

# BELPRES CHURCH

## **We Is Better Than Me**

### **Philippians 2**

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All right. Scripture, Philippians chapter 2. "Therefore, if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit, and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, rather, in humility, value others above yourselves. Not looking to your own interests, but each of you to the interests of the other."

A man who goes to a different church told me recently that he played a prank on his pastor who loves college football. And 30 minutes before this pastor's favorite team was about to play its rival, just to mess with him, this man texted his pastor and said, "Oh man, I hate to bother you, but something's happened and I really need to talk to my pastor. Could you meet me at the church in 30 minutes?" And this guy said it took the pastor a while to text back, but finally the pastor texted back, "Yes, I will meet you in 30 minutes." And then this guy waited five or 10 minutes and called the pastor. And when the pastor answered, he said, "Nothing's wrong, is there?"

Okay, that is so mean. Don't do that to me ever, because I know the dilemma this poor pastor was having. Like there's this thing you want to do, but there's someone that needs you, and you're willing to do that, but also kind of deep inside you have this thought, right? "But what about me? What about my need for college football?"

We're doing a sermon series comparing what our culture says with what Jesus says, because what Jesus says is ultimately more life-giving and joy producing. One of the things we hear in our culture, and if we're honest, sometimes even think or say out loud, at least I know I do, is, "But what about me? What about me?" Sometimes we hear it

phrased just like that, or sometimes we hear it in other phrases like, "Live your best life now," or "I just need a little me time."

But Jesus says, "We is better than me." In fact, one of the best ways to fulfill me is to be part of a we, a Christian community, because that brings joy, and meaning, and purpose. We is better than me every day of the week and twice on Sundays, which is a weird phrase. I think it's a theater phrase, but it feels like it should be a church phrase, right? So I'm going to use it. Every happiness study ever done, every study, shows that one of the key things to lasting happiness is having deep, meaningful relationships.

And right after the verses that I just read, the Apostle Paul who is writing this, sort of talks about, gives examples of how being part of a Christian community can be deeply fulfilling. He says to the Philippians, "I hope to send Timothy to you. I have no one else like him." And the literal meaning of the original Greek there is of equal soul or like-souled or like my own soul. That's how he feels about Timothy. "As a son with his father, he has served with me in the work of the gospel. He's like a son to me, and we're on mission together, striving for a common purpose." Then he talks about another friend of his named Epaphroditus, who Paul describes as "my brother, coworker, and fellow soldier."

So Paul is part of a community where he has deep, meaningful friendships with people who are like a son to him, but also like a brother and also teammates pulling together for the same thing. And unfortunately, that is increasingly rare in our culture for us to have these kinds of relationships because our instinct in our culture and what our culture rewards is, "But what about me? Pursuing my best life now, my dreams, my goals is all focused on me."

Now to be clear, we do need boundaries and we do need to take care of ourself. And we all do need some me time now and then. But in our culture, increasingly, me time is becoming all the time. And even people with no boundaries who are always doing things for other people, often underneath there's a me-focused motive. They just want people to like them. But we were made for so much more. We were made for community, which is what the church is supposed to be, a community where we find a few close friends, but also where we're part of a larger body pulling together in the same direction. And it is so counterculture because we are a nation of people pursuing our own desires, trying to live our best lives now. Or best lives for our kids if we're parents. But kids are really just an extension of ourselves. So that's still a me and mine kind of focus.

Not only that, what values are we passing on to our kids if we have no time for community, what are we teaching them? We have a lot of followers on social media, but no close friendships. The pandemic made everything worse. Now we work from home, shop from home and do church from home, which is making us more and more isolated

while rates of anxiety and depression are skyrocketing in part because we're lonely and isolated. And unlike in Africa or Asia or Latin America where community is everything and we can learn from people there and when they come here as immigrants, often they don't understand why aren't we inviting them into our homes because that's just standard for them, it's because US culture is very individualistically oriented.

Now, some of that is good, valuing the individual is a good thing, but it goes too far and it seeps into our faith. So for instance, let's take the Bible verse I love to pick on because it is the most misapplied verse in our culture, okay? Jeremiah 29:11. I love to pick on this verse because we so botch it in our culture. "I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper and not to harm you, plans to give you a future and a hope." And we individualize that and we think, "Oh, how nice God has a plan for me. I love that God has a plan for me. I wonder what his plan for me is. What's his life plan for my life, my best life. Now, me, me, me. My, my, my."

