

25th October, 2020
Standing Firm Together
Philippians 4:1-9

Thank you for your gifts and prayers for our Thanksgiving Day Offering. We will give you an update next week how it is all going. The opportunity to contribute will be open until the end of November.

Today is our second last reflection on Paul's letter to his much-loved followers of Jesus in Philippi. We have been encouraged and inspired by the spirit of this little letter--joy, maturity, unity, mission—which if embraced will launch us into our next season at Montrose. At the end of this message there will be the opportunity to take communion. So please take a few moments and prepare the bread and juice.

Paul begins: *“Therefore, my brothers, and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends”*. v1

This is not the first time Paul said to **stand firm** in his letter to the Philippians. If you remember, in chapter one he told them; *“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 gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you”*. v27& 28b

There was an amazing scene in the Blockbuster film “Gladiator” in the year 2000. General Maximus Meridius (Russel Crowe) is addressing the Roman Cavalry before the opening battle. He says: *“Brothers! Three weeks from now I will be harvesting my crops. Imagine where you will be, and it will be so... Hold the Line! Stay with Me! Brothers, what we do in life echoes in Eternity”*

I have chosen the title for verses 1-9 of chapter 4 as; “Standing Firm Together”. I suggest that today's passage shows four ways that we do this: 1. Being united in the Lord, 2. Rejoicing in the Lord, 3. Right praying to the Lord, and 4. Right thinking and living.

1. We stand firm together by being united in the Lord: v2-3

The first thing we note is that we stand firm together by agreeing in the Lord. We see this starting in v2: *“I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord”*.

Well, this letter just got awkward--Paul started naming names! He was calling out two members of the church to put aside their differences and *“agree in the Lord”*. We have no idea what their beef with each other was. Maybe in light of what Paul said back in chapter two to *“do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves,”* perhaps they were in some sort of rivalry with one another. Maybe it wasn't even sin-related, but a personality conflict where they just had rubbed each other the wrong way. Who knows; But it was serious enough that word had gotten all the way to Paul about it. Why was it such a big deal?

First of all, because a divided church smells to the world like a truck load of kitty litter. People outside the church already have enough drama in their lives--why would they want to come to the church to get more?

And second, how could the Philippians possibly stand firm in Christ when they were at odds with one another? To use a term probably familiar to all of us, “united we stand, divided we fall”. We have way too many enemies to hold up, if we start attacking each other. This was especially true in light of who exactly was in conflict. Paul wrote of them; *“Yes, I ask you, my true companion, help these women, since they have contended at my side in the cause of the Gospel along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life”*. v3

Euodia and Syntyche were veterans in the church. Paul described them in gladiatorial terms as ones who had “fought” alongside him for the gospel’s advance. And, like many of the founding members of the church at Philippi, they were women. This is no surprise to me after having served with several mission agencies--the strength of God’s missionary force has been and continues to be made up of women. We would do well in the church to learn from this! Women, you are the right arm of God’s global mission!

But even among people who fight hardest for the gospel’s advance, there is the potential for the biggest conflict. In fact, the number one cause of missionary attrition is conflict between co-workers! So, this would have been a major tension in the church.

So, Paul appeals to someone he referred to as “true companion” to help these godly women reset their eyes on what united them rather than what divided them. What was that exactly? That they had both been given the grace of having their names written in the book of life. Now that’s something we can agree on, something bigger than our beef. And it takes all of us at different times to help one another reset our eyes on what unites us.

2. We stand firm together by rejoicing in the Lord: v4-5

This is actually what Paul had done in choosing to focus on something bigger than his rivalry with other preachers; Preachers who, if you remember from earlier in chapter one, were preaching just to outdo Paul. Paul wrote there; *“What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice”*. v18

His second point is to actually rejoice in the Lord, v4 *“Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again: rejoice”*.

Think about this with me, this was the very foundation on which the church at Philippi was laid. In Acts 16 we are told that Paul and Silas were stripped and beaten then thrown into prison in Philippi; and at midnight they were doing what...? Praying and singing hymns--rejoicing! And that’s a significant part of how a church started in Philippi.

We can always stand firm because we always have reason to rejoice. And we can do so together because rejoicing softens our rough edges toward one another. This is what Paul was referring to when he continued in v5, *“Let your gentleness/reasonableness be evident to all. The Lord is near; “*

Gentleness or reasonableness” is, “a willingness to yield under trial...a refusal to retaliate when attacked.” And once again, this graciousness toward others is made possible when our eyes are lifted to something bigger than our situation. This time it’s that “the Lord is near”. This could be taken to mean the Lord is near to us, as in He is intimately involved in our lives or it could also be referring to the day of the Lord’s return being near. Either

way when our eyes are on Jesus, it gives us hope, and allows us to rejoice in the midst of our suffering.

