

Striving Together for the Faith

PHILIPPIANS 1:27-30

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The apostle Paul, in the previous verses, sought to relieve the Philippians' fears about what had happened to him. He had been arrested and put into prison, but he assured them that he would remain to help them in their faith. Paul was putting them on notice that he was coming to make another visit. Of course this would have been good news to this young church. At the same time, it would have caused them to consider their ways. After the letter was read to the church I can imagine some of them saying, **“Praise the Lord! Paul is OK and he’s coming back to visit! Oh, oh, we better straighten up before he gets here!”** You know how it is when the preacher comes by – some people might try to straighten up and give a good impression, I don’t know. But Paul wanted them to know that **“whatever happened”**, whether he came to see them or was absent, he wanted them to live worthy of the gospel and to stand together for the faith of the gospel.

In our passage today, Paul begins to lay the groundwork on the important matter of unity in the church. When we get to chapter four we will discover a specific situation where there is division in the church. But early in the letter, in a very positive and general way, Paul gives basic instructions about Christian unity. Unity is a very good and desirable thing in and of itself. Psalm 133:1 says, **“Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!”** The unity of believers is also vital to the mission of the church. Without it, we cannot accomplish God’s purposes and fulfill the Great Commission. There are two primary areas that we as believers need to work on that will enable us to achieve the unity God desires. Both of these things are related to the gospel. We will look first at **1) Worthy Gospel Conduct** and **2) Courageous**

Gospel Proclamation. **“Worthy gospel conduct”** and **“courageous gospel proclamation”** are both vital components of Christian unity.

Let’s look first at:

I. WORTHY GOSPEL CONDUCT

Paul said, **“let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ.”** The word for conduct in this verse is the Greek word *polites*, from which we get our English word **“politics”**. It originally had to do with **“behaving well as a citizen.”** In Paul’s day, being a Roman citizen was something which was highly prized. Paul himself was a Roman citizen and this fact helped him avoid some difficulties when dealing with the Roman judicial system. The city of Philippi was a Roman colony, and the people were very proud of their privileges. Philippi was the leading city in the region. With citizenship came privileges, and with citizenship came obligations. As a Christian, you and I are citizens of a far greater kingdom than Rome ever was. Later on in Philippians chapter three, Paul says, **“For our citizenship is in heaven.”** He said this in contrast to those whose mind was set on earthly things. You see, the kingdom of heaven is an eternal kingdom. And it is the kingdom of God, whose glory far outshines that of any human kingdom.

If you are a citizen of this heavenly kingdom then you need to realize what great privileges you have. Paul’s epistles are full of descriptions of the many privileges that we have in Christ as citizens of the kingdom of God. But his letters also contain much about the responsibilities we have as citizens. Today in the United States, we have many privileges. We take a lot of these privileges for granted. I don’t think we really appreciate the freedoms and the prosperity we have here. We also are often apathetic when it comes to fulfilling our civic duties. How many of you have received the letter in the mail from the county courthouse, and as soon as you realized that that the letter

was summoning you to serve jury duty for a week you started complaining about having to do it? We want the privileges and freedoms, but we don't want the responsibility.

I'm sad to say that in the church we often have the same attitude. We love having eternal life as a free gift, being forgiven by God, saved by Christ's blood and being an heir of heaven. But we shun the obligations of the Christian life and by doing so we act like the ungrateful welfare recipient who doesn't want to have to work for his food. About 35 years ago, Dr. James Boice said **"How much all of us need this emphasis on Christian conduct! Perhaps there has never been a period in history when true Christians have lived more like those who are in the world and have demonstrated so little of the high standards of the Christian faith."** If that was true 35 years ago in the church, how much more it is true today! If God has called you to Himself in Christ, then you must live worthy of that calling.

