

Sermon Summary #18

To the Women of Bridgeway, I say: "Thank You!" Philippians 4:1-3

This past week I counted up and gave some considerable thought to the churches that I've either regularly attended while growing up or at which I have served on pastoral staff. The total came to an even dozen. Included among these are four Southern Baptist churches that I attended regularly while growing up, one independent Baptist church, one Presbyterian church, two non-denominational Bible churches, one Vineyard church, one Anglican church, one non-denominational charismatic church, and finally Bridgeway!

I mention this only to point out that *not one of them, even Bridgeway, has been perfect*. I've never been in a church in which no false doctrine was believed either by the people or the pastors. *Someone somewhere is always wrong about something!* I've never been in a church that didn't experience some degree of division, a church in which no needs went unmet and no ministry was left unfulfilled.

As much as I love Bridgeway, I have to be honest and say that we aren't perfect. For most of you I hardly think that needs to be said, but I said it anyway. I can honestly say that Bridgeway comes closer to the ever-elusive "ideal" local church than any that I know of, but we are still a long way from having fully arrived.

If you were to ask me what local church in the New Testament has come closest to the ideal standard set forth in Scripture, I would probably cast my vote for the church in Philippi. They had partnered with Paul in the gospel from the get-go and had supported him financially when other churches failed to do so. They were theologically solid and filled with love for one another and joy in Jesus.

But there have been slight indications along the way that not everything was perfect. Paul's exhortations suggest that they struggled at times with selfishness, conceit, pride, and disunity. As bad as that sounds, all in all they were a very healthy and growing church.

However, one particular problem finally surfaces here in the opening verses of chapter four. Evidently a rather intense disagreement had erupted between two women. Paul doesn't even hesitate to name them! They couldn't agree. Their differences apparently had spilled out into the church as a whole and people were likely on the verge of taking sides and dividing over the matter. Whatever it was, it was obviously serious enough that Paul took time to address it directly and explicitly.

Let's never forget that although 1,900 years separate us from the Philippians, we aren't that much different from them. But more important still, the spiritual principles that would serve to heal the breach back then are the same that are available and binding on us today. Paul's way of handling the problem provides us with a pattern of how we should minister to one another and address our own divisions at Bridgeway.

Context!

The first order of business, and one of extreme importance, is to determine how what Paul says here in 4:1-3 relates to what he just said at the close of chapter three (3:17-21). Did you see that word with which v. 1 opens: *"Therefore"*? What is it there for?

I think Paul is telling us that it is precisely because Christians in general, and Euodia and Syntyche in particular, are citizens of a heavenly kingdom that they must take steps to put aside their differences and live in love. It is precisely because all Christians, and Euodia and Syntyche in particular, are awaiting the return of Christ from heaven when he will transform their bodies and our bodies to be like his own that they must address this division and display for everyone to see the unity that Jesus Christ died to give us.

In other words, Paul is telling us in all of chapter four how we are to live in the time between Calvary and the Second Coming!

It's as if he says, "Ladies, don't you realize that very soon you will stand in the presence of your Lord and Savior? Don't you realize the extent to which he suffered and sacrificed to save you? If you have any idea of what this means, please, take the necessary steps and humble yourselves and heal your relationship!"

Encouragement (v. 1)

I love Paul's pastoral wisdom. He knows that people will always respond more readily to exhortations if they are preceded by encouragement. So he opens up in v. 1 with a series of five expressions of love and affection for them.

(1) "My brothers" (v. 1a). This is the same language he used earlier in 1:12; 3:1, 13, 17; and will use again in 4:8, 21. He wants them to know that even though he is an apostle who travels and doesn't even live in Philippi, they are all family! It's as if he says, "Before I say anything at all of a corrective nature, please remember that I'm not an outsider sticking my nose into someone else's business. You are my spiritual brothers and sisters, and even if what I say sounds hard and you don't respond as I hope you will, we will remain brothers and sisters in Christ!" It's also likely that he's saying to Euodia and Syntyche: ***"Don't forget ladies: you are sisters in Jesus. So act like it!"***

(2) "Whom I love" or more literally, "my beloved" (v. 1b). Although God certainly loves them, Paul is here talking about *his* love for them. They are "his" beloved. This points to his motivation for the exhortation to follow. He doesn't speak from a position of superiority or arrogance or because he wants to hurt them. He loves them too much to remain silent and to allow their division to infect the church.

