

Standing Firm in One Spirit

Philippians 4:2-3

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Introduction

We return again this morning to the fourth chapter of the Book of Philippians, and so I invite you to turn there with me: to Philippians chapter 4. And we come to the portion of Paul's letter to the Philippians where he begins to transition from the body of his letter—beginning in chapter 1 verse 12 and running all the way through to chapter 4 verse 1—now to the summary of his central concerns, which take the form of a number of concluding exhortations. We have followed Paul's line of thinking closely as we've examined Philippians chapter 3, in which he is warning the Philippians to stand firm against various strands of false teaching that seem to be pressing themselves upon the church from the outside.

In the opening 11 verses, Paul warns them against the legalism of the Judaizers—those professing Jewish Christians who are seeking to woo the Philippians away from trusting solely in the work of Christ for the righteousness, and instead teaching that in addition to believing in Jesus one must also be circumcised and follow the customs of the Law of Moses. Knowing that any supposed spiritual gains attained by our own works do finally turn out to be liabilities, Paul admonished the Philippians to stand firm in the sufficiency of the external, alien righteousness of Christ imputed to them by faith. In verses 12 to 16, Paul refutes the error of the perfectionists—those who taught that the believer's exalted position in Christ somehow amounted to a practical perfection—that sin could be entirely eradicated from a believer's life on this side of heaven. Seeing how such a teaching could ensnare a Christian into apathy and indifference with respect to sanctification, Paul urged his dear friends to stand firm in the pursuit of practical holiness. And then beginning in verse 17, Paul warned his friends against the bad example of the antinomians—the sensualists, who so trusted in the righteousness of *another* to avail for them in the courtroom of God that they taught a practical *personal* righteousness wasn't a necessity in the believer's life. And Paul says by their profligate lifestyle they have become enemies of the cross, and so he urges them to stand firm in their putting off of sin and putting on of righteousness, as good citizens of heaven who eagerly await a Coming Savior who will banish all sin from our bodies. And so as a conclusion to all of these directives, he sums it up in the single exhortation to steadfastness in chapter 4 verse 1 when he says, "Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, in this way *stand firm* in the Lord, my beloved."

And last week, we spent some time reflecting on those five terms of endearment that Paul used to characterize his relationship with the Philippians—brethren, beloved, longed-for, joy, and crown—and discovered great application for us, as we pursue true fellowship, and true community with one another as the body of Christ. And those ideas—steadfastness and fellowship—are not unrelated concepts. God has ordained that His people press on to greater maturity and spiritual stability in the context of fellowship with one another in the local church. In his commentary on this passage, Pastor John speaks masterfully to this symbiosis of steadfastness and fellowship. He writes, “The more isolated a believer is from other Christians, the more spiritually unstable he or she is likely to be. The church should be a place where people support each other, hold each other accountable, and care for each other. It should be a communion of life in which believers restore those who have fallen into sin (Gal 6:1) and bear each other’s burdens (v. 2). The church is to ‘admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone’ (1 Thess 5:14)” (270).

And as you hear those descriptions of the church as a place of support, accountability, communion, and mutual care, I know that so many of you want that. I know that you hear the profusion of those five terms of endearment and say, “Oh, how I long for that! I want the kind of communion with my fellow Christians that makes them feel like family. I want to share that love and affection that Paul had with the Philippians. I want to sharpen and be sharpened by my brothers and sisters so that we can truly stand firm in the Lord—so that Christ will be presented with the pure Bride that He is worthy of!”

And so the supremely important question is, “How can that fellowship—how can that steadfastness—become a reality in my life? What are the implications of a biblical steadfastness? What does that true fellowship consist in?” And it’s in this next section of verses—chapter 4 verses 2 through 9—that Paul answers that question. True, biblical steadfastness is marked by (a) a diligent devotion to unity within the body, verses 2 and 3; it is marked by (b) an unyielding pursuit of joy in the Lord, verse 4; it is marked by (c) an eminent and demonstrable gentleness of spirit, verse 5; it is marked both by (d) a repudiation of all anxiety and (e) devotion to thankful prayer in verse 6; and the result of all of that, verse 7, will be that the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. And then verses 8 and 9 conclude this section of rapid-fire exhortations by centering on the importance of right *thinking*, verse 8, which is the ground of godly *living*, verse 9—both of which are essential to a life driven by the Gospel. And so unpacking all of that will be the task of our study over the next few weeks.

But this morning we’re going to focus only on the first of those implications of steadfastness and fellowship: **the diligent devotion to unity within the body**. If there is to be the kind of steadfastness—the kind of spiritual stability—that Paul prescribes in verse 1—if there is to be the kind of deep, intimate, affection fellowship that he models in verse 1—the people of God must

be **diligently devoted to maintaining unity** within the body of Christ. Read with me our text for this morning, Philippians 4, verses 2 and 3: “I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord. ³Indeed, true companion, I ask you also to help these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel, together with Clement also and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.”

