

Standing United *Philippians 1:29-2:4*

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves

Introduction: Do you ever pine for simple days of the past? I remember back to when Erin and I were first married (17 1/2 years ago). We had very little money but there was joy in the simplicity: coolers doubling as coffee tables, hand me down furniture that sometimes matched, no kids around, and most nights home together. Our date nights would be walks and grabbing coffee at the favorite spot and falling asleep halfway through every movie we watched (I've watched many 2nd half of movies by myself). We used to talk about what we hoped for in life, what we believed God would have for us, and what we were passionate about. Typically it came back to investment in **people and God's Word**, two valuable commodities that are eternal.

However, as is the case for everyone, life moves from **simplicity to complexity**, and it happens quickly. Budgets go up as the need for a bigger place goes up, taking care of kids, working longer hours, and all that goes along with family. Nights and weekends become filled with overtime, meetings, and activities, stresses build, bodies break down, trials come, and loss happens. Time together is stretched thin, pressure mounts, and *seeds of discord* can begin to sprout. What gets shrouded in all of this good activity is the **clarity of purpose that was once possessed**, where the constant motion of life does not equal the initial goals set out. What is replaced is often tension, unmet expectations, and sometimes division, which left unchecked will lead to separation. We can easily substitute a business or even a church in this model and struggle with the same thing. Since complexity and responsibility is NOT GOING AWAY in life, how do we stay **unified together**, knowing that so many distractions vie for our time and affections?

The church at Philippi had all the resources it needed to be effective, healthy, and united, but they also had all the seeds planted to become **dis-unified, scared, and ineffective**. There was already attacks against Paul, the gospel (Phil 3:2-4), divisions among individuals in the church (4:2-3) and opposition that was intended to frighten (1:28). So Paul wanted to make sure that this exceptional church would stay focused, on target, and unified in the midst of growing complexity.

He first called them to living as **citizens of heaven worthily in the gospel**. This means that they were not only a product of the gospels work in their own life, would continue to be transformed by it, but would be ambassadors to the world around. **Unity was imperative**, and the only way to maintain unity was to keep a **wartime mentality**, standing firm against a common enemy, and function with **team goals, struggling together for faith in the gospel**. The means to gain unity were uniting for something greater than themselves or their own interests, and that is **GOSPEL MINISTRY**, seeing more and more come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. When the focus of life is primarily outside of ourselves and on Christ and others, joy is found and unity is maintained. *So we continue to look at what is necessary for us as a church to maintain a high level of unity in the midst of complexity, so that we can be effective in gospel ministry to the glory of God.*

United in the Struggle (1:29-30)

For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for His sake

Suffering is a gift

Few verses challenge our trust in God more than this one. The word Paul uses for *grant* here is the word for "grace", unmerited favor and gift. He applies this to salvation, which we rejoice in even though the depths of which are hard to comprehend. We are saved by grace alone, and it is God's gift to us to believe in Him and received salvation (Eph. 2:8-9). This is a supernatural work of God done in those He's called, loved, and redeemed (Eph. 1:3-12). At no point do we look to our own contribution, goodness, or works to gain or add to salvation, but respond in faith by asking for forgiveness, acknowledging our own sin that places us under the wrath of God. God grants us faith, making us dependent on Him and causing us to glorify Him for lavishing grace on us.

But simultaneously Paul says that God also ***graces us with suffering***. Far from a result of our sin or because we have done something wrong, our suffering **for the sake of Christ** is a gracious gift from the hand of God Himself. Not only does this blow our mind a little bit, but also informs our mind and heart about ***why*** we face suffering. Notice that he does not define the way we suffer narrowly but broadly, meaning any suffering for Christ. This truth is imbedded all through the New Testament: through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22); we are destined for afflictions (1 Thess. 3:3-4); that worthy churches will face persecutions, afflictions, and suffering until we are granted relief when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven (2 Thess. 1:4-7); all those who desire to live a godly life in Jesus Christ will be persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12); that the Spirit bears witness we are children of God provided we suffer with Christ in order that we may also be glorified with Him (Rom. 8:16-17); and in which we actually can rejoice in that we may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed (1 Pet. 4:13). Suffering is not only a sign of our salvation, it is a gift through which God causes us to trust more completely on Him and through which He calls others to Himself.

