

Sermon 21: Philippians 4:1-3: Unity

OUTLINE

Stand
Agree
Help

INTRODUCTION

A neglected but necessary aid in our standing up to persecution and temptation is our unity as a local church. A church that is united in Christ will be incredibly resilient. All the parts will be working and serving each other; if there are financial, spiritual or emotional needs, the members of the church will rush to their aid to support them. When false teaching comes they will stand united in the gospel. Their love for each other and their love of the truth will create a wall which will not allow error in among them. This is why people have discovered the effective tactic of: Divide and Conquer! It is hard to overcome a united people but it is easy to overcome a divided people. As we come to the last part of the letter to the Philippians Paul revisits the matter of unity for the purpose of standing firm that has been mentioned several times already.

As we come to this last chapter you will notice that it begins with the word 'therefore.' Now if you know anything about Paul's writings you will know that these 'therefores' are of large import. This is the point at which Paul draws together all that has gone before and then proceeds to some necessary conclusions and applications. The Philippians you will remember were a faithful little church that was under some duress. They were experiencing the problem of persecution; the problem of false teachers; the problem of poverty; the problem of discouragement at Paul's imprisonment; as well as some problems in the area of disunity. Paul has written to them to encourage them showing that God is working in his imprisonment; that they must stand strong and united in the face of their struggles; how they must have the servant mindedness of Christ; and feel assured in their position as God's children who are saved by grace through faith in Christ. Paul has just finishing modelling in himself a walk that is striving towards the hope that we have in Christ. Chapter 4 marks a turning point where Paul begins to list some concluding exhortations for this church in light of all that he has said. If you look down you can see these exhortations clearly. In 4:1 we see Paul saying 'stand firm thus.' Then the first thing he does is address the matter of a disagreement between two women, v2-3; then Paul calls for the Philippians to be joyful, v4; to guard their witness, v5; to not be anxious but prayerful, v6-7; to fix their minds on the right things, v8; to imitate godly examples, v9. The letter then ends with some personal details and final greetings, v10-23.

We begin then with v1-3. It has been pointed out that there are three commands, to stand firm; to agree in the Lord; and to help in the actions of reconciliation. These will stand as our headings as we look at this section.

Stand

V1, 'Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.' You have all heard of the saying 'you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.' It means that you can usually

win people over by being kind and understanding rather than combative and confrontational. Paul is about to talk to a very sensitive issue, and now shows a lot of tact as he begins this list of exhortations, a list that begins with an embarrassing division. Before he airs the details of the matter at hand he begins with an overwhelming show of his love and affection for this church. As parents and as people in general we can learn from Paul's approach. Before the rebuke lands, and we will show how tactful he is in addressing the matter; before the rebuke falls he affirms his love. His addressing of this matter does not come like a bolt from the blue, but from love. There are six tokens of affection squeezed into this little verse.

'My brothers.' Paul, a Jew, is calling these Gentile Christians 'my brothers.' This is of course an inclusive term referring to men and women. Because these, like Paul have come to faith in Christ, they are now one family in God, united by the Spirit. A true and more permanent bond exists than with unbelieving family. 'Whom I love.' They are not only loved by God, but Paul himself loves and has deep affection for these believers. Paul planted this church, has been supported by them in his needs, has personal relationships with many in the church, they are dear to his own heart. Any strong words that come from him are coming from a heart of love, and from a place of deep concern not criticism. The rest of the list fills out what this looks like.

'And long for.' Some people love their families but don't love spending time with them, this is not Paul. He has a deep affection that makes him wish he was with them. They are a delight and not a duty; a breath of fresh air, not a burden. Do we ache for each other as Paul does here?

'My joy.' Joy we know is a big theme in this letter and we have learnt a lot about Paul's joy. His joy does not depend upon this going his way; him having a good day; him having all his desires met; him having his intended plans succeed. No, Paul delights when the gospel goes forward; he is joyful when sinners are saved; his joy depends on whether the church is doing well. His joys are shaped around Christ's joys, and Christ delights in His bride.

'And crown.' The word for crown, 'stephanos' is the laurel wreath that an athlete would win in a competition. You could think here of 'reward.' Like when a husband says to his wife, 'I don't prize you because of what you do for me, you are the prize,' Paul is saying to this church, you are my prize, my reward.

'My beloved.' This is a stirring way to refer to a loved one. Imagine a husband introducing his spouse and says, 'This is my wife, Lynn.' Then imagine him introducing her, 'This is Lynn, my beloved.' She is not merely an office, a function; she is what she means to me.

There is a massive challenge here. How do you feel about the church? Now granted a pastor will have a greater affection for his church than the regular church member but the family connection is real between every believer. Many treat the church as part of the problem but the church is what Christ laid down His life to obtain. Our western allergy of institutions can make us prefer individual experience and despise the communion of the saints.

