

VI. Lesson 6 Keep Standing/Secrets of Unity – Phil. 1:27-2:4

November 15/16, 2006

Aim: To become more aware of both the responsibilities and the privileges which are ours in Christ.

The first section of Philippians (1:1-26) has focused on Paul – his prayers for the Philippians, his trials, and his hopes. In this new section (1:27-2:18), Paul begins to address his concerns for the Philippian church, especially the need for holiness, unity, and humility.

A. Keep Standing (Phil. 1:27-30)

1. Worthy Conduct (1:27)

‘Only’ (*monon*) is placed first and is emphatic. The meaning is ‘above all, at all costs’ (cp. Gal. 3:2). This sentence very skillfully joins together the inner state of the church, which needed a reformation and amendment in the practical matters of true love and mutual concern, and its present danger which is that it will succumb to the pressure of adversaries and false teachers (1:28; 3:2).

Consistent Christian service is based on the principle urged on the Philippians in verses 27: a manner of life ‘worthy of the gospel of Christ.’ It is a recurring note in Paul’s letters (cf. Eph. 4:1; Col. 1:10; 1 Th. 2:2; 2 Th. 1:5). He does not mean that we earn God’s favor, but that our lives should be consistent with the gospel, living illustrations of the gospel’s power. Christians have a high calling to fulfil. They were to realize that, even if Paul could not see the kind of life they were living, Christ could. This principle is one of the keys to the message of the Bible: when the grace of God in the gospel touches our lives it produces graciousness. Christ begins to transform us into His likeness.

Paul hints at this when he says ‘let your manner of life be ...’ (v. 27). Literally he writes ‘live as a citizen’ (*politeusesthe*). Philippi, as a Roman colony, was intensely proud of its privileges. The Philippians are Roman citizens, with privileges to enjoy – and responsibilities to fulfill. They must equally remember that as citizens of a heavenly realm (3:20) they are called not only to accept the benefit of this gospel but also to model their lives according to the pattern laid down therein. Whatever happened to Paul or his readers, he wanted to hear that the Philippians were living as befitted their true citizenship. Paul is saying: ‘You belong to a heavenly people, therefore live a heavenly life. Remember who you are, where you have come from, and where you belong!’ (see 1 Pe. 2:11-12).

While Paul anticipates release from confinement, he urges his friends to patterns of Christian lifestyle which are not dependent on his own presence or absence. ‘Whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence’ is a message of caution that they should not wait for his return but put a reformation of their church life into effect immediately. Was there a quality about their Christian commitment when Paul was present which was lacking when he was not with them? That would be an all-too-common Christian frailty. Is our presence at worship and prayer, or our support for the various ministries of our fellowship more dependent on the presence of particular leaders than on our faithfulness to Christ?

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The Philippians would have immediately understood the words ‘stand fast’ (*stekete*). They would have thought of the phalanx in which the army was able to withstand the advance of the enemy because each soldier stayed in his place and did his job. This was a tactical device used by Philip of Macedon and his son Alexander the Great. Christians must resist Satan’s attacks on the truth of the gospel by refusing to break rank and flee the battlefield.

With the words ‘striving together’ (*synathlountes*) Paul takes his readers from the realm of military endeavor to that of an athletic endeavor. The athlete is not to compete for himself alone but for the good of the team. His emphasis is still on unity, as the phrase ‘with one mind’ (*mia psyche*) makes clear. They are to present a united front, not weakened by internal disaffections and rivalries. Paul’s point is obvious. Soldiers and athletes cannot succeed apart from when they are united. An efficient army or athletic team trains together. If we are going to be united against the enemies of the gospel, then we must study the Bible together, we must pray together, and we must work together.

The Christian’s fight is on a double front. Negatively, it is against their foes (v. 28) in refusing to be intimidated and cowed by them. Positively, they are striving together ‘for the faith of the gospel’ (*evangelion*).

2. Facing Opposition (1:28)

No matter how gracious we are in our lifestyle, opposition will come, just as it came to Jesus. The question is not whether we will experience it or not, but how we respond to it. Paul explains two things: 1) Christians should not be intimidated or frightened (*ptyromenoi*) by opposition. Outside of the New Testament the same language is used of horses startled into a panic. When we panic, we tend to be overcome.

2) Christians do not need to be overcome by such opposition. How? By recognizing it for what it is: a twofold sign. On the one hand, it is the mark of destruction on those adversaries (*antikeiomenon*) who oppose us. It is not a sign of their greatness and superiority – although they often think it is (cp. Ps. 73:2-20). But the opposition created by our humble Christian witness can have another effect – of encouraging us! How? It is a sign that we will be saved. If we are opposed for the sake of Christ (v. 29), it is because we belong to Him (Mt. 5:11). As Matthew Henry puts it, believers have been given two ‘precious gifts.’ One is to believe in Christ; the second is to suffer for Christ. The fact that our adversaries cause us to experience the second gift indicates that we have truly received the first. The opposition that might otherwise discourage us actually serves to assure us that we are truly Christ’s.

