

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
July 27, 2025

Unity through Humility

Philippians 1:27-2:4

Today we continue our series of sermons on Paul's letter to the Philippians. During the first two messages, we've begun to get a sense of the relationship between Paul and this particular community of Christians. We've been listening for how God is speaking to us, individually and together, especially as we move further into this season of transition in our congregation's life.

So far we've heard Paul greeting the Philippians, giving thanks for them, and promising them his prayers, that they will grow in love and be fruitful in right living. He and they share a confidence in the faithfulness of God, who can be counted on to finish the work of salvation he has begun among them through the gospel. This gospel is continuing to advance, in the midst of and through Paul's own imprisonment and hardships. This is a reminder to us that the good news that Jesus is Lord is powerful and effective, and is making progress in our lives and in the world. And as it does so, you and I are called to make Christ the main subject of our worship, our work, and our witness, so that in all things, he is exalted and God is glorified.

This brings us to today's text, 1:27-2:4. Recall from last Sunday's sermon that while Paul is at peace with the possibility that he may be executed by the Roman authorities, he does sound like he hopes and expects to be released, so that he may see the Philippians again. In the meantime, he and they are way more than acquaintances. The Philippians aren't distant spectators to Paul's hardships. They're partners in the gospel with him. This includes sharing in his struggles. Remember that Paul isn't the only one in trouble for allegiance to Christ. The Philippians themselves face resistance and opposition because of their loyalty to Jesus. Just as Paul's courage can inspire their own boldness, so his suffering means that they too must suffer for Christ. He and they are "in Christ," together.

Knowing that the Philippians' experience will mirror his own, Paul opens today's text by encouraging them to "conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (1:27). Paul's focus here is on living out the gospel. What's striking is that instead of using the more traditional Jewish image of "walking" in the ways of the Lord, Paul uses a political image. The Greek word translated as "conduct" has the sense of "live as a citizen," or "conduct your public life." Remember that this particular community of Christians is living out its faith in the midst of people who take great pride in being citizens of a colony of Rome. So part of what Paul is doing is exhorting them to live as faithful citizens, not of Rome, but of God's present and coming kingdom. Later on in his letter, Paul will explicitly tell the Philippians, "our citizenship is in heaven" (3:20). This doesn't mean being completely unconcerned about the welfare of the state and the part of the world where they live. But it does mean that their dominant devotion is to Jesus, the world's true ruler.

Because of where their ultimate loyalty lies, the Philippians need to, as Paul says, "stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel" (1:27). Here Paul shifts from a political metaphor to more of an athletic one, possibly even suggesting a

battle. In the face of opposition and pressure, the Philippians need to work together, like members of the same sports team. They need to “strive/struggle side by side,” standing their ground by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This type of unity and cohesiveness is critical to maintaining a faithful witness for the gospel, both then and now. From its very beginning, the good news of Christ’s Lordship has encountered resistance. Being a faithful Christian has always been a struggle. The present world that’s passing away doesn’t eagerly welcome the message of a crucified Messiah. So living in a way that conforms to the way of Jesus will always look strange and threatening in a world that places its hope in other lords and other gods, relying on human might rather than the strength of the Lord.

As our church goes forward in its mission, our call is to hold fast our hope in Christ, especially here in an American setting where religion is on the decline and houses of worship have more and more empty pews on Sunday morning. Some of this is self-inflicted. We’ve often treated the gospel as a mostly personal and private matter of the heart, without also considering its implications for the life of communities and societies. Or when we have moved to engage society with the claims of the gospel, we’ve done so in ways that grasp for power and control, or that come across as self-righteous and judgmental. Sometimes, corruption within the church, or political infighting within congregations, or scandals in the lives of ministry leaders, have damaged and weakened our witness.

Combine these things with the kind of indifference and outright resistance that come with a more and more secular society, and it’s no wonder that persuading others that the good news really is good is harder than ever. Here we are laboring to be gospel-centered and gospel-shaped people in a time of great debates about human sexuality, great divisions among different racial and ethnic groups, great threats to the environment, and great transformations in technology. Add to these the pressures that come from a materialistic culture, an individualistic mindset, political strife, toxic anger and hatred, and reliance on military and economic might, and we can begin to get a better sense of what the cross and the suffering way of Christ are up against.

But as it was for first-century Christians in Philippi, so it is for twenty-first century Christians here where we are. The gospel is always a public matter, so live your faith before others in a way that’s worthy of it. Don’t be afraid. Contend for the faith, not by taking up the methods and weapons of a hostile culture, but by embracing the self-emptying pattern of Christ. Conduct yourselves like people who believe that God is in charge, that God is the only Savior, and that you’re on your way to the day of deliverance. But do all that knowing full well that participating in, sharing in, the sufferings of Christ, is required. Paul says, “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have” (1:29-30). Strange as it may seem, Paul has come to think of suffering with Christ as a gift of God, and he wants to help the Philippians think of it that way too.

