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Wilmington, North Carolina
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“United We Stand”
Philippians 1:27 – 2:13

Memories have a way of driving lessons home to us. My first experience with splitting wood did that.

When I was growing up, my family heated our home with a propane gas heater—not a furnace, but a heater in the middle of the house with a blower. So I never had to learn the fine art of wood-splitting. But Jo Ann and I moved to our first pastorate when wood stoves were the rage—and for many people, a necessity. Hence, I encountered wood-splitting, almost 38 years ago.

So I bought an axe—a small one (our son has it now). A deacon cut down a big tree in the woods behind the parsonage and sawed it into lengths that would fit the heater. Later I went to split it and bring it to the house.

Everything went OK until the last three or four pieces from the lowest part of the trunk. No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't split them. I borrowed the deacon's big maul, and with a lot of “elbow-grease,” I finally made some progress. But there was one big section that I never did get split!

Later on, as I told my father about my difficulty, he told me the secret of splitting wood—you find a crack in the grain, and a good solid blow with the axe right on that crack would usually start it, even with a large piece of wood. That made it a lot easier for me for the next four or five years, since the parsonage at our second church had a wood stove, too!

Many years ago as I was meditating on Christ's church and the unity He intends and desires for it, the Lord brought that experience to my mind. In some ways, the church is a lot like wood—it takes a lot to split God's people, but a crack in the fellowship makes it a lot easier!

Back in 1970, a popular song by the Brotherhood of Man played on the old saying, “United we stand, divided we fall.”¹ The phrase actually goes back to at least the 6th century BC, where the Greek storyteller Aesop used it in his fable, “The Four Oxen and the Lion.” Patrick Henry used it in his last speech. It's the state motto of Kentucky, and it appears on Missouri's state flag.² Ross Perot—remember him?—gave his political organization the name “United We Stand” when he ran for president in 1992. And sixteen years ago, in the months that followed the terrorist attacks of 9/11, this theme became prominent once again—at least for a while.

Have you ever thought about how this phrase can apply to Christ's church? I think that's what Paul was driving at here in this section of his letter to the Philippians that we're looking at this morning. He recognized that *any* crack in the church's fellowship was *dangerous*.

Unity was a primary concern for Paul in his letters. For him, *any kind of division* was a *contradiction* of what God had done in Christ, so he was always concerned about guarding the church's unity. Philippians is no exception. It's obvious from 4:2, where he pleads with two women, Euodia and Syntyche, **to be of the same mind in the Lord**,³ that there was at least one

potential crack in the fellowship. His repeated emphasis on being of the same mind—*the mind of Christ*—indicates that there may have been other cracks in the fellowship as well.

So at this point in his letter, Paul called on the Philippians to live a life characterized by both outward and inward unity. Listen to his appeal in 1:27 – 2:13 . . .

Read text . . .

Now what Paul said in this text is just as important for us today as it was for the Philippian church nearly 2,000 years ago. He takes a two-pronged approach here.

Outward unity

First Paul says that *our unity in Christ must govern our life as the church in the world* (1:27-30).

Like the Philippians, if we're serious about our commitment to Jesus, we'll be in conflict with the world in some way. It might be in how we do things, or the views we hold to and urge in matters of morality and ethics. Unfortunately, many who claim to be Christian urge the acceptance of behaviors and attitudes that historic Christianity has always held to be incompatible with the Christian faith and life. That kind of approach simply affirms the world in its sinfulness, so there's little conflict with the world.

But when we stand firm for what the Bible and the Christian faith teach about how we should live, we *will* be in conflict with the world, and with some who claim to follow Christ. It won't be the first time. The letter of Jude and several of the letters that we find in Revelation 2 – 3 from the risen Lord Jesus to the seven churches in the province of Asia deal with such a situation!

And it really shouldn't surprise us. After all, Jesus said it would be this way in John 15:18-21.

Here Paul issued a clear challenge to the Philippians. As believers, they were to display *a corporate life that was worthy of the gospel of Christ*.

This unity was to be a reflection of their heavenly citizenship (the word here that the NKJV translates as **let your conduct be** is the verbal form of the word translated in 3:20 as **citizenship**). That's a very powerful backdrop here, since the city of Philippi was a Roman colony. Just as Romans in Philippi lived as citizens of Rome in a Roman colony in Greece, so followers of Jesus were to live as citizens of heaven as members of a colony of heaven here on earth.

So their way of life was to be characterized by unity in spirit, purpose, and action. Paul uses two familiar images to stress this to the Philippian congregation.

The first is a military image—**stand fast in one spirit** (1:27). The way Paul states it, the phrase can mean standing firm **in one spirit** (sharing in a common spirit of unity) or **in the one Spirit** (NIV, the Holy Spirit). In either case, Paul is saying that in the battle against evil, Christians must be united in spirit! And that kind of unity only comes through the Holy Spirit!

The second image is an athletic one—**with one mind** (literally, **soul**) **striving together for the faith of the gospel** (1:27). It's the image of a sports team striving together to win a competition, the idea of a whole team striving as one person to win.

