

FACING THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

SERIES: TENACIOUS TOGETHER



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Philippians 4:1-9
Eighth Message
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Philippians 4:1-9

During my sophomore year in college, I lived in a house with around 40 other students. It was university housing—in between a dorm and a co-op. I thought it was a great place to live, but not everyone agreed. One pair of young women in the house were so upset at being placed in this house that at the beginning of the year when everyone introduced themselves, they decided to give everyone false names.

A few months in, this fact became more widely known. The women acted nice and friendly, but in truth, they wanted nothing to do with the rest of us living in the house. One particularly awkward moment happened in the middle of a house meeting. We were talking about how to create a greater sense of community and connectedness in the house. People were sharing ideas and examples of how we could feel like we knew each other better.

Everyone was thinking about one obvious thing though: we could give each other our real names.

This situation is what we usually call the "elephant in the room." It is an issue that everyone is aware of, but that we don't talk about that frequently. We don't know how to talk about it. We can't figure it out, so our tendency is to ignore the issue.

We're getting to the last chapter of Philippians in our series that we've called *Tenacious Together*. In the first half of this chapter, Paul gets extremely practical. He's been talking about unity throughout this entire book.

Every community has specific issues which tend to divide them. They are like fault lines under the ground. They often lie dormant, but sometimes they move violently. Without proper attention, they threaten to fracture the community.

In this passage, Paul calls out one of those fault lines for the Philippian church. He wants them to work through a specific conflict that they face. Paul addresses the elephant in the room.

This morning we'll be doing the same. We can't talk about unity and ignore divisive issues. We have to be willing to face them. Today we'll see how Christ helps us in facing the elephant in the room.

The first nine verses of Philippians 4 are very different from the rest of the book. This book contains 26 imperatives. An imperative is a verb which tells you to do something: sit down, stand up, sing loud. Nine of those imperatives are in these nine verses. More than one-third of the very practical and specific instructions are here in this section.

When I first started looking at this passage, I wasn't thrilled to preach it. I thought it was a laundry list of all those things Paul forgot to mention and now he piles them up. But the more I've studied the passage, the more I've concluded that the things Paul mentions are connected. They all have to do with working through conflict and finding unity.

Each of us operates in several different communities. Our church is a community. Your families. Your workplaces or schools. Neighborhood groups. Social circles. Each of these has unique issues which might split the group.

As we watch Paul encourage the Philippians to deal with their elephant, we'll be thinking about how we can face any of the elephants in any of our rooms.

We're going to notice the repeated phrase "in the Lord" as we read this section. This phrase is not a general guide for facing elephants. This type of reconciliation only happens when people share a relationship with Christ.

There is a reason Paul doesn't address this significant issue until the end of the letter. First, he had to talk about the example of Christ, laying himself down. Then, he had to explain the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus above any earthly thing. Finally, Paul had to invite the Philippians into recognizing their citizenship in heaven as opposed to any earthly institution.

Facing elephants can be a dangerous thing to do. There's a reason we tend to avoid them. Sometimes talking about divisive issues can make matters worse. It has to be done "in the Lord."

First, Paul will raise the issue itself. Then he will give us a spiritual process so that we can stay "in Christ" with each other. Finally, he'll give us the over-arching attitude that we should always have.

Agree in the Lord

The first part of this passage introduces the specific conflict that Paul is addressing. Listen to the encouragement of Paul.

Philippians 4:1-3:

Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. 2 I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. 3 Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Paul begins with one of the most impassioned personal statements in the book. He refers to this church as his brothers. He loves and longs for them. They are his joy and crown, his beloved. These are strong words. Paul is trying to cement his relationship with this church before bringing up a controversial topic.

Facing elephants only happens in the context of relationships. Paul speaks directly to these two women. This is not something that can be done if you don't trust each other. We're not just talking about issues to work through. We're talking about people whom we care about.

It's rare that Paul mentions a specific conflict between two people in one of his letters. This conflict was a major conflict. Everyone knew about it. People had likely taken sides: Team Euodia and Team Syntyche.

It's likely that all throughout this letter, this conflict was the issue in the background. The conflict between these two women was the primary threat to the kind of unity Paul described. In the back of the minds of the Philippians, when Paul exhorted them to "be of the same mind" in chapter 2, they're wondering: "What about Euodia and Syntyche?"

Now he goes ahead and addresses the conflict head-on. He calls out the elephant in the room which had been on everyone's mind. He puts all of his talk about unity into practice by begging these two women to come together.

