

Harmony for the Holidays Philippians 2:1-5

Introduction:

“Achieve perfect harmony without all the work.” How nice would it be if harmony could be achieved by a pill? Harmony at home, harmony at work, harmony on the ball field, harmony in the classroom, harmony on a date. You know who I would provide Harmonex to? Our elected officials. How nice would it be if our politicians could take a little yellow pill that would provide harmony in politics?

But all of us know that harmony can't be found in a pill. In fact this week ushers in a season of great relational disharmony for lots of families. Some of us will be flung together with family we may or may not like and disharmony will rue the day. In fact, some of us can feel the tension welling up inside us right now as I mention it. The critical comment about your food. The look of disdain at your kids. The condescending conversation about your career. The question designed to embarrass you in public. It might come from an in-law or a spouse or your child. It might be that relative you were obligated to invite or the sibling trying to compete.

Thanksgiving and Christmas are holidays centered around fun and family and giving, but many times the holidays are something we've learned to endure. Or maybe it's a quiet building bitterness waiting to explode. Or maybe the holidays become a family fracas.

Some of us right now are worrying about weather or not the family is going to get along. Some of you are wondering who might show up for Thanksgiving because the disharmony already exists and Aunt June won't come if Crazy Phil is going to be there. Or is Uncle John going to be sober this year. Or are my sister's kids going to destroy the flowers again.

We have these dreams of the way we wish it could be, but experience has taught us a nightmare may be brewing.

How's that for a Happy Thanksgiving introduction? Unfortunately, what I just described is real for far too many families. And, I can't stand here today and promise you harmony. There is no Harmonex. There is no little yellow pill. You can't lace the gravy with Harmonex so everyone will get along. But that doesn't mean that harmony is a hoax. Harmony is possible.

This morning I'd like us to look at the Bible for some tips we can use that will help promote harmony in our relationships. We are going to look in the Bible at a letter the Apostle Paul wrote to a church. It is Philippians 2:1-5. Let me read it out loud and then we'll see what God wants us to learn about relational harmony. ►

^{NLT} **Philippians 2:1** Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate? ² Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose. ► ³ Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. ⁵ You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

In his letter, Paul is encouraging the church to have harmony. ► He says things like:

² Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose.

And in this section of the letter, Paul gives some principles for advancing relational harmony. And even though Paul was writing to a church, these principles work other places as well. Places like home, work, at Thanksgiving and Christmas get-togethers. These principles work anywhere relationships exist- with our spouses, our children, our friends, our employees and our employers.

So, let's look at some of the Bible's tips for relational harmony.

1. Number 1: ► Paul calls for understanding. Let me show you. Look again at verse 2.
 - a. ^{NLT} **Philippians 2:2** Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose.
 - b. The clear focus of this verse is for people to get along, to be on the same page- harmony. And there are actually phrases in this verse that call for understanding the other side: ► “agreeing wholeheartedly” and “working together with one mind and one purpose.” In both phrases Paul uses a Greek work (*phroneo*) that means to come to a shared understanding. Harmony only works when you understand each other.
 - c. One Bible dictionary defines this Greek work like this: “*Phroneo* implies interest or reflection, not mere unreasoning opinion.”¹ As a parent or a spouse or a friend or an employee or a boss, you can be right all day long, but if you appear to have an unreasoning opinion, being right won't matter. But a willingness to try and understand someone- that can bring harmony even if we decide we can't agree.
 - d. I help coach Little League baseball. And we had a kid on our team, never played before, who just didn't see too interested in baseball. He didn't seem to try. And it's frustrating trying to teach baseball to someone who isn't interested. It can make you kinda crazy or angry. You start yelling across the outfield, “Hey show me some effort” or “Get your head in the game.” But after the first few weeks, I heard the adult in his life (not a parent) tell him to shut- up and on another occasion refer to him as an idiot. My perspective changed. I gained just a little understanding of what kind of environment this kid lives in and so my angry attitude became a broken heart. Still frustrated- yea, sometimes. I still want to instill some fundamentals in this kid. But understanding helped. I was more patient; I was more encouraging; I looked for more positives than negatives.
 - e. And when we try to do that with difficult people in our life, ask some questions, get some perspective, seek some understanding of where they are coming from instead of assuming we know, we can begin to build a bridge to harmony.
 - f. But it's so easy to see everyone through our own pair of glasses, instead of trying to see the world through theirs. But part of creating harmony, especially where it doesn't naturally occur, requires a willingness on our part to understand other people.
 - g. But harmony and understanding also require work. It takes work to try and understand. *Phroneo* is a verb. It's an action word. Sometimes it requires effort to understand someone else. It's a whole lot faster and simpler knowing and acting like we're right. Assuming we know where people are coming from. Pretending to understand their perspective.

