

Opening Words: We are engaged in a great spiritual contest for the glory of the Lord in the world, and we must not let individual achievements or fame overshadow what can only be done when we are united for the faith of the gospel.

18 Phil Striving Together for the Faith

To think on what life is about – to live is Christ. To think about having purpose for living – bearing fruit for eternity. To think about what would happen when this life is over – to die is gain. These are the remarkable statements made by the Apostle Paul to the church in Philippi. How they must have motivated Paul when he wrote them. How they must have motivated the church in Philippi when they read them. And now they can motivate us.

After Paul wrote his classic words in Philippians 1:21-26, he then gave this stirring exhortation.

²⁷ 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.

There he was in prison, hard-pressed between a desire to depart and be with Christ and a desire to remain on earth in fruitful service. He believed that God would open the prison doors for him to walk out. He believed this because he knew the church was praying fervently for him. He knew that God would abundantly provide the Spirit. But regardless of how things ultimately turned out for him, he had some important words to share with the church. He wanted them to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel. He wanted them to stand firm in one spirit and mind. He wanted them to strive together for the faith of the gospel.”

Let me unpack this challenging verse for you today. Paul uses many images and pulls concepts from many areas of life to exhort the church.

First he says he wants them to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of Christ. The Greek word for **conduct** is a word that means to live as a citizen of a country. This would be especially meaningful the people of Philippi because of their history.

Philippi was the scene of a major battle in the year 42 BC where the forces of Octavian and Antony defeated the forces of Cassius and Brutus. This battle, once and for all determined that the Roman Republic would give way to the Roman empire. Philippi prospered under Rome and was granted legal status as an Italian city. There were no land taxes or tolls levied against the citizens of Philippi as they were all granted full Roman citizenship. The laws and judicial system were Roman and even the main language of Philippi was Latin instead of Greek. The people were proud of their heritage and they would be especially careful to maintain order and to live as good citizens.

But now these followers of Jesus were citizens of another kingdom and Paul was drawing on their exemplary Roman citizenship and their privileges to illustrate the kind of exemplary behavior they must show for another kingdom, the kingdom of God. And so Paul says, “Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ.”

This was a common exhortation he gave to churches.

In Ephesians 4:1 he said, “Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called.”

In 1 Thessalonians 2:12 he exhorts the believers to “walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.”

In Colossians 1:9-10 he prayed, “For this reason also, since the day we heard *of it*, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please *Him* in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;

We are to walk worthy of the Lord, of our calling, and of the Gospel. The word worthy has the idea of weightiness and it gives the picture of a balance or scales. On one side is the Lord, his good news, and his calling us into his kingdom. On the other side is our conduct, our behavior, and our lives. God’s goal is that our conduct would balance the scales, that it would be equal to our calling, the worthiness of the gospel, and the character of Christ. That is a challenge! Yet, the same abundant Spirit that Paul experienced was available to the Philippian Christians and he is available to us to live worthy, or equal to such a high calling.

The next picture Paul gives us is that of an athlete. He says that with one spirit and one mind we are to strive together for the faith of the gospel. The Greek for *strive together* is *athleo*. You can hear the word athlete in it. Paul is drawing imagery from the athletic competitions of his day and saying that we who follow Christ are in a struggle just like athletes. As I prepare this, the 2016 summer Olympics are just around the corner. We will see individual athletes strive for a gold medal. We will see teams strive for the great reward.

In the same way, the church is to strive together in this great spiritual contest for the faith of the gospel. What does Paul have in mind here? First, he wants to make sure the church is working toward the same goal of maintaining the purity of the Gospel message. It is so easy to compromise. It is so easy to allow others to reduce Christianity to just one more humanistic message of “let’s be good and kind to one another and accept what everyone else believes” as opposed to proclaiming the uniqueness of Jesus and his lordship over all.

We live in a culture in the United States where tolerance of anything and everything is the rule. And to pray in the name of Jesus, or to say something is a sin is well, not tolerated. But we need to unite with one another and strive to maintain the clear message of the Gospel. And of course, we must do this

with kindness and humility not condemning others because we too are sinners, but we must strive for the faith of the gospel.

Listen to these words from 1 Timothy 4:1. *But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons.* Paul would go on to commend Timothy for pointing this out to the churches so that they would remain protected from heresy and remain strong in the faith.

Jude 1:3 says, *Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.*

Paul does something interesting with the word, *athleo*. He adds the little word “with” to it. Notice that it doesn’t just say they are to strive for the faith of the gospel but they are to strive together for the faith of the gospel. Sixteen times in this short letter Paul uses this little word “with” because he is gently working on that problem in the church where some of the members were not getting along with each other.

He will talk about this more in 2:1-4 and he will name two names in chapter 4 and encourage these noble women who had a dispute to get along with one another. But here he more generally addresses the problem in the church by telling them to unite as a team of athletes and to strive as in a great competition for the faith of the gospel.

I’m sure many of us have seen talented sports teams lose to less talented ones all because of the lack of teamwork. And often that happens because of egos on the teams where some players want to have the ball more and want to be noticed by others. They put their reputation above the need to win the game. Back in the 1960s there were two very talented basketball players by the names of Wilt Chamberlain and Bill Russell. Chamberlain was the most dominant player of his era. One night he scored 100 points in a game. On another night he pulled down 50 rebounds. He would regularly lead the league in the categories of scoring and rebounding. But his team would not win the championship. That would always go to Bill Russell and the Boston Celtics because they played together as a team. Chamberlain would win the individual honors but Russell and his teammates would win the championships.

We are engaged in a great spiritual contest for the glory of the Lord in the world, and we must not let individual achievements or fame overshadow what can only be done when we are united for the faith of the gospel. Together, we can always accomplish more than what we can do alone. And so Paul says *live out your lives as good citizens of the kingdom of God in a manner worthy of and equal to 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 like a good team for the faith of the gospel.*

We want to do this to bring honor to the Lord. We want to do this to win people to Christ, but we also want to do this because of what Paul says in the opening words of the next verse: in no way alarmed by *your* opponents.

Brothers and sisters – we have opponents. We have enemies. There are forces in the world that are vehemently opposed to Christianity. Sometimes their opposition comes in the form of ridicule. Sometimes it comes in the form of not allowing students to speak up for Jesus in a classroom. Sometimes it comes in the form of persecution. The church in Philippi experienced it. It started with persecution when Paul was thrown in jail, and now ten years later, the church was still experiencing it while Paul was in prison in Rome for the Gospel. But Paul tells the church not to be alarmed.

Yes, times can get tough, but we will prevail in the name of Christ and we will especially prevail as we unite with one another for the faith of the Gospel and conduct ourselves in an honorable way for the glory of the Lord.