Exposition

And so this exhortation to be diligently devoted to unity within the body of Christ comes to us in the midst of a real-life instance of personal conflict within the church of Philippi. It’s plain that these two women, Euodia and Syntyche, were at odds with one another, and Paul intends for this directive to restore harmony between them.

And the text basically unfolds across **two main units of thought**. First, you have Paul’s exhortation for the two women to be of the same mind. And secondly, you have his request for one of the members of the Philippian congregation to *help* them in this prescribed pursuit of unity. So there is **an exhortation to unity** and **a request for help**. And to those, we’ll add an examination of **the identity of Euodia and Syntyche**, just so that we know who we’re talking about as we go.

And so we’ll seek to unfold our exposition of the text along those **three main headings**. And then, after we’ve understood the teaching of the text, we’ll draw some lines of application as we bring that teaching to bear on our own lives.

I. The Identity of the Two Women

In the first place, then, let us consider **the identity of these two sisters in the Lord** whom Paul exhorts to dwell together in unity. Their names, as we see in verse 2, are Euodia and Syntyche. And there is no reference to them in Scripture outside of what we learn of them in this text. But there is quite a bit that we can gather about them from the information that we do have.

It should go without saying that these two women were members of the church at Philippi, such that after Epaphroditus returned to Philippi and when the letter was read in the congregation, Euodia and Syntyche would have been sure to be in attendance. And it’s very likely that they were not only members, but somewhat prominent members, at that. They were likely women who were highly regarded and loved by the congregation. And I say that because the disagreement between them warranted a public rebuke throughout the whole church. It was likely, then, that their disagreement was affecting—or at least had the potential to affect—the entire congregation.

But we can surmise that these women were prominent church members also because of the way Paul describes them in verse 3. He says that these women “have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel.” He says that there was a time in his ministry where these women had occasion to labor alongside him in the advancement of the Gospel in Macedonia. This phrase that the NAS renders, “have shared my struggle” is a paraphrase of the Greek word *sunathléō*, which is made up of the prefix *sun-*, meaning “together with,” and the verb *athléō*, which, as you may be able to hear, is where we get our English word *athlete* or *athletics*. And so this is a picture of the laboring, the exertion of energy, and the discipline that goes along with athletic competition. It’s an image of soldiers fighting with all the athletic prowess they can summon, and striving side by side against a common enemy.

Paul uses this very word in the thesis verse of this letter, chapter 1 verse 27, when he exhorts the entire congregation to “stand firm in one spirit”—just as he’s exhorted them in chapter 4 verse 1—and then he says, “with one mind ***striving together*** for the faith of the gospel.” And that’s this word, *sunathléō*. In chapter 1 verse 30, Paul speaks of the *conflict* that the Christian will experience as he suffers for Christ’s sake. Well, Paul is saying that there was a time when these two women, in their contending for the cause of the gospel, stood side-by-side with Paul—and, apparently, side-by-side with *one another*—and experienced that same conflict and opposition that Paul experienced.

Just as Paul describes Epaphroditus in 2:25, Euodia and Syntyche were Paul’s fellow-soldiers and fellow-workers in the cause of the Gospel (4:3; cf. 2:25). And so it may be that they were among those women who had gathered by the riverside to pray when Paul had first come to Philippi. You remember in Acts 16, as Luke describes the birth of that church, that when Paul first came to Philippi he found no synagogue. It took eleven Jewish men to establish a synagogue, and because there weren’t that many Jewish men in the city there was no synagogue. And it was a tradition that started during the Babylonian exile that if there was no synagogue in which to worship God, the worshipers of Yahweh were to gather by a river to pray. And that’s exactly what you find in Acts chapter 16 verse 13. Luke says, “And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled.” And in the next verse, Lydia gets converted and the church at Philippi is born. Now, we can’t know for sure, but it’s very likely that Euodia and Syntyche were among the women who had assembled there at the river to pray—that they were, along with Lydia, charter members of the Philippian church.

And not only were they members, but they had gained a reputation for their courage and their zeal, as they labored alongside the Apostle Paul himself in the midst of conflict and persecution, as his fellow-soldiers and fellow-workers. Without seizing unto themselves any undue authority as to leadership or to preaching—which was forbidden to women in the church (1 Tim 2:12)—they had a strategic place in the progress of the Gospel in Philippi (cf. Martin).

II. Paul's Exhortation to Unity

Well, now that we know something of who these women are, let's examine **the exhortation that Paul addresses to them** in this passage. We see that, again, in verse 2: "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord."