Paul's love, concern and desire to see the church succeed cannot be in question and lays for the foundation for the exhortations he now brings. The first command is 'stand firm thus in the Lord.' This is not the first time Paul has called upon the Philippians to stand firm, 1:27-28, 'Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,' ²⁸ and not frightened in anything

by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.' Nor are the Philippians the only church that are called to stand firm, 1 Cor. 16:13-14, 'Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. ¹⁴ Let all that you do be done in love.' This is military language indicating an opposing tide, be it persecution; temptation; false teaching. The world is opposed to us and there are innumerable pressures to buckle. Not only does Paul tell them that they ought to stand firm, he tells them how. Commentators are torn as to whether Paul is reflecting on the past verses, saying that they should stand firm by clinging in faith to the righteousness in Christ not their own; by striving with all their might to the perfection they will one day have in Christ; with minds set on heavenly things and not earthly. Or is he thus pointing to the list of things to come, that they should stand firm by being united, joyful, gentle, prayerful, with minds set on the right things while imitating godly examples. I am of the opinion that the verse break is in the wrong place and Paul is pointing to the list that follows not the list that comes before.

Whichever list you prefer, there is a lot of overlap and both can be summarized as standing, 'in the Lord.' Those who try to stand firm but do not have the Lord cannot do it as we know are in the Lord. What does this mean? Our oneness with Christ has many aspects to it, and all of them feed into our ability to stand, one aspect or other coming into the foreground depending on what sorts of difficulties we face. Here are just three aspects of our union with Christ which inform what it means to stand in the Lord. Remember gospel realities. If false teachers come along telling you that you are not doing enough to be saved, that you need to do A or B to be righteous, remember the gospel reality that you have received the righteousness of Christ by faith; that your judgement day verdict has been brought forward that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Is guilt stealing your joy and causing you to be unfruitful in your walk, remember your sins are fully paid for. If you are facing division in the body of Christ, then remember the gospel reality of your oneness in Christ, that you are individually members one of another, that Christ has been willing to lay down His life and overlook the evils of that member of His church and so should you.

Secondly, we can stand in the Lord by imitating gospel patterns. If God has saved you through the selfless love and service of Christ, let this mind of Christ be in you as well. If disunity is threatening your fellowship because people are being selfish, imitate Christ and Paul and other servants of the church in their willingness to lay down their lives for the unworthy.

Thirdly, we stand firm in the Lord by drawing on gospel resources. Be in Christ means being grafted into Christ by the Holy Spirit. It means the same power that raised Jesus from the dead has caused you to die in Christ, is enabling you to be holy and is transforming you into the image of Christ. Is your struggle against sin? Are you feeling the weight of temptation, then remember that we are united with Christ, filled with the Spirit of Christ, draw upon these gospel resources that have caused you to be buried with Christ and enable you to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit.

Agree

V2, 'I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord.' Having spoken to the danger of false teaching in chapter 3, and now moving into a list of things

to do to stand firm, it is important to note Paul's logic as he addresses the matter of unity. We do not stand on our own in the war of which we are a part, we are an army, a family, a nation, a priesthood, a body, a flock, a temple of living stones, these are all metaphors that speak of our unity and diversity. Essential to our spiritual survival is our unity in the local church. We must not miss this emphasis and test whether we cherish the unity and the peace of the church as much. We have a unity created by the Holy Spirit, but do we maintain that spiritual unity in an outward bond of peace as Paul urges us, Eph. 4:1-3, 'I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.'

Let us think about the particulars of this situation. We know that the problem is between two women, yes women can be a source of problems as much as men. We know their names. We do not know what the problem is. It is likely not a doctrinal problem as Paul does not let doctrinal issues pass if they are a danger to the church. It is likely not a matter of ethical failure like we see in 1 Cor. 5 because Paul likewise calls those matters out. In one sense it is good that we do not know what the particulars of the problem are because in the absence of the matter that divided them being discussed, we see the duty to be united despite their differences coming to the foreground. What we can see is that women played a prominent role in the life of the early church and Paul was not a chauvinist who refused to acknowledge the contribution of women.

Now there are many who want to appropriate these verses. Today there is the egalitarian and complementarian debate; what is the role of women in the church. The egalitarian view taking its shape from feminism thinks that a woman should be able to do anything a man can do. The complementarian view sees men and women as equal yet different, and that a woman cannot hold the office of elder/pastor or preach when the Church is gathered for formal worship. Paul sees women having an active role in the life of the church and in the gospel as he indicates, 'who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together' and 'my fellow workers.' Paul also wrote, 'I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man.' There is no contradiction here. My theory is that because Paul calls Aquila and Priscilla his fellow workers, and they had a church in their home Romans 16:3-5; it is possible that these were women, perhaps like Lydia, who were well off and able to host the church in their homes. I readily admit that this is speculation, but it is an attempt to show how women can be involved in promoting the gospel, partnering in the gospel, without having to make them do and act as men can. We must learn from this that preaching and being an elder is not the only way in which the gospel is served. Praying, giving money, being a willing servant like a Sunday school teacher, or in any other capacity that serves the church in general makes you a partner.

