

Family Now

Philippians 1:27-2:4

We are in the last week of our sermon series on the 40 days of prayer. The devotionals will wrap up on Friday and this is the last sermon in this series. Our Tuesday night prayer gatherings will continue and I encourage you to come if you are able. I hope you've been encouraged to pray deeper or more regularly or with more understanding throughout this series and will be able by God's grace to continue to grow in prayer.

The theme for this week is "Family Now" and the emphasis is on the importance of the church family, the efforts of our enemy to separate us, and the need to be in prayer for the church. As I looked for a passage of Scripture to go along with this theme, I was repeatedly drawn to a series of verses in Philippians 1 & 2, so my plan is to use those verses to guide the sermon for today.

The Bible elevates the value of the church family to a very high degree. I was reminded of that this week. As you look at Jesus' teachings, and the writings of the Apostles, much importance is placed on the fellowship of believers, the unity of the church family, and our love for one another. In Paul's writings, he makes it clear that in the church, God is creating a new people for himself, a people devoted to righteousness, worship, and carrying out his mission on earth. When we are saved, we aren't just brought into fellowship with God, but into fellowship with other believers. We're saved into a new family and God's desire and design is that we join together in Christian community to carry out the eternal purposes he's given us.

The church family is also important for our own spiritual well-being. Scripture is clear, we can't make it alone. There aren't any stand-alone, do-it-all believers. We need each other and that's the way God designed the church to work. Each of us has different gifts and passions and we come together to share those things with one another, to be blessed by one another, and to mutually build one another up. We need each other to persevere in faith throughout the trials and temptations of this life. And it's within Christian community that we find the support and encouragement we need to do so.

So the church family is very important, and because of that, it makes sense that Satan is trying to dismantle it – trying to break churches apart, cause division, keep Christians away from each other, and nullify all the blessings of the church

family for one another and for the world. From the first church in Jerusalem to today, churches have been bombarded with things like persecution, division, and distraction. It seems Satan is using anything and everything to try to tear us apart. And if you look at churches across America, you can see he's been effective. There is great division among Christians. Many churches are shrinking, inactive, and ineffective in carrying out their mission.

Satan would like to see the same kind of disruption here at East Lincoln, and I believe he is actively trying to make it happen. We are in a spiritual battle and this morning I want to give you a couple critical things from Philippians 1 & 2 to pray for and then strive for so that we can experience the unity, strength, and blessing God desires for us.

The church in Philippi had faced resistance to the gospel from the very beginning. Their culture was steeped in idolatry, so when Paul first came to preach the gospel and people began to turn away from idols, it was very unwelcome and there was opposition. This letter was written several years later, but it is still apparent that they were facing opposition and the church was under pressure. So Paul wrote to them about how to stand firm together.

Read Philippians 1:27-28.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,²⁸ and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.

So you can hear what Paul's desire was for this church in Philippi. In the midst of the pressure and opposition they faced, his desire was that they would stand firm and strive for the faith of the gospel, and that they would do so together, in unity – in one spirit, with one mind, side by side, not frightened by their opponents. If that would happen in this young church in Philippi, they would be a powerful testimony to the ones opposing them. It would give credibility to who they were and the gospel they believed.

If you see someone standing firm for something in the face of opposition, it makes an impression – it could even be a lone Packers fan at US Bank Stadium. It tells you something of that person's character and conviction. But if you see a whole community united together and standing firm for something, it makes an

even stronger impression and elevates the credibility of what they're all standing for. That's what Paul wanted to see in Philippi. And I think Jesus wants to see the same thing in every one of his churches, including ours.

In his great prayer in the Upper Room on the night before his crucifixion, when he was praying for his disciples and future generations of Christians, he prayed this in John 17:20-23: *"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word,²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.²² The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one,²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me."*

When believers stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, it is a powerful testimony to the world that gives credibility to the gospel we believe. So how can we experience this kind of unity? Paul mentions something in Philippians 1:27 that he then describes more fully at the beginning of chapter 2. He says, "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ..." That's how this kind of unity is going to happen. Let's see how he describes it in chapter 2.

Read Philippians 2:1-4.

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy,² complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

I see two things in these verses that describe what it means for us to live in a manner worthy of the gospel. These are critical things for us to pray for and strive for as a church family so that we can experience the unity, strength, and blessing God desires for us. The first is described in verse 2. Paul tells them they could complete his joy by *"being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind."* So they were to pursue unity and agreement, but I don't think he's just saying this in general – I don't think he's expecting them to be in agreement about everything, because that would be unnecessary (and impossible). I think he's expecting and calling them to be in agreement about one

thing, and that's Christ. Having the mind of Christ, the love of Christ, and being in full accord and of one mind in Christ. They were all to have the common goal of becoming like Christ – that's what would unify them.

