

'Get A Hold of' Your Attitudes'

"Therefore, if you have any encouragement for me from your being in union with the Messiah, any comfort flowing from love, any fellowship with me in the Spirit, or any compassion and sympathy" (Phil. 2:1)

♪ Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory. ♪

Like a famished dog gnawing away the last trace of meat from a bone, the Nazis stripped Victor Frankl's life down to almost nothing. They took all his possessions, including his clothes and his wedding ring. They shaved his head. They stole his freedom. They robbed him of his family: his mother, father, brother, and wife all perished in the concentration camps. Only one sister survived.

Once a renowned psychiatrist, Frankl was reduced to being slave laboring at the notorious death camp Auschwitz. Most of his existence was spent laying railway tracks and digging—one time he had to dig a tunnel for a water main alone. All the while he was starved, deprived of proper sleep, shouted at, threatened, abused. The Nazis' dehumanization program missed no detail.

Frankl could have refused to cooperate, forfeiting his life, such as it was. He could have seethed in hate, plotting his revenge. He could have adopted his captors' view of himself, that of a subhuman wretch allowed the privilege (or curse) of life in return for serving the Third Reich. He could have given up and died in hopelessness. But Frankl, humiliated and robbed of every external possession, realized the Nazis could never steal, shape, or dictate one thing: a person's attitude. In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, he writes of those prisoners whose heroic choices shone through the darkness.

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread ' They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate.

Let's look at this 'last of the human freedoms' so we can keep from being 'molded into the form of the typical inmate' of this world.

My Attitude: It's Up to Me

Our attitude can have more influence than our past, our education, money, circumstances, appearance, skills, failures, successes, or how others treat us. Though most of us will probably never find ourselves in a concentration camp, the borders of our comfort zones will be assaulted by the unexpected. Our hearts will be stripped and shaven by disappointment, failure, unmet expectations, illness, frustration, and broken relationships. We don't, however, have to allow any of these things to dictate our responses. If our minds are guided by the Word of *G-d*, we can respond with a *godly* attitude.

Take the Philippians, for example. Judging from *Sha'ul's* admonitions to that congregation, they had a tendency toward disunity (see Phil. 1:27; 4:2-3). But instead of fighting one another, *Sha'ul* encouraged them to reflect an attitude rooted in their relationship with Messiah. ¹*"Therefore, if you have any encouragement for me from your being in union with the Messiah, any comfort flowing from love, any fellowship with me in the Spirit, or any compassion and sympathy,* ²*then complete my joy by having a common purpose and a*

common love, by being one in heart and mind." (Phil. 2:1-2) *If . . . if . . . if . . . if.* These begin four conditional clauses in the Greek. Commentator Robert Lightner explains the significance of this structure.

The "if" clauses, being translations of first-class conditions in Greek, speak of certainties. So in this passage "if" may be translated "since." Paul wrote here about realities, not questionable things. Paul appealed on the basis of (a) encouragement from being united with Messiah... (b) comfort from His love... (c) fellowship with the Spirit... (d) tenderness and compassion.

Thus, "Since you have all these things," says Sha'ul, "you have what you need to exercise godly attitudes toward one another."

An Attitude of Unselfish Humility

What kinds of attitudes should a Believer cultivate? In verses 3 and 4, the Rabbi gets more specific.

³*Do nothing out of rivalry or vanity; but, in humility, regard each other as better than yourselves—⁴ look out for each other's interests and not just for your own.*

Sha'ul's first admonishment is to change from being self-centered to being others-centered. It's the kind of attitude Messiah had when He came to earth to die for our sins.

⁵*Let your attitude toward one another be governed by your being in union with the Messiah Yeshua:*
⁶*Though he was in the form of G-d, he did not regard equality with G-d something to be possessed by force*
⁷*On the contrary, he emptied himself, in that he took the form of a slave by becoming like human beings are. And when he appeared as a human being,*
⁸*he humbled himself still more by becoming obedient even to death—death on a stake as a criminal! (vv. 5-8)*

That's not an easy attitude to adopt. But did you happen to notice the word *humility* in verse 3? It provides the key to carrying out the command. When it comes right down to it, *Yeshua* chose to come down from heaven and live among us. His humility was an act of His will. And it's the same with us. We can't feel humble or act humble until we think humble. Our instincts clamor, 'Look out for number one,' but we don't have to listen to that voice. We can shape our attitudes—and then our actions—to serve others.

An Attitude of Positive Cooperation

Now let's at verse 14: "*Do all things without grumbling or disputing.*"

Grumbling is displeasure expressed in murmuring. Listen to the sound of the Greek word—*goggusmos*. Sounds like grumbling, doesn't it? You can hear it every day at work—*goggusmos*, *goggusmos*. You can hear it in your homes—*goggusmos*, *goggusmos*. You hear it among Believers...

If you want to *goggusmos* your way through life, you'll find plenty of company. But you'll also be discouraged, depressed, and disappointed. Rabbi Sha'ul exhorts us to conduct our lives in a spirit of cooperation-seeking to build up one another with our speech instead of tearing each other down.

An Attitude of Genuine Joy

It is hard to grumble when you're rejoicing.

⁴*Rejoice in union with the L-rd always! I will say it again: rejoice!*
⁵*Let everyone see how reasonable and gentle you are. The L-rd is near! (Phil. 4:4-5)*

Rabbi Sha'ul's words carry a lot of weight when you think about who he's writing to—The Philippian Believers weren't exactly living a life of luxury. They had a lot more to worry about than beating

the crowd to the Swamp on Saturday afternoons. They were being persecuted, ostracized, and even executed by the Jews as well as the Romans.