(3) "Whom . . . I long for" (v. 1c). This reminds us of the pain of separation caused by Paul's imprisonment. But it also instructs us on how we should feel about one another when we go long without experiencing fellowship together. Do you "long for" the believers in this body, such that a week or two or three away from them becomes painful and distressing? Paul is saying in these words, "Philippians, you are important to me. I need you! I can't get along without you!"

(4) "My joy" (v. 1d). Of course, Paul's preeminent joy is in Jesus, but he doesn't hesitate to tell the Philippians that they too are his joy. His greatest delight isn't in being released from prison or amassing earthly wealth and fame. His joy is in not only knowing and loving the Philippians but in watching them grow in grace and truth. The Apostle John said something similar in his third epistle: "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth" (3 John 3).

(5) "My crown" (v. 1e). This isn't the diadem of a king but the victor's wreath presented by judges to the winner of the ancient Olympic Games. You are my prize! You are the great reward I seek.

Why do you think Paul takes time to encourage these people before he exhorts them?

My guess is that Paul knew more about human nature than you or I do. He knew the fundamental human longing for community, to be included as part of a family. He was keenly aware of the damage to the human soul inflicted by rejection. He knew how powerful it is when a man or woman knows and feels the love of others. He also knew the incredible power in words. I'm not talking about shallow flattery or merely polite compliments, but sincere and substantive words of affirmation and acceptance. So before he calls these women and the others in Philippi to clean up their act, he reminds them of just how much they mean to him and how he loves them and how he longs for them and how he considers them family.

Exhortation (vv. 2-3)

I'm going to skip the exhortation at the end of v. 1 and jump right in to his appeal to these two women.

Before we do, however, let me say something about ***the presence of "division" in the church.*** People are often confused on this. ***Not all "division" is bad just as not all "unity" is good.*** Sometimes division is absolutely essential, especially when the truth of the gospel is at stake. Back in 3:2 Paul warned the Philippians to stay clear of

the “dogs” and the “evil workers” in their midst. When people stand opposed to the gospel or threaten its purity, keep your distance. Unity is always a question of “with whom” and “on what grounds” and division is always a question of “from whom” and “for what reasons”? ***Unity that requires compromise on biblical truth or ethical purity is worth nothing. Division over secondary and comparatively unimportant doctrines is ridiculous.***

So what had happened in Philippi with these two women?

First of all, who were they? We know they were in fact women because the pronouns in v. 3 that refer back to the individuals in v. 2 are feminine. I say this because some have argued that “Syntyche” was a man’s name and that he was none other than the Philippian jailer we encountered in Acts 16. Euodia, so this theory suggests, was his wife. Some have said Euodia was symbolic of Jewish Christians and Syntyche was symbolic of Gentiles, and the dispute was one of ethnic prejudice. Some argue that one of the women was actually Lydia, the lady in Acts who was the first convert in Philippi. All this is speculation.

What’s also important to see is that these weren’t two women on the periphery of church life who simply spent their time gossiping and causing trouble. As we’ll see in a moment, they were “co-workers” with the apostle Paul. They were significant, contributing members of the body and the spread of the gospel.

Second, the nature of the dispute between them isn’t stated. There’s no indication that either was involved in theological heresy or immoral behavior. Did it involve their responsibilities in the church? Was it a personality conflict? Had one of them defrauded the other or broken a confidence? We simply don’t know.

Third, what’s most important is that Paul focused his energy on resolving the dispute. He doesn’t take sides. He doesn’t command them as an apostle. He entreats them in love. He doesn’t summarize each of their claims against the other. He doesn’t say, “O.K., Euodia, most of the blame falls on you, so humble yourself and confess. You need to apologize.” He doesn’t sit on the fence or suggest that they are both equally to blame.

As far as Paul was concerned, ***they were both responsible to make the first move.*** Paul knew that human relationships can be incredibly tangled, complicated, and messy. In effect, Paul says, “Don’t wait for the other to make the first move. I’m not expecting one of you to say, ‘I’m perfectly ready to *accept* an apology when it is made. Nor do I want the other to say, ‘I’m perfectly ready to *make* an apology when I’ve got some assurance that it will be accepted.’” It’s interesting that Paul repeats the verb “entreat” in both cases. I entreat both of you equally. Take steps to put this right!

