
“Gospel Living: Unity”
Philippians 1:27-2:5
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(Philippians 1:27-2:5)

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the Gospel²⁸ without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God.²⁹ For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him,³⁰ since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

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,² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

We can never separate what we believe as Christians from what we do as Christians. Never trust the person who tries to separate the two or to say that one of those things matter, but the other doesn't. Take a look at yourself for a moment. Are you a person who tends to emphasize belief, doctrine, and theology more *or* are you the kind of person that emphasizes behavior more? For example, if we had a sliding scale where on the left side is belief and doctrine and the right side is behavior. So, if you were way to the left, you're all about doctrine, and if you're all the way on the right you're all about behavior. And if you happen to land right in the middle, then you have an equal balance between the two. So, where are you? But before we even answer that question, we first have to ask, how does the Bible see it, which is the same as asking how does God see it? Where does God lay the emphasis? Or does God give us a perfectly balanced, right-in-the -middle view toward belief and behavior?

If you were to ask me, I would say that the Bible leans a little bit toward the belief side, the side of doctrine and theology. I say that because, we are never given commands of what to do and how to behave, apart from the reason why we should do those things. Why should we offer sacrifices? Why should we look out for and be merciful to the poor and the alien? Why should children obey their parents? Why should we work at our careers with diligence? All of these things that we are commanded to do, are always given with a reason. And the reason is always because of who God is and what God has done. Just think of any command, you can even begin with the Ten Commandments, all of the commands are rooted in who God is and what God has done, especially as it relates to his redemptive work in our lives. So, it would go like this: Because God is God, because God is our creator, because God is holy, because God is just and is the judge, because God created human beings in his image, because God saved us from our sins....therefore, do this, do that, and don't do this and don't do that.

Here's one very obvious example of that pattern. Romans 12:1-2. After 11 incredible chapters explaining to us who God is and what he has done for us in the Gospel, he drops the huge, "Therefore" --

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Now, you may push back a bit and say, "What about the Gospels, what about the life of Jesus? Didn't he focus more on what to do, rather than on what to believe?" If you asked that, then you're a good student of the Bible. What's the answer?

This is where people who believe that Jesus is nothing more than a teacher of ethics or a moral example that we should follow, misunderstand Jesus. They look at the trees but miss the forest. You can ask this question. Why did Jesus come? Did he say he came to help us change our behavior? No, he came to save people from their sins. That's a theological problem. Jesus didn't live perfectly to show us a model of what a perfect life looks like. He lived perfectly to 'fulfill the law'; 'to fulfill all righteousness'; so that he would be the only one capable of atoning for our sins. That's a theological issue. Do you see?

Belief and behavior are inseparable, but I do believe that the emphasis of the Bible leans more toward theology, toward belief, and then toward our behavior. Think it of this way, you cannot behave properly unless you believe properly. Even our disobedience, at the very core of it, is a problem of belief, not just an issue of misbehavior.

This brings us to today's text. In this part of the letter, Paul tells us that we are to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ, and specifically it has to do with unity. He's talking about our behaviour.

What does it mean to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ? Well, let's first look at the Gospel of Christ. What is the Gospel of Christ? The Gospel of Christ is that message that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to this earth to die for sinners. The most precious Son of God became a sacrifice, by giving his own life for rebels like us. And by God's grace, by His divine election, we were called and invited to have our sins forgiven, to become sons and daughters of God. If we repent of our sins and believe in Him, then we will be saved. This was all undeserved and unmerited, given to us freely by God. That is an incredible message. That is the greatest news, the greatest truth to have ever reached human ears.

In light of that, Paul tells us to conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of that Gospel. The literal translation for conduct yourselves is to be citizens of. Paul is saying that if you are a citizen of the Gospel, then you must live as such. Now, this isn't too hard to understand. Every society has citizenship, whether it's by birth or my immigration, or in ancient times, you could even buy your citizenship. As a citizen you can now participate in all the benefits of being a citizen. You can vote for elected officials, you can freely move in and out of the country, and many other benefits, but at the same time, you have responsibilities as a citizen. You are to obey the laws of the land. You are to pay your taxes. You are to respect your leaders. You are to live in such a way that shows that you are indeed a citizen.

I became a naturalized US citizen when I was a child. And then after about ten years in Canada, my wife and I became naturalized Canadian citizens, and I remember when taking my oath of citizenship, the strangest part, as an American, was paying homage and allegiance to the Queen of England. That went against every American bone in my body. I was conflicted, but there in my heart, even though it was more symbolic, I had to say, “okay, yes, I guess this means that I will give homage to the Queen.”