¹ Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary

- h. I notice I do this with my kids. I have a daughter who has struggled in math. It is so easy for me when she complains about math to say, “You need to stop watching TV and work harder.” Or “nobody likes math, but you’ve got to do it.” If you haven’t tried that, I can tell you it doesn’t breed harmony. But, when I slow down and ask some questions like “why?” or “it sounds like it is difficult?” I get a different reaction. I see my daughter open up a little. I understand it’s less about math and more about feeling she needs to get A’s all the time or she’s a failure. She is always afraid the next hard concept will ruin her grades.
 - i. Seeking to understand helps bring harmony.
 - j. Informing people you are right does not breed harmony. And if you are right, failing to understand the other person completely eliminates your influence. If you want people to consider your perspective, you have to be willing to understand theirs.
 - k. Harmony will require a willingness and some work at understanding.
2. Let’s move on. ►While number one dealt mostly with our attitude, our remaining points might be considered skills for creating harmony. Things to do or not do. But none of these skills will really work if we don’t have a sincere desire to understand. Number two is found in verse 3. It’s found in the phrase, ►
- a. ^{NLT} **Philippians 2:3** Don’t be selfish; . . .
 - b. The word for *selfish* here means “factions” or “seeking to win followers in a rivalry.” Here’s the skill: ►stop recruiting.
 - c. Somehow when there is conflict- at work or home; with our spouse or our kids or with friends and even this Thursday at Thanksgiving dinner- most of us feel the need to be right and so we recruit others to affirm our rightness. Instead of dealing with the person who hurt us, we recruit followers. Many times we ask, “Am I overreacting” when we actually mean, “Can you believe. . .” When someone offends us in some way, that’s not the time to jump on the phone or send a bunch of emails. Stop recruiting and deal with the person who hurt you.
3. Number three ►also comes from verse 3. It comes from the phrase,
- a. ^{NLT} **Philippians 2:3** . . . don’t try to impress others. . .
 - b. So, what’s the practical skill here? It’s ►talk less and listen more. All of us want people to think well of us. And sometimes that desire can lead to too much talking. We dominate conversations about how great we are at work or how awesome our kids are doing or how well our portfolio has grown. We manage information about our lives to impress people.
 - c. This is a difficult one for those of us who are a little less secure. We need people to think well of us. We need to impress people. We need these big family events to show the rest of the family that we turned out ok, that our life is ok, that I am ok.
 - d. This is also the part where we always have a story better than someone else’s. And sometimes that harmless and fun. But sometimes it isn’t.

