

FBC Service Sunday January 21 2024 Philippians 4:1-9 Standing Firm Together

Today's passage contains some of the most encouraging verses in the whole Bible.

Last week we looked at some characteristics of those who are citizens of heaven. Heaven is still in our future, but as we're not there yet, how do we live out our heavenly citizenship while living here on earth? Do we just go up on the top of some hill somewhere and wait it out?

Most definitely not! God has work for us to do and good gifts for us to enjoy while we're here on earth.

In the passage Donna read for us, Paul gives us some very practical instructions for living on earth while we wait for our heavenly home.

The first instruction is this: Stay true to the Lord. Verse 1: *"Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand true or stand firm in the Lord!"* (Philippians 4:1) Paul had a great affection for the Philippians. He addresses them as dear brothers and sisters, and dear friends.

Here in verse one, he makes his love for the Philippians especially clear. They are his pride and joy because of their partnership in the gospel.

He exhorts them as dear brothers and sisters to stay true to the Lord. All of us I'm sure have experienced those trials and temptations that try and upset our relationship with Christ.

Even though we may be tempted and tried to the breaking point, as citizens of heaven hang in there, and stay true to the Lord.

The call to **"stand firm"** refers to a soldier staying faithfully at his post no matter what happens around him. Let the enemy attack as he will, the soldier's orders are clear: **Stand firm!** This command was often repeated by the Apostle Paul:

1 Corinthians 15:58, "Stand firm. Let nothing move you."

1 Corinthians 16:13, "Stand firm in the faith."

Galatians 5:1, "Stand firm ... and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."

Ephesians 6:11, "Take your stand against the devil's schemes."

Ephesians 6:13, "Having done everything, to stand."

Ephesians 6:14, "Stand firm ... with the belt of truth buckled around your waist."

Philippians 1:27, "Stand firm in one spirit."

Colossians 4:12, "Stand firm in all the will of God."

2 Thessalonians 2:15, "Stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you."

Why this repeated emphasis on standing firm? I think Paul had a healthy respect for the devil's attempts to discourage and distract the people of God.

He knew that we would be sorely tempted to leave our post when the bullets of temptation start whizzing by our heads. **So he repeats it again and again: Stand firm! Stay true!**

Are you familiar with the term “Stay in the traces?” The phrase comes from the period of American history when few roads were paved, and people travelled by horse-drawn wagons. Over time the wagon wheels dug deep ruts that hardened until they were called **“traces.”**

A good driver would make sure his wagon wheels were firmly in the traces, and then he let the horses pull the wagon to the destination.

This is a parable of the spiritual life. Most days nothing exciting happens. Ninety-nine percent of life is ordinary. You get up, eat breakfast, go to work (or take care of the children), come home, eat supper, go to bed, get up the next day and do it all over again.

And the day after that and the day after that. Day in and day out—this is life for most of us.

Doing God’s will means staying in the traces of life day after day after day. Just do what God has given you to do.

If you like it, that’s great. If you don’t like it, do it anyway. If you wish you were doing something else, grit your teeth and do it anyway. God blesses those people who do what they have to do each day—and do it even though they might prefer to do something else.

Stand firm! Stay true! Husbands, stand firm! Wives, stand firm! Parents, stand firm! Children, stand firm! Students, stand firm! Singles, stand firm!

The second instruction is this: Agree with each other. Look at verses 2-3:

“Now I appeal to Euodia and Syntyche. Please, because you belong to the Lord, settle your disagreement. And I ask you, my true partner, to help these two women, for they worked hard with me in telling others the Good News. They worked along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are written in the Book of Life.”

Paul next deals with a difficult and delicate problem inside the Philippian church. It seems that two leading women couldn’t get along with each other. One was named “Euodia” (meaning “sweet smell”) and the other was named “Syntyche” (meaning “friendly”).

We don’t know much about these women or the precise nature of their dispute. They were evidently well-known leaders in the church who had a serious falling out. For whatever reason, “Sweet smell” and “Friendly” weren’t very sweet or very friendly to each other.

I wonder how these two women felt when they heard their names read in public. Two thousand years later they stand for women who couldn’t stand each other. I find it instructive that Paul doesn’t give us very many details.

Imagine mentioning them each by name? Can you imagine if your pastor did that in a sermon! **Imagine if the pastor mentioned your name! Everyone would snap to attention, wide awake.**

Remember this letter was read out loud to the whole congregation.

We're not told what their disagreement was, but it was clearly having a negative impact on the church. It doesn't take much to disrupt unity in the body. Two people face off against each other, and what does everyone else do? **They start taking sides.** And before you know it the whole church is facing off.

Paul knows how important unity in the church is, so he takes the unusual step of naming the offenders.

We do know this much. Paul regards these women as genuine believers (their names are written in the Book of Life, v. 3). They are evidently personal friends of his who worked with him in founding the church at Philippi.

