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 Philippians 1:27-2:4
 Fifth Message
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UNITY THROUGH HUMILITY

Throughout history there have always been wars and competition. And history has borne witness to the fact that it isn't always the most powerful military or the most talented team that wins the battle or the championship. Many times it is the underdog that rises triumphantly even though the opponent has superior size or strength. How is this possible? The answer is found in the fact that the seemingly inferior army or team fights or plays not as a group of individuals but as a united cohort or a cohesive team, fighting or playing for a cause greater than themselves. This greater cause is a powerful, unifying force in defeating the stronger opposition.

In our text from Philippians Paul applies this notion to the church, the company of believers in Jesus Christ who have been and always will be in conflict with the pagan world which refuses to acknowledge and worship the God of the Bible. Here Paul employs both military and athletic metaphors to encourage unity in the face of opposition.

The book of Philippians opens with thanksgiving and prayer, followed by a personal update on Paul's current situation and future possibilities. Now it is time for Paul to get down to the heart of why is writing the letter. This is a letter of friendship, but it also is a letter of exhortation. In 1:27-2:18, the apostle exhorts the Philippians to be steadfast and united in the face of opposition. We find exhortations and appeals in the first and third sections (1:27-2:4; 2:12-18), while the middle section (2:5-11) presents Christ as the example to follow. These three sections will form the basis of our study over the next three weeks.

Appeal to Unity in the Face of Opposition

Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; in no way alarmed by your opponents—which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that too, from God. For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me. (Phil 1:27-30 NASB)

The opening phrase governs the whole paragraph: "conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." Paul is not talking about moral conduct or behavior. His usual word for moral conduct is "walk," as we see in Ephesians. The word "conduct" here means to live as a citizen. Paul employs a term

that conveys civic duty, appealing to the Philippians to live in a way that is consistent with their citizenship in heaven. This is their primary loyalty.

Philippi was a Roman colony, a city in northern Greece repopulated with Roman citizens who gave their allegiance to Nero as lord. The Philippian believers were being pressured to bow their knee to Nero. However, they were also citizens of heaven, and their allegiance to Jesus as Lord flies in the face of their society. They were beginning to face growing opposition; they were suffering for their faith. The church in Philippi was an outpost of heaven, and Paul is reminding these believers of their primary civic identity and responsibility, i.e., to live in light of their heavenly home.

Paul further defines the idea of worthy citizenship with the words, "standing firm in one spirit with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; in no way alarmed by your opponents." The basic appeal here is to unity. Twice we see the word "one"—one spirit and one mind, or literally, one soul, one psyche. Paul's concern is that the growing opposition in Philippi will hinder the advance of the gospel. A united front is needed so that the gospel goes forward and doesn't retreat. A united front is needed so that the Philippians are not intimidated or fearful of the opposition. Whether Paul sees the Philippians or not, his hope is that he will hear that they are working together, standing firm, supporting and encouraging one another as they give testimony to Jesus in a hostile world.

God has called us in Christ Jesus to be his people, and as such we are called to unity. As we saw in our call to worship, Psalm 133, David declared that it is good and pleasant for "brothers to dwell together in unity. It is like precious oil upon the head, and like the dew of Mt. Hermon." Paul says in the letter to the Ephesians that we are to be "diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (4:3). We are to be united for the sake of the gospel. We are an outpost of heaven, citizens of heaven living in the Bay Area. What we believe and declare about Jesus flies in the face of pagan society.

Standing firm is a military term, while striving together is an athletic metaphor. Facing the opposition in Philippi is compared to a military battle or an athletic competition. An army doesn't go into battle and a team doesn't go into competition with everyone doing their own thing. What is needed is a united front, an army fighting together or a team working together. I love the metaphors, especially the idea of an athletic contest. Any sports team has to be on the same page,

running the same play in order to be successful. For example, think about the unity required in rowing. Members of a rowing team can't row at their individual pace. They are required to put their oar in the water at the same time. Striving together is imperative, and this is true for any team sport.

Usually it is a common interest that bands people together into clubs and organizations. We gather with people who all like the same thing—say golf or tennis or dancing—and we form a club. But not the church. Unity does not mean that we are all alike or that we all like the same things. We don't all have to like classical music, or Starbucks coffee, or dogs. We band together because of our faith in Christ and our citizenship in heaven. The word "Spirit" in our text does not point to some sort of school spirit. I think the TNIV is right in capitalizing the word (meaning the Holy Spirit). As Paul says in Ephesians, we are to preserve the unity of the Spirit, defined as "one body, one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father" (4:3-6).

