

STAND AS ONE

SERIES: TENACIOUS TOGETHER



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Philippians 1:27–2:4
Third Message
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Philippians 1:27–2:4

They weren't a very impressive group of people. They didn't have as much skill or talent as other groups. The task they faced was near impossible. No one thought anything would come from their efforts. Everyone gave them exactly a zero percent chance of succeeding. Not a single person could have ever predicted what eventually happened.

Who am I talking about?

I could be talking about a lot of different people. Perhaps the American Revolutionaries? Or the students from *High School Musical*? Plenty of movies would work: *Mighty Ducks*, *A League Of Their Own*, or *Guardians of the Galaxy*. Even *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings*. And of course: *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story*.

This is called a trope. It's a storyline that is told over and over again in different ways with different characters. You find this particular trope—the ragtag victorious underdogs—everywhere: in books, TV, and movies.

This morning we're going to see an inspirational version of this story played out in a small city off the Aegean Sea almost two thousand years ago. We're continuing our series in the book of Philippians that we've called *Tenacious Together*. Today we're looking at what could be considered the theme passage of the book. The main ideas of the entire book are wrapped up in Paul's words that we'll look at today.

Paul will explain his main hope for this new little church in Philippi. He wants them to persevere. He wants them to do it together. And he wants them to do it all for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus. He's encouraging them to stand as one.

We saw the diversity of this group of people two weeks ago. A wealthy polytheist woman, a trafficked teenager, a Roman correctional officer, and a handful of Jewish men. This ragtag group of underdogs is supposed to come together and do something tremendous for the kingdom of God.

Every church needs to hear this exhortation of standing as one regularly. This is what it means to be the church. It's always the same. We're always outclassed and out of our league. We're always a strange collection of people. We're always invited into the great work of the kingdom of God.

But it's also always different. We're strange in a unique way. We live in a unique place. Every church has to ask some questions that are unique to them. What peculiar things do we have to persevere through? How does our particular mix of people come together? What distinct work in our time and place are we engaged in for the sake of the Gospel?

You might have thought that you just showed up this morning to attend a service. You just want to be a spectator of the meticulously put together program that we've lovingly developed for your pleasure. But that's not at all how the New Testament speaks of the church.

The New Testament church was a force for change. A dynamic community that supported itself and engaged the world they lived in. A people beset by challenges on every side, but faithful through it all. The church is composed of people on a mission together facing adverse conditions.

This morning you are going to be invited into something deeper. A purpose. A community. A goal with great eternal stakes. I'm hoping that our passage this morning opens us up to what it looks like for us to stand together as a group for the Gospel. What has God got for us? What is our underdog story?

Join the movement of the Gospel

The first verse of this section gives a summary of the main idea.

Philippians 1:27:

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,

You can think of this verse as the theme verse for the book of Philippians. It introduces the two ideas that we've used to title the series. We are to stand firm and strive for the Gospel. That's being tenacious. And we are to find unity as we do it: in one spirit, with one mind, side by side. The next two sections of our passage this morning will focus on those two big ideas, but first, let's think about what it is that we're tenacious for.

The word that begins this passage is translated, "Let your manner of life be worthy." We don't have this word in English, which makes it hard to translate. It has to do with citizenship. A literal translation might be, "live one's life as a good citizen."

Many of us are citizens of this country: the United States of America. Some of you are citizens of another country. Some of you wish you were citizens here. Some of you wish you were citizens of another country.

I was born as a citizen of this country. Some of you have been naturalized as adults. If you did that, then you made an oath as a citizen. Part of that oath is the following pledge: "I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic." The oath continues to talk about bearing arms and performing work of national importance if necessary.

To be a citizen is to support and defend your kingdom. In this verse, Paul urges the Philippians to live as a citizen of the "gospel of Christ" and to stand firm and strive faithfully for "for the faith of the gospel."

That phrase is somewhat curious. We don't always think of the Gospel as a cause. More often, it seems like a set of ideas to believe.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul uses the same language of standing firm for the Gospel. He defines the Gospel as the news of four simple events: Christ died for our sins. He was buried. He rose again. He appeared to the disciples. This is what we celebrated over Easter. This is the proclamation of the Gospel. These things happened.

But some events have far-reaching implications. These four events have an impact that spreads out into the world. You might think of these events like a pebble being thrown into a lake. Then the implications ripple outward.

