a city in which everybody, the prevailing decision of our minds was not what's in it for me, not how can I advance my cause, but how can I advance your cause?

How can I help you succeed in life? Verse 4, Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. That's a remarkable statement.

Imagine we lived in a world like that where everybody thought, It's not about me, it's about how can I serve your interests? Verse 5, The reason why I should adopt this is because this is the attitude of Christ.

Verse 5, Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus. This is what Jesus was like and as followers of Jesus we are learning to become like him. Now Paul, what do you mean that this is what Jesus was like?

[14 : 54] Do you mean that when Jesus was arrested he didn't retaliate? Is that what you mean? Do you mean when Jesus was betrayed by Peter and denied him that you forgave him?

Is that what you mean? Well, those things are coming but before Paul even gets there he starts off with the story of Christmas. Look at what he says here in verse 6. For Jesus Christ who though he was in the form of God, now when it says the form of God that doesn't mean he was like God.

It doesn't mean he was similar to God. It means he was really and truly God. The NIV says by very nature God. So Jesus Christ who though he was by very nature God did not count equality with God something to be grasped, something to be seized, something to be exploited for his own advantage.

Remember Paul's writing to Philippians here and he's encouraging them because they're tempted to look at life through the lens of what's in it for me. How can I make the most of my life?

How can I make sure that I come out of this situation on top? How can I make sure that I don't suffer in the decisions that I make? And Paul writes and he says remember Jesus.

[16 : 07] Jesus was God and Jesus looked or approached life though he was equal to God, though he was God, he didn't consider how he can grasp or seize or make the most of his godness.

He didn't hold on to or take advantage of the fact that he is God, that which he is entitled to, that which was only fair and just. He didn't exploit that but rather, verse 7, he emptied himself.

He emptied himself. The word empty doesn't mean he was no longer God. It means he deprived himself of something that he was entitled to.

Jesus didn't stop being God or divine when he was born to Mary or lying in the manger outside of Bethlehem, but he put aside his glory and his rights that intrinsically came with being God.

Remember the wonderful Christmas carol? Mild he lays his glory by, born that man no more may die. And this is Paul's point. Jesus, in coming to us as a man, in taking on human form, he emptied himself.

[17 : 17] He lay aside his glory, taking the form of a servant born in the likeness of humanity. One theologian explained it like this. said equality with God is something that was inherent to Christ before he became a man.

Nevertheless, Godness, the fact that Jesus was God didn't mean that Christ was a grasping, seizing being as it would for the gods and the lords of the Philippians world.

It was not something to be seized upon to his own advantage, which is what you would normally expect from lordly powers. Rather, his equality with God found its truest expression when he emptied himself in his incarnation, becoming a man.

Friends, think of, the last couple of weeks we've been looking at the book of Revelation, right? And think of the emperors in the time of the Revelation. Domitian, one of the things, the laws he passed was that when he comes into town, everybody must say, Domitian is lord, Domitian is god.

Think of, when the emperor goes past, everybody bows down and worships him. The lords of that day demanded that you serve them, you honor them, you exalt them, you lift them up and you humble yourself before them.

[18 : 33] But what does Jesus do? Jesus doesn't exalt himself, he humbles himself, God becoming man. Jesus born in a manger with shepherds and cattle as his very first observers.

Friends, do you know the feeling, what it feels like when somebody has been condescending towards you. Do you know what the word condescending means? Condescending means when somebody treats you smaller or less worthy than you deserve.

Somebody speaks down at you. Maybe you feel like somebody's speaking to you and they're treating you like a child. I had that recently. Somebody spoke to me and I wanted to say, by the way, I'm not three years old, right?

I'm not a child. You can talk to me as a peer. Do you know that feeling when someone's been condescending towards you? They make you feel small or inferior or unworthy or they're disrespectful towards you.

One of the words that Bible scholars use for Jesus coming to earth is his condescension. Friends, when Jesus was born as man, no one was condescending towards him. Jesus chose of his own free will to condescend, to be made smaller, to come down to our level.

[19 : 51] Not because he had to but because he chose to. Or maybe think about what it feels like to be humiliated. Have you ever been humiliated? Treated shamefully or made to feel less worthy than you deserve?

Look at what it says here in Philippians. It says, Jesus embraced his humiliation. He humbled himself taking on the form, there's our word again, of the very nature of a servant.

Friends, it's remarkable to think that the God who made all things, who brought everything into existence, the one who thought of the molecular structure that the wood by which the manger is created, in which he's lying, the God who designed that and came up with that and thought of that in the first place, this sovereign, majestic God, the divine, infinitely glorious God would become a baby, a crying, helpless, dependent, nursing baby.