One of the biggest problems in the church is fragmentation. Churches splinter and divide over small things or big things but not essential things. Churches become nothing more than religious clubs that exist for the purpose of the membership. Another problem that plagues the church is individualism, the thinking that faith should be private, and thus Christians seek to grow as a self-contained entity. Fragmentation or individualism causes the gospel to suffer. What is needed is a cause that is greater than self, a reason for joining together, striving together in unity, and that cause is the gospel of Christ.

I sang in the choir in high school. The last day before Christmas vacation, the school put on a Christmas show, which was performed several times during the day. The last event was the singing of the Hallelujah Chorus, with the choir sitting in the balcony. As we went through each performance we were good but not great. We could tell by the look on the director's face that something was missing. But as we sang to conclude the last performance something happened. Everyone sang together; the parts were harmonizing; we were singing in unison. The director's face beamed. We were all caught up in the excitement and joy of the moment. At the end we all broke out into spontaneous elation. It was magnificent. We were part of a cause much greater than our own individual interests.

I have a sense that the Father's face beams when he sees his people, the church, striving together, singing together as citizens of heaven, living for the kingdom, united for the gospel. We all sing different parts, but when we harmonize together in unity our voices ascend to heaven and the sound is sweet music to God's ears.

Striving together as God's people is a great privilege, but it is not without its cost. We don't always win in the way the world defines victory. Paul says that it has been given, literally "graced," for the Philippians not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for him. They saw Paul suffer when he was in Philippi and they had heard about his current suffering. Now

they are joining him in the same conflict or struggle. Here again we find an athletic metaphor—a word meaning sporting contest or wrestling match.

We too join in this conflict or struggle. Our salvation, which comes by grace from God through Christ, also includes another extension of grace, namely, to suffer on his behalf. But as we stand together as citizens of heaven, striving together with one Spirit, we cannot be intimidated. Our unity becomes a sign to the pagan world of its destruction, even if it costs us our life, and at the same time a sign of salvation, giving assurance to the church. We belong to the future and live with unshakable certainty. We find comfort and strength in the fact that God is working. As we often sing: "The body they may kill; God's truth abideth still; his kingdom is forever."

Appeal to Unity through Humble Character

We are called to unity as the people of God so that we might contend for the gospel of Christ in the face of a hostile world. But how do we gain this unity? Do we make a list of all the things we agree on? If we tried to do that we would be here for months. Do we gather together at conferences and retreats? Those things help, but there is something much deeper, as Paul goes on to explain.

Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. (2:1-2)

Once again Paul repeats his appeal to unity: "being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose." The words "mind" and "purpose" come from the same Greek word. The idea is, setting one's mind on, having a certain outlook, a certain mind-set. This is a key word in Philippians, occurring nine times.

United in spirit is literally united in soul. The soul and the mind are joined together. Not only are their minds but their whole being to be set on the same thing. "Maintaining the same love" implies having the same love towards one another that God has for them. There seems to have been some internal friction among the leadership in Philippi. Paul's concern is that this tension might undermine their unity and halt the progress of the gospel.

Paul's appeal is based on what the Philippians have received. He uses four "if" statements that might be better understood by employing the word "since." In other words, if there is any encouragement in Christ (and there is); if there is any consolation of love (and there is); since these things are true, then Paul's appeal is to make his joy complete by having the same mind-set.

Notice that the first three phrases are trinitarian. Encouragement or comfort comes from Christ to aid in suffering; consolation or solace of love typically flows from the Father; the Spirit binds us together in *koinonia* or fellowship. Affec-

tion and compassion are probably what Paul and the Philippians have shared with each another as brothers and sisters in Christ. “The appeal is for their unity and love toward one another (vv. 2-4), based on their shared comfort and love that has its origins in God and found historical expression in Christ and the Spirit, and has been shared mutually by them and for one another.”¹

The motivating factor in unity is not achieved through rules and regulations, not by having more meetings but by setting our eyes on God, remembering his love and faithfulness to us even in our suffering. We take our mind off our resentments and disagreements and think about Christ and the cross.

My wife and I can be exhausted, worn out, occupied with many tasks and even on edge with one another, but when Sam, our two-year-old grandson appears, everything changes. All the focus is on Sam. Without even trying, he brings comfort, love, and joy. It changes our mind-set. Liz often comments that Sam makes her day, makes her joy complete.

