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# STANDING FIRM IN THE LORD

## Philippians 4:1-9

Mark Henderson

When I think of Philippians, passages such as “have this mind in you which is also in Christ Jesus,” “I’m being poured out like a drink offering,” and “for me, living is Christ and dying is gain,” come to mind. I don’t readily call to mind “I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche.” Furthermore, I sometimes have a tendency—and maybe you do, too—to read those great passages about Jesus in Philippians with a sort of detached sentimentality. When we do that, the words may thrill us emotionally at some level, but they never reach into the details of our lives and the difficult work of living in relationships with other people.

But as I go beyond the first glance at the verses of Philippians 4:1-9, I quickly become convinced that this passage is a lab assignment in applied Christology. These matters of day-to-day living and relationships are where all of the wonderful things we say we believe about Jesus really get put to the test. Verse 1 of chapter 4 is a transitional verse that serves as the starting point for our text today. Paul says, “*Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, this is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!*”

Now, I learned several years ago that when I am reading Paul and I come across a “therefore,” I need to ask what it’s there for. In a broad sense, I think this therefore points back to everything Paul has told the Philippians about Jesus in this letter. More immediately, it reaches back to chapter 3, verses 20–21: “*Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to*

*bring everything under control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.*”

Because of what Christ has done for us and because of what he promises to do for us in the future, our present circumstances, no matter how difficult they may be, don’t define who we are and they don’t have the last word in our lives; Jesus does. So Paul is saying, “Now that we’ve got that reality settled, I want you to live like you really believe it. I want you to demonstrate your citizenship by standing firm in the Lord.”

### **First—Stand Firm against Disunity**

Then in verses 2–9, Paul tells them *how* he wants them to stand firm. First, he appeals to them to stand firm against disunity.

*I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.*

We don’t know anything about Euodia and Syntyche beyond what is presented in these verses, but I really don’t think we are dealing with a doctrinal disagreement. Paul never attempts to take sides or solve the specific problem here even though, in his other letters, he never seems to be bashful about making himself known on matters of truth. I think we are more likely dealing with a clash of

personalities, a selfish insistence on personal preferences, a power struggle, or maybe just plain, old garden-variety pettiness. Now, this is first century stuff, but try to imagine such a thing in your own congregation. And while it goes beyond the evidence to say these women are recognized leaders in the congregation, they are clearly involved in the work. Paul says, “They contended at my side in the cause of the gospel.” That Paul deals with their conflict in this manner suggests, at the very least, that their relationships in the church run deep enough that their problem has begun to have a ripple effect. It is no longer simply their problem; it is affecting others, too.

I believe there are a few things worth noting about the way Paul treats this conflict as we consider how we might deal with sharp disagreements in our own churches. First, Paul brings the conflict right out in the open by calling names in a letter that he *expects* to be read to the assembled church. He addresses the conflict head-on and expects the church to be mature enough to handle it. Second, he refuses to take sides on the issue. He makes the same appeal to both women, pleading with them to agree with each other in the Lord. He wants them to recognize that their common love for the Lord and his work is more important than their present conflict. And third, while Paul appeals directly to the women to work through their disagreements, he also sees the resolution of their conflict as the responsibility and concern of the whole community of faith.

That is amazing. My experience has been that you rarely see clashes between strong personalities handled with such openness and maturity in the church. For some people, every conflict is a contest to be won, so it gets turned into a winner-take-all Texas Death Match (professional wrestling). Others want to try to iron out a compromise behind the scenes, away from the poor masses of the congregation who don’t have anything to offer to the solution and who aren’t mature enough to handle the open admission that some influential people are in conflict. Then there are the conflict avoiders who act like nothing is going on because they hope that if they ignore it long enough, it will just go away.

Paul seems to think that the *real* health of the body is more important than the apparent health of the body, so he brings the problem right up and urges them to address it before it gets any worse. He knows, and he wants us to know, that unresolved conflicts aren’t like contests to be won. They aren’t like little colds that will go away in a

few days if you will just ignore them; they are like death-dealing infections that will fester and spread, raising the temperature of the whole body unless they are treated seriously and aggressively.

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That’s why Paul calls this to the attention of the church. He isn’t trying to embarrass anybody; he simply wants them to know this is a serious matter. When we fuss and fight and choose sides in our relationships in the church, we deny our common citizenship in heaven. When conflict goes unresolved, it affects the health and the witness of the whole body; thus Paul says, “I want all of you who are mature enough and who have opportunity to influence this situation to help bring these people to agreement. Don’t try to be arbitrators to decide who’s right and who’s wrong. Be peacemakers. Remind them that they belong to each other because they each belong to Jesus, and appeal to them over and over again to be reconciled so that they may bring glory to Jesus by living lives worthy of the gospel.” Paul further says, “If you want to stand firm in the Lord as a community of faith, then you must deal aggressively with conflict and disunity.”