The German philosopher Schopenhauer described what's known as the "hedgehog's dilemma." He compared the human race to a group of porcupines huddling together on a cold winter's night. He said,

*The colder it gets outside, the more we huddle together for warmth; but the closer we get to one another, the more we hurt one another with our sharp quills. And in the lonely night of earth's winter eventually we begin to drift apart and wander out on our own and freeze to death in our loneliness.*¹

Schopenhauer didn't account for the power of the Gospel or the love of Christ. Paul believes that it's possible, in Christ, to come together and stop hurting each other. But not alone. He enlists the help of someone he refers to as his "true companion."

People have debated the precise identity of this "true companion." It's hard to determine a specific person he is referring to. The strongest suggestion is that Paul uses this phrase to refer more generally to the community as a whole. He's inviting everyone into this process.

Euodia and Syntyche had a problem. But it wasn't exclusively their problem. It was affecting the community. Their conflict threatened the unity of the entire church. Because of that, it's the responsibility of the whole church to work on coming together. It may not be our fault, but it is most certainly our problem. When something threatens our unity, it's up to all of us to face it together. We have to face issues together.

Rob Barrett used to attend PBC. He taught our college ministry for a year when I was a student. He now works for an organization called The Colossian Forum dedicated to helping Christians talk through divisive issues. They have observed that sometimes when Christians start talking about specific issues together, they can tend to have a hard time talking about them in a Christ-like way. It's almost as if the weight of the issue seems to justify dismissive, rude, or angry interactions.

Paul asks these two women to "agree in the Lord." This is the same word that we've seen throughout the book of Philippians. It refers to thinking a certain way. But in chapter 2 we saw that it doesn't have so much to do

with the content of what you believe, but your attitude. The humility of Christ is the ultimate example of how we are to think.

Paul isn't suggesting these two women find common ground or come to the same conclusion. Other translations render this, "live harmoniously in the Lord." He is asking them to relate to each other, in the midst of their difference, in a Christ-like way. This is what it means to agree in the Lord. It's not arriving at the same conclusion; it's about treating each other like Christ. This is the path toward unity.

So here's the dangerous question to ask: What are the elephants in our room? You can apply these ideas to any of the various communities you are part of, but we need to apply it here at PBC in our church community as well.

Two of our biggest elephants are the issues of gender and politics. Remember, these aren't issues which divide us. They threaten to divide us. Our commitment to the Gospel of Christ and our deep conviction that nothing is better than knowing Christ in his weakness allows us to have a deep sense of unity even amidst our disagreements. But these — and there are probably others as well — are issues where there are real disagreements, and so they have the potential to drive us apart.

On the topic of gender, we know that different people come to different conclusions about what the Bible has to say about the various roles of men and women in marriage and church leadership. We have different convictions within the body, the staff, the deacons, and the elders. We don't agree on the issue. But we can agree in the Lord.

Our practice is that only men serve as elders at PBC. Men and women both serve in every other position of leadership at the church.

We recently spent a year digging through the Scriptures on the topic of gender at our elders meetings. We agreed on many things: men and women both have spiritual gifts; God created men and women with absolute equality; both men and women are called to servant leadership. But we didn't come to an agreement on how to interpret certain passages discussing the role of women leading in the church.

Our policy requires elders to agree unanimously on any major decisions. So without an agreement to change, we will continue our current practice unless the Spirit leads us to unanimity in a different direction.

This situation is difficult. The issues of justice and equality and faithfulness to the Scripture are significant. I know that some people at PBC are disappointed we didn't change. Others are upset that any change was even talked about. Paul isn't saying to brush off issues because they don't matter in the end. He's suggesting a deeper unity found only in Christ.

Another one of our elephants could be the current political atmosphere. Rob Barrett, from The Colossian Forum, recently started a poll on Facebook asking people whether their churches were populated with both what he called Trump Supporters and Trump Detractors and if so, how much people talked about those political issues. The most common answer by far was that congregations were mixed, but avoided talking about politics between groups.

That probably describes us. We have people who support our current political direction passionately and people who don't. Again, these are important issues. These are issues of justice and patriotism and character and national protection. All of those are important.

Is it possible to disagree on the conclusions, but agree in the Lord? How do we face these elephants? It sounds nice, but how do we live it? As the passage continues, Paul gives us more practical guidance.

Rejoice in the Lord

When people preach the book of Philippians, they often focus on the theme of joy. The idea shows up at least fifteen times in the letter. It might seem strange, but in the context of dealing with this conflict, that's where Paul goes next.