Now Paul was of course thinking along the lines of ancient sports, usually having to do with the kinds of things we would refer to as track and field events. But this is true in other team sports as well such as football or basketball or baseball or soccer—the difference in the outcome of many games is teamwork!

Along with this unity in spirit, purpose, and action, Paul called the Philippians to have *an attitude of Christian fearlessness in the face of suffering for Christ's sake*. He said that this firm courage is a twofold token of the Philippian believers' ultimate salvation and their opponents'

ultimate destruction (**perdition**, 1:28). Paul saw this grace of suffering as being just as much an integral part of salvation as their faith in Jesus.

So here's Paul's point: Our courage for the church's battle or contest with the world is found in *our outward unity*. This outward unity must govern our corporate life in the world, our life together as the body of Christ.

It's like being in a family—even though we may be having conflict and disagreement within the family, we unite against any outside attack against it.

When we're united, we stand firm against attacks from the outside, and that bears a powerful witness to the world around us. Indeed, *united we stand!*

Inward unity

But for us to have this outward unity, the second part of this text has to get hold of us.

Our unity in Christ must govern our life together as the church and within the church (2:1-11). Look at Paul's argument here.

He says that the blessings of the Christian life form *the basis of this inward unity!* If these things really exist in Christ—**consolation** (or **encouragement**, NIV), **comfort**, **fellowship**, **affection and mercy** (2:1)—then there is to be unity in Christ! In fact, their presence gives rise to unity.

Paul tells the Philippians that his joy would be fulfilled by their living in genuine unity in the church. This unity he was talking about is characterized by several components: **being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind** (2:2). That's how we are when we are living in genuine inward unity.

So how can we have this kind of unity within the church? I mean, we're *Baptist* Christians, and everybody knows that you're never going to get Baptists to agree on everything. In fact, an old joke says that if you have two Baptists in the same room there'll be three opinions. That may not be that far off from the truth!

Paul shows the Philippians (and us!) *the way to have this inward unity* (2:3-11).

First, we are to *act from the right motives*—not from **selfish ambition or conceit**, but rather in **lowliness of mind** (humility) esteeming others better than ourselves—in other words, valuing others above ourselves (2:3).

When we act from the right motives, we will then *have the right concern*—we'll look out for others' interests as well as or more than our own (2:4).

But in order to act from the right motives with the right concern, we have to *have the right attitude or mindset—the mind of Christ*, an attitude of self-sacrifice for the benefit of others (2:5-11).

Did you notice how often Paul refers to *the mind* in this passage? When you read through the rest of the letter, you see that he focuses on the importance of the mind in living the Christian life over and over, *especially* in our relationships with one another. In this passage Paul says that believers are to have *the same mind*, that we are to be **of one mind**, and that mind is *the mind of Christ!* Though He continually exists **in the form of God**, sharing in the essence and nature of God, He **did not consider it robbery to be equal with God**, or as the NRSV puts it, He **did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited** (2:6). Instead, He **made Himself of no reputation**, emptying Himself and taking **the form of a bondservant**. He took on human flesh, becoming truly God and truly Man, and humbled Himself by becoming **obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross** (2:7-8)!

In God's intention, unity is inherent in the nature of the church—it's how God designed it to be. But that unity is always under attack by Satan. The tragic thing is that he often uses God's

own people, members of the Lord's church, as his weapon, as his axe to strike the crack in the grain of the wood.

Someone has wisely said that because unity is in the nature of the church, we must recognize it, even when it seems that it's not there, and practice it fearlessly!⁴ And when our motives, concerns, and attitudes are right, we'll be practicing our unity in Christ! When we're more concerned with the needs and interests of others than our own, when we're acting not out of selfish ambition but out of our value for one another as fellow believers, when we have the mind of Christ—the attitude of self-sacrifice for the benefit of others—we'll be practicing this unity!

So here it is in a nutshell. *As Christians, our unity in Christ must govern our life in the world and our life together.* Unity makes all the difference in how effective a church's ministry and witness are. A divided church will accomplish little; but a church characterized by unity shows we have something genuine to offer!

Now unity is *not* uniformity. It's *harmony*. We can't create it; it's Christ's gift to His church. But we must *practice* it. Practicing unity doesn't mean we'll all have the same *opinion*, but rather the same *attitude*—the mind of Christ. It means we'll guard against and remedy cracks in the fellowship, and strengthen our relationships.

And when we do, when we stand united in Christ, He will be honored and glorified. Then just as He prayed the night before His death, the world will know that the Father has sent the Son into the world (John 17:23).

†MEG

¹ "United We Stand," written by Tony Hiller and Peter Simons, recorded by the British group *The Brotherhood of Man*. <http://www.songlyrics.com/the-brotherhood-of-man/united-we-stand-lyrics/>

² <http://quotes.yourdictionary.com/articles/who-said-united-we-stand-divided-we-fall.html> (accessed 10-16-2017).

³ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture taken from the New King James Version.

⁴ Bernard Rolf in a brief newsletter article on unity.