The first impact is the personal meaning. Peter's sermon from Acts 2 summarizes this aspect: "Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). The Gospel begins with a personal transformation that we accept. When we do we are forgiven and free.

But then there is a communal meaning. In Ephesians 2, Paul talks of how the Gospel creates one new man being out of Jews and Gentiles together. The Gospel doesn't only save individuals—it also creates communities.

Finally, the Gospel has an impact on the world. This is the message that Jesus proclaimed when we are told that he "preached the gospel." The news of the Messiah impacts the world. Healing and redemption and reconciliation and peace follow where the Gospel is present. This is the story we see in the book of Acts as the Gospel slowly spreads to the entire world.

The Gospel starts with Jesus. But then the effects ripple out through us as individuals, the church as God's people, and the world around us.

Jesus. You. The Church. The World.

This is the movement that we are a part of. This is the reason that we stand firm. Standing is not a defensive position. It's part of something moving outward. The Gospel doesn't just settle into a community. It transforms a group of people and sends them out. The ripples of that pebble keep going into deeper and deeper places. Don't just believe the Gospel. Join the Gospel Movement. Join the Gospel Movement.

Think about trying to eat healthy as an example. There's a basic set of ideas: you will feel better and be healthier if you eat well. That's the idea.

If you believe that idea and decide to act on it, you'll change your lifestyle. Everything has to change if you want to transform the way you eat. It's a complete program. That's healthy eating as a lifestyle.

Now imagine you talk to your friends and relatives, and everyone starts realizing that eating healthy really is a great thing and they start changing their lives. Now the people around you are healthy.

Finally, imagine that this message starts to change our culture. Food companies start to change. Advertising is transformed. School lunches and gas station food marts and fast food restaurants all start to incorporate different kinds of options. Now healthy eating is transforming the world.

It would be a great thing for healthy eating to succeed as a movement. But it would be a far greater thing for the Gospel as a movement to transform the people, communities, and the very culture that we live in. Paul wants the Philippians to live as citizens of the kingdom of God so that what begins with them ripples out into the culture.

The Gospel is not just a set of ideas to get us into heaven or even to make our lives have meaning. It is a movement that transforms God's entire creation. God will make that happen. And he has given us the privilege of being part of it.

Maybe that transformation is on our street as we partner with Street Life Ministries to minister to homeless people in Palo Alto. Maybe that's in our community as we throw a huge Harvest Fest event in East Palo Alto this fall. Maybe that's around the world as we support the work of International Justice Mission to combat online sex trafficking in the Philippines. Or maybe it's in remote areas as missionaries from this church translate the Bible and share the Gospel and disciple believers all over the world.

Or maybe the movement is happening in your family. Or on your campus. Or within your school.

The Gospel is the cause that we rally around. We are tenacious together for the sake of the faith of the Gospel. This is our motivation. But it turns out when you give yourself to this cause, there are certain costs. That's where the passage heads next.

Suffer for Christ

Every cause has those who fight against it. The Gospel of Jesus is no exception. That's why the passage continues by talking about the opposition that will have to be faced. Philippians 1:28-30 continues from the previous section describing how they should stand firm.

Philippians 1:28-30:

...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. 29 For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, 30 engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

I remember conversations I had when we first started doing Beautiful Day in our community. We were asking

to go into schools and bless them with our time and effort and money. It seems easy enough. Free labor. Free stuff.

But we stepped into a system full of complicated relationships that we didn't understand. Maybe the principal was excited, but the superintendent fought the idea. Or maybe the administration was on board, but the Facilities staff had issues. We had last minute cancellations, accusations against us, petty bureaucratic hoops to jump through, and contradictory messages.

I think this is what Paul means when he says that opposition is a clear sign from God. The conflict being stirred up is a sign of the truth of the Gospel. It's an indication that the Gospel is in the process of healing and redeeming the world. Instead of discouraging us, the opposition should indicate to us that we're doing what we're supposed to.

