

presenting unified testimonies

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

Philippians 2:12–18

BUILDUP THEME



INTERNALIZE GODLINESS

God wants believers to work on their unity so they might be testimonies of the gospel light.

MEASURABLE RESPONSE

The learners will actively seek like-mindedness and opportunities to take the word of life to the world.

MEMORY VERSE

"Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12).

Teacher Preparation

- "This little light of mine. I'm going to let it shine." So the children's chorus goes. Every believer does have the light of the gospel to take to the those living in spiritual darkness. But the individual lights in a church will shine brightly only if they shine together.
- Read Philippians 2:12–18. Paul urged the Philippians to work on their unity, noting that God will be faithful to work in them to draw them together. Paul went on to point out the connection between their unity and their testimony. Churches with strong unity will have a strong testimony before the watching and crooked world.
- If you invited an unsaved friend to your church, would you be worried about your church's testimony? What about a church softball game? Or what if your friend hung around for a church business meeting? Challenge your learners to work out their unity as a class and then as a part of your church. Encourage them to use their unity to draw others to Christ.

Session Summary

Paul commanded the Philippians to work out their salvation with fear and trembling. Specifically, he wanted them to work on their unity out of reverence and respect for Christ, Who humbled Himself and died to make their unity possible. Working on unity means working together without complaining and arguing. A unified church will shine as lights in the crooked and perverse world, drawing unbelievers to Christ. Paul added that he would rejoice in the day of Christ to see the Philippians united and reaching their world even if it meant he suffered and died for Christ.

Session Starters

Option 1—Coaching Methods

Steps

1. Have learners share coaching experiences they have had. Use the following questions to prompt them.

ASK: What team sports have you coached?

ASK: How did your team do?

ASK: What did you say or do to motivate them to do their best?

ASK: Why did you want them to do their best?

2. Transition to the Bible lesson.

Paul saw his life as a cross-country run. He also saw himself as a cross-country coach to team Philippi. He expressed his concerns that his labors in coaching them as they ran along with him wouldn't be in vain. Good coaches want their teams to succeed because they care for their teams and want them to experience the thrill of victory. Paul was a good coach. As we will see in this session, his encouragement to his players to get moving applies to us too.

Option 2—Running in Vain

Steps

1. Summarize or read the following account.

Eddie Hart made the 1972 United States Olympic track team as a sprinter. He set a world record of 9.86 seconds in the 100-meter sprint while competing in the Olympic trials. He expected he would beat out a couple of teammates and a Soviet sprinter named Valery Borzov. Eddie eased through the preliminaries in Munich and awaited his quarterfinal race while relaxing with his teammates. When they turned on the TV, they saw what they thought were reruns of the preliminaries. They were shocked to learn the races were their quarterfinals. They rushed to the stadium, but only one of the runners, the slowest of the three Americans, made his race. He ended up finishing second in the finals to Borzov. The American coach had misread the schedule, which used the international 24-hour clock. The coach saw 16:15 and thought it meant 6:15 pm instead of 4:15 pm. Eddie did win a gold in the relay but never in the 100. He lost because he failed to start the race.

2. Discuss preparing for a competition in vain.

ASK: When have you prepared for something only to have all your work be in vain?

ASK: How did you respond?

ASK: What good, if any, came out of the experience?

3. Transition to the Bible lesson.

Paul put a tremendous amount of literal blood, sweat, and tears into helping the Philippians in their spiritual walks. He was concerned that they wouldn't respond in the end and that he had "run" in vain. His instructions to get the Philippians active in being like-minded should prompt us to be active too. This session covers Paul's instructions.

Bible Study

I. Purpose to Work on Like-mindedness (Phil. 2:12, 13)

A. Get active (2:12)

READ: Philippians 2:12.

Verse 12 by itself seems to call on the Philippians to work on becoming saved. Paul's other writings clearly teach that salvation has nothing to do with our works (Eph. 2:8, 9; Titus 3:5–7). It is all of grace by faith. So what does Paul mean? It appears from the flow of the letter that Paul wants the Philippians to continue in their obedience to God. The word "therefore" that opens verse 12 points us back to the context of the previous section. In that section, Paul called on the Philippians to be like-minded by adopting the mind of Christ—a mindset characterized by humbly esteeming others as better and looking out for others' needs. Furthermore, Paul's instruction in verse 14 continues the unity theme. Like-mindedness, then, is what Paul must have had in mind in verse 12.

Note that Paul opened verse 12 by calling the Philippians his "beloved," a term of endearment. He then acknowledged their obedience to God in the past and expressed his confidence they would obediently work on their unity in the coming days. With this opening, Paul kindly and lovingly lit a motivational fire under the Philippians. Though the Philippians felt the heat of Paul's instructions, they knew taking action to resolve the disunity in the church would be in their best interest.