There's just one problem, one tiny little problem. The you there is plural. God is saying this to the nation of Israel, "I know the plans I have for y'all. Plans to prosper all y'all and give you guys a future and a hope." It changes the verse, doesn't it? So as we do this Bible reading plan together, remember this, most of the time when you see the word you in the Bible, it's plural. It's to a community. Yes, God has a plan for your life. And part of that plan is to put you in a community where you can find deep meaningful relationships because "we is better than me" every day of the week and twice on Sunday. And to get to those kinds of meaningful relationships and be that kind of community, we need a Copernican revolution of our soul.

Back in 1543, Copernicus said, unlike what was thought at the time, the earth is not the center of the solar system. The sun is. "We need a Copernican revolution of our souls where we realize we are not the center of the universe." We know that up here, but don't always act like it. And that's what the Apostle Paul means in today's passage when he says, "Make my joy." See, these relationships, these kinds of deep relationships brings joy. "Make my joy complete by being like-minded." And like-minded there doesn't mean we always agree. It doesn't always mean we have the same opinions or think the same. It means we are striving for a common purpose. So the first ingredient to "we is better than me" relationships is common mission.

What holds Paul and his friends together is not that they all have the same job, it's not that they all vote the same way, it's not that they all like golf because golf's not godly. At least it brings out not godly things in me. I end up having to apologize for my rich theological language. They're on mission together to make Jesus known and make this earth more like his heaven. And there is no mission that is more deeply rewarding and fulfilling than that mission, not even politics. And this is so different than our relationships today, which are often so transactional, our relationship.

I mean, think of the dating apps. Now unfortunately, we're so isolated. Sometimes those dating apps are necessary, but it's so... What does it train us? It's so transactional. Swipe left, swipe right. It's like shopping for cereal or something, right? No Tweety's, but yes, yes, yes to Frosted Flakes. And it makes all our friendships, everything's so transactional. "What are you doing for me?" And if we don't get something out of it, we move on. Because after all, what about me? What about my needs? Do you ever think about me once in a while? What about me? No, I don't think about you because you seem to be doing quite a good job of it yourself. And if we're lacking these kinds of "we is better than me" relationships, a question to ask is, "What am I living for? Where am I aimed?" Because if it's a mission that is bigger than me and mine, to bring God's kingdom, we will find like-souled people to partner with.

Paul goes on, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit." In the Greek, selfish ambition also carries kind of the connotation of a spirit of squabbling. Is there any squabbling in churches sometimes? A vain conceit is a hunger to be recognized. I see this in my gym all the time. Some guy stand in front of the mirror, shirt off, flexing, taking pictures to post on social media. It is so embarrassing when someone catches me doing that. I don't actually do that.

Selfish ambition and vain conceit are the reasons we can't have nice things. They wreck churches, families, friendships. Instead, Paul says, "In humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests, but each to the interests of others." In other words, the way to get to these rich, meaningful, deep relationships is you have to have an attitude that says, "You before me." Your needs, your wants first, then me. This makes for flourishing friendships, flourishing families, flourishing churches.

Let me tell you a frequent conversation that every pastor in every church has, okay? Not just here. Every church, every pastor that has this conversation. Somebody is upset about something, a decision or music or a sermon or something like that and the pastor says, "I hear you, but please also understand that we are a community of people here. And the very thing you love, other people hate. And the thing you hate, other people love. We're trying to manage all of that because we're a community."

Not once when I have said that. Not once do I recall anyone ever saying, "Okay. I mean, I guess you might have a point there." Not once. Not once. I've been here 21 years. Always the response is either just ignore the statement and keep on going. Or say, "Well, I'm not the only one that feels this way." Yes, I know you're not, but there are others who don't feel this way. Or people will just flat out say it, "But what about me? You don't care about me." No, we do care about you. It's just we also care about the other yous that are here, and we're trying to care for all of you.

When we insist on having everything our way, we miss out on these amazing relationships that we could be having with our brothers and sisters in Christ. We also lose our chance to model for a very divided culture, Jesus better way of living, where everyone is looking out not for their own interests, but for the interests of others, which means everyone's interests are being looked out for just without all the fighting. Now, whenever we talk about this sort of thing, laying down our rights for other people, almost immediately the question is, "Well, am I supposed to just be a doormat and everyone else gets what they want and I don't get anything I want?" Okay, first, why did we go there so quickly? I do the same thing. "Why is that the place we go to? Are you saying I have to be a doormat?" No. These relationships need to be mutual sacrifice. Not always 50/50 at the exact same time in all the different categories, but across the totality of the relationship, we're talking about mutual sacrifice.

