

UNITED WE STAND!

PHILIPPIANS 1:27-2:4

CHRISTIANITY MAY BE PERSONAL ... BUT IT IS NEVER PRIVATE.
WE ARE CALLED TO LIVE AND DIE TOGETHER AS A FAMILY
GATHERED TOGETHER IN CHRIST.

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UNITED WE STAND!

PHILIPPIANS 1:27-2:4

In this morning's text, the Apostle Paul starts to get into the body of his letter to the church in Philippi . Keep in mind that in his introduction he thanked the Philippian church for their faithful partnership with him. He expressed his love for them and their love for him. And let's also keep in mind that this church seems to be his favorite.

But it seems as if there is a threat to this church. Their unity seems to be threatened by forces both outside the church and inside the church. It appears as if the threat from outside the church came from Roman nationalists. Last time I had to address the issues of government here, things didn't go so well. I'm going to have to address some of those issues again. I do so with fear and trepidation. Politics and other social institutions are a real threat to the unity of the church.

Unity is something we are commanded to pursue and maintain in the church. The greatest threat we face is our own sinful attitudes. Sometimes I think we are too intelligent for our own good. Combine intelligence with arrogance, selfishness, and a distorted view of righteousness, and we have the perfect ingredients to split a church.

Let me give you an example of how this distortion plays itself out in church. You remember that church I used to pastor ... the one that was so tough?

It was so tough that even the deacons were too clever for their own good. On one board retreat, a husband and wife who were both on the board invited me to drive up to the retreat with them. I sat in the backseat and was enjoying the ride. It seems that out of nowhere, they started arguing about some church policy. Finally it got so heated, that they both became silent. At this point I was getting really uncomfortable so I just sat quietly looking out the window. I noticed this farm. So trying to break the silence, I said, "Look at that wonderful farm. They have mules, donkeys, and pigs."

Sarcastically the husband asked the wife, "Relatives of yours?" To which she said, "Yes, in-laws."

You see, being quick and clever are not always good things. Our goal is not to win arguments. Our goal is to maintain unity.

Unity is going to be a major theme for Paul throughout the book of Philippians. You see, there has been a sinister threat to the existence of the church from the beginning. However, it has become increasingly more powerful in the modern day churches situated in western democracies. We have made faith in Christ a private matter. That is not only a wrong notion. That is not only a sinful notion. That is a downright demonic

stronghold. Here is the main idea of this morning's text. **CHRISTIANITY MAY BE PERSONAL, BUT IT IS NEVER PRIVATE. WE ARE CALLED TO LIVE AND DIE TOGETHER AS A FAMILY GATHERED TOGETHER IN CHRIST.** I think there is a very important point to be made here. There is a fundamental portion of my faith relationship with Jesus Christ that is personal. In other words, it was me that was born into sin, it was me that sinned against God, and it was me that stood condemned for eternity. I had to make a personal confession of my sin to God. I had to confess Jesus as Lord personally. I have to personally continue to submit to the will of God. In other words, I became a Christian through a personal act of faith.

However, that personal act of faith does not and cannot remain private if it is true faith. By that act of faith, you and I became part of God's family, the church. We have obligations to our fellow believers. We have been given some very public missions. We are to win the lost for Christ. We are to work for justice for those who cannot get justice. We are to bring compassion and mercy to those in need. We are to be prophetic to the world and culture in which we live. Christianity may start as a personal act of faith, but it can never remain private. Part of our responsibility to one another as believers is that God wants us to be unified. This morning we will see that Satan works both outside the church and inside the church in an attempt to disrupt our unity.

I. THREATS FROM OUTSIDE THE CHURCH (1:27 -30)

We Will All Face Hardships In Life That Threaten To Separate Us From One Another And From God's Love.

Verses 27-30 of chapter 1 deal with threats that come from outside the church. In other words, **WE WILL ALL FACE HARDSHIPS IN LIFE THAT THREATEN TO SEPARATE US FROM ONE ANOTHER AND FROM GOD'S LOVE.** Now knowing how passionate many of you are about politics, I am going to try and speak the truth while at the same time speaking in generalities. My intent here is to address the church not the government.