3. We stand firm together by right praying to the Lord: v6-7

Focusing on the nearness of God has the power to extinguish our burning beef with others. Although we were once far off, we who have been brought near to God can come to him like an adopted child. We can come before him, not with our best foot forward, but with real stumbling feet weighed down with real anxieties. We can stand firm together by right praying to the Lord. Paul continued in v6, *“do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God”*.

Throughout the Bible, the clear antidote to fear is lifting our eyes from the wind and waves and setting them on the Lord. In fact, the most common command in all of Jesus' teaching was *“Don't be afraid.”* But for the honest person whose baseline anxiety is similar to mine--which means calm on the outside and a trembling chihuahua on the inside, this verse can be condemning. Saying “do not be anxious” is like saying “do not be breathing”.

But Paul's meaning here was not to become a completely non-anxious person, but to be the constantly anxious person you are, who constantly offers up prayers of supplication to the God who is near to you. What are prayers of supplication? To borrow the grand theological definition from Matt Chandler, these are prayers of “Help me!!!”

They are white knuckle prayers of “Lord, I don't know what I'm doing here, please help me. And thanks, I seriously couldn't do this without you.” And that kind of resolute prayer gets a resolute response from God: *“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. v7*

This is the pure, distilled peace that flows straight from the wounds in Jesus' hands and feet and side. It already guards you in such a way that the Bible says you are already seated in heaven with Jesus, so why not also guard your heart and mind! This guarding is a metaphor that would have been quite familiar to the Philippians as they watched Roman garrisons standing resolutely on guard around their city. However, it makes little sense to the unbelieving world. *‘How is it you can have such peace?’* they ask. *‘Even when your prayers aren't answered?’* I don't know, half the time it doesn't even make sense to me! All I can say is; *“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things”?* Romans 8:32

4. We stand firm together by right thinking and living: v8-9

Now, I see as the fourth and final means in which we stand firm together: by thinking and living right. Lord. Look at v8: *“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent, or praiseworthy - think about such things”*.

It's important to know these aren't just random good things that Paul encouraged the Philippians to think about. He used concepts here that were highly held virtues in the Greco-Roman culture of Philippi. So, what was he doing? Something we call contextualizing: communicating a gospel concept in the language and culture of a particular people.

This isn't Paul plagiarizing from *The Power of Positive Thinking*. These eight virtues aren't just meant to distract us from the drama of life, but to point us to something that will actually allow us to stand firm together amidst formidable opposition.

- What is truer than the One who says, "I am the Truth"?
- What is more noble than the One who is to receive all honour forever and ever?
- What is more just than the One who himself is the justification for our sins?
- What is purer than the One who dwells in unapproachable light whom no one has ever seen or can see?
- What is more lovely than the One who has made everything beautiful in its time?
- What is more admirable than the One who if everything he did was written the world itself could not contain the books that would be written?
- What is more excellent than the finished work of Christ on calvary? "Once and for all"
- What is more praiseworthy, than the approval, and pleasing of God? Obedience to God's word and His purpose.

What I'm getting at here is that if you set your mind on anything virtuous and follow that virtuous thing out to its ultimate source--I don't care if it's appreciating creation, or a wonderful mother--your eyes will eventually end up on Jesus Christ. As one author puts it; *"The heavenly mindset is profoundly earthy"*.

This is part of taking every thought captive to obey Christ. Did you know that every day you preach to yourselves all day long in your thought life, your self-talk. How does your preaching sound? Is it virtuous, pointing you to Jesus? Or is it peppered with the opposite of what Paul described here: whatever is false, whatever is shady, whatever is unfair, whatever is impure, whatever is ugly, whatever is condemning, anything worthless, anything that shames?

If you answer yes, no wonder it's so hard to stand firm. Listen, friend, there is One who has taken your sin and negativity upon himself. He came and preached peace with his very life and death and resurrection, so that, I could preach peace to you today, so that you can preach peace to yourself every day. Paul concludes: *"Whatever you have learned or received from me, or seen in me – put into practice. And the God of peace will be with you"*. v9

Conclusion - Communion

When we take communion, we know this promise is true because on the night he was betrayed, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, broke it and gave it to his disciples and said to them, "This is my body, which is broken for you; eat this in remembrance of me." He also took a cup of wine, and after blessing it, gave it to his disciples and said, "This cup is the new covenant marked by the shedding of my blood. For as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you announce the Lord's death until he returns."

We are announcing that Jesus Christ stood firm all the way to the cross so that we can stand firm together with our eyes on him.

Let's pray.