- *In what ways do you find opposition to your Christian life and witness intimidating? Does Paul give some hints in this passage about how the fear of intimidation may be overcome?*
- *In Philippians 1:28, Paul speaks about an aspect of Christian witness that we rarely think about. Compare 2 Corinthians 2:15-16. What do these passages lead us to expect as the result of our witness?*

3. Unwelcome Gift? (1:29-30)

Paul has a further striking insight to add. Of course you suffer. But your suffering is part of God’s providence in your life; He is working out His purposes through it. There is no accident in their suffering, nor is it a mark of divine punishment as though God were angry with them. On the contrary, it is a sign of His favor. ‘It has been granted’ (*echariste*) is derived from *charis*,

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meaning ‘grace’ or ‘favor.’ This reminder is an encouragement and consolation to the afflicted people of God in all ages. Suffering is the friction which polishes our graces. Without it we would be all the poorer as reflectors of the image of His Son.

Suffering tends to isolate people. Those who comfort others do not share in their suffering. But that is not so when Christians suffer. For although our suffering is uniquely ours, we are not alone in it. The Philippians saw Paul engaged in ‘the same conflict.’ Paul uses this same word, ‘conflict’ or ‘struggle’ (*agona*), to describe his physical hardships at Philippi (1 Th. 2:2) and the ‘conflict’ of Colossians 2:1.

The emphasis is upon the word ‘same’ (*autos*), reminding the readers by way of encouragement that they shared, in far away Philippi, not only in the same fight for the faith, but also in the same grace to overcome their adversaries. Paul was telling them that ‘we are all in this battle together.’ This is the reason why he continually stresses the unity of those who are in Christ. We suffer for Christ – together. We stand firm in one spirit – together. We contend for the faith of the gospel – together. And we believe in Him – together. They could see in Paul, as well as in one another, that through suffering Christ created character (Rom. 5:2b-4). One of the greatest of all the privileges we enjoy in Christian fellowship is this: seeing brothers and sisters, often older and wiser, whose graces shine because of all they have been through.

- *Does it make any difference to the Christian who suffers to see suffering as a gift (1:29)?*

B. Secrets of Unity (Phil 2:1-4)

Paul has been exhorting the Philippians to stand ‘firm in one spirit, with one mind striving’ for the gospel (1:27). Unity in our fellowships is essential to our witness (cp. Jn. 17:21). There are several reasons for that. One is that the gospel is a message of reconciliation and peace with God. How can non-Christians be convinced that Christ reconciles us to God if we are not reconciled to each other? Another is that disunity always has the effect of turning a Christian fellowship in on itself, wasting energy on itself.

Now Paul turns the spotlight even more directly on the fellowship at Philippi. In the gentlest possible way he hints that he knows that there are frictions and tensions among them. Later, as we shall see, he is more specific and even singles out two individuals for special mention (4:2ff).

In these opening verses of chapter 2 he shows us how unity is based on humility (vv. 1-4), then in the famous section that follows he sets before us a magnificent portrait of Christ as the source and model of true humility (vv. 5-11).

1. Paul’s ‘Ifs’ (2:1)

Verse 1 implies four ‘ifs.’ In this context ‘if’ really means ‘since.’ His logic is as follows: because these Christians have experienced so much blessing, they ought to exhibit the effects of grace in their lives. If we belong to His family it follows that the following will be the family characteristics produced in us.

a) Being United with Christ

‘Consolation’ (*paraklesis*) can also be translated as ‘encouragement’ or ‘exhortation.’ ‘In Christ’ is Paul’s favorite summary expression for all that it means to be a Christian. To be in Christ is to share in all of the blessings he has gained for us. If we are in Christ, if we are really bound up

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together with him – then whatever happens to us, we shall be safe for evermore. Such a condition will be a great encouragement to all who draw near to God in faith.

b) Comfort from His Love

‘Comfort’ (*paramuthion*) denotes a greater degree of tenderness than the previous phrase. Although Paul expresses himself generally here, many interpreters understand this as a reference specifically to Christ’s love. Had they not felt the grip of Jesus’ love for them?

c) Participation in the Spirit

‘Participation’ is the Greek word for ‘fellowship’ (*koinonia*). We are bound to Christ through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit dwells in all of our fellow-believers. We are one with them in the fellowship of the Spirit. The unity of the Spirit is the basic theological foundation of all Christian unity.

d) Affection and Sympathy

‘Tenderness’ (*splanchna*, see 1:8) refers to the viscera as the seat of this emotional state. ‘Compassion’ (*oiktirmoi*) signifies the outward expression of deep feeling in passionate yearning and action.

