

Intro

Threats to our unity come in various forms. There's external pressure. Values around us are changing rapidly. We're pressured to conform. We're tempted to give in. Fears abound. What will happen if I don't conform? What will become of my relationships? What will happen to my income? But when gospel convictions are surrendered, division emerges. We're no longer of one mind.

There's also an internal threat: selfishness. Maybe it's self-seeking. Maybe it's an inflated ego. Maybe it's individual agendas that blind us to the needs of our brothers and sisters. What happens when the local church is composed of individuals with separate agendas? We work against each other. We're not of one mind.

Paul presents a better way: Better is a united front in battle. Better is a community that cares for one another. Better is a community united in the gospel. This morning Paul tells us:

BIG IDEA: Strive together for gospel advance

READ PASSAGE

PRAY

Body

Passage Focus/Book Setting

Paul is likely writing from a Roman prison to believers he's familiar with. He's concerned about division in the church.

Point 1: Strive together by embracing persecution (1:27-30)

Explanation

Paul begins with a command: "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ." The rest of the passage will flesh out what worthy means: **embracing persecution, repenting of selfish ambition, and putting others above ourselves**. Paul wants to hear:

- 1) "you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel"
- 2) [they are] "not frightened in anything by your opponents"

Standing firm means not backing down, holding our position. Like soldiers in battle. They hold their ground to maintain the line so the enemy can't break through. Despite the threat.

Striving side by side means working together with someone in a struggle where opposition exists. Like protestors against racism and police brutality are doing right now. NBA players and coaches from competing teams kneeling together with arms linked refusing to stand for the anthem. They are working together against a common foe (racism) and they are not backing down.

So it should be with the local church. When opposition comes, we hold our ground. We link arms. We respond with courageous unity. Why? "For the faith of the gospel." The message that our sins can be forgiven through faith in Jesus. The message that reveals sinners can be changed by the Holy Spirit. The one

mind is our attitude towards the gospel. We long for Christ to be worshipped and for sinners to be saved. The gospel is the bond that unites us.

The flip side is that fear is a real threat to gospel advance. By gospel advance I mean numerically (new disciples) and spiritually (greater Christlikeness). In Acts 16, when Paul was in Philippi, he was seized and dragged into the marketplace. Then he was publicly stripped of his garments and beaten with rods. Then he was imprisoned. The Philippians are engaged in the same conflict (1:30). Gospel opposition endures.

What's interesting is Paul's counsel. Paul doesn't suggest strategies to minimize persecution. Paul counsels a right perspective.

- 1) When believers stand firm, locking arms in the face of persecution, this is a sign to their opponents that their eternal ruin is certain

The sign is Christians not cowering when bullied. Like when local churches take an unpopular moral stand. When we won't give in. When we won't embrace sin. No matter the narrative. No matter the insults. No matter the threats. We can do it graciously. We don't have to be vengeful. We don't have to be abrasive. We can articulate our views well. We can appeal to reason. We can be kind in the process. But when we won't back down we are a sign to their rebellion against God. And their destruction. Some might turn to Christ because of our graciousness and refusal to give in.

- 2) Standing firm and locking arms is a sign to one another that our future deliverance by Christ is sure

Paul explains:

Philippians 1:29 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

God has graciously granted us faith. The world dwells in darkness. Satan has blinded the minds of unbelievers by ushering in the fall, keeping "them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ (2 Cor 4:4)." We were once dead in our sins, blind to the glories of Christ, yet God shined light "in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:6)." God removed our blindness, he gave us sight, that Christ might have a people to worship him for all eternity.

Like God has granted us faith, he's granted us the privilege of suffering for Christ. When persecution comes, it's a sign that we're God's children. Suffering because of allegiance to Christ means we belong to Christ. It's also a sign that we're faithful to God. And we know that God rewards faithfulness.

Application

Here we see the root of Christian unity: the gospel. What bonds us together isn't our age, our skin color, our educational level, our economic status, our music preference, our hobbies. We're bonded by our passion for the gospel. This is what unites us. Because our purpose is advancing the gospel, both in making new disciples and in our own growth in Christlikeness, we stand with one another, locking arms, when opposition threatens.

A word of caution. This isn't saying we need perfect uniformity. This isn't saying our convictions must perfectly line up. We don't need to be unanimous on mask wearing. Next week we'll see that NT churches were populated by people with different convictions. This isn't saying we need interpret every Bible passage exactly the same. Yes, this church has a doctrinal statement that its members hold to. But there are numerous doctrines not covered in our constitution. For example, end times, spiritual gifts, etc. Common purpose is the idea, not total agreement on every minute point.