ASK: What does a condescending, harsh approach to instructing believers reveal about the instructor? *That the instructor doesn't care about the students and that the instructor doesn't esteem others better than him- or herself.*

Paul's tender but firm approach to the Philippians provided an example of how the Philippians were to treat each other while working on their like-mindedness. Paul lived out the instructions he gave in Philippians 2:3 and 4.

ASK: When has someone lovingly motivated you to get active in a spiritual matter?

ASK: How did the person communicate his or her genuine care for you?

B. Stand awestruck (2:12)

Paul added fuel to his motivational fire with the final phrase in verse 12. He wanted the Philippians to work on their unity with "fear and trembling." He didn't mean for them to be afraid of him or each other. In fact, he didn't mean for them to be afraid of anyone. Paul wanted the Philippians to have a deep respect for God as they worked on becoming like-minded. Remember Paul had just presented God's exaltation and glorification of Jesus Christ. Consistent reflection on Jesus' exaltation should have caused the Philippian believers to respect Him and His authority over their lives. Fearing God forms a crucial part of the Christian experience. And the Philippians' knowledge of Jesus' humiliating death on the cross for their sins, including their sins of disharmony and pride, should have motivated them to want to confess and forsake their grudges and disunity.

ASK: How does your view of your sin change when you think about Christ having to hang on the cross for you?

ASK: How does the thought of Christ on the cross affect your view of any grudges or hurts you might harbor?

Churches who refuse to work on their unity and choose to hold onto to petty grudges and hurts instead show disrespect for Jesus' payment for their sins on the cross. A church that turns their eyes to Jesus will be motivated to be pursue like-mindedness. Paul wanted the Philippians to be daily awestruck with their God and Savior. He expected the same from all those who read and studied his letter.

C. Be assured (2:13)

1. Of God's part

Paul continued by presenting God's part in the Philippians' work toward like-mindedness.

READ: Philippians 2:13.

As the Philippians admitted their need to work toward unity, they could be assured that God would work in them to bring it about. God even

works in believers to fix their “wanters.” He affects their hearts so that those who don’t want to change will come to decide they must change. God creates in us the will to obey Him.

ASK: What does God use to affect our wills? *God the Holy Spirit works through God’s Word to bring about the desire to change. God’s Word is key.*

Philippian believers who thought their problems with others were too hurtful and deep-seated to address could hope in God’s ability and willingness to change their hearts. We have that same hope.

2. Of God’s passion

Paul added the phrase for “His good pleasure” to the end of verse 12. What pleases God will always be the best for us. God doesn’t demand obedience for obedience’s sake. He calls us to obey Him because He loves us. All His commands benefit us. He tells us what to do and how to treat each other because He loves us and wants us to know the spiritual blessings of living pure, obedient lives.

READ: 1 John 5:3. **ASK:** What would be the unwelcome alternative to God’s commands being born out of His love for us? *God gives commands to dominate and control us and make our lives miserable.*

Satan likes to tell the lie that obeying God is burdensome. We can be assured that obeying God’s direction for our lives relieves us of the burdens of sin. In the Philippians’ case, those believers who sought reconciliation and like-mindedness found that obeying God proved to be much easier and more enjoyable than holding on to grudges and hurts. God’s loving passion for us should drive us to want to know His will for every area of our lives.

ASK: When have you found that obeying God leads to freedom rather than a sense of being burdened?

II. Present the Word of Life (Phil. 2:14–18)

Paul continued his instructions on like-mindedness by connecting it to one’s witness.

A. Shine like Jesus (2:14–16a)

READ: Philippians 2:14.

Paul commanded the Philippians to do all things without complaining and arguing. “All things” is all inclusive. So there aren’t any situations that would allow for an exception. In fact, Paul put the Greek word for “all things” at the front of his sentence to emphasize it. Believers should never be heard complaining, especially when carrying out God’s will or when talking about a fellow believer.

The word Paul used includes the idea of murmuring against others to promote ill will instead of harmony. Such murmuring betrays discontentment, a wish that others would be unsuccessful, and an inward rebellion against God.

ASK: When believers complain, what message about God do they communicate to the watching world? *That God can't be trusted, that He doesn't love and care for His own, and that living for God is drudgery.*

Believers who mix sharing the gospel with persistent murmuring greatly diminish the effectiveness of their witness. The same goes for disputing with fellow believers. Church splits harm a church's testimony in its community, especially when the new church opens down the block. In verse 15, Paul made clear the harm believers bring to the cause of Christ by their complaining and arguing.

READ: Philippians 2:15.

Being like-minded helps believers become "blameless" before the world. When the world observes a believer's life, they shouldn't find any reason to discredit the believer's message. The believer should be harmless or innocent, meaning unmixed and pure like grape juice that hasn't been watered down or mixed with something that ruins its taste. Furthermore, believers should be known as "children of God," or as living with godly character and having no reason to be rebuked for a fault.