Each of the above attributes can be seen supremely in the life and death of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is He who brings with Him encouragement, comfort, fellowship, tenderness, and compassion.

2. Paul’s ‘Thens’ (2:2-4)

If these things are true, *then* certain implications follow. *If* we have received all these blessings in Christ and from Christ, *then* we are responsible to live to Christ and for Christ. In this context, Paul spells out that this means being willing to put others first in several important ways.

a) The Joy of Others

Paul exhorts them to one mind, one love, one spirit, one purpose. ‘Complete my joy’ he says (v. 2). In the most gentle of ways he is challenging them: which is more important – your self-indulgence, or giving me – who brought the gospel to you – the joy of seeing you live mature and gracious Christian lives? Christians owe a great debt to those who have labored diligently to bring them to Christ and to bring them up in the truths of Christ. One of the best ways to show gratitude for such leaders is by avoiding dissension.

b) Unity with Others

The fourfold appeal in verse 1 is to lead to a fourfold result: ‘like-minded,’ ‘having the same love,’ ‘being one in spirit,’ and ‘of one purpose.’ This piling up of expressions which all bear upon church unity is intentional. The Philippians are left in no doubt as to the apostle’s desire for them that they share a common outlook.

‘Being like-minded’ literally means that they were to ‘think the same things’ (*auto phronete*). Paul did not want them to act like robots, primed and controlled by their leaders; rather, he wanted them to have a common purpose as their aim in life. Paul wanted each of the believers at Philippi to think the right things, and he wanted all of them to think these things together.

The Philippians were obviously a deeply committed group of Christians. But sometimes those who have deep commitment to the truth develop a short-sightedness about the nature of truth. To live in the truth means more than having our theology right. It means embodying its implications in lives of graciousness and humility. When there is only superficial commitment

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to the gospel there is little risk of serious division. Why divide over relatively unimportant issues? But where there is zeal, that danger always exists if the zeal is not permeated with humility. Perhaps more disunity is caused in the church by a lack of humility than by a lack of zeal.

c) The Value of Others

What value do you place on others? Here is the secret of a genuinely united Christian fellowship: its members count each other more significant than themselves (v. 3). Notice the alternative. It is not merely being a mediocre Christian. It is ‘rivalry’ or ‘selfish ambition’ (*eritheia*) and ‘conceit’ or literally ‘empty glory’ (*kenodoxia*). This is the same attitude Paul has already described for those who preached Christ ‘out of envy and rivalry ... out of selfish ambition’ (1:15, 17). The apostle knew how easy it is for believers who are being successful in the work of the Lord to become puffed up with a pride in their own achievements. The alternative to valuing others for Christ’s sake is to become spiritually disfigured ourselves.

In the ancient world in general, and in a society like Philippi in particular, a Roman colony with its well-ordered social scale and values, ‘humility’ or literally ‘humble-mindedness’ (*tapeinophrosyne*) was not a highly-esteemed grace. Greek writers almost always used the word ‘humility’ in a bad sense, with the meaning of ‘groveling,’ being ‘abject,’ or ‘cringing’ before one’s fellow-men. But Paul lifts up this word and gives it a Christlike character (2:5, 8). To display humility is to replace the value system of this world with the values of heaven. We are never more like Christ than when we live like that.

Paul’s formula for joy stands out in Philippians. It is J (Jesus), O (Others), Y (Yourself). So very often we try to have Paul’s joy while we reverse his formula. It cannot be done. We can’t spell joy but putting the Y first, and we can’t find joy by putting ourselves first.

How could the Philippians complete Paul’s joy? They could do it by living a much more Christlike life. How can church members today bring joy to their pastor’s heart? They can do it by taking encouragement from being united with Christ, by taking comfort from His love, by enjoying fellowship with the Holy Spirit, by being tender and compassionate, by being united in mind, spirit, and purpose, and by showing humility towards others.

- *Since we are proud by nature, how can we learn to ‘do nothing from ... conceit’ and ‘count others more significant’ (2:3)?*

C. Application & Discussion Questions

- *Paul urged the Philippians to a lifestyle ‘worthy of the gospel of Christ’ (1:27). Later (2:1-18) he makes specific application of what this means. But here it implies to ‘live as a citizen’ (p. 34). What parallels are implied between citizenship and Christian living?*
- *What are Paul’s four ‘ifs’ (2:1-2; pp. 38-39)? In what ways are you conscious of these privileges in your life? What is the connection between them and what follows in verses 2-4?*
- *The New Testament places a great deal of emphasis on the unity of Christians (e.g., 2:2). Why? What implications does this carry for our fellowship?*

For next time: Read Philippians 2:5-11 and Ferguson chapters 11-12.