And it's not about being a doormat. It's about prioritizing relationship. Prioritize relationship over getting my way all the time, relationship over being right in some argument, relationship over career advancement to get to these "we is better than me" relationships, which are way more fulfilling than getting everything we want all the time. These kinds of relationships have three characteristics. First, challenge. We challenge each other to be the people God made us to be, which means sometimes we may have to say to someone, "You're not being the person God created you to be, and I know you have it in you to do better." And who do we say that sort of thing to? People we hardly know who irritate us? No, we say that only to people who know that we love them.

Second characteristic is working through conflict. Rather than avoid conflict because it's uncomfortable, it's loving someone enough to go into conflict and be uncomfortable and work through it because there are no deep relationships without conflict from time to time. And then third, mutual sacrifice of time. Because the biggest block to community is we're also busy, but busy is just another word for priorities. Sacrifice time, that may mean I don't rise up the career ladder as quickly because I'm prioritizing relationship. We make that sacrifice. It may mean I have to sacrifice some of my preferences, mutual sacrifice. Now, all of that's super hard to do, super hard to do. It's not how we're wired.

And so where do we get the power? Where do we get the motivation to do this? Well, two things. First, what we always say, because it's true, get close to Jesus. Paul starts in his passage saying, "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, any comfort from his love..." And that "if" there is actually rhetorical so what he's saying is, "Since you are united with Christ, when you are united with Christ, you will begin to sacrifice for other people." Jesus put himself ahead of us. He sacrificed for us. The more we experience that, the more able we are to do that for others.

And the second is to want more, want more for yourself and want more for this community. There is more joy in "we is better than me" relationships than there is in getting our own way all the time. There's more joy in these kinds of relationships on a

personal level with a few people that we can be close to, but also as a church. This is about the kind of church we could be because nobody gets up on a Sunday and says, "You know what? I just have just have this sudden urge to go someplace where everyone is fighting about music and politics and all kinds of things, and everyone's trying to get their own way. I just have this sudden urge to go to a place like that. I know. Let's go to church." Nobody says that. But a community where we're not demanding our own way, but sacrificing for each other, who wouldn't want to be a part of that?

So action step for this week. Make some sacrifices to prioritize relationships this week. Maybe that means joining an all-in group or a service team here at church. Maybe it means letting go of a preference or of a thing that I want. Maybe it means to prioritize these relationships because they lead to lasting joy. That's your action step. Make some sacrifices. We preachers often live what we preach, and that has certainly been true for me the last couple of weeks. We planned this topic for this Sunday way back in August. And as many of you know, two and a half weeks ago, a very close friend of mine died in his sleep at the age of 44. So young, and he was super healthy. Just one of those things.

His name was Brian. He was a student in my college ministry when I was a college pastor. He and I had breakfast every Friday where we would discuss the three Gs in his life, God, grades and girls every Friday for four years. But not just that. We'd go running together, hiking together, backpacking trips together. When Christina and I moved here, Brian and another student named Scott, who I was also close to, and they were part of my installation service here, they were in seminary in Vancouver. And they'd come down and spend about one weekend a month with us for the whole three years that they were there. In fact, when we watch our home videos, they're always on the home videos. And at one point my kids asked, "Did they live with us?" Sort of.

I officiated Brian's wedding. I spoke at his ordination. I never thought I'd have to speak at his memorial. He was so much younger. He was supposed to speak at mine. Brian became senior pastor of Highland Park Presbyterian Church in Dallas. And we would talk a lot about our successes, our failures, our sins, because we would confess our sins to each other, our fears, our hopes. We'd swap best practices of what was working in our churches. Because see, we were on mission together, to advance God's kingdom. We shared a lot of life. When Brian was in college, his mom died and I was with him that night, my arm around his shoulder as he cried, even as his arm was around my shoulders at various points in my life when I needed his support. We prioritized being together. He'd come here. I'd go to Dallas often for several days. And for two busy senior pastors with families, that is an extravagant sacrifice of time.