### Second—Rejoice, Don’t be Anxious

Second, he says, “I want you to stand firm against anxiety.” Look at verses 4-7:

*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*

You know, when the stress of life is really wearing on you—when it’s causing problems in your relationships and your health is suffering and you’re wondering just what

in the world may happen to you next—this is just the sort of thing you want to hear, isn't it? Someone says, "Rejoice!" and you want to say, "Come a little closer; I didn't quite catch that." What is Paul doing here? Is he just playing a little "Don't worry; be happy" kind of mind game, telling them to put on a happy face and act like everything is okay even though they are faced with all kinds of worries and difficult circumstances? No, he isn't telling them to live in the land of make-believe, but he is saying, "Don't let your circumstances *dictate* your attitudes or your behavior." Christians ought to rejoice no matter what our circumstances because our circumstances don't determine our identity, our worth, or our future—the Lord does. Our rejoicing is in the Lord, in what he has done for us, in what he is continually doing in our lives and in our churches, and especially in his promise that he has the last word on our lives. Paul says that Christians don't have any reason to be anxious about the future because our future is already a settled issue.

Now, that sounds like a great idea. We ought to rejoice in the Lord more. If we put that to a vote, it would pass—but how do we put it into practice? What are we supposed to do with our anxiety over the things that trouble us? Paul says, "Give your anxiety to God." Or, as one writer has said, "The way to be anxious about nothing is to be prayerful about everything." Notice that Paul sort of piles up these terms, "prayers, petitions, and requests," not to distinguish between *different* kinds of prayer, but to highlight the significance of *all* kinds of prayer. He says the way to deal with the increasing pressure, stress, and anxiety brought on by trying circumstances and relationships is by increasing prayer. Have you ever noticed that we tend to do just the opposite? Maybe it's just me, but I have noticed that when the level of stress and anxiety in my life goes up, the level of prayer in my life goes down. I don't have time to pray because I'm too busy worrying about my circumstances. I think Paul would tell me, "No wonder you are anxious. You are acting as though *you* are responsible for all these situations that you can't even control. That's God's job. He is in control, so why don't you let go of the reins here and let him take responsibility for the outcome of your circumstances and your future?"

I think my greatest fear in trying to talk about this is that it is one of those subjects that sounds nice, but it really isn't all that big a deal to us. We say, "Yeah, right. We probably ought to pray more and worry less," and then we go on with the anxious business of trying to solve all

of our own problems. In our churches, as in the church at Philippi, we are anxious about our relationships with each other and about our relationship with the surrounding community. We are anxious and depressed about our jobs, our health, our finances, and our kids. Elders are anxious about trying to keep everybody happy. Many of the preachers I know are anxious about the direction and the future of their congregations, and if that's not enough to keep them busy, then they worry about the future and direction of the whole brotherhood. The greatest paradox of all is that I realized last week that I was way too anxious over giving this lecture about not being anxious. I mean, we are eaten up with it, and I really believe one of the most effective tools Satan is using in our time to neutralize the church is convincing us that it is okay for us to lead frantic, distracted, and anxious lives as though the weight and fate of the world rested right on our shoulders. Well, it isn't okay, and in his book *Finding God*, I think Larry Crabb begins to capture something of the seriousness of the problem when he writes, "Whenever we place a higher priority on solving our problems than on pursuing God, we are immoral."

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**Paul says that if we are going to stand firm in the Lord, we must stand firm against anxiety by offering it up to the Lord.**

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It is incongruous—it doesn't fit—for us to claim to be citizens of heaven and then to live with heartburn and ulcers and migraine headaches and back pain brought on by the stress and anxiety that go with being too much at home in this world. When unbelievers look at us and see us as stressed out about our circumstances as they are and as conflicted in our relationships as they are, they rightly question whether we really believe this stuff or not.

Paul says that if we are going to stand firm in the Lord, we must stand firm against anxiety by offering it up to the Lord. Notice that Paul doesn't say that if we pray about our circumstances and our relationships, God will smooth all of them out to suit us. He says that by pouring out our requests to God, by the very act of praying about those concerns, we are recognizing the sovereignty of God

and *his* control over our tomorrows and *his* ability to finish the good work he has begun in us. And Paul says that this God, who transcends not only our circumstances but even our very understanding, will give us *his* peace in the place of *our* anxiety. Now, that's a pretty good trade, isn't it? We may still have to endure some difficult times, but we can do so with peace, with a sense that God is still God, so that we can trust him with the outcome of our situation. And when Paul says that this peace that passes understanding will *guard* our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, he is using the language of an armed sentry that stands ready to protect us against every assault of the enemy. As we begin to look at every moment of anxiety as a prompting to make our requests known to God, we have *his assurance* that his transcendent peace—a settled, secure sense of well-being that our God is still God—will protect our hearts and minds from the debilitating anxiety we experience when we try to assume responsibility for things that really are beyond our ability to control anyway.

### Third—Stand Firm

Third, Paul says, “I want you to stand firm against negative, critical thinking.” Look at verses 8-9:

*Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think on these things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.*

I think Paul recognizes clearly that when the heat is turned up on us, when our relationships and our circumstances are difficult, our natural reaction is to focus on the negative—to become cynical, to expect the worst, to think the worst of others. He also recognizes that our minds are a primary battleground in this business of standing firm in the Lord: if Satan wants to attack the morale and paralyze the work of a church, he turns loose just a *handful* of negative, critical thinkers, and they take the joy out of that place in nothing flat.