God can change our day too and give us a different outlook and perspective. Our relationship with him brings us comfort, love, and compassion. It makes our day. It is what we receive from God that motivates us to have the same unifying mind-set. But what is that to be? Paul explains:

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. (2:3-4)

The mind-set isn't to agree on worship styles, what everyone should wear to church, or world politics. Paul is talking about humility. This is the one thing we are to think of and agree on. The grammar of the text makes this very clear. Humility is to characterize relationships in the body of Christ, from leadership on down. This is far from easy, because the body is made up of imperfect people, people we might not choose to be our friends.

Here is how Henri Nouwen put it:

There is always someone who doesn't satisfy my need or someone who irritates me. Community is not some sentimental ideal place or time where everybody lives together, loves each other, and always gets along. That's never going to happen. Rather, in living together we come to realize that community doesn't require or offer total emotional harmony. It offers us the context where we try to love one another and receive the love and care of others.²

Paul is hitting at the deepest problem in our life and community, which is pride, self-exaltation, self-glorification. Pride seeks to elevate oneself. C.S. Lewis said, “According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.”³

Paul describes pride as selfish ambition and empty conceit. The word for “selfish ambition” occurs in 1:17, where he talks about those preaching Christ out of envy; “empty conceit” means vain or empty glory. Those who think too highly of themselves seek a glory that is empty and altogether baseless. Paul indicates that a proud person is not other centered but is only concerned with self, thinking that he or she is better than others. Pride always manifests itself in comparison, rising above others.

C. S. Lewis has these insightful words:

Pride is essentially competitive—is competitive by its very nature—while the other vices are competitive only, so to speak, by accident. Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. . . . It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest.⁴

Pride undermines relationships and destroys unity in the body. Paul is calling the Philippians to have a unified mind-set of humility so that they might work together for the advance of the gospel.

Humility means to make oneself low, to be other centered, to look on others as more important than self. It does not mean false modesty or abject servility. It means to have a proper estimation of yourself as a creature before the Creator, being fully aware of your weaknesses and strengths, trusting in God rather than in yourself.

Humility is a uniquely Christian virtue. The Greco-Roman world considered humility a shortcoming, not a virtue. Our world today isn't much different. People around us seek to rise to the top no matter the cost, to attain wealth and status no matter the means. The models we see in the world are corrupt politicians, power hungry CEO's, bonus happy executives, and the beautiful people of Hollywood. In the end, all of this worldly glory will be empty.

Paul urges Christians to another way, a way that is totally counter to the world. His argument is that humility by “each one” is the key to unity within the body of Christ. Humility is the main mark of a citizen of heaven. It won't come easy or naturally. We must be in a constant, ruthless battle with the enemy of pride. And we must be soaked with Christ since Christ himself was gentle and humble (Matt 11:29). Every morning we remind ourselves that we are a man or woman in Christ. Every night we remind ourselves we are a new creation in Christ.

If there is only one thing in life for us to attain or one character quality to desire, it is humility, to become other-centered, not to be concerned about yourself. Augustine said: “For those who would learn God's ways, humility is the first thing, humility is the second, and humility is the third.” John Stott says: “At every stage of our Christian development and in

every sphere of our Christian discipleship, pride is the greatest enemy and humility our greatest friend.”⁵

Humility is required for us to know God. “As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.”⁶

Humility is the essential ingredient for the body of Christ to be truly the body of Christ. It is humility that helps us to deal with our different personalities, to put off anger and envy, to be someone who wants to help others mature. It is humility that unifies believers to live for a greater cause—to live for Christ and the gospel.

Humility is the most important character quality in marriage, how we relate to our family, interact with our roommates, and how we conduct ourselves at work. James Barrie said, “Life is a long lesson in humility.” And of course, the first step is the most important: to realize and confess that we are proud.

Our culture values “upward mobility”: staying on a secure career path, maintaining the status quo, appearing to others as an interesting person, succeeding in business, politics, sports, academics, or even spiritual practice. ... The world ... suggests to us, in thousands of ways, that we really should try and to become a center of attention. ... We are interesting when we do things other people do not do, say things other people do not say, and think things other people do not think.

The way of Jesus is radically different than the spirit of the world. It is the way of downward mobility. It is going to the end of the line, staying behind the sets, and choosing the last place. Why is the way of Jesus worth choosing? Because it is the way to the kingdom and the way that brings life everlasting.⁷

¹ Gordon Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 182.

² Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 114.

³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, Simon and Schuster, 1996), 109-110.

⁴ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 110.

⁵ Quoted from *Humility*, C. J. Mahaney (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah, 2005, 29).

⁶ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 111.

⁷ Nowen, *Spiritual Direction*, 137-138.