Let's respond to cultural pressures with courageous unity in the gospel that saved us. Let's hold our ground. Let's lock arms. Future victory is sure. God wins. We're uniting in a cause (the gospel) that is sure to triumph. The antidote to fear is trust in the gospel.

Point 2: Strive together by repenting of selfish ambition (2:1-4)

Explanation

“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy”

Paul appeals to their common experience in Christ. He's saying, “are you encouraged in Christ?” Ponder the fact that in Christ we're declared righteous and not guilty. That we have a Savior who is interceding for us. Are we not comforted by Christ's love for us? Are we not encouraged by the fact that the Holy Spirit is working in our hearts to replace sin with love? Is there any affection and sympathy among us? Having experienced Christ's love and mercy, is there not love and compassion among us? Since these qualities should be present, Paul says: love one another, live in harmony, be in agreement. After all, we share a common mission.

But there's an internal threat to gospel advance:

Selfish ambition: self-seeking; everything is just for themselves

Conceit: inflated opinion of oneself; vanity (= self-absorbed)

The common denominator is concern for only ourselves. Others don't exist. All that matters is getting what I want. People become obstacles in the way of our desires. There's no love, no compassion. Only I want. The implication is clear: selfishness hinders our gospel mission. We won't stand our ground together, we won't lock arms when selfishness reigns.

Application

There's a principle here: reflection on our experience in Christ should foster concern for each other. Consider what Christ has done for you, and consider how you can love others in the body. Has Jesus encouraged you? Maybe it's the promise of reward in heaven when we stand firm under persecution. Encourage your brothers and sisters. Have you been comforted by Jesus' love? Maybe it's his death for your sins. Maybe it's his commitment to never leave you or forsake. Comfort your brothers and sisters with acts of love. Have you experienced the work of the Spirit in your life? Has God given you victory over a particular sin? Have you seen God change your character? Encourage your brothers and sisters in their battle against sin. Have you experienced affection and sympathy in the local church? Have believers wept with you in times of grief? Have believers rejoiced with you in times of blessing? Learn from their example. Is this a struggle? We can set up discipleship to help you process life in a Christlike manner.

When our own preferences are more precious to us than love and unity and gospel advance, it's time to repent.

Point 3: Strive together by putting others above ourselves (2:5-11)

Explanation

In 2:5-11 we have one of the most descriptive passages about Jesus in the Bible. But why does Paul go on about Jesus' incarnation and death? To illustrate how we ought to look out for the interests of others.

“Have this mind” is a command. Paul is saying, “Instead of doing everything for yourselves, have the attitude of Jesus.”

Jesus was in the form of God. As God the Son, he existed from all eternity with the divine nature. Prior to the cross, Jesus prayed this:

John 17:5 And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.

Before creation existed, Jesus, God the Son, dwelt with the Father in divine glory. Although he was divine, Jesus didn't count his deity as something to be grasped. He didn't hold tightly to his exalted status. He didn't cling to his divine rights.

Not grasping for his own advantage, Jesus emptied himself by taking on human flesh. It wasn't that he emptied himself by giving up his divine attributes. No, it was emptying by addition (taking on human flesh), not subtraction (giving up the divine nature). He emptied himself by becoming a servant: he gave up his divine rights and became a human subject to fatigue, sickness, hunger, pain, and death.

He also humbled himself by obeying the Father's will:

John 6:38 For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.

This included dying on the cross. Let's recap Jesus' humility on the cross:

- 1) The Son of God was charged as a blasphemer by those he created
- 2) The Son of God was spit on
- 3) The Son of God was struck with fists
- 4) The Son of God was slapped
- 5) The Son of God was mocked verbally
- 6) The Son of God was publicly rejected by the Jews in favor of a man who committed insurrection and murder
- 7) The Son of God was scourged

David Turner writes:

“Flogging [scourging] was a horrible, flesh-ripping experience that hastened the death of those about to be crucified. The victim was tied to a post or forced to the ground. The scourge was a short whip that had several leather thongs with lead balls and sharp pieces of bone or metal attached to them...Such horrendous punishment would cause deep lacerations of the back, severe pain, and loss of blood.”