Agony of effort required

What does it take to engage in gospel ministry that is greater than any one of us? In a word: **AGONY**. Hard, tireless, and relentless effort that has been seen in worker from Paul until now. Paul's work on behalf of the church was a **struggle, a fight, required expending much energy, exercising self-control, and boldness** (see Col. 2:1, 1 Thess. 2:2; 1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:7; 1 Cor. 9:25; Col. 1:29, 4:12). In other words, what is required to keep gospel ministry at the forefront of life that is full of complexity without dropping out of other responsibilities? We must embrace that it will require tireless work, constant struggle, a fight of faith that requires us to be focused, self-controlled, and bold. It means we WILL go to bed tired, feel stretched thin often, and overwhelmed, which drives us back to God and His grace, revealing our weakness and relying on His strength alone. Unity will only happen when we are convinced that ministry will require suffering and agony.

Agony and struggle is needed to overcome one of the most dangerous issues the church faces: ***apathy***. Apathy kills. Particularly apathy toward the spiritual aspects of life. In 1 Cor. 9:24-27 we see that to do everything for the sake of the gospel (9:23), it requires *self-control, focus and discipline* in order to obtain an imperishable prize or wreath rather than a perishable one. This means that to have the gospel continue to transform our own lives, our families, this church, and the world around, it will require hard work, tireless effort, relentless prioritization, and putting exhausted heads on the pillow each night. Indifference to any of these aspects will lead to a slow death and growing disunity.

United in God's Work (2:1)

*So if there is any **encouragement** in **Christ**, any **comfort** from **love**, any **participation** in the **Spirit**, any **affection** and **sympathy***

In light of the struggle that would be required for gospel ministry, the church at Philippi needed to be reminded of the **grounds of unity**, how they could maintain a unity that seems so difficult and elusive. Notice that this verse is tied directly to the previous verse by the word "so" or "therefore", meaning that

based on the agonizing effort, the next statements must also be true. These four phrases are *first class conditional clauses*, that carry the idea "if this condition is true, and it is, then...." This is why we can better express the idea as "**because, since, or so**" in order to give a clearer understanding of the meaning Paul was conveying.

Objective

The church did not need fluffy platitudes or subjective niceties, but something ground in the work of God. There is some disagreement on the language Paul uses, but the point is clear. The **encouragement in Christ** comes when the church knew the comfort of salvation that was in Christ alone. They had experienced the comfort that God's love for them has brought in their sufferings and afflictions. They have participated together in the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who united them together in unity (Eph. 4:3). They were recipients of God's tender affection and sympathetic compassion when God began a good work among them through the preaching of the gospel (1:6). Each of these realities would express themselves in results expressed toward each other.

Supernatural

Why did they have to understand these things? Unity is impossible without the intervention of God. Unity is not something that can be conjured up by good intentions, similar personalities or artificial interests. It is a comfort to know that the entire Godhead was, is, and will be at work in our lives. This is why the type of unity needed and exemplified by the church is not something that can be reproduced in the business world or any other venue.

Possessed

The requirements for unity before and after this are impossible, overwhelming, and ginormous. We need to remember that as many seeds are present that would sprout into discord or disunity, we possess realities in us already, resources that make all of these commands and principles possible. It is through the ongoing work of the gospel that allows us to make much of Christ in the gospel.

United in the Results (2:2)

complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind

Completion of joy

Before discussing the results of the work of God in our lives, Paul give the one singular command of this sentence: **make my joy complete**. We remember that nothing can take our joy away except for our own sin, so Paul is not talking about losing joy. The picture here is more the idea of joy overflowing over the top of a glass, spilling over. He was joyful in Christ, but when the church was unified in mind, heart, and mission, joy was overflowing. This is part of the angst and agony Paul dealt with, when those that he loved and ministered to walked in disunity or discord.

