

**“Church Unity”**  
**Philippians 1:27-2:4**  
**January 2, 2022**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

The first part of Paul’s letter to the Philippians was devoted to giving an update on his status. His conclusion was that though his circumstances were troubling, he was doing quite well because the gospel was doing well. Paul was living in God’s big story of the coming of God’s kingdom through the advance of the gospel rather than being trapped in the little story of Paul’s kingdom. In today’s passage, he moves from himself to the Philippians and their condition. They were responding a little differently than Paul in that they were too absorbed in their little, individualized stories, and that was leading to disunity in the church.

There was a troublesome disunity that had arisen in this church, and much of this letter seeks to correct this. Two prominent members of the church were quarreling with one another. Euodia and Syntyche were two women who were valuable coworkers in Paul’s ministry, but they were having trouble getting along with one another. This disunity had begun to infect the rest of the church. The unity of the church is always under threat from the evil one because it is our secret weapon in the advance of the gospel. Didn’t Jesus say, **“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”** (John 13:35)?

It is appropriate that we should be looking at this topic of unity on the day when we install new officers in our church. If a church is to be fruitful in its gospel ministry, its unity is critically important. That is even more so the case among church leaders. I can report that God has blessed our church with a great deal of unity among our staff and officers, for which I am grateful. Like so many other churches, we have been through a difficult two years. I shudder to think how much worse it would have been had our church leadership not been marked by unity. As we move forward into a new year, the unity of our church will continue to be a matter of greatest importance.

**I. The Need for Unity – 1:27-30**

Paul wants them to live the kind of life that is **“worthy of the gospel of Christ,”** and he makes it clear that the kind of life he’s talking about is one marked by unity, in which they **“stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.”** He wants them to do this whether he is present or absent. Sometimes church people respond differently when the preacher is around than when he is not. Paul wants them not just to

get along when he's present with them, but to be marked by this kind of unity at all times. And notice how he connects this unity to their mission of striving for the gospel. He connects those things because God connects them, even as Jesus did in his famous verse cited above about the connection between effective outreach and church unity.

In verse 28, Paul mentions opponents of the gospel, telling the Philippians that they don't need to be afraid of these enemies. He brings up this issue of the fear of enemies because it is often our fearful response that leads to disunity in the church. There have always been enemies of the gospel. There are those today who will mock us for our beliefs. Some even encounter enemies who can bring real harm to them. Perhaps there is an enemy of the gospel who has the power to block a promotion at work, or there might be one spreading lies about a Christian. The enemies Paul has in mind were able to do even greater harm, as Paul himself was experiencing at this moment in his life. He was in prison because of being falsely accused by these enemies. Yet he insists that there is no need to fear these opponents no matter how strong they may seem and no matter how much harm they might bring.

These opponents remind me of bullies. A bully relies upon fear. If a person loses the fear of bullies, the bully is defeated. I think that's what Paul means when he says, **"This is a clear sign to them of their destruction."** For a Christian to face without fear something as terrible as death is a sign that the bullying gospel opponent has lost his power and is in trouble. It is also a sign to us of our salvation. Verse 29 describes two gifts God has given to us: faith and suffering. Suffering is a gift not because God is its author, but because of the way he uses suffering in our lives. Suffering confirms that we are on the right path as followers of Jesus. Jesus suffered first and then was glorified. Those who follow him follow the same pattern. So when we suffer, it draws us closer to Jesus. In that way, we lose our fear of the gospel opponents who would do us harm. They have no ultimate power over us.

It is clear from this passage that Paul regarded disunity within the church as a greater threat to the advance of the gospel than even the most powerful and evil opponent of the gospel. We need not fear those opponents, but we do need to take care to have one spirit and one mind. I'm afraid that there are many Christians who don't believe that. I have witnessed many who get so distraught over the growing secularization of America that they take it out on other Christians who don't agree with them about something. There is no doubt that America is growing more secular. The latest Pew Research poll was just released a couple of weeks ago, and it reported that the percentage of Americans claiming no religious affiliation has grown by six percentage points in just the last five years. That's an addition of 18 million people in the ranks of the religiously unaffiliated. As significant a threat as that might be, Paul teaches here that disunity in the church is a far greater threat.