Philippians 4:4-7:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. 5 Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; 6 do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

I've just brought up several weighty issues where people have different opinions. Now we're supposed to rejoice in the Lord? What does that look like?

This is one of the most practical paragraphs in the entire book of Philippians. The Christian life is not about following a recipe. But Paul gives us very clear steps to follow that enable us to talk to each other in the midst of conflict.

Paul is teaching us to trade anxiety for joy by inviting God into our situation so that we can treat each other well. We trade our anxiety for joy through prayer. Once we've done that, we're able to treat each other well.

Most of what makes talking about divisive issues difficult is fear. Fear of our country going in the wrong direction. Fear of our church losing its way. Fear that people will be hurt. Fear that I will be hurt. Fear that we aren't representing the Gospel faithfully. We are so driven by fear and anxiety.

But Paul gives us a way to handle our anxiety: "in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God." We don't have to be afraid. We don't have to be anxious. We can turn it over to God.

When we do that, we have access to the peace of Christ that none of us can even begin to understand. And peace frees us up to rejoice. This is the spiritual process at work. Anxiety is given up in prayer which gives us peace so that we can rejoice.

The reason Paul reminds us of this process here, in the midst of conflict, is the phrase in the middle of the passage. All the other parts of this process have to do with you and Jesus. But this phrase talks about how you're able to relate differently to the people around you when you work through stuff with Jesus, Paul says, "Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is near."

It's a strange encouragement. If someone asked you what you wanted to be known for, I'm not sure many of us would say, "reasonableness." It sounds very bland. What's Paul like? Oh, he's pretty reasonable.

But the word being used here is far deeper than our English word. The definition from the standard Greek lexicon states: "not insisting on every right of letter of law or custom; yielding, gentle, kind, courteous, tolerant."

When we follow this kind of spiritual path: anxiety to prayer to peace to joy, this is what happens as we relate to other people. We become gentle, kind, tolerant.

We don't have to insist on every right of letter of law or custom. And why?

Because "the Lord is near." This phrase refers to two things simultaneously. First of all, Jesus is here. He has not left us alone to figure everything out. He is with us. His Spirit indwells all of us who believe. Secondly, Jesus is coming back. His return is imminent. It could happen any day.

Both of these points mean that I don't have to insist on anything because, at the end of the day, it isn't up to me. Jesus is here with us. He's returning soon. I can weigh in. I can offer what God has given me to contribute. But I don't have to fix everything. I can be gentle because the Lord is near.

This is one of the ways we deal with the elephants in the room. We do so gently. Be gentle.

I spoke once at a college group which was dealing with a lot of division over theological issues. There was a small group insisting on a particular viewpoint regarding Calvinism and making everyone else in the group feel inferior if they didn't agree. I spoke from 1 Timothy, and the title of my talk was "People are more important than ideas."

I thought I was pretty clear. I thought I made a good case. But as soon as I sat down, one of the group's leaders whispered to me, "I still don't get it—are you Calvinist or Arminian?"

You see, the issues are rarely the issue. I say this all the time when I provide marriage or pre-marital counseling. Whatever is causing the conflict is rarely the issue at hand. There's usually something deeper going on. And our highest calling is not to be right, but to love sacrificially.

I am preaching to myself right now. I need to hear this, learn this, remember this in my marriage, in my relationships with other staff at the church, and with my family. I need to follow this pattern so that I can be gentle.

On the PBC Facebook group page, I asked on Monday what are some strategies for talking about divisive issues. People had many great suggestions: listening, understanding the other person's world view, avoiding personal arguments, humility, and empathy. All of these things are enabled by our relationship with Jesus.

One person put it this way: "my faith in Jesus and the Word of God shape not only my world view but my interactions with and responses to people and situations."

This is being gentle. We can't do it on our own. It only happens in relationship with Christ.

Focus on the good

Paul finishes this passage with a description of the over-arching attitude we are supposed to have.

Philippians 4:8-9:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9 What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

These are lofty words, but it isn't immediately apparent to us that Paul is addressing specific cultural issues of his day. The words for "excellence" and "worthy of praise" are keywords in the Greco-Roman standards of conduct. They were especially popular for a school of philosophy called Stoicism. Paul is referring to the dominant philosophical system of the Roman world.

The fact that he is asking this church to recognize the good parts of Greco-Roman philosophy is remarkable. Paul spends a lot of time in other places arguing against some of the ideas of Stoicism. It was not a Christian world view. This is the culture persecuting them and throwing them into prison.