- 8) The Son of God was stripped
- 9) The Son of God was tortured by a crown of thorns
- 10) The Son of God was struck on the head with a reed (a heavy piece of plant stalk, maybe bamboo?)
- 11) The Son of God was crucified

David Turner writes:

“The Romans used it in the case of slaves, notorious criminals, and insurrectionists to make a political statement. Crucifixion asserted the dominion of Rome over conquered peoples by making a gruesome example of anyone who dared to upset the pax Romana...Long nails were frequently driven through the victim's ankles into the vertical post of the cross and through the victim's outstretched hands or wrists into the horizontal beam. The medical cause(s) of death by crucifixion would be asphyxia, loss of blood, dehydration, and/or shock. Victims would suffer an agonizingly slow death, since no vital organs were

directly injured. Eventually they would have difficulty supporting their own weight with their legs. Breathing would become increasingly difficult from hanging by the arms. The gruesome process could take days.”

12) The Son of God was subjected to the Father’s wrath

Isaiah 53:4-6 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

13) The Son of God was abandoned by the Father

This doesn’t make sense. The one through whom all things were created, the one in whom all things are held together, and the one for whom all things were created (Col 1:16-17) took on human flesh and subjected himself to all the physical and emotional suffering we experience. The one who will return to judge the world subjected himself to the judgment of his creatures. The one who dwelled in glory with the Father subjected himself to public mockery and defeat. The one who did no wrong took the Father’s wrath for our sins. This should baffle us. It shouldn’t make sense. Like we think it makes no sense to give up our freedoms for the good of our brothers and sisters. But Paul says give up your self-seeking for your brother’s good. Like Jesus did for us.

Jesus will be vindicated. Because Jesus willingly chose the role of suffering servant, God highly exalted him. Jesus will return and one day every knee (“in heaven and on earth and under the earth”) will bow before him and declare that he is Lord, to the Father’s glory. At the final judgment everyone will bow before Jesus, whether willingly or in submission. Some will bow as Jesus says, “Well done, good and faithful servant...Enter into the joy of your master (Matt 25:21).” Others will bow as Jesus says, “I never knew you; depart from me, you worker [s] of lawlessness.”

To Unbelievers

A common question is, why suffering? Have you ever asked yourself, why the cross? Isn’t it confusing that the ruler of creation came to die at the hands of his creatures? This should puzzle you. Why the cross? Because God is holy, just, and merciful. God desired to pardon sinners, but he’s just, so he can’t forgive us unless his wrath against our sin is satisfied. On the cross, the Father treated the Son as if he’d lived our life. If we believe, the Father treats us as if we’ve lived Jesus’ life. Jesus had to become a man and die because there needed to be a worthy substitute to take the punishment we deserve. If we were to be saved, Jesus had to die.

Application

The point is simple: follow Jesus’ example. He veiled his divine glory by taking on human flesh. He suffered for our sins. Give up your rights for the good of your brothers and sisters. The gospel advances when our love increases.

Another thing stands out: Jesus took the initiative. We didn’t approach him. He wasn’t under obligation. From heaven he came and died for us of his own volition. Likewise, we shouldn’t wait until we’re asked. Be on the look out for ways you can bless your brothers and sisters in Christ (e.g., discouraged, overwhelmed, suffering financially, suffering physically, needing wisdom). When we seek the interests of others, we’re sure to create unity.

Is selfishness standing in the way of our gospel unity? Are we more concerned about our own rights than loving one another? Are we more concerned about our own rights than gospel advance? It's a matter of priorities. Are we seeking the kingdom first? Paul says desire love and unity and gospel advance. Paul calls us to examine ourselves.

On masks. We're not endorsing a political party. We're not trying to shame those not wearing masks. I haven't been wearing one. We're not saying you have to believe mask-wearing is right. We're saying look out for the interests of others. Those at risk. Some among us would feel safer if we wore masks. Seeking their interest, feeling safe attending, is one way we can act in love. Let's do what we can to make others comfortable in worshipping with us physically. This could go on for a while.

Beware of competing agendas that turn our focus away from the gospel. The antidote to selfishness is meditating on Jesus' example and following him in the strength he supplies. Going against selfishness isn't natural for us. We need God's help.

Conclusion

Strive together for gospel advance. Numerically and spiritually. Stand firm and link arms in a united front. But we face obstacles don't we? One obstacle is external. So **strive together by embracing persecution.** Standing firm under persecution is a sign that we'll be delivered by Jesus when he returns. Another obstacle is internal. **Strive together by repenting of selfish ambition.** Consider the encouragement you've received in Christ. Turn from self-centered interests. **Strive together by putting others above ourselves.** Follow Jesus' example. Take initiative. Care for your brothers and sisters.