Steve Brown has a memorable illustration of this. He says that when a group of thoroughbred horses face attack, they stand in a circle facing each other and with their back legs kick out at the enemy. Donkeys do just the opposite; they face the enemy and kick each other. Let's not be donkeys. Or to give another analogy, consider a bundle of twigs fastened with a binding rope. Five hundred twigs bound together will be quite strong. But what happens if the binding holding them together is broken, and all the twigs scatter? Each twig is then quite easily broken. The unity of the church binds us together, making us strong for the mission God has for us to **“strive side by side for the faith of the gospel.”**

## **II. The Basis of Unity – 2:1-2**

If this unity is so important, the obvious question is how we can acquire it, or at least improve upon it. That's the question Paul begins to address in chapter 2. The word “so,” translated as “therefore” in other versions, indicates that Paul was making a connection between these two sections. The connection is that he is telling us how to pursue this unity.

The basic command is found in verse 2: **“complete my joy by being of the same mind.”** The unity of the Philippians would complete Paul's joy, which is an amazing statement. Was Paul's joy dependent on others? Apparently so, at least in part. Isn't that a feature of love? When we love someone, we tie our emotions to them in such a way that their flourishing becomes a source of joy to us and their languishing a source of sadness. The implication here is that the disunity within the Philippian church was a source of sorrow for Paul.

It is in the first verse of the chapter, however, where Paul describes how we might grow in this area of church unity. In the Greek, the little word translated “if” can carry the meaning of “since,” and that is the case here. Paul is saying, in effect, “if there is any encouragement in Christ (and there certainly is), if there is any comfort from love (and there is), any participation in the Spirit (and there is), any affection and sympathy, then make my joy complete.” What he is doing here is reminding them of gospel truth. Unity comes as we are reminded of all we have in Christ.

Let's consider this list more carefully. There is encouragement in Christ. I like the way Spurgeon speaks of the good news of the gospel.

It is the ‘good news’ of Jesus Christ, and it is ‘good news’ emphatically, because it clears away sin—the worst evil on earth. Better still, it sweeps away death and hell! Christ came into the world to take sin upon His shoulders and to carry it away, hurling it into the red sea of His atoning blood. This is ‘good news,’ for it tells that the cancer at the vitals of humanity has been cured.

There is also comfort in those words. There is the comfort of knowing that I am loved by God. And the language here is probably intentionally vague. Is it referring to God's love for me, or my love for God, or the mutual love Christians have for one another? All the above, because all of that comes with the gospel. There is also **"participation in the Spirit."** The word for "participation" is the well-known Greek word *koinonia*, often translated "fellowship." In the gospel, we have fellowship with God. The Spirit is mentioned because it is the Holy Spirit, the third member of the Trinity, who is literally present with his people today. God's purpose in our salvation is that we might enjoy fellowship with him, and our present fellowship with the Holy Spirit is a down-payment on that.

I read an article recently that pointed out the three times Jesus said, "The Son of Man came..." He came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). Elsewhere, Jesus says that the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve (Mark 10:45). The third one is a bit surprising: the Son of Man came eating and drinking (Matt. 11:19). Eating and drinking with others is a precious part of fellowship, and Jesus says that this is what he does when he comes to be with his people. The good news of the gospel is that we are invited to the feast, not because of our righteousness but because of his grace.

This is the gospel, and it is the way the Bible wants us to be motivated toward unity. It is a motivation out of fullness, not neediness. Much of the motivation we are accustomed to is based on avoiding bad things by behaving as we should. Be sure to exercise, eat a balanced diet and get enough sleep so you can have the best chance of staying healthy. Work hard and study hard so you won't be poor. There is, of course, much truth in those warnings. But the better motivation is the gospel motivation found here. "You are loved by God completely and eternally, based not on your good works but on God's mercy." It is as we as Christians live in this reality that unity comes to us.