Well, what are we supposed to do? When we're having stress in our relationships—and, as usual, it's the other person's fault—we can't help but have negative, judgmental thoughts pop into our minds. That may be true, but I

think the old saying is helpful here: you can't keep a bird from landing on your head, but you *can* keep him from building a nest in your hair! Paul is calling us to go on the offensive to be more discriminating about what we allow to dominate our thinking. We are *not* at the mercy of our emotions or of whatever ungodly, negative, self-serving thoughts may enter our minds when things are not going the way we think they ought to. On the contrary, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 10 that we are to take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. And from an earlier age than we might realize, we are able to control what stays in our minds and thus shows up in our speech.

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## Paul calls us to seek the mindset of Jesus Christ, to fill our minds with the things that really matter.

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Sharon and I have a nephew who is six now; when he was four or five, his parents were really working with him to control some of the things that were coming out of his mouth, especially when he was in some sort of conflict with his older sister. One night, when both of the kids were in the bathroom, their mom was walking down the hall when she heard Scott say, “I hate you, Kayla!” As you can imagine, that was on their “no-no” list, so she did a quick about-face and marched into the bathroom. As soon as Scott saw her, his little heart sent a message to his little brain: “Houston, we have a problem.” His mother said, “Scott, what did you just say?” And he replied, “Well, I made a mistake. I said, ‘I hate you, Kayla,’ but I *meant* to say, ‘I love you, Jesus.’”

Well, like any four- or five-year-old, we get to decide what will dominate our thoughts, and Paul says that Christians ought to fix our minds on things that are praiseworthy, things that are noble and pure and admirable, things that have to do with moral excellence, things that will cause us to be an influence for goodness and loveliness in our churches when the natural reaction would be to wallow in negativity. He calls us to seek the mindset of Jesus Christ, to fill our minds with the things that really matter; and the language he uses refers to thinking that finds its expression in action. He says, in other words, “I want you to

think like Jesus so you will start acting like Jesus to one another.”

### Finally—Put it all into Practice

Finally, Paul says we have to put all of this into practice. Paul doesn't want us to just agree that standing firm is a good idea; he wants us to actually take the stand. At the beginning, I said this was applied Christology, so I want to close with just a little audience participation. How many of you know people in your church back home who are locked in a personal conflict they just can't seem to solve? If you want to stand firm in the Lord, your job is to go home and actively work to make peace in that situation when it would be easier to either ignore the problem or to choose sides and identify a winner and a loser.

Now, how many of you are finding it hard to rejoice in the Lord because you are worried and anxious over your circumstances or your relationships? If you want to stand firm in the Lord, your job is to actively get on your knees and, with thanksgiving, offer your anxiety up to the Lord. I don't mean just tell him about it; I mean offer it to him and leave it with him. If you do that, he has promised to take it from you and to give you his peace so that your life will reflect the gentleness of Christ rather than the anxiety of our culture.

How many of you can think of a person or a situation in your church that just sets you on edge and floods your mind with negative, critical thoughts? If you want to stand firm in the Lord, your job is to actively seek to embrace *only* those thoughts that are consistent with your faith in the one who humbled himself, even to the point of death on a cross. The next time you start thinking negative, critical thoughts about a brother or sister, just pause long enough to say, “Lord, please let me know how you feel about this person. Lord, I really want to have your mind in this situation,” and I suspect that will solve most of your problems with negative, critical thinking.

Paul can hold himself up as an example to these friends of his because they have seen him endure all kinds of tough circumstances. They have seen him refuse to lash out at those who oppose him, and even now, as he writes to them from prison, he is a living example to them that once you determine that the only thing that really matters is the imitation of Christ, there is nothing the enemy can throw at you to rob you of your joy. And church, if we want to have a more powerful, more effective witness in this world, then we are going to have to stand firm against the schemes of Satan that are designed to rob us of our joy as if our difficulties had the last word in our lives. Paul says, “Quit letting your circumstances dictate your thinking and your behavior. You stand firm in the Lord as people who really believe your citizenship is in heaven. Imitate me, even as I imitate Christ, and the God of peace will give you his peace.”

You know, there isn't a whole lot to object to in a passage like this one. It is easy for us to nod our heads in agreement and just as easy for us to excuse ourselves for not putting it into practice or, worse yet, to fail to recognize the sometimes glaring inconsistencies between our faith-claims and our lives. I do not expect we will ever take these words of Paul seriously until we reach the point where it grieves us that our lives are too often what John York called a “cheap imitation” of the life of Christ. In the words of Thomas a Kempis,

*Let it be the most important thing we do, then, to reflect upon the life of Christ.*

When you and I, individually and collectively, come to desire more than anything else for the very life of Christ to be displayed through our mortal bodies, *then* we will take with utter seriousness Paul's exhortation that we stand firm in the Lord in all the details of our lives.

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