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Philippians 1:27-2:4 - Living Out Gospel-Shaped Unity

Intro

In our passage today, Paul makes a distinct shift in the letter from talking *about his own life and affairs* to talking to them *about how they should live*. He switches from *talking* to *telling*; from saying “here is what you should know...” to saying “Here is what you should do.” So naturally, he gives some incredibly practical, down-to-earth applications and imperatives for his readers, and therefore, for us today. The commands are simple and straightforward; but they are by no means easy.

Paul begins this new section by giving an exhortation - to have a “manner of life worthy of the gospel of Christ.” To conduct ourselves in such a way that is fitting for Christians, in a way that is consistent with what we say that we believe. Paul’s exhortation to the Philippian church - and therefore, God’s exhortation to us today - is this: ***that we would live out the gospel in our lives, not only as individuals, but as a united local church body, standing firm together against opposition, having a unity that is firmly rooted in the gospel, and working out our unity among each other through selfless humility.*** In other words: live a life transformed by the gospel; be a *church* transformed by the gospel; strive together against opposition, being firm in the faith; maintain unity in the Christian faith, being centered on Christ, the gospel, and His Word; don’t be selfish or prideful; don’t grumble, complain, argue, gossip, bicker, or cause division; give yourself over to humility; seek to selflessly serve each other, putting each other’s needs - indeed, the needs of the church - over your own.

Like I said, simple, straightforward, and incredibly practical - *but by no means easy!* And yet, if we believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ, then this is the life we are called to live as Christians. Faith in Christ transforms our lives so that they no longer look like they once did - but more and more, we look like Jesus; ***our lives become gospel-shaped, Christ-shaped*** - and therefore, by necessity, ***cross-shaped***: this requires dying to ourselves, no longer living for ourselves, but instead, living for Christ, and therefore, for one another. After all, this is what we saw last week, isn’t it? **To live is Christ, to die is gain.** The gospel calls us to live radically different lives, and not as lone wolf Christians, but as those united to a specific body of believers

- a group of Christians, a local church. And our lives together, as a church, are to be gospel-shaped. But the gospel doesn't only give us this demand and example, but it is also the **means** by which we are changed, the **means** by which we live out gospel unity.

So this passage calls us to 1. Be **unified together** as we **stand firm against opposition** to our faith, specifically persevering *with each other*; secondly, 2. He reminds us that **our unity is grounded firmly in the gospel of Christ**, that as believers, as a local body of Christ, we are united by our common faith in the gospel and the Word of God; and finally, 3. **The last part calls us to strive for unity through the path of selfless humility.**

[Transition]: These will be our three main points today. So point number 1:

I. (Gospel-Shaped) Unity Despite Opposition (1:27-30)

In verse 27, Paul exhorts the Philippian church to “stand firm,” being united together as they all “strive side by side for the faith of the gospel,” and he adds in verse 28 that as “**not be frightened in anything by your opponents.**” He is using *military combat* language here to call the believers to **stand firm** in a **united front against the opposition they are facing - opposition against the gospel faith. As we strive for the faith, laboring to see the gospel advance and to live out out gospel-shaped lives, “worthy of the gospel,” we are going to face opposition, and as we do so, we must persevere steadfastly, not only striving by ourselves, but striving “side by side” with on another, being *united in our faith as we work together for the faith.*** That is what Paul is saying in verses 27-30. The exhortation, or command, works a bit like a two-sided coin: on one side, positively encouraging us to keep striving for the faith, not only persevering in the faith ourselves, but also persevering *in our unity with one another*; and on the other side of the coin, he also encourages us not to “be frightened” by our opponents, not to let the external pressures coming against us threaten our ***unity and faith in the gospel.***

Paul is a little vague here on exactly what “suffering” (v.29) and “conflict” they are experiencing (v.30). He mentions their “opponents” in v. 28, that they are “suffering” for the sake of Christ in v. 29, and that these are the same conflicts Paul had among them and now has in Rome. While vague, it seems very likely that, at the very least, he is referencing explicit persecution they are facing on account of living out the Christian faith. A few weeks back, in our first sermon in this series on Philippians, I mentioned a bit about the religious and political scene for the Philippian church there in Philippi, and the persecution they were suffering. Even though

in modern-day Greece, Philippi was a Roman colony, meaning it received lots of privileges and many of the people living there were Roman citizens - which was a *very big deal* in the Roman world. But it also came with certain duties and expectations. While they were still allowed to worship their different pagan gods, whether Roman, Greek, or something else, they also had to regularly bow down and acknowledge **the current Roman emperor, the Caesar, as Lord, ascribing a sense of deity and worship to him.** Obviously, this creates a problem with Christians living there. As Christians, we have *only one Savior and Lord* - our Lord Jesus Christ! We can bow down and worship no one or nothing other than the One, True Living God! Everything else is idolatrous blasphemy! And so as they persevered in the faith, steadfastly trusting in and obeying Jesus, living out the gospel and seeing it advance, *they faced serious persecution, from the society, culture, and political regime.*