ASK: Why would Paul call believers the "children of God"? What is he conveying with that designation? *That believers are spiritual siblings in Christ; that every believer is loved by God; that every believer has a responsibility for the growth and well-being of other believers, especially those believers who have joined to form one church.*

Paul described the watching world as living according to a crooked, twisted perversion of God's truth. The pagan Romans worshiped false gods by committing immoral acts in hopes of compelling their gods to bend to their will. They believed they could control their fate by manipulating their gods.

Some of the Roman emperors created an even greater perversion of the truth by declaring themselves gods. Emperor Nero, for example, presented himself as a god and part of Rome's imperial cult. He gladly accepted the worship of kings like Tiridates of Armenia. Nero granted Tiridates favors in response. Tiridates treated Nero like he did his gods. He worshiped and obeyed Nero insincerely, going through the motions to get the wealth and protection he needed. Nero must have been aware of Tiridates's insincerity. If so, he didn't mind, for he greatly

benefited from Tiridates's public show of obeisance in the forum in Rome in AD 66, just a few years after Paul wrote Philippians and at the same time of Paul's final imprisonment that likely led to his execution.

Paul called on the Philippian believers to love and serve God sincerely without any hint of the crookedness and perversion that pervaded first century Roman culture. As the Philippian believers stood together with like-mindedness and endured persecution for their faith and for God, they would stand out like lights in the night sky. Pagans, who worshiped the lights in the night sky, knew nothing of serving the God Who loved humanity and sent His son to die on a Roman cross for them.

ASK: What characteristics of our culture makes us stand out as we serve God sincerely with like-mindedness? *The culture's emphasis on living for now instead of for eternity, their obsession with immorality and pleasure instead of purity, their desire to control their lives through manipulation and dominance, and their emphasis on serving themselves instead of God.*

The Philippians were to be different, standing out as lights over against the world's darkness. They were also to take the gospel light to the world.

READ: Philippians 2:16a.

The word order in the opening phrase of verse 16 reveals Paul's emphasis on evangelism. He put "word of life" first in his sentence and after the phrase "in the world" in verse 15. The "word of life" is unmistakably the gospel. Through the gospel one learns of eternal life. The Philippians were to hold fast to the gospel by word and deed.

ASK: What made the gospel offensive to the Romans and therefore something the Philippian believers would need to hold without compromise? *The gospel exposed the Roman pagan beliefs as false, the Roman emperor as just a man, and the Roman ways as sinful and deserving of eternal punishment.*

John wrote that in Christ is life which was the light of men. The light of Christ shown into the dark world without being overcome. The Romans could not stop the gospel's movement. The more they tried to kill and bury it, the more it spread and grew.

READ: John 1:4, 5.

B. Serve with joy (2:16b–18)

READ: Philippians 2:16b.

Paul wanted to be able to rejoice in the day of Christ that the Philippians had held fast to the word of life, doing their part to shine

the light of life into the dark world by their words and like-minded deeds. If the Philippian believers maintained a good attitude while working out their salvation, Paul would boast about what God did in and through them in the day of Christ. The Philippians' obedience would show that he hadn't run or labored in vain. Their dedication to Christ and the gospel would testify that his rigorous missionary labors on their behalf had been worthwhile. He wanted to rejoice to see them receive rewards for holding fast the word of life.

ASK: Who in your life is pulling for you to succeed spiritually?

ASK: For whom are you pulling? In what ways?

For Paul to have not run in vain would mean the Philippians would have become like-minded, endured hardships, shone as lights in their dark world, held fast the word of life, and known the joy of the Lord all their days. Paul genuinely wanted the best for the Philippians. He firmly believed if they took action to become like-minded, they would never regret it and would forever rejoice that they obeyed God.

READ: Philippians 2:17, 18.

Paul considered the Philippian believers' testimony so important that even if he faced a martyr's death, he would still rejoice because of their faith. To make that point, he likened his death to a drink offering. In Moses' day the Israelites brought sweet-smelling offerings to the Lord to express thanks for His provision, goodness, and mercy. In some cases, wine was poured over the sacrifice as a symbol of God's provision flowing to His people (Num. 15:1–16). Because the altar was hot, the drink offering immediately evaporated into the air as steam.

Paul's point is that the sacrificed animal on the altar was more significant than the drink offering. So the Philippians' faith was more important to Paul than his own life. He encouraged the Philippians to view his death the same way. If the believers at Philippi continued to work out their differences with like-mindedness and humility, they would become shining testimonies in a perverse world. Their blameless, sincere lifestyles would validate the word of life they offered to those around them. In this testimony Paul would rejoice even if his blood were spilled. He added that the Philippians could rejoice, even if he were martyred.

Session Application

Steps

1. Review the lesson's main points.

ASK: Summarize what God expects of a believer's reputation before a watching world.

ASK: Does your life match that reputation? Explain.

2. Emphasize personal evangelism, taking the word of life to the world.

ASK: How are you taking the word of life to the world?

ASK: What opportunities do you have that you can trust God to take advantage of?

3. Close in prayer for your class and for your church, asking God to work in your hearts to make you like-minded with Christ and effective witnesses.