The Gospel has opponents. But they are not the people who stand against us. In 2 Thessalonians 2, Paul uses the same word for opponents to refer to the coming "man of lawlessness." In 1 Timothy he uses the same word to refer to "the adversary", whom he clarifies as Satan. In Ephesians 6:12, Paul points out that "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

Brothers and sisters, the ones who stand against the Gospel are not school bureaucrats or staff afraid for their jobs or the people who put Paul in prison in the ancient city of Philippi. We live in a world where what we can see is not all there is. Over 150 years ago, the French poet Baudelaire pointed out that "the devil's finest trick is to persuade you that he does not exist." ¹

We have opponents. They are the spiritual forces around us and the spiritual beings who are so good at hiding the fact that they are even there. They are real. They are dangerous. They make following Jesus much more complicated. In fact, they make it painful.

Paul says this as if it's a good thing: "It has been granted to you that suffer for his sake." When you join the Gospel movement, you will suffer for Jesus.

Notice what has changed. First, we join a movement. Then, we suffer for Christ.

We can work hard for a cause. If we believe in it, we can expend tremendous amounts of effort for the sake of a worthy cause. We labor for a cause. But we suffer for a person. We strive together for the sake of the Gospel.

We suffer for the person of Christ. This is what striving and joining the movement looks like. When we join the movement of the Gospel, we suffer for Christ.

Our problem is that we've suffered before. And we don't want to do it again. Last week when I travelled to a conference, for a variety of reasons, the first night I could barely sleep. I hate that feeling of lying in bed and getting more and more frustrated as time ticks by.

Not only was I exhausted the entire next day, but I was scared. Scared to go to bed that night and have a similar experience. You see, suffering makes us afraid. Fear is a gift to us—it's a normal human reaction to pain. That's what helps keep us alive. Fear keeps us from doing things that might hurt us.

Paul opens this section telling the Philippians not to be frightened. The word that he uses is often used to describe skittish horses that are easily surprised. Paul says, don't be worried that you might suffer. Know that you will. And don't be afraid of it. Don't let fear keep you from the calling that God has given you.

Fear keeps me from so much. Fear keeps me from speaking more openly about Jesus. Fear keeps me from taking relationships deeper. Fear keeps me from being creative and taking risks and leading in new ways. Fear keeps the pebble of the Gospel within my little world. I don't know what would happen if I let it ripple outward. So I just contain it.

Friends, what are we afraid of? What do we really have to fear? Last week we were exhorted that there is no losing when we follow Jesus. If we live, we win. If we die, we win. So what are we afraid of? Who are these opponents who think they can stand against the redemptive and healing purposes of the creator the world?

The suffering will be real. Our opponents are manipulative and deceptive and relentless. Suffering for Christ isn't just persecution from the world. It's all those hard things that come when you follow Jesus—all the chaos and confusion and hurt and pain that you walk into instead of running away from. We have the privilege of suffering for the one who suffered for us.

But we don't have to be afraid because we can do it together.

Be humble

Our passage now pivots to focus on the kind of unity that Paul eagerly desires for this young church. He starts off by telling them about it; then he shows them how Jesus is the perfect model for getting there. We'll look at his instructions this week and the beautiful example of Jesus next week.

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.

Paul begins by begging them to take action. The first sentence is written in a pleading tone. He's not asking whether they have encouragement in Christ or comfort from love or affection or sympathy. He's assuming they do. He knows some of that is there. And he's saying that based on whatever amount of those things you have, please do this thing.

It's like me saying, "If there is any appreciation of my preaching at all (and I hope there is at least a little bit), please buy me ice cream." That's just an example though. I don't really need more ice cream. But you see the point of what Paul is trying to say? This is a high-leverage maneuver.

His hope for them is simple: unity. As they participate in the Gospel and suffer for Christ, he wants them to be unified.

Paul says it in several different ways: "same mind," "same love," "full accord," "one mind." He hopes that they would come together around a certain core. Like a solar system circling a sun, he wants this community to be drawn together by one single thing at their center.

That core is Jesus. The same mind that we are supposed to have is the mind of Jesus. The same love that bonds us is the love of Jesus. We are one with each other in Jesus: his is our one mind. The "one accord" is literally, "united in spirit." We are united by the Spirit of Jesus.

Jesus is the sun that we orbit around. It is the person of Jesus. It is our relationship with him. Our commitment and our love and our worship and our suffering for Jesus. He gives us unity.

But how do we live that (unity) when so many things pull us apart? It's not as if our differences are unimportant. Our political ideas matter: the very future of our nation depends on its citizens making good political choices. Our theological perspectives are critical. What you think about baptism and church government and the role of women and the timing of Jesus' return are not minor issues. Backgrounds and social statuses and ethnicities and cultural preferences: all of those aspects to who we are matter a great deal.