A. THE SOURCE OF CITIZENSHIP (27a)

The first half of verse 27 lays out the source of our citizenship. Let me address first of all how important Paul thinks this is. Paul is in prison awaiting his verdict. He is in the

capital city of the worldwide Roman Empire , Rome . If the verdict is "guilty" he will be tortured and nailed to cross until dead. Although his hunch is that he will receive a "not guilty" verdict, he still wants to make sure that in case things go badly, he wants the Philippians to understand this point. Verse 27 starts out, "*Whatever happens,*" and then goes on later to say, "*whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence.*" That is a correct translation but in the Greek, it sounds a little more ominous. Let me translate it several ways so you can get the feel. He may be saying something like, "Above everything else, at all cost, only do this, whatever happens." Now I hope we can hear the full force of, "Whatever happens, above all costs, if I'm able to come and see you, or if I have to remain in jail and just hear about you, or if I die." So you get the idea this is very important to Paul.

Look at the next phrase because this imperative command drives the whole section. He says, "*Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.*" Various translations frame this command as, "conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of", "you must live in a manner worthy of", "let your manner of life be worthy of" ... You get the idea. What is interesting about the Apostle Paul's choice of words here is that he normally uses the word *peripatein*, which means to *walk in the way*. That would be consistent with Hebrew thought. In other words, our journey through life for the Hebrew was considered a walk.

However, this time, Paul uses the word *politeuesthai*, which means, *be a good citizen of* You readily hear the word *polis* as the root of that word which means city. We get our English word politics from this word. Now please keep in mind that Paul is being held in Rome , the capital city of the Roman Empire . The Philippian church finds itself in a colonial city. There are many, many retired Roman soldiers living in Philippi and Philippi enjoys imperial status. It is a proud city of Roman loyalists. And keep in mind the idea of Roman peace. Anything that disagreed with Rome was pushed down and killed.

Paul is commanding the church in Philippi to live their lives as citizens of heaven that brings honor to the gospel of Jesus Christ. In other words, they are to be living out their faith in Jesus Christ.

To be sure, Paul commands them to obey the laws. However, their citizenship is not here on earth. Their citizenship is in heaven. There was a common practice throughout the Roman Empire that ultimately led to widespread persecution of Christians. In cities throughout the Empire, especially these special cities like Philippi , there was emperor worship. People would burn incense on an altar and proclaim that Caesar was lord.

For Christians, there was only one Lord, and that was Jesus Christ. This became a real problem in the early church. There were all sorts of views. People's ideas ranged from burning the incense and proclaiming Caesar as lord, while in their hearts saying that was lord with a small "l." And there were of course the hard liners that stood firm and refused to have any part of it. At any rate, the local people didn't like the Christians' lack of patriotism and started to persecute them. Of course there were other pagan religions that would pile on the Christians as well.

Further, there was plenty of sexual immorality to go around with drunken and wild living. Christians would certainly not participate in any of this. And while in the public arena, simply preaching Christ would condemn all these behaviors and attitudes.

We live in times much like the church in Philippi . We live in a society that is immoral, self-absorbed, and decadent in many ways. People say we live in a Christian country. Have you turned on the television lately? Have you read the newspapers lately? What is it exactly about our country that makes us Christian? I think the single biggest problem we have in evangelizing Muslims and other religious people is this identity with the United States as Christian. Think about this. If you were a very moral and religious person who was sexually pure, didn't drink or party, gave money to the poor, and lived a righteous life, and identified American culture with Christianity, would you want to give your life to Christ? Why would anyone want to become a Christian if becoming a Christian meant living a crazy wild life of immorality?

B. THE OBLIGATION OF CITIZENSHIP (27b-28)

Paul commands the Philippians, and since this is the Word of God, commands us to live our lives as good citizens of God's Kingdom while bringing credibility to the message of Jesus Christ. In the second half of verse 27 and verse 28 he lays out the obligation of citizenship. Again Paul is going to use a military metaphor. Christians are to stand firm in one spirit. We need to break this down into two parts. And once again notice how Paul uses a little poetry here. He says, "*Stand firm in one spirit,*" then he first describes the second half of that statement first, and then in verse 28 he describes standing firm.

What does he mean by stand firm? That word *stand firm* described soldiers holding their post against incredible odds. In other words, they may have been outnumbered and running low on ammunition. But since they knew other units were depending on them holding out, they would fight on with superhuman courage. Look at the first phrase in verse 28. They are to stand firm and fight on without being frightened in any way by the enemy. Paul is standing firm for the gospel in Rome . He encourages the

Philippians to stand firm for the gospel in Philippi . He encourages us to stand firm for the gospel in the United States . We are not to be intimidated by family, friends, society, or the government. We must continue to speak and live the gospel without fear.

