Philippians: How to Become United (and Stay That Way) Memory Verse: Philippians 2:11b

August 24th, 2025 Scripture Reading: Daniel 4:28-37

**[SLIDE 1]**

This is our third week taking a look at Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi. Paul is very close with this church, he marks them as personal friends. He has called them fellow servants and partners in his ministry. As he expresses his great love for them, he shares with them the things that he prays for them, and as we have discussed, Paul is writing to them while he is in jail. These church members wait anxiously to hear about how Paul is doing, and sure enough Paul does share with them an update, but it is not so much about his own well-being. All he can talk about is the gospel! Even while in jail, the gospel message advances. And all of these factors provide for Paul a context for joy. He finds joy in his relationship with these church members. He finds joy in the gospel itself and he rejoices that the gospel is being spread and preached even if he finds himself sitting in jail.

In the section we are looking at today, we will see that Paul switches to a new topic, one of providing some **[SLIDE 2]** instructions to the church. His transition is pretty adamant here. **[SLIDE 3]** (READ 27-30) In verse 27 he says, “Most importantly.” This is an important clause in any instruction. I can think of the times my wife and I left the house on a date night leaving one of the older kids in charge. Before we take off, we have a lot of things to say to the one who is left in charge. They need to know about the timeframe of the evening, they need to know what is expected, and most importantly, just like Paul, we want everyone to get along, to live in peace, to not antagonize one another. By the time we get to dinner, we have usually received a few text messages of frustration and impatience. We respond maybe with a quick, threating phone call, “Get along. Just get along with each other!”

This is Paul’s message to the church. But he is not threating or angry at all. He has a better strategy…he points the church to **[SLIDE 4]** Jesus. So again, verse 27, “Most important, live together in a manner worthy of the gospel.” A.k.a. get along, why? So that you can stand firm. Struggle together, he says in the next verse, “So that you can remain faithful. Not to Paul and not to each other, but so that they may remain faithful to the gospel. The message here is “Get along so that you can all stick together and stay strong in your faith.”

See in our culture, in our world, we love to elevate the **[SLIDE 5]** individual. We feel like we get to make our own choices and live our own life. If we are unable to do something on our own, we tend to see that as a form of failure. We don’t like the idea of being dependent on anyone else. So if this is my life and I get to make my choices, then this faith is my faith. There is a sense in which God loves each of us individually. We do have to nourish and attend to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We need to commit to personal prayer time, personal bible study. There is an intensely personal aspect to faith. But we deceive ourselves if we think we can remain without a **[SLIDE 6]** community of faith. Our faith is just as communal. We will not be able to stand firm on our own. I read a recent study that found overall, bible reading has declined in churches. One of the reasons for the downtrend is that people normally read the bible in isolation. People tend to engage in devotionals and read very small portions of scripture and they do it alone. How much better to have your devotional time alone but to also engage with scripture together as a community of faith. That is why Sunday morning is so valuable. That is why grow groups are valuable. We don’t have to try to stand alone, we have a community of faith that supports, the encourages and yes, that sometimes challenges us. The fact is, we need each other. We live together, we struggle together so that we can stand firm and remain faithful.

And in that standing together, we are privileged. Verse 29 **[**SLIDE 7**]** “God has generously granted us the privilege, not only of believing in Christ, but also of suffering for Christ’s sake.” Let’s make sure we don’t skip over this verse too quickly. The first part is easy to grasp. Certainly, for any who believe, we would say that faith is a **[SLIDE 8]** privilege. It is not something we have earned, it is not something we have deserved. To go from a helpless orphan starving out on the streets, to a fully adopted son of the king is an enormous privilege. But there is another layer to this glorious privilege. It includes, not just the gift of faith, but a capacity for suffering as well. We don’t have to endure hardship, we get to endure hardship for the sake of Christ. We don’t have to endure ridicule. We get to endure ridicule for the sake of Christ. We don’t have to navigate setbacks. We get to navigate set-backs for the sake of Christ. Paul gets to sit in jail for the sake of Christ, that is his privilege as a Christian, his privilege as a son or daughter of the king. We get to go through this life, the ups and downs, for Christ. That is a privilege.