Folks, if our names are all written together in God's book of life in heaven, how much more should we all agree in the Lord and get along with each other here on earth.

We're going to spend eternity with each other. Let's get it right now while we're still on earth.

Instead of focusing on the causes, Paul appeals to these two women to **"settle their disagreement"**—which literally means to come to one mind. It doesn't mean seeing eye to eye on every detail; instead, it indicates a personal choice to focus on the things that united them in Christ.

We can't tell from his words the background of the problem, and nothing he says lets us know who was right and who was wrong. Instead of taking sides, he simply exhorts these two Christian women to settle their differences.

That's a useful principle to remember because in most disputes it usually doesn't matter who started it. Once animosity builds up, there is generally plenty of blame on every hand.

Euodia and Syntyche are to agree with each other *"in the Lord."* **In other words, we don't need to agree with each other on each and every particular thing.** But we must agree with each other in the Lord, working together as partners in the gospel.

There's an old saying by Rupertus Meldenius that goes: "In Essentials - Unity, In Non-Essentials - Liberty, In All Things - Charity."

It would seem that Euodia and Syntyche were disagreeing over a non-essential matter and were not doing so in a charitable manner. And so Paul intervenes.

Paul knew they were going to need some help with this, so he calls on some unnamed person, perhaps the pastor of the church, perhaps the one reading the letter, to come alongside these two women and help them resolve their differences.

They had struggled and labored alongside Paul in the cause of the gospel, along with a man named Clement and fellow-workers.

Euodia and Syntyche were mature believers in the faith, but even mature believers can get off track sometimes. And when we do, we need the help of others to reconcile and make things right.

If this was an important enough matter for Paul to name names in the letter, we can be assured this instruction is for us too, to agree with each other in the Lord!

Paul's third instruction is to rejoice. Look at verse 4: *"Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice!"* Joy has been a major theme in this letter, and we hit it again right here.

When Paul says, *"always be full of joy in the Lord,"* he's not talking about giddiness or a positive mental attitude.

This is not simply a throw-away phrase like "Hakuna Matata" or "Don't worry, be happy." This command has some teeth to it. You rejoice in the Lord, not in your circumstances. Your circumstances may be terrible, or they may be great.

It doesn't matter. Your rejoicing has nothing to do with them. Circumstances change, but the Lord remains the same forever. The object of your rejoicing is your good, all-loving, all-powerful, all-wise God who never changes. Rejoice in the Lord.

This is not "put on a happy face" or "look for the silver lining." The rejoicing he has in mind is not based on our outward circumstances. That's crucial because very often our circumstances can be depressing. Where was Paul when he wrote these words?

In a Roman prison chained to Roman guards 24 hours a day. He was on trial for his life with no certain hope of release. I take it that Paul didn't "enjoy" being in prison, but he found reasons to rejoice even in that difficult circumstance.

This is one of the most recognizable verses from Philippians, and it's really a remarkable verse. It's easy enough to understand, drop dead simple to memorize, but we marvel at the implications.

Always be full of joy in the Lord! No matter what is going on, no matter what the circumstances, rejoice! Really? And as if Paul anticipates our objection, he repeats the command: *"I will say it again, rejoice!"*

Understand that joy is different from happiness. Happiness comes and goes and is dependent on your circumstances. **Joy is a settled confidence that God is God, that God is good, and that God is in control.**

When you trust God, you can know joy in even the most desperate of circumstances.

In 2 Corinthians Paul talks about being "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing." (2 Corinthians 6:10) There is nothing sinful about being sad. It's right to feel sorrow over sin and death and tragedy. But you can still rejoice in the Lord through your tears and the sadness.

People ask us how we're doing, and we often answer, "Okay under the circumstances." **But as Christians we don't live under the circumstances. We live above the circumstances!**

Joy is one of the marks of a true believer in Jesus Christ. Christ is risen! Jesus is alive! Always be full of joy in the Lord!"

Our fourth instruction for earth is found in verse 5: *"Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is coming soon."*

This verse is not as well known as the verses surrounding it, but it's just as important.

This command has to do with your attitude towards others. The word “gentle” means a gracious, humble, patient spirit that puts up with other’s faults. And that gentleness is to be evident to all.

Evident not only at home and in the church and to your family and friends, but also to your neighbours, your co-workers, your waiter or waitress, the person at the checkout counter, the telemarketer ... on the phone ... during dinner.

Some of us have rough edges we need smoothing off. We can be pretty abrasive or pushy. Paul says, “*Let everyone see you are gentle in all you do.*”

In other words, when people see you, they should see a gentle spirit. It’s part of your testimony to them.

And then Paul adds a motivation to this command. “*Remember the Lord is coming soon.*” One of the characteristics of the citizen of heaven we looked at last week was our eyes are watching for heaven’s Saviour. **Christ is coming. So let’s treat each other well.**

We’ve had four instructions so far: 1) Stay true to the Lord. 2) Agree with each other. 3) Always be full of the joy of the Lord. 4) Let your gentleness and consideration for others be evident to all.

