

Staying the Course

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[0 : 00] I'm going to be looking at this passage from Philippians, chapter 1, verse 27, to do 4, on page 185 of your few Bibles, if you would like to turn there.

It's a great passage from St. Paul. I want to begin by asking you a question. Are you a confident Christian? Because as I go around meeting people and talking to people, I've noticed that sometimes people lack confidence.

They lack confidence in the church and its mission. And sometimes they lack confidence in their own faith. Are you a confident Christian?

Some people lack confidence in the institution we know of as the church. By that, I don't mean just the Anglican church. I mean the church. And, you know, they don't see the church effectively changing the world, reaching out and touching the lives of the majority of people here.

And we think, what's that all for? Why are we doing this? And can become discouraging. Other people become discouraged about their own faith. About their own Christian lives.

[1 : 09] Some people, because no matter how hard you try, the whole Christian thing doesn't spark to life for you. Or maybe you've been a Christian for many years and yet you still struggle.

Your life hasn't worked out as you thought it might. And you get discouraged. Do you think, what's it all for? What's this Christian thing all about? Well, that's very understandable.

To get discouraged. Discouraged about the institution of the church. And get discouraged in your own Christian life. Sometimes I wonder myself, why on earth I agreed to get ordained?

Because I think there must have been easier ways to make a living than this. It feels a bit like spooning back the tide with a fork sometimes. But, you know, if you look at Paul's letter to the Philippians.

These words he has for us today. You will see some words of advice and encouragement. And there are two things in particular I want to give you today. The first is he tells us we must stand firm.

[2 : 10] And the second is that we must be of one mind. And of course he's talking to a Christian community, to a church. So he's speaking to all of them as a body. And yet what he says for them to do, we must all do.

Ourselves and yet together. But what he says will not make any sense to you. If you do not first of all take on board one important thing. And it is this.

Jesus Christ. The person of Jesus Christ. He is a living reality. Who exists quite independently from our own imaginations.

We did not think him up. The church did not dream him up. He revealed himself to us. He is alive. He is the Lord of the church.

He wants to be the Lord of you and me. Jesus is a person. Jesus is the divine son of God. And because he is real.

[3 : 10] Then Paul's words to us today are true. And what he calls us to do is something that will give us all a foundation in our lives. A foundation that will strengthen us against encouragement.

Discouragement. And keep us on our Christian lives and ministries. Will you turn with me to verse 27 of chapter 1. Paul tells us to stand firm.

He writes, And this is God's doing.

So now you see here that in telling them to stand firm. Paul is urging the Philippian Christians to stand. Stand in one spirit.

And that means three things. First, they must live their lives worthy of the gospel. Second, they must continue to work together for the gospel.

[4 : 32] And third, they must do so. Even in the face of opposition and persecution. We don't exactly know what kind of opposition and persecution the Philippians were facing.

One thing that the text suggests, if you look in chapter 3, is there is pressure about going back to some of the Old Testament Jewish practices. When, of course, they had been made free in Jesus Christ.

But also, you know, they were out there with Paul ministering for the gospel. And so they were suffering from opposition and hostility for that. And Paul is telling them that they must stand firm in Christ.

And that this needs to be evident in their conduct, in their pursuit of ministry, and in the way they handle opposition. His words to them are literally, Live out your citizenship in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

For we are all ministers of citizens of heaven. We belong to the kingdom of God. We are saved. We are under the authority of Jesus Christ.

[5 : 43] And so if you have a faith that is genuine, if you have a relationship with the person of Jesus Christ, then that needs to be reflected in how you conduct yourselves, how you do your ministry, and how you deal with hostility to the faith, hostility to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And you see, we can be confident. Are you confident, not necessarily in the church, but in Jesus Christ? Are you confident about the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ?

Because you see, our ability to stand firm in the faith comes from being confident, not in a strategy or a way of doing ministry, but in the person of Jesus Christ.

And that confidence comes when you have, when we all have, strong, loving relationships with our Lord Jesus Christ. And that is something everyone here needs to cultivate first and foremost.

Make your relationship with Jesus Christ the first agenda in your life. Because when you get that in its right place, everything else in your life will take its right perspective.

[7 : 04] Now, as I said, the Philippian Christians were going out there, they're doing ministry for Jesus Christ, and they are facing hostility and persecution, and they are under pressure.

They are under pressure because of their ministry for the gospel of our Lord. And, you know, I think a lot of Christians today, nothing really changes, are under pressure.

We are under pressure to compromise the faith, to compromise what the Bible says about Jesus Christ, to compromise what the Bible says about how we should live our lives.

And when we come under that pressure, when the church comes under that pressure, I think that the church, there's a tendency for churches to make one of two mistakes. We can either retreat from society, or we can bow down before it.

By that I mean we can become hostile. We can put the shutters up and adopt a hostile posture towards the dominant culture all around us, towards those who are hostile to us and critical of us.

[8 : 09] And so instead of engaging with the chaos and the emptiness of the people around us in this beautiful city in which we live, we put the shutters up.

And what we end up doing is taking our Bibles and holding them as a kind of barrier against everybody else. Or we bow down to society.

In that case, in our desire to reach out and affirm society and to neutralize any offense the Christian message might cause to individuals or interest groups, we abandon any part of the Christian tradition, no matter how ancient or biblical, we re-examine everything in the light of the prevailing morals and beliefs.

And so we make changes and accommodations. But the result then is a church that has taken its Bible and submitted it to society. And so a church then has no authority to speak to society because we have abandoned our truth.

But you see, both of these postures come from people who lack confidence in the Gospel, who lack confidence in our Lord Jesus Christ. And so other agendas come to the fore.