**[SLIDE 10]** I recall a story I had heard about a team of missionaries serving in China. At one point, they were **[SLIDE 11]** arrested and spent many months in jail. While there, they managed to get ahold of a **[SLIDE 12]** small bible, but they knew they had to keep it concealed so they **[SLIDE 13]** divided up the pages amongst themselves. Theses missionaries endured beatings and starvation, but they were able to stand strong through it all because they were able to walk the path together. Eventually these men were released. They were able to go back home, they continued on with their lives always staying in touch. Many years later, at one of their reunions, these missionaries spoke of a longing, a sort of regret. One of them expressed to the others how he missed the days when they were imprisoned. He missed how closely he walked with God in that time. He was so utterly dependent, every moment filled with faith and prayer and need. The others couldn’t disagree. They found that throughout their trial, God was present with them. God walked with them. God drew near. These missionaries concluded that enduring such suffering was actually a gift, a privilege that not everyone gets to experience. Having faith and enduring suffering…both ought to be counted as a privilege.

**[SLIDE 14]** Chapter two opens with encouragement. (READ 2:1-4) If struggle is a reality, wait! There is encouragement! There is comfort! There is sharing! There is sympathy! If we stick together. If we live out the same love, if we stand united and agree with each other. Paul is making a plea for **[SLIDE 15]** unity. And that term, “unity” is highly abused in our current context. People throw it around because it is a feel good word. If you run a company or an organization, you want everyone to be unified, so you might say that you are, even if reality projects a very different picture. We suffer from this in our own denomination. The United Methodist Church has a certain title but there are disparate factions at work, there are divisive powers at play. There are people who just don’t agree. But Paul pleads for unity, true unity. Apparently there was some threat to the unity of the Philippian church. We don’t know what was going on specifically, but it seems different groups were beginning to form. So how does Paul handle the situation? How do we come to be unified? Don’t we have to just agree to disagree? Don’t we have to set aside our differences in order to live together in harmony?

For Paul these solutions are surface level. These solutions create a facade, a false representation. For Paul, the answer to every problem is theological. Commentator Fred Craddock observes, “Paul did not reserve theology for seminaries and clergy gatherings; it was the church’s theology, the church’s faith. Paul also did not subscribe to the notion that congregational problems and disputes should be answered practically and expediently as though big questions get big answers and small questions get small answers. On the contrary, small issues could be an indication that the church was suffering from the biggest problem of all: pettiness. Paul’s response to pettiness was a big answer: a hymn, a creed, a confession of faith.” For Paul, unity was not found in tolerating surface level differences, but unity must be rooted in Christ. So he turns to what most scholars think of as one of the most ancient hymns of the early church. Paul encourages everyone in the church to live and function with the attitude of Jesus. Then in verses 6-11 Paul shares this very special, very sacred hymn that served as a creed for all the churches. **[SLIDE 16]** (READ 5-11)

This poem follows the life of Jesus in three parts. It covers his pre-existence, his earthly life and his glorification. Before the Christmas story, even before the creation of the world, Jesus was. He is God as he always was. Verse 6 lets us know that Jesus shares the same form, the same nature as God. And yet, this powerful, exalted state, he did not consider as something to be exploited, something to be grasped at or held onto. The Greek word here is **[SLIDE 17]** *harpagmos* and it refers to a robber or to seize by force. This is, of course, the way of the world. If you see any opportunity, go out and grab it, take what you want. This is really no surprise. This grabbing for equality with God is the exact scenario we see in the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in hopes of being like God. We want to be in the know, we want to be in charge. We grope and grasp for it. We seize it if we can. But Jesus sees it differently. His own status, his own exultation is something he held loosely. And in verse 7 he gives it up…completely. He empties himself and takes the form of a **[SLIDE 18]** slave. Again, the word here is not servant. Jesus took on the role of one who is subject to a master. He left the Godhood and took on humanity. And if that were not enough, he went lower still and submitted to death by crucifixion on a cross **[SLIDE 19]**. This was not just a horrible way to die, but for any Jewish person, it was nothing less than a curse. To be crucified was to be cursed by God. Jesus, the Son of God, God Himself….cursed. But then in verse 9 comes part three: **[SLIDE 20]** “Then God highly honored him and gave him the name that is above all names so that at the name of Jesus every knee might bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” **[SLIDE 21]** **Jesus Christ is Lord.** Can you say that with me? “Jesus Christ is Lord.” These four words make up the very first creed in Christianity. This is the grounding of unity. This is what Paul calls the church to when he tells them to agree with one another in verse 27. Be unified, come together, agree with one another that “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