Coming to understand suffering with Christ in this way isn’t something you can pursue or achieve on your own. As Paul’s words indicate, it takes partnership in the gospel. It takes a community of Christians, a church. It takes people in a congregation, striving side by side, as one, in order to stay on the way of Jesus. This is why, at the beginning of chapter 2, Paul picks up the theme of unity and develops it even further. He says, “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ” (2:1). Note that “if” is Paul’s rhetorically skilled way of making a point. He doesn’t use “if” to express uncertainty but actually the opposite. “If there is any encouragement in Christ (and there is).” In one respect, Paul

could actually begin each of the four clauses in this verse by saying, “since there is.” Since there is encouragement, comfort, fellowship, tenderness, and compassion. He’s not questioning whether these qualities of life exist among the Philippians. He, and they, know from their experience together that these qualities do exist in their church. So rather than try to motivate the Philippians by laying a guilt trip on them, Paul helps them recall what has already been true of them. This is Paul demonstrating his skill as a pastor. He builds on who they are and what they already know.

This is instructive for us as we journey further into this season of change in the life of our church. Going into and through this period of transition won’t necessarily require coming up with qualities, ideas, and approaches that are entirely new. True, this can be a stage in our congregation’s story where there are opportunities to evaluate previous experiences and explore fresh ways of being the church. But that doesn’t mean that we need to reinvent the wheel. We need to keep drawing upon and practicing the kinds of things that have sustained us in the past, and that still thrive among us here in the present. Qualities like fellowship, love, partnership, affection, mercy, and compassion. One of the best ways for us to navigate faithfully during the days ahead is to keep doing these kinds of things that have helped make us who we are in Christ.

Paul tells the Philippians that when they live this way, it helps make his joy complete (2:2). He’s not telling them to do all this for him, as if their behavior should be motivated primarily by a desire to keep the pastor happy. No, Paul realizes that his joy isn’t his alone. It’s something that he and the Philippians share together. Recall what I said last week about this three-way bond of Paul, the Philippians, and Christ. This means that joy is something that Paul and the Philippians nourish and cultivate in their relationship with one another. And he says that the best way for them to cultivate this joy is by “being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose” (2:2).

Let’s break this down some, in order to get a better handle on what Paul is telling them. Be “like-minded” he says. This doesn’t mean agreeing on everything, or having the same opinion about everything. It means having a common attitude or orientation, a common perspective or way of thinking about things. Then Paul speaks of “having the same love.” This means having the same love for one another that they have already experienced in God’s love for them, and in their relationship with Paul and one another. Then Paul speaks about “being one in spirit and purpose.” The language here has to do with having their souls joined to each other, being in full accord. The Philippians need to remain bound to one another in a common pattern of thinking and acting.

In next Sunday’s sermon, we’ll hear more about what constitutes this common mindset, defined by the pattern of Christ himself. But for now, we need to know that Paul’s primary concern is for the Philippians to live in concord and harmony. As much as we’ve focused on the sense of partnership and joy that prevailed in the church in Philippi, we don’t want to lose sight of the fact that there were problems, struggles, and issues that created discord in their fellowship. We don’t know many details about exactly what was causing some divisions in their congregation, but we do know from Paul’s appeals and instructions that unity was to be paramount in their life and mission as God’s people.

As for any disunity, there may be some clues in the closing portion of today’s text, verses 3-4. “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit” (v. 3). “Look not only to your own interests” (v. 4). After being so positive about many of the qualities that the Philippians exhibit in their life together, Paul may be highlighting some of the ways that they’re behaving inappropriately, causing fractures in the fellowship. We can’t be absolutely certain

of this, but it does begin to sound like at least some of the Philippians were acting in self-centered ways that weakened their bond with Christ and with one another.

Here too is instruction for us, especially when it comes to how we think and act as a community of Christians, going into the weeks ahead. What has been a priority needs to remain a priority, namely, unity. In fact, cohesion will be one of God's best gifts, and one of our greatest resources, as we go forward. Having concord as a congregation is a big part of our response to the faithfulness of God, and an important way of demonstrating our own faithfulness. Go back to the opening section of today's text, where Paul says, "stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel" (1:27). During the upcoming season of change, the necessity for unity will not change. Unity through your steady and dependable presence in worship and in the study of God's word. Unity through your reliable participation in our fellowship and in service to one another. Unity through your consistent generosity in our shared mission. Unity in all the things that help make us who we are as Grace Baptist Church, "living in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (1:27).

In order for that to happen, we'll each need to conduct ourselves with humility. Paul says, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (2:5). What does that mean, and what does that look like? We'll take that up next Sunday as we go into one of the most influential passages in all of Scripture.