The same must be true a thousand times more for us as Christians. Jesus is our Lord and King. It is his divine right that we owe him our allegiance, our obedience, and unlike any earthly leader, he deserves our worship. Back in Paul’s day, Ceasar, the emperor of the Roman empire saw himself as divine and in this hostile culture, Paul says, we are to live as citizens of the Gospel, not Rome. Now, before we look at what that means, it would be good for us to ask ourselves this: Do I see myself as a citizen of the Gospel of Christ? Is my allegiance first and foremost to Christ or to someone or something else? Whose rules do you live by? The rules and law of Christ or someone else?

I also want us to notice how Paul begins this section. He says, “Whatever happens.” The NASB says, “Only.” The word means, “Just one thing!” He’s saying there’s one thing now that’s really important for you to know. Live as citizens of the Gospel of Jesus. Remember that Paul is in prison for the Gospel. Whether he’s imprisoned or free, all he cares about is the Gospel. Whether he lives or dies all he cares about is Jesus. If he dies, he’s with Jesus. If he lives, he gets to serve Jesus. Everything about his life is about Jesus, about his Gospel. If the Gospel is the most important thing, then the only thing that matters is to live a life worthy of the Gospel, as citizens of the Gospel. That should be the way we think and act too. Whatever happens, regardless of the circumstances, I only want to live a life worthy of the Gospel.

Paul mentions three things to describe this life. First, he says, **Stand firm in one Spirit.** When we read the words stand firm, we are to get the idea of a soldier, or soldiers, holding a ridge, holding a line, preventing the advancement of the enemy. No matter what attacks come our way, we mustn’t retreat; don’t give in, don’t surrender; stand firm. And the manner in which we stand firm is in the one Spirit, which refers to the Holy Spirit. What does it mean to stand firm, to hold the line, in the one Spirit? It mean that we are to stand firm in God, in the unity he has formed and the strength that he provides. We are not to stand firm in our own strength, or in our own knowledge or in our own wisdom. Our strength is not in our wealth or what we own. Our standing firm is in the Holy Spirit that dwells in all believers.

The other thing this implies is that we stand firm with each other, and not alone. Yes, there may be times, when we have to stand alone. You may be the only Christian in your family or in the workplace and you are standing alone. But even then, you have a church community behind you. Paul is telling us to lock arms, to be together, united by the Gospel, united by the Holy Spirit, and stand firm. There’s incredible power when we stand together.

I’ll give you an example. Last year we saw violent mobs from both the left and the right. In the summer, violent mobs formed as a protest to the injustice done to George Floyd, a terrible and sad event. And then in the fall, there was the mob, that stormed the Capitol building. In both cases, because it was such a large group of people, a lot of damage was done. If it was just one person storming the Capitol or just one person breaking a window of a business in protest, then very little damage would have been done, and very little impact would have been made. There was power in numbers.

Similarly, as Christians, if one person stands alone against opposition or persecution, it'll be very hard for the person to sustain his effort, but if he or she does it together with the entire church family, then certainly they can stand firm. They can resist the enemy better and more effectively. Do you see? That is what Paul calls us to do. You and I are a part of the most amazing organization the world has ever seen. It's a collection of people brought together by God. It's completely voluntary, no one is coerced to join. It has universal distribution. There is a branch of this organization in almost every town on the planet. It has over a billion adherents. And it's called the church of Christ. Never think that you are alone. You have a billion brothers and sisters, and you have hundreds here in our community. So that's the first thing, Stand firm together in the one Spirit.

Here's the second thing. **Strive together as one for the faith of the Gospel.** This too is a military image of soldiers fighting side-by-side. When we strive together in the one Spirit, that will result in striving together, side-by-side, for the faith of the Gospel. Another interesting word that the English translation doesn't capture is the use of the word, "soul". So literally, it would read like this. "Striving together as one SOUL for the faith of the Gospel." The NASB says, "one mind". What Paul is trying to get at is that this oneness should be at the deepest level, from the soul, or in the soul. It's a very powerful image. You see, we can come together for a cause. The cause is out there. Let's save the whales. Or reduce greenhouse gases. Or the cause out there is a political or national enemy. Let's come together to fight this foe. But what Paul is saying is, you've already been united, at the very core of your being, by the Gospel and by the Holy Spirit. You are one in soul. So strive together, because you already are together, for the faith of the Gospel. That means we cannot be divided like Euodia and Syntyche were in chapter 4. How can we do the work of the Gospel; how can we advance the Gospel, if we are fighting amongst ourselves.

The Bible makes this requirement for unity really clear. Here are a couple examples. Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount the following words,

(Matthew 5:23) Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

What is it that he is insisting on, when we are presenting worthy offerings to God? Unity in our relationships. Forgiveness. You see, these two ideas cannot be separated.

Here's another example. Peter tells us in his first letter,

(1Peter 3:7) Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

Living peaceably in marriage, having unity with your wife is essential to the husband's life of prayer, the ministry of prayer. So again, we cannot separate them.