Our conduct is important! While God looks mainly at the heart, He also is concerned about our behavior. And while God looks at the heart, man can *only look* at outward behavior. The outward conduct of believers is important because it either compliments the gospel we preach or it contradicts it. The word for worthy used here means **"befitting, congruous, corresponding to a thing."** Does your conduct correspond to the gospel? I don't want you to get the wrong idea here. Christianity is not merely about being a good moral person. The Christian faith is all about redemption of people who are immoral. God takes the sinner, washes him clean in Christ's blood and begins a gradual transformational process in him. That is where the conduct comes in. But it is not mere outward behavior. It is outward behavior that is motivated by an inward grace and gratitude in the heart.

Paul says that our conduct must be worthy of the **“gospel of Christ.”** This does not mean that we become worthy of salvation. We will always be entirely unworthy of it! As I said before, it means that you and I live lives befitting the gospel. We need to live in such a way that we demonstrate the gospel! The gospel is that God became man in the person of Jesus Christ and He did for us what we could not do for ourselves. He saved us by His grace through His sacrificial death on the cross. In order to be saved, you and I have to depend upon Christ alone to save us. We must lean totally on Him and only on Him for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. So then, to live worthy of the gospel is to demonstrate, in an ongoing way that we are completely dependent on Christ! It means that we continue to live a life of dependence on Him. Sometimes we forget that our sanctification is as dependent upon Christ as our justification!

So you see, the Christian life is not just about being good and doing good deeds. It is about becoming a new creation in Christ. It is about going back to Christ every day to receive grace and forgiveness and help to live for Him. The Apostle Paul is saying to adorn your profession of faith with a life of grace, according to the gospel. We therefore ought to be very gracious and forgiving toward others. We ought to be loving, patient and kind. In a word, we are called to be like Christ. To live worthy of the gospel is to take orders from Christ, draw strength from the Spirit of Christ in order to become like Christ.

Think of the Christian life as having a three-fold purpose. Almost everything in the Christian life comes down to these three things that we are called to by God. We are called to.

- 1) Know Christ
- 2) Become like Christ
- 3) Make Christ known

If you have something to write with – write these three things down right now. Your purpose in life is 1) to know Christ, to 2) become like Christ and to 3) make Christ known.

Number 2 can't happen until # 1 happens. You can't become like Christ until you come to know Him by faith. You can't live worthy of the gospel until you have first believed the gospel. And of course we must continue to learn more and know Christ better. And # 3 can't happen if # 2 is not happening. You can't really be an effective witness for Christ – you can't faithfully proclaim that gospel to others without a life that is worthy of that gospel. No one will listen to you if you are a liar, use foul language, are a drunkard or sexually immoral. So many Christians never really get around to fulfilling the Great Commission in their lives, which has to do with # 3, making Christ known to others. They aren't striving for the faith of the gospel because they aren't striving to live like Jesus wants them to live.

Where are you in relation to these three things? Do you know Christ? If not, you need to read the gospels and put your faith in Jesus Christ as He is revealed there. If you are saved and you know Christ, are you living worthy of the gospel? Practically speaking, let me ask you a few questions about #2:

- How's your thought life?
- How's your devotional life – personal time in the word and in prayer?
- How's your language – your mouth?
- How about your submission to and respect for authority?
- How's your relationship with the opposite sex? Is it pure and holy?
- If you're married, how is your relationship with your husband or your wife?
- What about your emotions – are you controlling them, or are they controlling you?
- Are you free of anger, bitterness, lust, pride and resentment?
- Do you always tell the truth – are you completely honest?
- Do you fear God, shun evil and turn away from temptation?

You may not be feeling very Christ-like right now. If you are honest, you know you are really un-Christ-like in many areas. You aren't living worthy of the gospel. The question is – what are you going to do about it? If you say you are a Christian, you've got to live like a Christian. How does all of this relate to Christian unity? Well, the more each one of us becomes like Christ, then the more we have in common – the more unified we are. There must be a spiritual unity and that unity consists in the fact that we all believe in the same Lord and we are all becoming more and more like Him. But this unity also consists in “**striving together for the faith of the gospel**”, as Paul said. This leads us to the second point today that is important for Christian unity:

II. COURAGEOUS GOSPEL PROCLAMATION

In verse 27 Paul goes on to urge the Philippians to “**that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.**” Christian unity is not the idea merely that we all get along well together. It is that we are all standing firm and striving together for a common purpose – for the faith of the gospel. We have already sent that our conduct must be worthy of the gospel. But also, we must work together to proclaim that gospel to a world of sinners who need Christ. The church is not merely a group of people who come together for worship one day a week. The church is the body of those who stand together for the gospel!