Fourth, he entreats them to “agree in the Lord” (v. 2). He certainly doesn’t expect them to put their minds and deeply held beliefs on hold and agree on every issue imaginable. He doesn’t say: “Hey, ladies, put aside your doctrinal differences for the sake of unity.”

The key is in the phrase, ***“in the Lord.”*** “You are both Christians! You both are loved by Jesus who gave himself for you both! You are united not only now in this local church but for eternity by virtue of your faith in Christ. You are both ‘in’ the Lord! So be willing to be defrauded by the other. Be willing to have your rights trampled. Be willing to suffer an injustice. Be willing to give in more than the other. If you genuinely love each other and desire the best for each other and for the welfare of the entire church, be quick to come to agreement. And part of that agreement may be that you agree to disagree but to do it in a way that doesn’t cause friction or prevent the two of you from tearing each other and the rest of the church apart. Above all else, ***do it for the sake of the name and*** reputation of Christ in Philippi. Don’t let your disagreement bring reproach on his name or the gospel.”

This is extremely important. It’s as if Paul is saying that men and women who together are “in” the Lord should be willing to bend a bit. Don’t be so brittle that you snap in two every time someone disagrees with you or has a proposal that runs counter to yours. Don’t be wishy-washy, but at the same time don’t be so inflexible that you alienate others in the body of Christ. If the issue isn’t one of primary theological or ethical importance, be a little more tolerant and understanding of each other.

So, he’s not calling for perfect agreement on everything between them. Rather, he’s urging them to embrace a common vision, a common orientation around the gospel. He wants them to be jointly committed to the same Christ and do all things for his glory. See Philippians 2:2.

Fifth, Paul's exhortation extends to someone else in the church who is to insert himself into the situation and help resolve their dispute. This is instructive, because it reminds us that sometimes certain disputes can't be resolved by the people involved but call for a mediator, someone wise and patient and competent who can help people work through difficult disputes.

Paul calls him "true companion" (v. 3). Who was this? The word translated "true companion" literally refers to someone who works well in partnership with another. This is the sort of person who is especially gifted and skilled in mediating broken relationships. Some think it was Lydia. Others say it might have been either the husband or brother of one of the ladies. Perhaps it was Epaphroditus or Timothy or Silas or an Elder in the church at Philippi. The fact is, we'll never know and don't need to.

Fifth, the most important thing to note is that Paul's concern for these women and the reason he wants them unified is that they had fought together with him in the proclamation of the gospel. They were co-laborers, working at Paul's side in spreading the truth of Christ. They had both made great sacrifices and likely had taken great risks to their physical welfare to help Paul in his ministry.

I find it interesting that Paul doesn't feel the need to mention any other names, except that of one man named "Clement." It's as if he says, "It's not important that we know them by name. It's only important that God does, and he has them each inscribed in the book of life."

I know what you're wondering: ***What is the "book of life"?*** There are two possibilities.

(1) In the OT the "book of life" (or its equivalents) was a register of the citizens of the theocratic community of Israel. To have one's name written in the book of life implied the privilege of participation in the temporal blessings of the theocracy, while to be erased or blotted out of this book meant exclusion from those blessings. In other words, this book had reference to the rights of citizenship for the Jewish people (cf. Ex. 32:32; Ps. 69:28; Isa. 4:3).

(2) The most likely reference is to ***the Lamb's book of life*** that serves as the register of those who have been chosen for salvation from eternity past. It is not temporal or earthly blessings that are in view, but participation in the eternal kingdom of God as recipients of eternal life (see Luke 10:20; Heb. 12:23; Rev. 13:8; 17:8). It would appear from these texts that not all are written in this book, but only the elect.

We need to look closely at Revelation 13:8 and 17:8 to understand what Paul has in mind here in Philippians 4:3. According to Revelation 13:8,

"all who dwell on earth will worship it [i.e., the Beast], everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain."

Similarly, in Revelation 17:8, we read:

"The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come."

The "book of life" therefore is a metaphor of the register or list of those whom God has chosen for eternal life and whose names therefore were inscribed before the foundation of the world.

To the Women of Bridgeway, I say: "Thank You!"

It would be wonderful and unsettling for some of you should I choose to explore this in more detail, but today is not the day. Rather, since this is Mother's Day, and our honored guests are women, I want to take just a few minutes and this opportunity to highlight Paul's description of these two women, Euodia and Syntyche, as those who "labored side by side" with him and served as his "fellow workers" in the gospel.