Unity vs. Uniformity

Though not a formal command, the idea of **being of the same mind** carries with it the force of a command. This means that we are knit together in our thinking since we are born again out of the same truth and walk in the same truth. We not only think the same way but we come to the same source for our thinking. Being united in the same soul and mind means we express the same grace, mercy, compassion, and sympathy poured out on us to each other. We "**love one another with brotherly affection, outdoing one another in showing honor.**" (Rom. 12:10), "**having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart.**" (1 Peter 1:22).

What does this unity mean, though, played out in the church? Is there a difference between unity and uniformity? The resounding answer is, YES, and when we understand the difference, unity among a diverse group of people becomes beautiful.

- **Internal persuasion vs. external pressure** - Uniformity works from the outside in, lining a group up to look the same, act the same, talk the same, with the hope they will pull together for a common purpose. The masters of this technique is our Armed Forces, who drill, dress, and train a group of individuals to look, march, and fight the same way in order to face a common enemy. Unity works from the inside out, born out of love and affection for someone else, and that drives and motivates toward action. This is vital since someone can dress, talk, and even act the part, but only when there is heart change can unity be found. Part of the reason churches struggle with unity is there are those who can talk a good game, come dressed with a smile, but do not have a new desire to love and move together, sacrificing for each other.
- **Unity invites and embraces differences** - One of the reasons marriage is beautiful is it reflects Christ's love for His bride, the church, and plays out the same principles. Marriage matches up two distinct people who are uniquely different: man/woman, different ways of thinking, ways of expressing and receiving love, communication, emotion, etc. No one would say a marriage where a husband a wife dressed the same way, talked the same way, and agreed on everything would be a healthy marriage (it'd be something odd, but not healthy). When a husband and wife not simply exist together but begin to understand, listen to, and enjoy each other with all the complexity and difference, we begin to taste of the beauty of unity. At one point in our marriage it came up that I did not really like watching HGTV and home improvement shows on my own. Erin said, "I thought you like those shows?" My response, "I love you, and so when I watch them I'm interested, but I wouldn't watch them on my own." In other words, I'm interested in what my wife is, enjoying her as I enjoy what she enjoys. Unity in love has that opportunity in the church.
- **Unity celebrates diversity** - Far from trying to be the same in everything, we celebrate the fact that we are so different. We stand on the truth, love relentlessly, stay centered on Christ, view others through the lens of the gospel, and then unleash, appreciate, and stand amazed at differences among us. Instead of viewing differences as threats, we view them as gifts of grace and marks of a creative God. This has implications **among us & outside of us**. Among us, this means we uphold and uplift the differences of schooling options we each decide on, the way we dress, the way we spend our vacations, money, etc. The ruling principle should simply be: ***is all of this being done for, through, and because of Christ, and if so, we can celebrate the way its different from me.*** It has implications **outside of us** realizing that the variety and diversity among us reaches a diverse range of people. There are some people that I will naturally have contact with and interact with that you may not have an opportunity to, and that is good. When God has placed you among a group of people in a neighborhood, job, team, or social group, you have been placed there as an instrument in the Redeemers hand to be a light and conduit of the gospel. When we all begin to see ourselves that way, we become an unstoppable force.

United in an Uncommon View of Ourselves (2:3-4)

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Motives Matter

This leads to the last principle of the playbook for unity. Paul had focused on our common enemy without and our unified purpose ahead of us. He then dealt with how we interact with each other in the

same mind and love. Now, he turns the focus to each individual, especially those motives that reside in each of our hearts. "Do NOT ONE THING out of selfishness or self glory, but in humility, consider others as **having surpassing value greater than yourselves.**" Selfish ambition is the symptom form the real cause, which is vanity, thinking that we are something greater than we actually are. Interpersonal relationships not only are where conflicts show themselves, they also have a funny way of revealing our true motives. Here is a call to **examine and root out** those seeds or motives that would take root and flower into selfishness and vanity. Selfishness is at the core of all disunity, and every conflict in your marriage or interpersonal interaction can be traced back to this insidious sin. We have already seen that there were those operating out of this motive in the church, those who were preaching Christ out of envy, rivalry, and selfish ambition (Phil. 1:15-17). This is a **scary and sobering thought.** We can do "good things" in ministry but they can absolutely be done out of motives that will ultimately rob our joy, effectiveness, and unity.