And so, in verses 28-30, Paul encourages them not to give in, not to be frightened in anyway, but to steadfastly strive for the faith, firmly believing that even in this persecution, Jesus is still Lord, and one day, their salvation will be made evident to all, and the destruction of those who deny Christ and rebel against Him will be evident as well. Even now, this is made evident *as believers persevere in faith.*

Application

It is absolutely **essential** and **necessary** that each individual believer persevere in the faith, not falling away when the going gets tough, but pressing in, trusting in Christ and obeying Him in faith, no matter what! But what we also see here is that **we are not meant to do this alone.** We do not find “lone wolf Christianity” in the pages of Scripture. Paul doesn’t *just* exhort us to persevere, but to do so **together, to “stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side-by-side” (v.27)!** That is not a command you can obey just on your own; it requires fellow believers around you, doing the same. In other words, I think we must read this as primarily being fulfilled among us *in the local church, as a local body of Christ.* After all, that is who Paul is writing to!

So as a small aside here: if you’re listening to this, and you profess faith in Christ and you want to live as a Christian, but you are not currently a member of a local, gospel-preaching, Bible-believing church, then I want to *encourage you to join one quickly, for your own soul’s sake.* We are not meant to weather the storms of this life alone; we need God’s grace, and he

often supplies that to us *through our fellow believers, especially our fellow church members*. We need one another to help us *stand firm*, so that we might *stand firm together, striving side-by-side for the faith of the gospel of Christ!*

Illustration

When conflict and opposition comes to a community, it can have one of two results: 1. It could cause the group to *scatter in fear and disband*, or 2. To *band together, to draw closer and tighter to one another, and so become stronger*.

Picture a group of soldiers, camping at night. Suddenly, there is an ambush by enemy soldiers upon them! One of two things can happen:

1. First scenario, the soldiers panic; they are mortally afraid of the enemy, and they don't trust their fellow soldiers to be able to help them **scatter**. Each soldier goes their own path. Some run away in terror; others give in and surrender; some keep fighting, but not as a group, but as isolated lone rangers, and are picked off by the surging enemy forces.

2. Now picture the second scenario: The ambush still comes unexpectedly, but instead of running in fear, the soldiers quickly scramble together, back-to-back and shoulder-to-shoulder, squarely facing off against the enemy. They trust each other to fight with and for them, and more importantly, they're willing to stand firm together, no matter what. And as they stand together, they are stronger for it.

We are to persevere in the midst of persecution, suffering, conflict, and opposition **by leaning on our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ; by standing firm together, not letting either one another's faith, or our unity as a whole, be shaken by these conflicts!** And as we stand firm, steadfastly together, we strengthen one another! God graciously uses us to help each other persevere! So let us stand firm in our **united front against opposition to the faith of the gospel of Christ.**

[Transition]: But as we know, there are many threats to our unity, even today. It seems Paul is even concerned that this opposition they faced threatened the Philippians unity. So how do we maintain unity when it comes under fire? **We remember that our unity is rooted in our common faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ.**

II. Gospel-Shaped Unity in our Faith, Convictions, and Affection (1:27, 2:1-2)

The unity that this passage calls us to is rooted firmly in our common faith in the Lord, His gospel, and His Word. Our unity flows out of the gospel. So first, we see we are to have a **unity of faith**.

Unity of faith - “One Spirit”

We see this here in verse 27 and then in 2:1. When Paul is giving his exhortation to live out the gospel by “standing firm” together, he says we are to do so **“in one Spirit”** the one Spirit of God within all believers. In 2:1 Paul grounds our call to unity in our common reality of having trusted and believed in the gospel of Christ. So he starts off by saying, **“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy....”** In other words, he’s saying, “If you are believers!” If you are encouraged by the salvation you experience in Christ through faith! If you yourself are comforted by the love of God for you, demonstrated through the work of Christ in His life, death, and resurrection! If this work of salvation has been applied to your heart by the Spirit of God at work in you, so that you participate in the love of Christ by the grace of His Spirit! If the affection and sympathy of Christ for you has so captured your heart that you now love Christ with all your affections, and also love others with Christ’s own affection and sympathy! In short - if you are believers, with faith in the same gospel of Christ, being filled with the same Holy Spirit! If you are all really Christians, then strive for unity!