We do that by standing firm in one spirit. *One spirit* can refer to the Holy Spirit or in an attitude such as the French say *esprit de corps*. Again, I think Paul means both. We have all received the same Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit we are all part of the Body of Christ. We are one in reality. But further, look at the last phrase in verse 27. We stand firm by, "*contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.*" Now Paul switches to an athletic metaphor. The word contending is a compound word that means to fight together with one will. It's like a team contending for the championship. The translation "as one man" is okay, but misses the passion. It is literally "one soul." In other words, we have one spirit, one goal, one mind; to bring glory to God and credibility to the gospel message. I want us to really grasp this concept. This word *contend* was used of gladiators as they fought together as a team against others and wild animals. They needed to depend on one another. We are engaged in a life and death struggle with the powers of darkness for the souls of real people. How we live our lives and how we love one another is critical for our success. We are citizens of heaven. We have one Lord. It's not any president, or king, or religious leader. It is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now here is what kind of bothers me about the way the church is active in politics. This is not about any individual here, so please remain calm. In case of an emergency, your oxygen masks will drop down in front of you. Just put them on and take a deep breathe. On any given night before, during, and even now after the elections, we can see evangelical Christian leaders on television. One will say, "George Bush is the only moral choice Christians can make." Immediately on the split screen, another famous, and equally credible evangelical leader will say, "A vote for George Bush was immoral, is immoral...", and then go on to make his case. Then what happens next is a public disgrace to the Kingdom of God . They will start casting barbs that question the faith of the other. Here are two evangelical, bible believing Christians, questioning the salvation of each other on national television over what? A vote in an election for the kingdom of this world?!? How can that be? How does that bring glory to God and credibility to the gospel of Jesus Christ? How is that contending as one soul for the hearts and minds of lost people headed for hell? Listen, I don't want anybody to get riled up. I don't want any talk in church about this. If you are interested in chastising me, please set up an appointment with me. I will be glad to point out the immorality of whichever party you belong to or whichever candidate you voted for. I am a firm believer in equal opportunity insults.

I am not saying that you cannot vote or be part of the political process. That is totally between you and God. But when worldly politics divide the family of God, it is my business because it is immoral, it is sinful, and it is demonic. Christians should be neutral enough to be prophetic to the world. To the Democrats we should be able to stand up as one soul and stand firmly against them by saying we believe the killing of unborn children is wrong. To the Republicans we should be able to stand up as one soul and stand firmly against them by saying we believe that starving these newborn babies when they come into this world is equally immoral. It disturbs me to see bible-believing, evangelical Christians becoming shells for political parties, and then arguing with one another in public.

I think Paul tells us to stand firmly against the powers of this world. We are to be a prophetic voice in the world for the Kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Look what is at stake here in the last phrase in verse 28. How we stand together as Christians, how we fight on together as a team, united in the Holy Spirit, and working together to be a prophetic voice in the world ... governments, social institutions, powers and principalities, and Satan himself, will become frightened and timid. As long as Christians are fighting about worldly things like politics, Satan is happy. When we see Christians arguing about politics or anything worldly, we should be frightened because the body is weakened. We can become bold and confident as we start to realize that our salvation and power come from Jesus.

Just so there is no mistake, I want you to hear me out. You can vote or campaign for whomever you want. Only, whatever happens, like the Apostle Paul has said, "at all cost," don't bring any disunity into the church.

C. THE PRIVILEGE OF CITIZENSHIP (29-30)

Our obligation to one another is clear. We are to stand firmly against the threats that come from outside the church and not let them infiltrate the church. But there are privileges of citizenship for us described for us in verses 29-30. Again, coming from our culture, I'm not sure we want to hear this. Look at verse 29. Paul says, "*For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ.*" The word for *granted* is literally *graced*. It has been graced to us. It has been gifted to us. God has graced us on behalf of Jesus to, first of all, receive eternal life. When we placed our faith in Christ, we received salvation as a gift from God. We all like to hear that. That is music to our ears.