One Christmas carol said it like this, Behold within the manger lies the one who built the starry skies, the one who created all the universe, lying in a manger.

And the reason why is because of his profound love for us, because of his love for us. And friends, this is the apostle Paul's encouragement. Let that soften our hearts.

[21 : 12] Let that produce a gentleness, a humility in the way that we deal with and handle one another and view our differences. But that's not all. Look at what he says in verse 8.

Jesus becoming a man, what would he do with his humanity? The fact that Jesus is now a human being, what would he do? Would he use his humanity like a Trojan horse to crush his enemies?

You know the story of the Trojan horse? Some men want to go and attack the city of Troy, I think it is. Is that right? And they don't know how to get in there. And so they build this majestic horse and they come to the city of Troy and they say, we've got a present for you.

We have built a horse in your honor. But they don't know that inside this wooden horse soldiers are hiding. And so the city of Troy opens its gates to welcome in this big majestic horse and as they wheel it into the city center, all the soldiers jump out the middle and they attack and they defeat the city of Troy, right?

Is that what Jesus did? Did Jesus say, let me hide myself in a man and then once I'm a man I will destroy my enemies. What did Jesus do when he became a man?

[22 : 23] Look at what verse 9 says. Verse 8. Being found in human form, he humbled himself further, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

You see friends, the Christmas story doesn't end with three wise men bowing down on their knees with gold and frankincense and myrrh. The Christmas story doesn't end with the wise men hearing that Herod actually wants to kill Jesus and so they sneak off a different way.

The Christmas story doesn't end with Joseph and Mary evading Herod by running off to Egypt. Friends, the Christmas story ends 30 years later with Jesus being nailed to a cross.

Jesus dying and taking the sins of the world, your sin and my sin, my brokenness and my self-centeredness, my guilt and my shame, my self-glory and my pride and my self-righteousness.

Jesus took it upon the cross. Jesus took the very worst about me and he took it on the cross and there he cried out and he said of those that were hanging in there and he said of us, Father, forgive them.

[23 : 33] They know not what they do. Friends, Jesus took upon himself the sins of the world, your sin and my sin so that we can be forgiven, acquitted, set free.

Jesus is in a magnificent love for us. The Christmas story ends with him dying on the cross. Only of Jesus can it be said the reason he was born, he was born in order that he may die.

And friends, the degree to which we see that and understand that and feel the graciousness and the kindness of Jesus towards us is the degree to which we will offer grace and compassion and tenderness to those around us when they hurt us and they let us down or when we have differences of opinions.

Said another way, friends, the degree to which I have anger and bitterness and animosity in my heart is the degree to which I don't understand the kindness and the grace of God towards me.

Think about how Peter writes this in 1 Peter. He says, he says, bless those that persecute you. Pray for those that revile you.

[24 : 42] When someone is evil towards you, don't be evil back. Pray for them and bless them and love them. And what's his reasoning? What does he appeal to? Why should we do this?

Look what he says in verse 18. For Christ suffered once and for all the righteous for the unrighteous that he might bring us to God. Friends, the reason that we can respond to antagonism with grace and gentleness is because once upon a time Jesus responded to my antagonism towards him with unbelievable grace and tenderness hanging on the cross taking my sin and my guilt for me so that I can be reconciled to the Father.

I'm sure many of you saw this. In the last year, there was an amazing story that came out of the US. September last year, September 2018, a young African-American man, he's 26 years old, he's sitting in his apartment block in Texas.

He's watching TV one night and a white lady, an ex-police officer, comes in the apartment and shoots him dead. And what happened is that this lady has just come off duty, she's tired, she's maybe worked all night, she comes in the apartment and she thinks she's on the fourth floor of the apartment block but she's actually on the third floor.

And so she goes to the door, she's surprised that it's not locked, she walks in and she sees this man in her house and she thinks he's a burglar. And so her first instinct, she reaches for a gun and she shoots him dead.

[26 : 17] And as she sees what's happened, she looks around and she realizes she's not in her apartment, she's actually in his apartment. And so she's just killed this innocent man.

And she's panicking, she phones 911 while he's busy dying, she tries to get an ambulance there and the ambulance doesn't come in time and before the ambulance gets there, this man dies.

Anyway, she's obviously guilty, she hands herself in and she goes on trial and she's sentenced, she's convicted of manslaughter. And before she's sentenced, there is a thing called a victim impact statement which means one of the victims, someone who's been affected by the crime, can speak to the jury about how this crime has affected them so that the jury can give an adequate sentencing.