Now we come to our fifth instruction: Don’t worry – pray!

Verse 6: “*Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done.*” What a powerful verse this is.

First, “do not worry about anything.” (Philippians 4:6a) I’ve prepared a special slide for you this morning where I’ve listed all the things that it’s okay to worry about. **Ready? Here it is.**

(Put blank slide up.) How about those apples?

Anytime you’re worrying about something, just check and see if it’s on this list, and if it is, it’s okay to worry about it! Folks, take a moment so you can write it all down!

Now of course, we’re just having some fun with this, but you get the point. Philippians 4:6 says, “*Do not worry about anything!*” Worry about nothing. **This is a command without any exceptions.**

Next, I’ve prepared a second slide with a list of all the things it’s okay to pray about. Let’s take a look at that one. **(Slide with word “Everything” written on it over and over and over).**

That’s right, it’s okay to pray about everything! “*But in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*” (Philippians 4:6b)

That means you can bring the really big things in your life to God in prayer, and you can also pray about the really small things. Nothing is too big or too small to bring to God in prayer.

There are actually four words for prayer tucked away in that one sentence: prayer, petition, thanksgiving, requests. The first word is just the general word for prayer. The words petition and request both have to do with asking for God’s help.

And the fourth word tucked in the middle there brings out another aspect of prayer which is thanksgiving.

We usually think about thanking God after He has answered our request, but notice that Philippians 4:6 says we should mix our thanksgiving right in with the request. *“With thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”*

And so even as I am asking God, I’m already thanking Him: thanking Him for being my God, thanking Him for being my Saviour, thanking Him for hearing my prayer, and in faith thanking Him for answering my prayer according to his wisdom.

Don’t worry, pray! The two commands go together. In fact it’s impossible to obey the first command without first obeying the second. The only way you can worry about nothing is to pray about everything. Every time you’re faced with something to worry about, turn it to prayer. **And what is the result?**

Verse 7: *“Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.”*

God will fill you with a supernatural peace that goes beyond your ability to understand it.

This supernatural peace is not a result of God granting all your requests but of you making all your requests to Him. Once you have prayed about it, you know that God’s will will be done, so you can leave it in his hands.

Paul says this supernatural peace will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. That word guard is a military term. It was used of soldiers standing guard over a city to protect it from harm. God’s peace will stand guard over your heart and your mind and protect you from worry.

This is such an important instruction for earth. **Don’t worry, pray.** Worrying and praying are both actions. You can choose to do one or the other. **If you choose to worry, then you will be filled with anxiety. But if you choose to pray, you will be filled with peace.**

God already knows your needs before you ask him, but the asking will help you. Prayerful people are peaceful people. Don’t worry, pray.

Okay, we have two more instructions to go, and these two also go together. 1) Think good thoughts, and 2) put it into practice. **First of all, instruction number six: think good thoughts.**

Look at verse 8: *“And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honourable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.”*

What you feed your mind with has such an important impact on your life. And so Philippians 4:8 encourages you to think good thoughts.

Whatever is true means those things that are real, genuine, and honest. Don’t live in a fantasy world, and don’t listen to lies. Stay connected to those things that are true and honest and dependable.

Whatever is noble means those things that are honourable, dignified, solemn, majestic, worthy of respect. Don’t think unworthy thoughts. Don’t leave your mind in the gutter. Think about noble things, like sacrifice and honour. Go outside and reflect on God’s majestic creation.

Whatever is right means those things that are upright, just and proper.

Whatever is pure means those things that are holy, chaste, and undefiled.

Whatever is lovely means those things that are pleasing, dear, agreeable, that which calls forth love.

Whatever is admirable means those things that are commendable or attractive.

And then Paul sums up all six by saying if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things.

Memorizing Scripture is key here as we learn to think God's thoughts after Him. Spending time in God's Word, listening to good Christian music in the home or in the car, all of these are important ways of filling your mind with good things.

Filter out the bad; focus on the good; practice discernment. Think good thoughts.

And then finally, instruction number seven: put it into practice. Paul writes: *“Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you.”*

Paul asks the Philippians: Did you learn something from me? Did you receive instruction? Have you heard what I've been saying? Have you seen my example? Then do it! And the same word applies to us.

We don't just come to church to listen and leave. **We come so that our lives may be changed.** Take what you have learned or received or heard or seen and put it into practice.

And what will be the result? *“The God of peace will be with you.”* **That's it folks. Nothing beats that.**

So there you have it. We're citizens of heaven, but we still live here on earth. Paul leaves us with seven vital instructions for earth:

- 1) Stand firm in the Lord.
- 2) Agree with each other.
- 3) Rejoice in the Lord always.
- 4) Let your gentleness be evident to all.
- 5) Don't worry, pray!
- 6) Think good thoughts.
- 7) Put it into practice.

We cannot do this list on our own, but we can do all things through Christ who gives us strength!