How do we unify around Jesus in the midst of all those things? Paul gives us very clear instructions. He doesn't say to find people that are similar to you. He doesn't say to figure out the most important issues and agree on them. He doesn't say to create some kind of cultural or theological or political boundary and only experience unity within that.

Paul uses three different phrases to say the same thing. "Do nothing from selfish ambition." "In humility consider others more significant than yourselves." "Look to the interests of others."

We tend to think that agreement leads to unity. But Paul is clear: unity is built on humility, not agreement. Unity begins when each of us starts to rethink our importance, and we change the way we act because of it. Unity is built on humility.

We get closer to unity when I lay myself down.

We get closer to one mind when I truly understand your point of view.

We have the same love when I forgive you for the wrongs you've done against me.

We can work together when I put your needs above my own.

Unity is built on humility, not agreement. Humility begins with me. Humility begins with you. Be humble.

It's sad, but sometimes suffering pulls us apart. Sometimes when I suffer, I withdraw. I pull away. Maybe that's pride. Maybe it's shame. But the encouragement here is that as we suffer, we serve each other in humility. Next week we'll see how Christ is the ultimate example of that. This morning, let's dwell on this one phrase: "count others more significant than yourselves."

It's important to realize that this is not an intellectual exercise. Humility is not something that happens in your head. It's not about what you think about yourself. It's about how you interact with other people. One translation renders this, "be moved to treat one another as more important than yourself."

Christians disagree on many issues. Those issues are not minor points that don't matter in the long run. Many of have to do with the nature of God and the calling on his people. Many of us in this room hold very strong positions with great confidence that land on different sides of issues. You don't see any possible way you could be wrong.

I'm not asking any of you to consider changing your views. But I would ask you to hold them with humility. Especially as you interact with people, who think differently.

Many of us hold a particular view because we think the Bible leads us to that view. And we may be right. But others read the Bible and come to a different conclusion. What is the Christian perspective? How should a Bible-believing, Jesus-worshipping Christian think about any of these divisive issues?

No one disagrees that we should be humble. It's one of the clearest things in the entire Bible, which is why I'm always amazed at people who hold views they think are biblical with arrogance, dismissiveness, superiority, insensitivity, rigidity, and condescension. Being right doesn't exempt anyone from humility.

I'm not picking on any one side of any issue here. People on every side of every issue need to grow in humility. Pick the issue: Trump. Women in ministry. Immigration. Same-sex marriage. Creation. Schooling choices. It's rare to find someone on any side of any issue that exemplifies humility.

I wish I could say this sets Christians apart. I want to point to that as a distinguishing mark of the people who follow Jesus Christ. I think we are supposed to have that difference from the world. But I'm not sure that's really true. In fact, if you asked the average non-Christian to list words that describe believers in Jesus, how many would they have to get through before they said "humble"? I'm afraid it would be a lot.

Let's change that. Let's commit ourselves to considering others as more significant than ourselves. Whatever we think, whatever we are convinced of,

whatever might divide us, let's be humble. It's the only way that we'll find unity.

Conclusion

Think back to that unimpressive group of people who fought against all odds and emerged victoriously. Whether it's sports or music or politics or international relations, we love to tell the story of the underdog.

Maybe that's because we all feel like underdogs. Maybe it's because we've seen this story happen over and over again. But maybe it's because these kinds of stories "ring true" in some theological way. Maybe these stories that we tell over and over again make sense to us because they tap into some deep truth about how God designed the world.

Maybe being an underdog gives you a kind of humility that is more important than skill or experience. Maybe it's that humility that draws people together and makes something remarkable happen. Maybe if we cultivate that kind of humility among us, we'll be drawn together, and we'll be able to strive for the sake of the Gospel in new ways.

Don't just believe. Don't just attend a service. Don't be satisfied with divisiveness and complacency. Don't let fear hold you back from the things that God has asked of you. And don't let your pride isolate you and separate you from the community.

Join the movement. Suffer for Christ. Be humble. That's what it looks like to stand as one.

Endnotes

¹ Charles Baudelaire, *GoodReads* (<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/7512394-the-devil-s-finest-trick-is-to-persuade-you-that-he>)