And so the victim's brother, this young man, he's 23, 24 years old, he makes this victim impact statement and he goes and he's standing in the dock to speak about how this crime has affected him and how he thinks, you know, traditionally how the jury should ramp up the charges and the sentencing.

And this young man, he doesn't speak for very long but he takes the stand and this is what he says. he looks across the room at this police officer that's killed his brother and he says, if you are truly sorry, I want you to know that I forgive you.

[27 : 44] I can't speak for others but speaking for myself, I want you to know that I still love you just the way I love any other person. I do not hope that you rot and die like my brother died.

Right now, I want the very best for you. He says, I wasn't going to say this in front of anybody else. I don't want to see you going to jail. In fact, I want the very best for you because that's what, I know that's exactly what my brother Botham would want for you.

I think giving your life to Christ would be the very best thing that Botham would want you to do. He looks her in the eye and he says, I love you as a person and I don't wish for anything bad to happen to you.

And then he turns to the judge and he says, am I allowed to get up and give this lady a hug? And the judge doesn't know what to do. It's like unprecedented and breaking all sorts of conventions and so there's silence for a few moments and he asks her again and eventually the judge says, okay, you can.

And this man gets up, walks across the courtroom to this lady and he gives her this hug and he says, there's no bitterness, all is forgiven. I'm so sorry that this has happened to you.

[28 : 57] And you can see on the video the judge pulling out some tissues and she's just crying at what she's witnessing before her. Now friends, what led to that? What motivated this young man to do it?

When you see the video, he didn't have a script. He wasn't premeditated. He hadn't written out. He's just sitting there in the dark sharing from his heart. And what he says is, I don't want anything bad to happen for you.

I want the best for you. I love you and I forgive you. What causes this young man to do this? Friends, it is that his heart had been so melted, so softened by the love of Christ towards him that he looks the person that killed his brother in the eye and he says, I love you and I want the best for you.

Now, we may say, yeah, but if we just go around giving grace and forgiveness to everyone, where's justice? Where's the justice in that? Someone once said this, mercy and grace is like a stick of dynamite that brings down the walls of our hearts.

Friends, mercy and grace don't deny justice, but they do rid our hearts of the anger, of the resentment, of the bitterness, of the hardness that causes disagreements and differences of opinions to become divisive and damaging.

[30 : 08] Friends, Jesus Christ on the cross, we see mercy and justice. Justice because the full weight of my sin and your sin was put upon him. Justice because the full wrath and the anger of God was poured out on him.

justice because none of it was swept under the carpet. Every evil thing that was done, every bit of wrong that was done in the world, every bit of pain and wickedness was fully dealt with, fully punished on the cross.

But on the cross, we also see extravagant mercy because on the cross, God, there Jesus died in our place to take our sin for us so that we don't need to. Friends, where there's division and disagreement in the church in Philippi, where brothers and sisters can't see eye to eye and adults couldn't, young adults couldn't see eye to eye with their parents.

Paul doesn't write to them and say, come on, you Christians now, sort yourselves out. You should be better. Paul doesn't write to them and say, listen here, .3, .2 of the membership document says you shouldn't disagree with one another.

Now just pretend to get along. What does he do? He reminds them of the humility and the kindness of Jesus. He says, Dear brothers and sisters, do nothing from selfish ambition, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.

[31 : 27] Lower yourself and lift others up. Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others. Remembering Jesus, remembering his condescension, remembering his humiliation, remember his coming to us at Christmas, remembering his crucifixion on the cross.

Friends, this year, many of us are going to get Christmas cards that say words like love and peace and joy and hope and all these good things. Where do we get those words from? We get them from the stunning announcement of the angels.

Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace and goodwill to all mankind. Friends, because all this, because God decided to become one of us, to take on human form, to lay his glory aside, born that men no more need to die, and ultimately to go to the cross.

Friends, this Christmas and this next year, with all the difficulties going on in our city, may the good news of great joy melt our hearts, bring down the walls, flood us with his grace, that we too can offer peace and joy and love and grace to those around us and those in our city.

Let's pray together. Father, oh, heavenly Father, we so desperately need your gospel to come and take root in our hearts.

[32 : 48] Father, this Christmas, we don't just need to be told what to do or how to be nicer kind of people. God, we need the good news of Jesus to flood our hearts, to flood over us again.

God, we need the kindness of God to melt our own hearts. God, to bring down the walls in our lives. Jesus, I pray this Christmas amongst all the festivities, amongst all the food, the presents, the meals, the hanging out with friends, God, may you, in the quiet place of our lives, may you, Jesus, reign supreme, we pray.

We pray these things in your wonderful and your powerful name. Amen.