Now let us talk about this division. Many of us would be shocked if we were sitting in the church and the apostle Paul sent us a letter to be read out and two individuals were named and publicly mentioned in this way. In our context we would see this as naming and shaming. Not so in ancient culture. Firstly, the point is made by the commentators that not naming someone was a worse act than naming them. To depersonalize and not address them by name was a form of insult.

You will notice that Paul gives the same exhortation to both, 'I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord.' It is significant that Paul is not

picking a side like he does when speaking about weaker and stronger brothers. He helps us to see that it is every Christians duty to reconcile. Christ spelt this out when He said in Matt. 5:23-24, 'So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.' As Christians one of the characteristics of our walk is we are peacemakers. Matt. 5:9, 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.' Rom. 12:18, 'If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.'

The command is to 'agree in the Lord.' First we stand firm in the Lord and now we are called to agree in the Lord. That word 'agree' means, 'think the same thing/be of one mind.' In other words make sure that your thinking lines up with the gospel. It is not a case of one being called to capitulate to the other; but both are obliged to be conformed to God's truth in the gospel. The unity called for is not a forced agreement because you give up thinking merely conforming your opinion to someone in authority. The unity called for is not a shallow conformity to manmade rules. The unity here is not a shallow outward conformity in dress and behavior. It is not a fake posturing of oneness for outsiders while in your hearts you are truly divided. There is the truth in Christ and we are all to submit to it. This gospel truth helps us in so many of our disagreements and divisions.

Think of a marriage for a moment. We all sin against each other, all the time. What are the lies we can believe about a person that sins against us? Their sin is unforgivable. Their character is irredeemable. Sin has broken this relationship. But if your spouse is a Christian then you cannot believe these lies, you have to agree with what the gospel says about your spouse. If God can forgive that sin so can you; are you willing to deny that they are utterly depraved, not saved and that the Holy Spirit has no power to change them? If sin no longer separates us from God but He is reconciled to us in Christ, how much more should we strive to be reconciled in Christ.

Help

V3, 'Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.' Here we see our third command. Paul addresses an unknown companion to be a third party intervention. Some think it is Epaphroditus; or one of the elders, or whoever the messenger is who brought the letter, or even someone whose name is literally 'true companion.' This is not important. What is important is that sometimes there is a need to bring in a third party. There are situations that reach a stalemate; or a total breakdown in communication; or an unwillingness to engage because of past grievances. This could result in a cold war; or factions arising around the different groups; or just outright damage in the church, hurting the church as well as its witness. Just as at times we need someone to help us bear the burdens of our own sins, Gal. 6:1-2, 'Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.' Sometimes our relationships become burdened with sin and we need a mature, gentle, objective third party to come alongside and help.

We don't like to think that we are helpless and need help in the face of our sins, but the truth is, sometimes we do. If someone is caught in an addiction, the power of sin is in its secrecy, and having someone who you are accountable to can help you break the sin cycle. Because we are great at believing lies about ourselves and our sins we often need someone outside our situation to speak the truth to us. When there is a relationship breakdown we always preach the smallness of my sins and the greatness of the others sins; the innocence of my actions and the terrible motives of their actions; the harmlessness of my actions and the grievous wounds the other has caused. It is helpful to have someone else call us out and remind us of the truths of the gospel, we are all sinners, we are self-deceiving liars who always make ourselves out to be better than we are; we are always better at focusing on others sins than our own; and we are more ready to see our brothers and sisters in Christ as utterly depraved sinners than saved saints. Paul identifies each of these women as those who have a proven track record of service, that they are worthy of recognition; that they are Christians whose names are in the book of life and they will be part of the same community in the new creation forever. No doubt Paul is trying to give a little perspective by shining some gospel truth that will help melt their hearts towards the other.

I suspect that Paul makes this appeal publicly so that these women see that this 'true companion' is trusted by Paul so they can trust him; and that he is given permission by Paul as an apostle, so they should not resist the process.

Let us conclude. There are threats to the church, one of the greatest threats is when we allow the sin in our own hearts to come between our duties to one another. There are a thousand ways and more that the devil can tempt us and divide us against each other so we need to commit to stand firm against these attacks, standing firm in the Lord; by seeking agreement in the Lord; and accepting help in the Lord.