People often talk about unity – about how good it is and how important it is. But around what are we supposed to unite? Around the faith of the gospel. The “**faith of the gospel**” is the objective truth about redemption in Christ. Most of the time in the Christian community the gospel is reduced to a few statements and contains only a minimum of truth. But the truth is, the gospel is much bigger than that. As Gordon Clark used to like to say, the gospel is the whole Bible. In other words, we ought to

strive together to uphold the entire word of God. That means we've got to study it and understand it correctly. It means that theology is important. In his commentary on Philippians, Vincent Cheung says that, **“With many people, theology is the least important factor when it comes to unity, so that all kinds of people are urged to unite even when their theologies contradict one another. On the other hand, Christian unity puts Christian theology first. If we cannot agree on theological matters, then there is no point in discussing other matters that are related to unity. If you affirm and preach a different gospel than I do, then how do we unite? Why would we unite? Any ‘unity’ that disregards theology is superficial and meaningless.”**

However, once we agree on the theology of the gospel message, and once we agree on that we are called to proclaim this gospel, then we will have a biblical and meaningful basis for unity. This unity should be so strong that, as one translation puts it, we would contend **“as one man for the faith of the gospel.”** And if we are committed to this, we will order our lives for the sake of the gospel. What do you order your life around? Is it for your own personal pleasure and happiness or do you order your life for the sake of the gospel? Proclaiming the gospel is not a hobby that we do in our spare time. It is something that ought to consume us. Building the church of Jesus Christ is pretty important to Christ. He came and gave His life for this very reason.

The citizens of Philippi lived on the outer frontier of the Roman Empire. Their responsibility was not only to live as good citizens within the city, but to advance Roman rule in the face of barbarism. If they did not keep on advancing the Empire, the Barbarians would eventually take over. In a similar way, if we as citizens of God's kingdom do not aggressively advance the Empire of God, the world will eventually take back the territory that we've won in the past. Christians today have often retreated into

spiritual isolation. We feel safe in our Christian enclaves and we are not willing to venture beyond our barricades to spread the gospel. We can look at the world and say, “**What a mess**” and stay away from it to avoid contamination. Or, we can look at the world and say, “**What a mess**” – we must get involved and proclaim Christ!

If we decide to courageously proclaim the gospel and stand together in doing this, it is certain that we will encounter opposition. Did you know that all sinners have only one purpose? That purpose is to oppose the gospel. Jesus said, “**He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters**” (Matthew 12:30). Ultimately, there are really two options – either unite to promote the gospel, or unite to oppose the gospel. It is truly sad when church members forget their common purpose of proclaiming the gospel and divide into parties which fight over secondary matters. When believers stop battling the world and begin fighting among themselves we lose our unity. You know the old saying, “**United We Stand, Divided We Fall.**” This saying is applicable within the church too. In the battle for Stalingrad during World War II the Russian commanders ordered their soldiers not to give up any more ground. Any soldier who fled from the Germans was shot on the spot. The Russian commanders knew that if even a couple of soldiers fled their post the Germans would have an opening through which they could pour into the city. Likewise, when the church is divided, instead of aggressively proclaiming the gospel, we will lose ground to the enemy.

The apostle Paul, as our commanding general, has given orders that we stand fast together to defend and proclaim the gospel. Those who run away from their post or neglect to get involved will not be shot. But neither will they please the Lord. We must stand together as we look to our Lord. Lord willing, next week we will look at some of the adversaries that we face as Christians and how we are to deal with them.