He asks this question, with an **“If”** at the beginning, not because he is doubting their salvation or sincerity; on the contrary, he has made clear through chapter 1 that he is quite confident that they are believers (cf. 1:3-7). He’s being rhetorical here; he’s saying that because we are all trusting in the same gospel of Christ, because we are all partakers of the one Holy Spirit, because we are all saved and united in the same love of God for us, then **of course** we should strive for unity with one another!

Unity of Conviction - “One Mind”

And so he makes another appeal in verse 2: **“complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.** He describes this unity in four ways, but we can really break it up into two parts: **Unity of Conviction** and **Unity of**

Affection. So first, our unity centers around our common faith, beliefs, in convictions. He says twice in this verse that we are to be **“of the same mind”** or **“of one mind.”** Earlier, in 1:27, not only says with one Spirit but also **“with one mind.”** Just as our unity arises from our common faith, so we strive to maintain it by constantly growing in our common faith and beliefs, striving to having great conformity to the truth of God’s Word, and therefore, greater commonality among us.

[Illustration]: Think of it this way: Let’s say you’re throwing darts at a dart board. The further your darts are away from the target, the further apart they will be from one another. Sure, you might have some close to each other on the far right, but they are far removed from those on top or the bottom left. Some might even be on the wall, off the board! But the closer the darts are to the target at the center, the closer they are to each other. As you aim for the bullseye, and each dart falls near the center, the darts are brought closer together.

And so it is with us. Our target, our bullseye, is the gospel faith, Truth of God’s Word, and living like Christ. The more our knowledge and opinions and truth conform to God’s Truth, the more commonality we will have with each other. The more our lives look like Jesus, greater the unity displayed in our corporate church life! So that’s the goal: each of us aiming for the target: fully understanding and believing God’s Word, obeying Him in all things in faith. And as we do so, as a whole church of people thinking this way, then we are indeed **“striving side by side for the faith of the gospel”** **“in one spirit, with one mind.”** So we strive for unity, in part, by aiming to have our “minds renewed” in the truth of God’s Word, all seeking to submit to Christ and obey Him in all things, as individuals and as a church. When we do this, we’re not focusing on our own opinions or preferences, but are all bowing our knees together at the throne of God.

Unity of Affection - “One Accord”

Our unity arises out of our common faith in Christ, centering around our unity of conviction, but it does not just sit in our minds - it leads to unity in action. We also strive for **Unity of Affection.** This is what Paul means in the other two descriptions in verse 2: **“having the same love, being in full accord”** with one another. Our gospel unity pushes us to love each other with the same love we receive in Christ, doing all things in one accord with one another, not being divided, but being united in Christ.

Application:

Like the Philippians, we face many threats to our Christian unity today, as well. As we face greater hostility and opposition to the Christian life and faith, pressure can mount against us, tempting us to cower and run in fear, or even to turn on in each other instead of standing firm together. But there are other threats to our unity as well. I don't think I have to convince everyone that 2020 has been, and will continue to be, **a very tense, divisive year**. It's an election year, bringing it's contention as normal, but politics in our country are at a fever pitch right now. The economy has taken a hit affecting us all. Protests, riots, and many disagreements abound about racism, police brutality, the role of police, and even attempts to justify rioting and looting. And of course, the COVID pandemic hangs over everything like an ominous storm cloud.

All of these are deeply concerning and significant; but one of my greatest concerns during all of this has been how divisive these issues have been throughout churches and among like-minded Christians. I'm tempted to tackle each of these issues, but I can't; so let me just quickly give a brief word to all such issues, then specifically look at one example.

When such enormous issues arise, we are tempted to make every point a dividing issue, so that if anyone takes a different position from us at all they are on the wrong side. We are tempted to **major** on the **minor** points. Instead, let us **major on the majors**. Our unity is rooted in the gospel. Let us strive to make sure our dividing lines don't go beyond the gospel faith and the Word of God. To be sure, sometimes that means taking a stand on issues that will be offensive to some. But let us take care that we don't add to the gospel, as well.