But the verse doesn't stop there. "*But God has also graced us with suffering.*"

Huh? What did he just say? That's right. God has gifted us with suffering on Christ's behalf. Remember I said salvation comes in three stages. Part of our being saved in the present is that we are shaped and molded to become more like Christ every day. Christ suffered for the Kingdom of God . He died to bring us salvation. Paul was sitting in jail suffering for the spread of this great news that God wanted to be in a love relationship with human beings. He says to the Philippians, we are in this battle together. Be good soldiers there in Philippi to spread the message of God's good news. Satan tempted Jesus to avoid the cross. Satan tempted Paul to give up. Satan tempted the Philippians to simply be good Roman citizens. Satan has worked through all sorts of institutions in the United States . Government is an easy target. But Satan has worked through society, television, movies, music, all sorts of social institutions, schools, and let's not leave out the church. Most of us cannot discern what beliefs come from our ethnic or social backgrounds. We can't discern which beliefs we developed in school about science and reality. We cannot discern which beliefs come from our political bent. In other words, we hold on to many beliefs, but I'm not sure they're very consistent with the gospel message of Jesus Christ. Listen, when we start to identify these areas in our lives and start to live according to the gospel, I can guarantee this. We will suffer. That's a promise. **WE WILL ALL FACE HARDSHIPS IN LIFE THAT THREATEN TO SEPARATE US FROM ONE ANOTHER AND FROM GOD'S LOVE.** The key is that we are commanded to fight on as a team. We are family. At the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Franklin said, "*We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.*" ¹ The issue is not about politics, it's about being unified as citizens of heaven.

II. THREATS FROM WITHIN THE CHURCH (2:1-4)

Based On What God Has Given Us And For What We Have Already Received

...

We Should Sacrificially Love One Another.

It's bad enough that we let outside forces like politics, race, gender, economics, and other outside influences threaten our unity. But for Paul it was scandalous to think that there could actually be threats from within the church as described in chapter 2 verses 1-4. Here is what he is saying about unity. **BASED ON WHAT GOD HAS GIVEN US AND FOR WHAT WE HAVE ALREADY RECEIVED, WE SHOULD SACRIFICIALLY LOVE ONE ANOTHER.** As we first look at these verses, we

will notice the poetic style of it, but we may miss the fact that this is not conditional, it is a command. The reason it may be confusing is that verse 1 starts out with "If," and then verse 2 starts out with, "Then." In philosophy they call this structure a *modus ponens*. The argument would go, if "a" then "b". "a" therefore "b." But that's not really what Paul is doing here because the "a" premise is never in doubt. His intent is more of the nature, "*Since you have received all these things, do the following.*"

A. THE MOTIVATION FOR UNITY (1)

So let's start with verse 1, the motivation for unity. By the way, verse 1 actually starts with the word therefore. It refers back to verse 27. In other words, above all else, no matter what happens, we are to be unified within the church. If we are truly born-again Christians, we have all received these things. He starts out by reminding us of all the encouragement we receive on a daily basis because of our unity with Christ. That word encouragement is the exact translation of the Greek but it means more than our English word. The word actually means "in courage." In other words, because of our unity with Christ, we receive courage to live every day. Since we are no longer enemies of God, but now children because of our faith in Jesus, we have nothing more to fear. Nothing in this life, not in the natural world or the spiritual world can ever separate us from the love of God. This is available to all of us, no matter what we have had to face, no matter what we are facing, or what we will ever have to face. As we learn to partner with Jesus in life, we can live boldly and die well. We receive courage to live. We have all experienced confidence and courage to live as we have partnered with Christ. We have all experienced new life.

The next phrase, "*if any comfort from his love,*" is the next blessing Paul points to. Now actually the word "his" is not in the text. We need to again mystically intertwine this phrase between heaven and earth, between the natural and the supernatural. The Philippians received love from Paul, from God, and from one another. Paul received love and comfort from God, from the Philippians, and other believers. Keep this in mind. When we comfort one another in love, that comfort and love is mixed with the comfort and love of God in Jesus, ministered through the Holy Spirit. So if we are too proud to receive comfort and love from others... in other words, if we are too proud to receive from others, then we cannot receive the comfort and love God has for us, because His choice is to mystically minister His comfort and love through other people.

The third blessing Paul points to is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Again, that is that mystical partnering with God the Holy Spirit. When we minister to one another, we are in reality partnering with the Holy Spirit. It is a really good feeling we get when we

minister through God's power and not on our own. Believers are being constantly used by God to minister. That is one of our purposes as citizens of God's kingdom. We are ministers and priests.

And the fourth blessing we have all received as God's children is experiencing the tenderness and compassion of God. Hopefully we have all experienced this through other people as well. This is gut-loving, overflowing love.

Here is what Paul's assumption is. Every believer should have experienced these blessings. When we received Christ, we received His tender compassion, His comfort and love, the fellowship of His Holy Spirit, which strengthens us, empowers us, and makes us strong and courageous to stand and to minister.