Let's take note of just a few of the ways in which women served and ministered to Jesus as well as the ways in which other NT authors envisioned them serving in the local church.

In Luke 8:1-3 we read about several women, including Mary Magdalene, who financially supported the work of Jesus and his apostles.

There was a prophetess named Anna who never departed from the temple but worshiped and prayed incessantly. We are told that she publicly thanked God and spoke "of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:36-38). She sounds like quite the evangelist!

According to the prophecy of Joel, as fulfilled in Acts 2, both "sons and daughters", both "men and women" will exercise spiritual gifts and be the recipients of divine revelation and shall prophesy.

Philip's four daughters prophesied in the local church (Acts 21:9).

Paul fully expected women to pray and prophesy in the corporate gathering of the church as is clear from 1 Corinthians 11:1ff.

Not only Aquila but also his wife Priscilla privately instructed Apollos in the things of the gospel (Acts 18:26).

Again in Romans 16:3 Paul refers to Priscilla and Aquila and describes them both as "fellow workers" in Christ Jesus "who [both] risked their necks for" Paul's "life."

Listen to how Paul describes Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2 –

"I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well."

The word translated "servant" is actually the same word translated "deacon" in Paul's first letter to Timothy. And many think it likely that Phoebe was the courier to whom Paul entrusted the Epistle to the Romans. Did you hear that? ***Paul asked Phoebe to carry his letter to the Romans from Corinth to the church in Rome. What does it say about the providence of God when an apostle entrusts the most important piece of literature ever written to a woman's handbag?! [Just kidding! No emails please!]***

So where does Bridgeway stand on the role of women in the local church? We are complementarian in our view, which means we believe that men and women are created equally in the sight of God and yet have differing roles and responsibilities that complement each other. Here is how it is put in our doctrinal statement:

12. We believe that both men and women are together created in the divine image and are therefore equal before God as persons, possessing the same moral dignity and value, and have equal access to God through faith in Christ. We also believe that men and women are together the recipients of spiritual gifts designed to equip and empower them for ministry in the local church and beyond. We also believe that God has ordained the principle of male headship in both the home and in the local church and that certain governing and teaching roles are restricted to men (primarily the office of Elder) (Genesis 1:26-27; 2:18; 1 Corinthians 11:2-16; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 5:22-33; Colossians 3:18-19; 1 Timothy 2:11-15; 3:1-7; 1 Peter 3:1-7).

There are some complementarians who draw a very solid and rigid line and live in fear of women ever crossing over. I am not that sort of complementarian. I am extremely reluctant to place restrictions on anyone of either gender or any age in the absence of explicit biblical instruction to that effect. In other words, if I am going to err, it is on the side of freedom.

In my opinion, the only restrictions placed on women concern what I call ***senior governmental authority*** in the local church. By that I have in mind (1) the primary authority to expound the Scriptures and enforce their doctrinal and

ethical truths on the conscience of all God's people, and (2) the authority, as Elders, to exercise final governmental oversight of the body of Christ.

Therefore, unlike a number of other complementarians, as long as the principle of male headship is honored in the above two respects, I believe women can lead worship, can lead small groups together with their husbands, can assist in the celebration of both baptism and the Lord's Supper, can serve as deacons (or deaconesses), can chair church committees, can lead in evangelistic, missionary, and church planting outreach, can (and should) be consulted by the local church Eldership when decisions are being made, and can contribute to virtually every other capacity of local church life. Women should be encouraged to pray and prophesy in corporate church meetings (1 Cor. 11) and should be given every opportunity to develop and exercise their spiritual gifts.

So, as we find ourselves on Mother's Day reading not only about the service and ministry of Euodia and Syntyche but also that of Mary Magdalene and Anna and Priscilla and Phoebe and numerous others, ***I want to say thank you to the women of Bridgeway!*** Thank you for your selfless devotion to Christ. Thank you for your service to the body of Christ. Thank you for your passionate love and worship of our Savior. Thank you for the many ways you sacrifice and give and encourage us and model for us how to walk in holiness and purity. Thank you for all we have learned from you. May God continue to empower you and provide you with spiritual gifts and use you mightily in the growth of this church and the expansion of God's kingdom on earth. Thank you!

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