So to look at one threat to unity today: the different responses to the COVID pandemic, and the issues of masks and social distancing in particular. This has been an incredibly divisive issue among churches and Christians, to a very concerning degree. There are many different views and positions on whether or not masks are useful, how much we should agree with different medical reports, the best approach to take, and on and on it goes. Now, I am not saying right now what my position on any of these things is; and that's my point. These are not issues we should divide over, but should instead strive extra hard to maintain our unity in our common faith in the one Lord Jesus and His gospel.

And I'll go ahead and brag on you all and say this: it makes me very glad to see how you all, as a church, have handled these difficult days. I've heard some of you confide privately your

disagreements with social distancing policies and the legitimacy of wearing masks; but then I've seen you lay your opinions aside for the sake of love and unity on Sunday morning, wearing masks and following protocols without complaint, in an effort to submit to the governing authorities and love each other well. What a beautiful thing! So be encouraged, and let us press on striving for unity in Christ.

[Transition]: But there are threats to our church unity that arise, and are often the most devastating; these are the threats that come not from **outside** the church, but from **within**: our own selfishness and pride, leading to grumbling, bickering, and in-fighting. And so, we need **gospel-shaped humility**.

III. (Gospel-Shaped) Unity through Selfless Humility (2:3-4)

In order to strive for and maintain unity with one another, we must do so with **selfless, Christ-like humility**. Humility is a very difficult subject to talk about; it's even harder to actually accomplish! Preaching about it makes one feel like a hypocrite. Humility is one of those subjects where if you say you practice it, you probably don't! So I'm not preaching on humility because I'm an expert, but because this is what God's Word says! I am a selfish, broken sinner, and I need this word just as much as anyone.

Verses 3 and 4 are convicting to read, aren't they? **“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit.”** We're commanded, “Don't do anything out of selfishness or pride!” And yet how often are those the very thoughts and desires driving what we do? We so easily act, speak, and think out of our selfish desires, preferences, and opinions; we are so easily motivated by our pride, seeking to elevate our name or at least preserve it. Before doing something for someone else, we might think, “Sure, as long as it's on *my terms*, fits into *my schedule*, conforms to *my preference and opinions*, and is *convenient for me*.” Like I said, these words are convicting, aren't they? I feel the sting of them in my own heart.

These verses call us to *die to ourselves*; to no longer live ourselves, to no longer be driven by selfishness and pride! And we are to live this way, in vv. 3-4: **“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.”** This is not the way that is natural to us. This does not come easy. This only comes from truly *dying to ourselves, repenting and turning away from our own*

selfishness and pride, and truly trusting in Christ alone, so that He is our hope and life! Only then can we live for Him and for each other! A person transformed by the gospel lives for the sake of other people, putting them first in all things!

The only way we can truly live out gospel-unity with one another is by dying to ourselves and putting each other's interests before our own. Let us live out this gospel-shaped humility in our lives, in our homes, with our spouse, our children, our neighbors, our unbelieving friends and coworkers. And let us *especially live it out here, as fellow church members! Of all places, the local church should be the place where we go out of our way to serve not ourselves, or our own preferences, but seek the good of one another!* So as we gather, as fellowship, as we call and visit each other throughout the week, **even as we gather for church business meetings - let us go out of our way and make an extra effort, by the grace of God, to die to our own selfish ambition, to swallow our pride, and to humbly love each other by considering each other as more significant than ourselves.**

Conclusion

This does not come easy, but it is incredibly important. It's so important, that we're going to hit it again in next week's sermon! So think of this as a cliffhanger, or even a preview of what's coming up next week: in the next passage, vv.5-11, Paul points us to Christ, who is our motivation, example, and means of such humility. Jesus Christ, the glorious Lord over all Creation, **humbled Himself by becoming a human, even to the point of death on a cross in our place!** Jesus suffered, bled, and died an unjust death, even bearing the wrath of God the Father against Him! Why? Because he loves sinners like so much that he was willing to sacrifice Himself for us! How much more so then, should we be willing to selflessly sacrifice and serve Him, and therefore, each other? And He not only died, but was raised! If you have not yet believe, then turn from your sin today, turn from living for yourself, and trust in Jesus alone for salvation! And if you are trusting in Him alone today for salvation, then you and I are raised to a new life, even now, so that by the one Spirit of Christ within us, we too can die to ourselves, humbly serve one another, and stand firm together in gospel-shaped unity.

Let us pray.