B. THE THREAT TO UNITY (3-4)

Since we have all experienced those things personally from God and God's people, Paul wants us to be good citizens and demonstrate that to one another. However, as verses 3 and 4 highlight through a negative command there are three basic threats to unity in the church. They are selfish ambition. This has to do with self-promotion. In other words, people in the church often do things in church because they want to enhance their own status. They climb to positions of power in church as if they were climbing the corporate ladder. To put it simply, people often promote themselves rather than promoting the gospel.

The next enemy of unity is vain conceit. Vain conceit is plain and simple pride. It is those righteous and religious people going around trying to point out other's sins and shortcomings. Righteousness is a real threat to the unity of the church. The righteous people in Jesus' day tried to kill Him. Ultimately they succeeded. People who think they are wise and righteous and good tend to be very judgmental. And the problem is that it is usually misguided beliefs about biblical Christianity. We all have to be careful of self-promotion and pride. But in case we don't get it, Paul summarizes it in verse 4. We are not to come to church with personal agendas. In fact, we are not to be self-focused. Again, this goes against everything we learn in society. We are so self-absorbed with what we want, how we think things should be done, so focused on our own happiness, that we don't spend much time thinking about how God can use us to serve others.

I can't speak for all of you, but I can certainly find myself in those three threats to unity. And I don't have to do an awful lot of self-reflection to find selfishness or pride.

C. THE WAY TO UNITY (2-4)

But Paul doesn't leave us without the remedy. Verses 2 through 4 point out the way to unity. Let's start with the obvious attitude that seems to come up all the time, humility. Paul says that we should truly be empathic. That is we should be able to put aside our own agendas, our own ideas, our own interpretations, in order to hear one another. In order for us to be of the same mind and to be one in spirit and purpose, we have to set aside all of our own self-interest to listen to one another. We have to honor one another by considering the other as more important than ourselves. Do we listen like that? Really that kind of listening leads to loving service to God and to His kingdom, the church.

And then Paul, in verse 2 points back to the blessings we received from God directly and through His people. Since we have received comfort, love, fellowship, compassion and tenderness, we should be healthy enough and filled up with love enough to spill out onto others. We are to be like-minded. In other words, we should all be good listeners. We should be listening to God and one another. We should be like-minded in that we are constantly humbling ourselves to listen and to serve.

We have received unconditional love from God. We should be spilling that out onto everyone we meet in God's family. And we are one in the Holy Spirit. We are all pursuing the same goal. We are trying to live lives that bring glory to God and credibility to the gospel. We are here to heal and to set people free in the Name of Jesus. We have all received much from God. We could never repay Him for all the blessings He has sent our way. **BASED ON WHAT GOD HAS GIVEN US AND FOR WHAT WE HAVE ALREADY RECEIVED, WE SHOULD SACRIFICIALLY LOVE ONE ANOTHER.**

III. EPILOGUE

Somehow we have come to think that our faith is something that is private. Being a Christian can never be private. Christianity is a relationship with God that must be lived out in community, and together as a community, lived out in the world. We are family. We are citizens of heaven. **CHRISTIANITY MAY BE PERSONAL, BUT IT IS NEVER PRIVATE. WE ARE CALLED TO LIVE AND DIE TOGETHER AS A FAMILY GATHERED TOGETHER IN CHRIST.** You know unity and harmony doesn't mean that we all think exactly the same. In fact harmony requires different notes. But the power of the Christian church is the love we have for Christ and

for one another. Jesus said that the world would recognize our King and our citizenship by the love we have one for another. Jesus is our King. Heaven is our home. Love is our bond.

In his commentary on Philippians, Frank Thielman brings a quote from the early church to us. He says,

"In the late second century, the Christian philosopher Athenagoras pleaded with the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Aurelius Commodus to stop their policy of persecuting Christians. In a memorable passage, he described the demeanor of persecuted Christians:

'With us, on the contrary, you will find unlettered people, tradesmen and old women, who though unable to express in words the advantages of our teaching, demonstrate by acts the value of their principles. For they do not rehearse speeches, but evidence good deeds. When struck, they do not strike back; when robbed, they do not sue; to those who ask, they give, and they love their neighbors as themselves.'"

It doesn't matter what gender we are. It doesn't matter what race or ethnicity we are. It doesn't matter what our level of education or income is. What matters is this. Are we willing to lay down our lives in order to follow Christ, love one another, and be unified in our mission and message? I hope so, because not much else matters.

Credits

1. QUOTATION: *We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.*

ATTRIBUTION: Benjamin Franklin, at the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

3949. Benjamin Franklin. 1706-1790. Bartlett, John, comp. 1919. Familiar Quotations, 10th ed.