Here's an even more practical example. You may have already heard this fact. It's been swirling around the evangelical world for a number of years. What is the number one reason why missionaries leave the field and come back home? Because they can't get along with other missionaries. Imagine what that disunity does to hinder Gospel ministry. Christian unity is not one of these things that it's great if you have it, but if you don't it's okay.

Unity is essential to our Gospel ministry. Let's make sure that each of us are doing what we can to maintain the unity that Christ has achieved, to strengthen the bonds of that unity, and to do nothing to diminish that unity.

First was standing firm in one Spirit. Second was to strive together as one soul for the faith of the Gospel **and third, we are not be frightened in any way by those who oppose you.** Remember again, Paul was in prison for the Gospel. The government of Rome was against him, persecuted him, and imprisoned him. He also had opposition from within the church. There were people who had impure motives while preaching the Gospel. These could have been reasons for him to be fearful. But he's not fearful at all. He's brave and courageous. So, he tells us not to be afraid either.

Our society, our culture here in the 21st century is not very different from the culture of the 1st century. There is a growing hostility to Christianity and our values today, as there was back then. There is an aggressive attack on the family unit, on the biblical understanding of gender, on the value of life at birth and end of life issues. Our culture is rapidly descending into non-Christian ethics and morals. It's no longer a matter of Christians becoming the minority. We are already the minority.

Even the so-called Christian church has capitulated to the world's moral agenda. Denomination after denomination has embraced the world's teaching and rejected the Bible's teaching on many of these issues. What shall we do? "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em?" Is that what we are called to do? Or do we re-interpret what the Bible has meant for centuries, to accommodate the changing culture? Do we make it mean something that'll be less offensive, more palatable with our society? No, we do not. We do not give into fear. That is not an option for us.

Now, look at this unusual phrase in the second half of verse 28. "This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved, and that by God." What is Paul trying to say? There are a couple options that commentators give, but the one that seems to make the most sense goes like this. The NASB helps my explanation. It says, "in no way be alarmed by your opponents—which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and too, from God." Here's what's going on. These non-Christians, these enemies of the Gospel look at what they're doing to Paul and Christians, in persecuting them. So from their perspective, it's a sign of the destruction of Christians and the Christian faith. But from our perspective, from the view of the Christian, the persecution they are receiving is a sign of salvation. How so? Well, Paul just articulated earlier that him being in prison has opened up a new world of Gospel opportunities, that would never have been considered before. And Paul said, even if his imprisonment ends in his execution, what does that mean, but his final salvation!! He goes home to be with Jesus. So, for the enemies of Christ, it appears to them the destruction of Christianity and for Christians, it's their salvation.

If this is indeed the meaning of this phrase, then that means that whatever negative thing happens in our society, no matter how anti-Christian our country is becoming, we should not fear, we should not fret. It only means new Gospel opportunities. It only means salvation for us.

Related to this Paul says, and I'll end with this, that it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him. This should be a paradigm altering verse for every Christian. The word 'granted' comes from the word for 'grace'.

It has been graced to you, it has been gifted to you, to believe in Christ. This part we know very well. We know salvation is by grace, completely unmerited by us. But Paul applies that same word, 'grace' to suffering. It has been graced to you to believe in Jesus and it has been graced to you to suffer for Jesus. This is our precious gift. Why would suffering be a grace to us? And undeserved favor for us? There are many reasons, let me just give you a few.

1. It is a grace to suffer in order to advance the Gospel. Suffering is absolutely necessary to advance the Gospel. Paul wrote in Colossians these crazy words,

(Colossians 1:24) Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.

Paul is saying that to minister to the church, to advance Gospel ministry, he must suffer.

2. It is an honor to suffer for the name. That is a grace. Here are two verses:

(Acts 5:41) The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the **Name**.

(1Peter 4:16) However, if you **suffer** as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that **name**.

Suffering for Jesus is a cause for praise. It's an opportunity to say, "He alone is worthy!"

3. In suffering for Jesus, I experience a deep union and identification with Jesus. Do you remember when Paul was hell-bent on persecuting Christians? And Jesus stopped him dead in his tracks, he fell off his animal and do you remember what Jesus said? "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute them?" No, "Why do you persecute me?" There is an incredible union with Christ when we suffer for him.

4. A third example. When we suffer for Jesus, we will receive his vindication, and that is an undeserved grace. Hear what is written in the book of Revelation.

(Revelation 6:9) When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.

¹⁰ They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" ¹¹ Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been.

When we know the purpose of our suffering, we can overcome our fear. So, do not be afraid.

Friends, what does a citizen of the Gospel of Christ look like? He stands firm in one Spirit. She strives together as one for the Gospel. And he does not give in to fear but embraces suffering. May all of us live as citizen worthy of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's pray.