((We don’t do so well with Lordship in our context. We uphold the greatness of rugged individualism. Do-it-yourselfism. We value self-determination and freedom to make our own way. We have recently seen protests throughout the country that held high banners declaring **[SLIDE 23]** “No Kings”. While they wave these banners to make a comment about our president, I would love to take my Sharpie and add a comment of my own: **[SLIDE 24]** “No King but Jesus.”

Politically we don’t want a ruler, but in our quest to remain liberated from tyranny, we easily forget, there is, in fact, a king. He rules over much more than our country. He rules over much more than the Church. He rules over all. And in the end, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that original Christian creed: **[SLIDE 24]** Jesus Christ is Lord.)) What a blessed thing it is for us to be able to bow now before Jesus, to be unified now in Jesus, to put aside all pettiness, all peripheral matters, all opinions and proclaim Jesus as our Lord and King. Just like the church in Philippi, the church in Forest Lake can use a reminder… can we say it again? Jesus Christ is Lord!

And as Lord, he has some expectations of his followers. He gave up the rights and privileges that came with being part of the Godhead. He emptied himself. He gave himself on behalf of others. You and I are called to do the same. We are to live out our days with the same attitude as Jesus Christ our Lord. And according to Paul , this is an attitude characterized by **[SLIDE 25]** humility.

There are many examples of pride and humility in scripture, but I want to focus on one in particular that we find in Daniel chapter 4. This is a story about **[SLIDE 26]** King Nebuchadnezzar, the great and powerful king of Babylon. One day, Nebuchadnezzar was strolling about on the roof of his beautiful palace. And as he surveyed his domain he couldn’t help but declare in verse 30, **[SLIDE 27]** “Isn’t this Babylon, the magnificent city that I built as the royal house by my own mighty strength and for my own majestic glory?” We see some red flags here don’t we. By **[SLIDE 28]** *my* strength and for *my* glory, does not line up with a humble attitude. And once he spoke these words, God stepped in. He takes away power and glory from the king. **[SLIDE 29]** Nebuchadnezzar becomes like a wild animal, living outside, eating grass, growing nail like eagle’s feathers and claws like a bird. God says to him, seven periods of time will pass over you until you acknowledge that the Most High dominates human kingship, giving it to anyone he wants.”

Eventually, **[SLIDE 30]** Nebuchadnezzar’s reason returns to him and he worships the Lord. He says, “The Most High does whatever he wants with heaven’s forces and with earth’s inhabitants. No one can contain his power or say to him, ‘What do you think you are doing?’ Now, I, Nebuchadnezzar, worship, magnify and glorify the king of heaven. All his works are truth, all his paths are justice, and he is able to humble all who walk in pride.”

**[SLIDE 31]** Humility is not just about someone who doesn’t brag or boast. It’s not just about treating other people well. Humility is theological. It is all about recognizing who is truly in charge, who is truly Lord. Humility leads us into right worship. It’s the difference between *my* kingdom come and *your* kingdom come, *your* will be done.

“In Paul’s judgment what the church needs is not a scolding but a reminder of the event that created and defined their life together.” What the church needed then and what we need now is **[SLIDE 32]** theology. We have to be willing to let the character and nature of who God is bear on the things we decide to do. We are humble because Jesus was humble. We are hopeful because Jesus rose from the grave. We are joyful because we are children of God and we get to enjoy the privileges that come with such an adoption; the privilege of faith and suffering. We stand unified because we declare the same creed: **[SLIDE 33] J**esus Christ is Lord and as our Lord, we have taken on his attitude: humility. Amen.