- e. I remember being around a group of friends once and it was one of the first times I had shared about being sexually abused as a kid. And someone in the group pipes in, “Well, you think that’s bad. . .” and told their own story. I had just poured out my soul and someone basically said, “My story’s better.” I remember sitting quietly for quite a while- angry and dismissed.
 - f. But what we do when we dominate a group with our stories of success or one upping everyone is we alienate people. We talk too much. We need to talk less and listen more. It helps build a bridge to harmony.
4. Number four ► also comes from verse 3. It comes from the phrase,
- a. ^{NLT} **Philippians 2:3** . . . thinking of others as better than yourselves.
 - b. The skill here is ► plan ahead. Let me show you what I mean.
 - c. The word for “better than yourselves” actually means more important. “Think of others as more important than yourself.” And when we consider other people more important than ourselves, we think and act differently. When we are having people over for Thanksgiving, we might consider what they would appreciate. What might they want to do with their time here? Maybe we plan ahead by calling and asking.
 - d. If we know grandma will be disappointed because we have to leave early, we might consider grandma’s feeling and call ahead and warn her we have to leave early.
 - e. Your student is home from college and you want them home with family for the weekend because you miss them. But what might they want to do this weekend? Planning ahead might include a phone call to arrange some family time.
 - f. When we start considering others as more important, it opens the door to harmony. It helps prevent conflict that arises due to last minute planning. When everyone plans at the last minute, someone’s feelings are going to get hurt. Planning ahead when others are in mind build bridges to harmony.
 - g. Planning ahead helps create harmony for 2 reasons: First, you are thinking of others. But secondly, you’re preparing yourself. You are considering others and realizing that this may not be the exact way you wished it would go and that’s ok. Instead of being disappointed when things didn’t go your planned way, you can have more realistic expectations about how things are gonna go.
 - h. When we plan ahead with others in mind, it helps us pave the way for harmony.
5. Number five ► comes from verse 4. It’s found in the phrase,
- a. ^{NLT} **Philippians 2:4** Don’t look out only for your own interests, . . .
 - b. The skill: ► don’t get defensive. How many of you know someone who gets defensive at the slightest comment? How many of you are the person who gets defensive. . . Sorry, probably a little close to home. This is the sister to impressing people. Someone says something about our kids or church or husband or wife or job or performance or the turkey or the potatoes. Someone will say, that was great, but next year. . . Or your presentation was great but. . . Or your kids are so excited- which is really code for, “Can’t you control these loud brats?”
 - c. And the question is, “what do we do with that?” Most of us look out for only our own interests. It is difficult not to react and become defensive when there might actually be a nugget of truth in what people say. And it’s always good to look for it. But when we get defensive, we sometimes miss what we need to hear. Sometimes we even begin preparing our rebuttal before the other person is done talking.
 - d. Defensiveness will kill harmony every time.

6. Number 6 ► also comes from verse 4.

- a. ^{NLT} **Philippians 2:4** Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.
- b. I think the skill here is ► protect others.
- c. We don't look out for our own interests, but we should look out for the interests of others. We shouldn't get all defensive, but I think we do our best to protect other people. We protect their soft spots. Digs aren't necessary.
- d. And trust me, opportunities will present themselves for digs. DON'T! Sarcasm is the enemy of harmony. And that is so hard for those of us who are sarcastic to grasp. Because stuff comes out of our mouth before we can think. And if you are sarcastic, you know what I mean. But that doesn't build a bridge to harmony. In fact, more times than not, sarcasm will blow up any bridge to harmony. One poorly-timed sarcastic remark can undo years of bridge building. It is the fastest way to disharmony. We should be looking out for other people's interest, not making them the butt of our jokes. Instead, we protect them. We stand up for them when other people joke. Protecting people builds a bridge to harmony.

CONCLUSION

► So, we ended up with 6 seeks: seek to understand, stop recruiting, talk less and listen more, plan ahead, don't get defensive, and protect others.

These principles will work anywhere we lack relational harmony- including the holidays.

But let end with why we ought to seek harmony. Why should I do this? Why should I try and live out these skills? And the answer comes in verse 5. ►

^{NLT} **Philippians 2:5** You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

The attitude Jesus had was one of selflessness. In verses 6-11, Paul recounts the selfless acts of Jesus. And when we practice these skills- seeking to understand, not recruiting, talking less and listening more, planning ahead, not getting defensive, and protecting others- when we have this selfless attitude, not only does it help us build harmony, it also helps us take a step of spiritual maturity that makes us more like Jesus. These things are practical things to do, but they are also spiritual things to do.

And yet, another lesson we learn from Jesus is that harmony requires more than one person's effort. Jesus left heaven to pay for our sins by dying on the cross. He did that to create harmony between us and God. And the Bible says we can have harmony with God when we believe in Jesus for eternal life. That's it; that's our part. But Jesus doesn't force harmony. He does his part.

And our attempts at harmony are similar. The results aren't left up to us, because we are just one piece. And sometimes when we strive for harmony, we get run over. Someone will still question our motives. Someone will still get their digs in. Someone will still try to go over our head. Someone will continue to try and manipulate us. For all our striving at harmony, it still requires another striving willing participant. And just like people reject the attempts at harmony that Jesus has made, people may also reject yours. So let me close with this verse ►

^{NAS} **Romans 12:18** If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

All we can do is our part. And trust God that these practical things will help bring some harmony.

Pray