[9 : 22] But we don't need to be threatened. Even when we are criticized for what we believe, we don't have to worry because the strength of this church is not from our ministries or our position or our wealth or our numbers.

No, it comes from the commitment of everyone here to our Lord Jesus Christ. And the kind of certainty you may be looking for in your life comes from your commitment to the person of Jesus Christ.

So we don't need to be threatened when people disagree with us. We do not need to be discouraged when our lives seem to sail into troubled time. We can be confident and carry out our ministries with confidence, standing firm in the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us stand firm in the ministry He has given us. But second, we need to be united in Christ. If you could read with me from chapter 2, verse 1.

Paul writes, If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete.

[10 : 39] Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. I heard a preacher one time say that it doesn't matter what we are in this, where you can be Presbyterian or Baptist or Anglican or Catholic, when we go to heaven, we will all be united.

Well, we'll have to see about that. But you see, what is the one fundamental thing around which all churches around which we as a congregation must unite?

What is the one indispensable thing? Many churches I have been to unite around their identity. You get Catholic churches or social justice churches, liturgical churches, musical churches, society churches, churches that are warm communities.

And really, all that is is about creating an identity that will be attractive to a certain slice of the population. It's a strategy for trying to keep a church afloat.

But is our identity the ground of our unity as Christians here? You know, the one thing that I've learned over the years is that it is notoriously difficult to get a whole room of people to agree on anything.

[12 : 01] We have wonderful staff meetings in this church which I enjoy. I do enjoy them very much. I really do. And you know, sometimes in those meetings we thrash out our issues of ministry.

How should we organize our work? What should we do? What should our priorities be? And that's very important. We need to do that. We need to talk out our differences and our opinions as a church.

We need to hear as many voices as possible. Everyone has a unique contribution to make to this church. And you should make that contribution.

But what is the one thing that should unite us all? The one thing without question upon which we should agree. Perhaps I should say more specifically, who is the one person around whom we should all unite.

Well, of course, it's Jesus Christ. Not an ideology, not a strategy, a person, our Lord Jesus Christ. Notice Paul's words here.

[13 : 12] He says this, if there is any encouragement in Christ, be of the same mind. Do you see how crucial that is? Paul is appealing to their unity as people saved by Christ.

We are people who live our lives in Christ. That is our status. We are in Christ. It's almost an ontological statement. This is our being.

This is who we are. We are in Christ. Every one of us. And so what Paul is saying to them is this, whatever else you may disagree on, you must be completely united around the person of Jesus Christ.

You have all been saved by Jesus Christ. You are all children of Jesus Christ. Jesus is your Lord. Jesus is Lord of the Church.

And that means there cannot be fundamental disagreement between those who have been saved by the same risen Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus needs to be the focal point of unity for all of us.

[14 : 28] But not some kind of empty unity. It is a unity that comes from knowing Jesus as Lord. From submitting to Jesus as Lord. From being part of one church of which Jesus is Lord.

Lord. Do you know, there can arise in congregations and churches a kind of willful disagreeableness. When I was in my last parish, we had a wonderful retired warden, Colonel John Gunn, who was 80 years old.

And he'd seen off many a vicar in his time. And I said to him, John, you must have seen many changes over the years. And he said, yes, and I opposed every one of them.

Well, he was standing firm. He was a really, I must say, he was a great man who I really liked and loved working with. But you know, people can get disagreeable.

They can complain about the services or the music or the sermons or the pastoral care. People form factions and opposition groups opposing the leadership. Now, Paul is not telling us that we should suppress our opinions and toe the line.

[15 : 39] He's not telling us that at all. We are a family and we need to act like one. Sometimes that may involve a certain amount of discussing and shouting. But can you see that any points of disagreement between us pale into insignificance compared to our relationship with Jesus Christ?

We need to find our common ground in our relationships with Jesus Christ. And when you have that common ground, there you have the most wonderful basis for unity and sharing of our lives together.

But you see, it is a matter of order. We are first of all disciples of Jesus Christ. The church is first of all under the authority of Jesus Christ.

And when we have that sorted out and established, then everything else follows in its right place. the agenda for the church's mission, the preaching roster, the liturgy, the music, everything.

And the problem for unity in the church comes when Jesus is knocked out of his rightful place as Lord. Because if I come along with my personal agenda and try to impose that upon the church, see, that threatens unity.

[16 : 59] If at the same time we are trying to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Christ. Because there is no unity apart from Jesus Christ. There is no agenda apart from Jesus Christ.

There is no church apart from Jesus Christ. And so you see, when you get groups of Christians, some of whom may want to pursue an agenda which reflects submission to Jesus Christ and the biblical standards of our lives, there may be others who want to pursue an agenda that is dictated by the world and society, then it's difficult to see where the unity there can be unless we all agree that we will submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

And you see, passionate about Jesus as he was, Paul can see no basis for division amongst people who are all committed to Jesus.

We are all in Christ. Christ. We must therefore be of one mind. We must be united under the authority of Jesus Christ.

Stand firm in one spirit and be of one mind. Don't be discouraged about the church. Don't be discouraged in your Christian life.

[18 : 24] You know, none of this would make any difference to our lives or to our church if Jesus Christ was not Lord, but he is. Jesus needs to be the center of everything we do.

We must, as a church and as Christians, stand firm in our faith, knowing that we follow and serve the Lord Jesus Christ. We must stand united around the person who is Jesus Christ.

And from there, get our confidence to serve even in the face of hostility. For Jesus is our mighty Savior. He is our Lord.

He has authority over the church. He is powerful. He is the Lord Jesus Christ. We need nothing more than to stand united around our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

For he who is powerful will never let us down. I thank you. You meiner God were to meinem you to ever