Stand Together

Scripture
Philippians 4:1–3 (ESV)
Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. 2 I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. 3 Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Introduction
Paul is preparing to close his letter of friendship to the family of God at Philippi. The “Therefore” with which he opens Philippians 4:1 is his way of bringing to the table the great gospel truths that he has been expounding in the first three chapters to serve as pillars and prods, as foundation and motivation, for a series of specific directions that will bring his epistle to its conclusion.

The commands in chapter 4 spell out more particularly what it means for Christians to follow the example of Paul and his like-minded, cross-focused colleagues (3:17), resting in God’s grace already received (3:2–11) and racing together toward God’s grace to be consummated when our Savior appears from heaven, the site of our true citizenship (3:12–21). He will offer counsel to help them meet their sufferings with joy, gentleness, prayer, thankfulness, and meditation on the beauties of Jesus (4:4–10).

Message

The Current Situation
There is a delicate issue, fraught with the dangers of misunderstanding and offense. Words must be chosen with the utmost care. The distressing difficulty that demands such pastoral diplomacy is this: two women whom Paul treasures for their courageous partnership in the cause of the gospel are now at odds with each other. Their friction threatens the congregation’s unity at the very time when they all need to stand “firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27).

Summary
This brief text contains three commands: “stand” (Phil. 4:1), “agree” (4:2), and “help” (4:3). More fully states they are: “stand firm … in the Lord,” “agree in the Lord,” and “help these women, who have labored … in the gospel …, whose names are in the book of life.”

1. Stand Firm in the Lord
Jesus’ blood, shed for us on the cross, binds believers together more tightly than DNA could ever do.¹

This pastor loves his flock intensely, and that love is the wellspring from which he is about to speak words that may cause discomfort to two dear co-laborers. In fact, Paul’s love for the Philippians runs so deep that he feels the pain of their separation: “my brothers, whom I … long for.”

As you contemplate the day of Christ’s return, are your brothers and sisters in Christ, with whom you live and sometimes struggle week in and week out in the church, central to the celebration you imagine in heaven? Has Paul’s insight captivated your heart so that you see your spiritual siblings, for all their flaws, as your joy and crown, loved and longed for even in their imperfections?

How are we to “stand firm” in the face of hostile enemies?
Paul, Timothy, Epaphroditus, and others have shown how Christian soldiers stand their ground in the battle. Now Paul puts their example and our duty into words: reconciliation, unity, and mutual aid; joy and gentleness; replacing worry with thankful prayer; saturating our thoughts with heaven’s beauties and our practices with heaven’s values. To those whose minds are set on earthly things, this battle plan—so lacking in aggression, deception, and self-advancing strategy—may seem counterintuitive and destined for defeat. Heaven’s citizens know better, having been rescued by “weakness” of the Suffering Servant, who is Lord of all.²

¹ For help in this difficult area, please see “Stand Firm” in the November 10, 2019, message.
² For help in this difficult area, please see “Stand Firm” in the November 10, 2019, message.
We must stand firm. The Lord commands it. We can stand firm because the Lord who issues the command has bound us to himself by faith, so we now stand in the Lord.

Spiritual instability leads to disappointment, doubt, discouragement, and ineffective witness. Unstable people are likely to be crushed by their trials. They are also susceptible to temptation.

2. Agree in the Lord

The key to victory is unity: “in one spirit, with one mind … being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (1:27; 2:2). The mind-set that fosters such unity: “in humility count others more significant than yourselves. … Look not only to [your] own interests, but also to the interests of others” (2:3–4).

Paul invites and urges Euodia and Syntyche not merely to decide who is “right” or even to come up with a compromise acceptable to both. His concern is that their disagreement, over whatever issue and for however long it has persisted, has disrupted their ability to exhibit in their relationship to each other the unity that is theirs “in the Lord.”

The tragic conflict between Euodia and Syntyche reveals that even the most mature, faithful, and committed people can become so selfish as to be embroiled in controversy if they are not diligent to maintain unity.

When your relationship with a Christian brother or sister hits an impasse, When you cannot resolve a disagreement, when it is a strain even to be in the same room with him or her, at that moment you both need to pause and take to heart Paul’s gentle reminder to Euodia and Syntyche that there is a third person involved. The tense situation includes not only believers who disagree with each other and hurt each other, but also the Lord, in whom you both now live as citizens of heaven.

3. Help These Women … in the Gospel … in the Book of Life

Perhaps the perspective of a third party could bring clarity and balance to the one-sided perception of one or both of them. Perhaps the involvement of Paul’s “genuine yokefellow” would alert them to the sobering truth that their interpersonal dispute, whatever its origin, was adversely affecting the wider congregation.

Paul’s emphasis on the togetherness that should characterize believers. Euodia and Syntyche have stood together with Paul for the gospel. The brother who must help them has “pulled the plow” alongside the apostle. They belong to a greater company of fellow workers, including Clement and others—too many to name.

The Book Life

This company of coworkers has been gathered not by the courage or character of its members but by God’s grace. The adhesive of their unity, which makes reconciliation between Euodia and Syntyche so imperative, is the mercy that God has shown them in the gift of his Son. The gospel has taken root and borne fruit in their lives because the living God, in his sovereign grace, wrote their names “in the book of life” before he created the universe. This vivid image of the book of life is the note on which Paul ends his appeal for his sisters’ oneness of mind and heart, through the assistance of others in the family of God.

In Closing

Loving unity in the fellowship of believers creates an environment of stability. But discord leaves the church collectively and its members individually vulnerable and unstable. Spiritual stability requires peace and harmony in the church. Blessed indeed are the peacemakers (Matt. 5:9).

Those who live within the sphere of Christ’s Lordship are equipped to overcome circumstances that would dishearten unbelievers and disrupt their friendships.

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