At his memorial, I saw this picture that I had never seen before, this picture that I'd never seen before. It was at his wedding, which I officiated. And yes, I had more hair back then. I know that's what y'all are thinking, so we might as well just acknowledge it so that we can move on. And someone asked me, "Do you remember what you were saying to

him?" I do. I was telling him how much I loved him and how proud I was of him and the husband and the father that I knew he was going to be and he was a great husband and a great father. I was telling him how much I was proud of his character and his courage.

And then there's this picture, which is in my office, and it was in Brian's office as well. On the far left over here is my lifelong mentor, Steve Haner, who mentored me, and then me and then Brian who I mentored, and then a high school student who Brian was mentoring at the time, who is now in his 30s. He's not a pastor, but he helps lead a men's ministry where he is mentoring younger men as well. Four generations of mentors. This picture has been shown in churches all over the country, and it's been shown at men's retreats because this is how we become disciples. It's caught, not taught. We become disciples only in these "we is better than me" relationships.

And for the last couple of weeks, every time I look at this picture, all I can think is wrong order. Steve died several years ago. I'm in the batter's box, not Brian. Not that I want to go anytime soon, but it's just the wrong order. Well, most of the guys that I had invested in deeply when they were in college, most of those guys were at Brian's memorial service because my friendship with Brian existed in a larger community. And afterwards, one of them rented a private room in a restaurant, and all of my guys were there. And we talked and we told stories about Brian. Many of them funny, many of them inappropriate and couldn't be shared at the memorial, but were just so good they needed to be relived.

We talked about how grateful we were for Brian and for each other and to God, and we shut the place down. And there was nowhere else I would've rather been that night than there with them. But here's the thing, those relationships were not always easy. There was conflict. We didn't always agree. There was challenge and confrontation. I mean, when some of those guys were in college, they needed a little bit of challenging confrontation. I'd be talking to them, I'd be, "I'm sorry, you said what to your girlfriend? How did that work? Oh, she got mad. Weird, huh? What did you learn from that?"

But they would also challenge me and confront me when I wasn't being the man that they needed me to be. And we all had to sacrifice some of our preferences, things that we want to prioritize the relationships. Hard won friendships, but so rich and so deep and so real. And whatever I sacrificed, cheap at twice the price to get those relationships. To me, Brian was a son, but also a brother, a pastor to me, colleague, friend, for 26 years. And to lose a friend like that with whom I had gone so deep and been on mission with for so long hurts, so, so much. And I'm glad. I'm glad it hurts because grief is a measure of gratitude. It hurts because it was good. And the deeper the grief, the deeper the gratitude. So when I am grieving, I am at the exact same time saying thank you. So even now, in all of this grief, with all that I've gained and all that I've lost, if you ask me, I will tell you, we is better than me every day of the week and twice on Sundays.



So Jesus, make us this kind of church where these kinds of relationships happen. Lord, teach us to sacrifice for each other so that we can be the people of God. And Jesus, I can confess, I am so me focused. "What about me?" I'm just so me focused. Change my heart. Change our hearts. Give us that Copernican revolution of our souls, where we put you in the middle. And Lord, help us be the kind of people that sacrifice for each other, the kind of community that we don't see in our world that people are drawn to because it is so different and it's so life giving. And out of this large community, help us to find a few people that we can walk with like Brian and I, were able to walk together for 26 years. We want to be those people. We want to be that church, our own hearts get in the way.

So Lord, change us, heal us, mend us, mold us so that we can be the people of God. And we will give you all the praise and all the glory because you are faithful and you are good all the time. And we trust you. In your name, Jesus, amen.

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### **Discussion Questions:**

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*Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.*

**Opening Question:** Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

**Scripture Reflection Questions:** Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following (note: we use the same scripture reflection questions each week so that we can practice using the same tools over time as we examine different scriptures):

- What do you feel when you read this scripture (excited, angry, worried, etc....)? Why do you think that is? (Explain in your group and then take that response to Jesus in prayer this week.)
- As you read this scripture, where does it challenge your current cultural context?

**Sermon Reflection Questions:** Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- According to Philippians 2, what should the characteristics (plural) of Christian fellowship/relationships be?
- In his sermon, Scott describes the joy that is found in a "we is better than me" relationship. Where or how have you experienced something like that? How might you make a sacrifice this week to practice putting someone else's needs first in a relationship that is important to you?



**Closing Question and Application:** Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

**Closing group prayer:** Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.