But Paul says that we can look at the anti-God world view of the culture around us and find something worthwhile. We can see aspects which align with the character of God, parts of the culture which celebrate beauty, and examples of sacrificial behavior even in people far from God.

This is a helpful way for us to approach culture. There is beauty and truth and honor and purity and justice all around us. We can appreciate those aspects of our culture. Just because something didn't come from Christians doesn't mean there are none of God's fingerprints on it.

In the context of dealing with conflict, this idea is especially powerful. If there is truth and honor and purity even in Stoicism, how much more can we find it in each other?

When we look at these issues that divide us, it is very tempting to focus on the differences. We want to insist on our way. We want to find all those ways in which we are different. But what about those ways in which we are the same?

When I'm able to listen to you, I might realize that I share the passions which drive you to think so differently from me. Underneath many of the issues which we care about deeply are similar values. We want to be faithful to the Bible; we want to care about people; we want to stand up for truth; we want to represent God's character accurately; we want the purposes of the Gospel to be served.

Can we look for that in each other? Can we think about these things? Can we focus on the good?

This doesn't mean we don't talk about our differences. It doesn't mean we don't work through the conflict. It means that as we do, we remember that if we share faith in Christ, then we are on the same team. We have far more in common than we possibly have different.

Perhaps our agenda, whatever it might be, isn't as important as finding our common identity in Christ. Let me re-read from chapter 3:8:

I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.

If you put your politics or your theology or your commitment to the Bible or your passion for justice above knowing Christ, you have made a mistake. These are important issues, but nothing compares to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ. Nothing.

I have strong opinions about some of these areas. I pray regularly for God to be at work in specific directions within our church and the world. I am not suggesting that we lay these concerns aside or merely agree to disagree. Instead, we talk about them. We study them. We advocate for our positions.

But if we start to think that convincing others of our opinions is more important than knowing Christ, we

have lost our way. If we begin to believe that the change we want to happen or the change we desperately don't want to see happen is more important than knowing Christ, we have strayed from the Gospel.

In the middle of a conflict, it always seems like there are only two options. I'm right, and you're wrong, or you're right, and I'm wrong. But the Lord is near! And he gives us that third path. We can know Christ Jesus in our disagreement. It's not an easy road, but it is a compelling testimony to the truth of the Gospel when we can walk it faithfully.

Focus on the good. Be about each other. Don't lose sight of knowing Christ.

Conclusion

Those two women living in my college dorm didn't want anything to do with our community. They gave everyone false names as a way of saying that they weren't really there. And that issue divided our house community. It kept us apart.

We know each other's real names. Not only that, if we are followers of Christ, then we share a common identity at the deepest core of our being. Whatever else may be true of us, whatever positions or opinions or interpretations or political leanings we may hold, our common name is "child of God," "redeemed sinner," and "beloved of Christ."

Facing the elephant in the room is complicated and dangerous. If you feel like we haven't done anything this morning, that's because we haven't. We've seen the apostle Paul begging his community to follow a process that allows them to find unity in Christ over everything else.

But that process is only useful if it is followed. The elephants in our room aren't addressed by a sermon. They're addressed when we come together in Christ to understand each other, listen to each other, and be humble before one another.

What are the elephants in your room? What are the issues you're afraid of? Are there ways you might be mistreating people for the sake of something you deeply believe in?

Can you come together with people and agree in the Lord? Can you walk beside others as their true companion, helping them to find unity? In the midst of fault lines which threaten to break apart our families, our communities, and our church, can we value knowing Christ above everything else?

Only the power of Christ can lead us into unity. Only in Christ can we be one. I'll close with a prayer asking God to work in our lives. This is a prayer for unity written by Rachel Wojo, blogger and author of *One More Step: Finding Strength When You Feel Like Giving Up*.

Prayer for Unity:

Dear Father,

*Just as it was when Jesus made his home on earth,
The world can be a hateful and cruel place.*

We ask that you would guide our actions as believers.

Give us an eagerness to be humble and gentle.

Help us have hearts of patience and forbearance.

Thank You for the hope we have in You;

May Your hope unify our thoughts and decisions

And invoke peace through the Spirit.

*Amen*²

Endnotes

¹ "Porcupines," Bible.org, accessed June 2018. <https://bible.org/illustration/porcupines>

² Rachel Wojo, "A Prayer for Unity," *DaySpring*, November 14, 2017. <https://www.dayspring.com/articles/a-prayer-for-unity>