Paul expresses this as the goal of the church in his letter to the Ephesians. He tells them that Jesus established churches and leaders in the churches to equip the saints to do the work of ministry and then says in Eph. 4:13: *"until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."* Together, we must all be pursuing Christ – believing in him and knowing him and seeking to become like him. Christ is our target, Christ is our goal, and he is the only bond that can unite us all together.

So I believe Paul is calling the believers in Philippi to pursue unity in Christ – to exalt him and pursue him high above anything else that might divide them. We have to be willing to put our differences aside and pursue Christ as most important. That's the first thing we need to pray and strive for.

The second is in Philippians 2:3-4 and I'll read those verses again: *"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."*

Here the attention shifts to other people in the church – brothers and sisters in Christ. If we are going to live in a manner worthy of the gospel so that we stand firm together as a church family, we must first make Christ our goal and then treat others in the church as more important than ourselves. Our nature is to flip this around and put our own interests first. But that's why there's so much division in churches. People cling to their way and what they want rather than considering the needs and interests of others. But if we're going to stand together as a church family, we're going to put others first.

Jesus gave his disciples a powerful example of this when he humbled himself and washed their feet. It says this in John 13:12-15: *"When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, 'Do you understand what I have done to you? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.'"*

He was teaching them to put the interests of others before their own. That's what he did then, and that's exactly what he did when he went to the cross to die for our sins. And if we are going to be a church family who stands firm together, that's what we're going to have to do as well.

When I think about what this could look like in our church, I think about the ladies small group that meets here on Tuesday mornings... They meet for Bible study, but it goes way beyond that into personally meeting one another's needs beyond the walls of the church. When one of them is sick or struggling, they rally around them like true sisters in Christ. There are phone calls, drop by visits to check on someone, they give rides when needed, they'll help with meals, or cleaning. They pray for one another, encourage one another. It's a beautiful example of what Paul is talking about. That's the kind of relationships each of us needs to seek in the church family if we are going to stand firm.

So Paul has given us two critical things to pray for and strive for so that we can experience the unity, strength, and blessing God desires for us as a church family, and stand firm against Satan's efforts to dismantle us. I want to talk a little bit more about each of these.

The first is that we would be united in Christ, setting aside our differences to pursue Christ as most important. Is pursuing Christ most important to you, or are there other things that have become too important that could cause unnecessary division? Christian friendships can divide over the craziest things: decisions about paint color or carpet (it really happens!), music preferences, differences in secondary theological issues, politics is a big one, and more.

We saw a lot of this happening during the COVID era. When divisions like that happen I have to wonder if we've got our priorities screwed up and if our pursuit of Christ has taken a back seat. I'm thankful that many of those issues just kind of went away, but if they hadn't, I honestly wondered if we'd make it as a church. Or would Satan have his way? When anything other than Christ becomes most important to us, weakness and division will eventually emerge. Pray for our church, that we would be willing to put our differences aside and pursue Christ as most important.

Pray also that we would humble ourselves and put the interests of others before our own. I thought a lot about that this week because I wanted to get a practical

idea of what this means for us and what kind of steps we could take to grow in this area. How do we put this into practice? I already shared about the Ladies Bible study on Tuesdays, and I think that kind of care and those kinds of friendships are a great goal to have, but how do we get there?

I think it starts by showing up to church on Sundays to begin to connect with fellow Christians. All of you have done that this morning, so good job. Keep it up. But there's no way that going to church for a couple hours on Sunday is enough to put others interests before your own. I think the next step needs to be some kind of connection with a smaller group of believers to build deeper friendships and connection. You might be able to do that through one of the small groups at church, like the Ladies group on Tuesdays. Or maybe you can do that by getting together with some other group of Christians in some other way. I meet Tuesday mornings with a group of pastors who have become good friends so that's how this is working for me right now.

This is a good second step, but I still don't think it goes far enough for us to really get where we need to go. I think it needs to go beyond that to where we are connecting and serving one another outside the group time. Seek to develop Christian friendships that will endure even if the small group quits meeting. Get together for a meal, help someone split wood, rake a friend's yard, go fishing together or hunting, sit by each other at kids events or sports activities. If we take the time to set aside our stuff in order to connect with others, befriend them, help them, I believe we will be fulfilling Paul's instruction to put others interests before our own.

So pray for these things for our church family and strive for them in your own life so we experience the unity, strength, and blessing God desires for us as a church family.