Beware of the Enemy within

The greatest enemy that we face in the fight for unity is the one that resides IN US. In fact, the problem I have with this verse (which is a life verse, meaning I hope to continue working on my whole life) is that I too quickly think about this as applied *to someone else, rather than myself.* Combining the drift toward selfishness and pride we see Paul commend that we not simply look to ourselves but to the interests of others. Clearly, this type of living is rare, since Paul said in 2:20-21 "**For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.**" This was in reference to Timothy, who flew in rarified air when it came to selflessness and humility. There is no room for the pushing of self when Christ is central in everything. The fight for unity begins and ends with our willingness to engage our own motives and fight the enemy within.

Joyful Replacements

The fight against selfishness and pride is won when we replace them with more joyful counterparts. Repentance is always about replacement, and here Paul gives us the more joyful option. Humility is required to kill selfishness and prideful ambition. This means we **see ourselves properly, meaning we rank** last on the hierarchy: Jesus 1st, Yourself last, and Others in between (remember the song?). This is why we must maintain an active focus on Christ through His Word. It is in God's Word that we remember life is about God, not us. He is to be glorified, not us. He is the central figure of the universe, not us. When that truth grips us, we are ready for the next obliteration to our pride: other people have surpassing value greater than ourselves. When others are MORE VALUABLE, their lives, opinions, thoughts, and actions matter to me a great deal. I care what you think about MORE than what I have to say, your life and situation more than my own. This is why humility **is not an act. It does not say ACT HUMBLY, but rather BE HUMBLE.** An act wears thin and is betrayed by our actions.

The second great replacement is looking out for the interests of others. **1 Corinthians 10:24 says "Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor."** Here Paul does not say to *neglect* ourselves, since pursuing Christ on our own is imperative to be able to love others. But rather, we are to look to the interests of others. All conflict is born out of **competing interests or the desire to 'be right'!** When the emphasis on life is pressing MY PREFERENCES, MY AGENDA, MY BEING RIGHT, there will never be true unity. Remember back in chapter one, Paul did not fight for his rights or for what was right when there were those speaking against him while in prison, only that Christ would be proclaimed (1:18)! This is what humility looks like. Remember, **true leadership** is found when you are the one to admit pride and selfishness and are willing to experience loss from another, even if you are "right". We need more leaders.

Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less

Questions For Discussion:

- How do you describe God's grace in your life? Where have you seen grace? Why do we have a hard time seeing God's grace in our suffering?
- The gospel changes us and calls us to pursue Christ in: our individual lives, family, one another in the church, and the world around. If gospel ministry is a struggle or agony, in what of these areas are we neglecting? Read 1 Corinthians 9:23-27 and discuss what is required to center ministry and life on Christ
- How do we maintain the same thinking and love among our church when we are too big to know everyone? What do you think that would look like in the relationships we have here?
- Where do you see selfishness and pride in your own heart and life?
- How do we become better listeners, particularly when it comes to each other?

Counseling Thought:

Conflict is born out of selfishness, pride, and seeking our own interests or the desire to be right. This means that the true and complete resolution of interpersonal conflict comes when we are willing to humble ourselves, sacrificing our own rights, and selflessly looking to the interests of others. What are interpersonal conflicts that you have right now (or have had)? How would those be resolved if you would humble yourself, lead, and proactively confess your sin to the Lord and the one you are in conflict with? How would past conflict been resolved sooner or more completely? Ask the Lord to give you the grace to confess your sin, humble yourself, and seek restoration with the one you've been in conflict.