How then, could they be expected to rejoice? Notice *Sha'ul* doesn't say, 'Rejoice in your circumstances.' He says, "*Rejoice in the L-rd.*" Our joy is rooted in a Person, not in circumstances. Rabbi *Sha'ul's* next words tell us how to rejoice in the *L-rd*.

6Don't worry about anything; on the contrary, make your requests known to G-d by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving. 7Then G-d's shalom, passing all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds safe in union with the Messiah Yeshua. (Phil. 4:6-7)

Prayer shifts the load from our shoulders to *G-d's*, making room for the peace only He can provide.

Aggressive and Passive Alternatives

When circumstances overwhelm us, we have a choice to make: to focus on *G-d* or to focus on our problems. When we look at the problems too long, we usually drift to either blame or self-pity.

Blame

When life doesn't go our way, we often become aggressive. We start looking for people to blame: ourselves, others, even *G-d*. But if we blame ourselves when we're not responsible, we bind ourselves to the past and imprison our self-esteem in the dungeon of self-flagellation. If we blame someone else, we risk poisoning our relationship with that person. If we blame *G-d*, we lash out against our single most important source of help. One psychologist puts it this way:

Only one kind of counselee [is] relatively hopeless: that person who blames other people for his or her problems. If you can own the mess you're in. . . . there is hope for you and help available. As long as you blame others, you will be a victim for the rest of your life. ---Carl Rogers

Sometimes things just happen; there is no one to blame. And even if there is, harboring hate instead of offering forgiveness will do little to make things better.

Self-pity

"Nobody loves me, everybody hates me-I think I'll eat some worms." You might remember that little ditty from childhood. Perhaps you've even sung it when self-pity, the passive response to life's circumstances, sets in. Self-pity keeps us down. It makes us feel like the victim of an unfair world. It tells us that life, which could once be trusted, has turned on us. Our countenance droops with despair, and our hearts sink in helplessness.

Feelings of loneliness often stir up self-pity. We begin to believe the lie that nobody, especially *G-d*, cares and that our problem is unique. "No one could possibly understand what I've been through," we cry. In this way, self-pity distorts reality.

Are you abandoned? You're surrounded by others who have been abandoned and/or divorced—and have made it through. Have you failed? Welcome to the club; not one of us is perfect. Have you sinned? There's only One who hasn't—the *L-rd Yeshua* Himself. And because we're related to Him, *G-d* forgives us and beckons us to move ahead with Him as our focus. We're often harder on ourselves than *G-d* is. Don't be sucked in by self-pity.

Food for the Right Attitude

Rabbi *Sha'ul*, in his typical style, never tells us to avoid something without giving us something to practice in its place. In Philippians 4:8, he provides six thoughts to dwell on that will squelch the voices of blame and self-pity and help us develop a godly attitude. "Finally, brethren," he says,

⁸*In conclusion, brothers, focus your thoughts on what is true, noble, righteous, pure, lovable or admirable, on some virtue or on something praiseworthy.*

"If there is any excellence," *Sha'ul* concludes, "and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things." Some people might call this a denial of reality, just the power of positive, but unrealistic, thinking. Not so. Look what comes first on the list: whatever is true. *G-d* doesn't want us to live in a dream world, where we deny the existence of hardship and escape into fantasy. Rather, He wants our attitudes to be rooted in truth.

- Whatever is honorable—To honor is "to worship, revere." "Dwell on the things that are worthy of respect," *Sha'ul* is saying. Not thoughts and images that are flippant, cheap, superficial, and shallow.
- Whatever is right—whatever conforms to *G-d*'s standards. An attitude that reflects Messiah-likeness is one that conforms to the Word, not the world (see Rom. 12:2).
- Whatever is pure—This phrase "*refers to what is wholesome, not mixed with moral impurity.*" Purity isn't a synonym for prudishness. A high-necked dress or a pious smile does not a pure person make. Purity means that we have thoughts and actions that can hold up to the scrutiny of *G-d*.
- Whatever is lovely—The best translation here is probably winsome. Maybe we need to work on this one most of all. How pleasant are we to be around? How cheerful? How enjoyable?

Finally, dwell on the things that are *of good* repute. Literally, "of good report." This is the opposite of a "*that's-just-me-and-people-can-take-it-or-leave-it*" attitude. People of good repute, though not living to please others, care about how they come across.

Prologue

Yes, we can control our attitudes. Why else would Solomon advise:

Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life. (Prov. 4:23)

Think of your mind as a safe deposit box. Every day, we make attitude "deposits" into that box. It's not like a checking or savings account or a mutual fund. We don't gain interest or receive dividends. We can take out only what we put in.

So fill that box with *godly* attitudes—like joy, humility, encouragement, forgiveness, love and guard them. Don't let anyone steal them and replace them with selfishness, discouragement, vengeance, or hatred. Hold on to the key. You fill the box. You determine how you'll respond to life.

Some of us are sweating under the blazing lights of adversity. We feel stripped of all that matters and broken beyond hope. Our only reality seems to be the pain we feel. But we don't have to give up. We still have our minds and our will. And no Third or Fourth Reich on earth can touch those, if we belong to the heavenly kingdom.

ⁱ Adapted from *Strengthening Our Grip*
Chuck Swindol, 1990