### **III. The Obstacle to Unity – 2:3-4**

One of the common mistakes we make is to think that diversity is the biggest obstacle to unity. It is our instinct to think that if others could just be more like me, then we could all get along so much better. I see this all the time in marriages, including my own. Wendy and I are very different in so many ways. On the Myers-Briggs personality profile, we are opposite in three of the four areas. We speak different languages when it comes to home-remodeling projects. Wendy speaks the language of the artist, while I speak the language of the engineer, a difference which has led to numerous arguments over the years. In verses 3-4, Paul puts his finger on the root of the problem. The obstacle to unity isn't diversity, but self-centered pride. **"Do nothing from rivalry of 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.”**

Paul is commanding a reversal of the way sinful pride works in our hearts. Instead of assuming we know best, that our ways are to be preferred simply because they are our ways, we are to honor others. There is a wonderful illustration of this in Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Two of the female characters, Christiana and Mercy come up out of the bath of the interpreter’s house, where they have been washed and had jewels put upon them both. Mercy says to Christiana, “How comely and beautiful you look!” “No,” Christiana said, “My sister, I see no beauty in myself, but how lovely you look! I think I never saw such loveliness.” Spurgeon comments on this, “They were both lovely because they could see other people’s loveliness. Your own spiritual beauty may be very much measured by what you can see in other people.”

Remember our previous point, that the ability to do this comes from the gospel. The self-centered pride that Paul is against here is the opposite of gospel motivation. Pride believes that if any good is to come my way, it’s going to be by my hand that it comes. The gospel declares that good comes to me by the hand of God. So the gospel brings a fullness to us that doesn’t need to be consumed with my own interests. God has been consumed by my interests, literally. Jesus was consumed by my sin that I might be delivered. Now I can look to the interests of others and see the beauty God has created in them.

There is a beautiful, though obscure, picture of this unity in the short Psalm 133. It uses two metaphors to tell us what the unity of God’s people is like. First, **“It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron’s beard, down upon the collar of his robes.”** This oil was considered precious in biblical times, making people fragrant and attractive to us who otherwise we would dismiss or reject. Second, **“It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion.”** This is a miracle, because Mt. Hermon was in the far north of Israel, while Zion was in the south. Such is the precious gift of God’s unity in the church.

## **CONCLUSION:**

In conclusion, let me suggest two specific steps we can all take to pursue this unity. First, ask God for a repentant heart, the kind of heart that sees yourself as the greatest of sinners who can only live in God’s sight by his grace, a grace he gives you generously through Jesus. Second, honor the reputation of your brothers and sisters as a precious gift that you dare not harm through any uncharitable word. And may God be pleased to advance the gospel through our church, as we live together in gospel, Spirit-given unity!

**Small Group Discussion Questions**  
**Philippians 1:27-2:4**

1. Both Jesus and Paul link church unity with effective outreach. Jesus said that men will know we are his disciples by our love for one another (John 13:35) and Paul says in this passage that the Philippians are to stand “firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (1:27). Describe what you think church unity looks like. What are some of its components?
2. How might such unity help in effective outreach? How would the lack of it hinder effective outreach?
3. In his book, *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer lists seven principles for eradicating the kind of selfish ambition that harms church unity and there effective outreach. Which of the following seven are most applicable to you by describing what you might do to encourage such unity?
  - Hold their tongues, refusing to speak uncharitably about a Christian brother;
  - Cultivate the humility that comes from understanding that they, like Paul, are the greatest of sinners and can only live in God’s sight by his grace;
  - Listen ‘long and patiently’ so that they will understand their fellow Christian’s need;
  - Refuse to consider their time and calling so valuable that they cannot be interrupted to help with unexpected needs, no matter how small or menial;
  - Bear the burden of their brothers and sisters in the Lord, both by preserving their freedom and by forgiving their sinful abuse of that freedom;
  - Declare God’s word to their fellow believers when they need to hear it;
  - Understand that Christian authority is characterized by service and does not call attention to the person who performs the service.”
4. We often think that the biggest obstacle to unity is diversity. How have you seen diversity be a challenge to your relationships? Your marriage?
5. Instead of a challenge, how might diversity lead to greater unity in relationships? Can you think of an example?
6. What can you think of as some specific applications of the important commands in 2:3-4?
7. Paul viewed the gospel as our greatest resource in doing this (2:1-2). How does the gospel help us obey the commands of verses 3-4?