Now this exhortation to "live in harmony"—which is literally translated, "to be of the same mind"—presupposes that there is a conflict that exists between Euodia and Syntyche. And Paul doesn't discuss the precise nature of their disagreement. But again, we can be very confident that this was not a *doctrinal* disunity. Euodia and Syntyche were not debating over doctrine, here. Doctrinal disputes were not the Philippians' problem. Paul consistently praises them as a sound church, as being solidly grounded partners in the Gospel. If doctrinal disunity was the problem, Paul would have simply delivered an apostolic verdict as to who was teaching truth and who was in error. Paul was not a man who was soft on false teaching. He certainly had no qualms about settling questions about doctrinal matters all throughout chapter 3, beginning by denouncing the Judaizers as *dogs* (3:2). This was the same man who wrote to the Galatians, "If any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!" He is to be, as one translation puts it, "condemned to hell!" (Gal 1:9, NET). So we can be sure that if there was any doctrinal disagreement, Paul's counsel would not merely be "to live in harmony in the Lord." He would have identified the theological issue and sided with the truth.

Instead, this was a personal conflict—a relational conflict. It may have been over a matter of personal conviction that the Word of God was silent about. Perhaps a contemporary example of the kind of disagreement that was taking place would be two families disagreeing about public school, private school, or home school. Perhaps it was a disagreement about how one of them was treated, and now Euodia is sitting and waiting for an apology and the Syntyche is waiting for Euodia to grow up and get thicker skin! Something along those lines was taking place in the church at Philippi, and if it hadn't begun already, Paul knew that it wouldn't be long before these prominent, zealous, strong women would have had their own factions starting up in the church.

And so **he exhorts them** to "live in harmony." This is the particular application of the great number of general exhortations to unity that Paul has issued throughout this epistle. The emphasis on unity in Philippians is so explicit that some interpreters take it to be the theme of the epistle! And while I believe the central theme of the letter is quite clearly the command to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel, it's plain that chief among the implications of a Gospel-driven life is unity among the brethren. In fact, at the very heart of our thesis verse in chapter 1 verse 27, Paul mentions unity no less than three times in the span of a single sentence. He says there, "Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that

whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm **in one spirit**, with **one mind** striving **together** for the faith of the gospel.”

And then just a few verses later in the opening words of chapter 2, Paul issues that heartfelt, passionate plea for Christian unity on the basis of the glorious benefits we receive from the Gospel. Philippians chapter 2 verse 1: “Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind,”—almost the same exact construction in our text—“maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.” In chapter 2 verse 14, he calls them to do all things without grumbling or disputing, which surely implies that there was some grumbling and disputing going on. And in chapter 3 verse 17, he entreats them to be *summimētai*—*fellow-imitators* of him. Even in the way he calls them to follow his example, he does it in a way that implies that they must be unified.

And so here in the case of Euodia and Syntyche, he makes a practical application of the exhortations and commands to unity that he has been issuing throughout the epistle. And the phrase is, literally, “to be of the same mind,” or “to think the same thing.” Now, this is not a mandate to become carbon copies of one another in every way, shape, or form. Paul is not suggesting that they can no longer be individuals—with no creativity or independent thinking—or that they must have the same opinion about absolutely everything. This word, *phronéo* describes a person’s whole attitude and disposition of mind (O’Brien, 178). In chapter 2 verse 2, this verb gets translated as, “intent on one purpose.” Paul is calling them to have the same dominating attitude, the same mindset, the same basic aim, direction and orientation that controls all their behavior (O’Brien, 478). And what is that orienting center of their life? It’s the Gospel, of course. They are to live Gospel-driven lives, and therefore they are not to allow any personal squabble get in the way of their working harmoniously for the propagation and advancement of the Gospel in their community.

This is why he exhorts them to be of the same mind *in the Lord*—because the objective union that they each have with the Lord Jesus Christ as a result His work in the Gospel is the ground for the subjective unity that binds all believers together as the body of Christ. They are to come to a harmonious agreement as two sisters who share a common bond with one another in Christ. I like the way one commentator put it when he wrote, “When one’s attitude of mind is *in the Lord*, union with the Lord informs and inspires the attitude. . . . When their common bond in the Lord becomes central, their attitude toward each other will be the same as Christ Jesus expressed on the way to the cross” (Hansen, 283), which is to say, chapter 2 verse 3, “doing nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regarding one another as more important than yourselves”—who, though He was God, emptied Himself by taking on the weakness of human nature, and then further humbling Himself by becoming obedient to death on a cross.

Whatever their disagreement, it was to be crucified along with their pride, as they forged a path of Gospel-driven unity.

III. Paul's Request for Help

Well, we've examined the identity of the two women, as well as Paul's exhortation to them. We turn now, **thirdly**, to **Paul's request for help**. And that comes in verse 3: "Indeed, true companion,"—or literally, true yokefellow—"I ask you also to **help** these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel...."

Now, as I said, this word that the NAS translates "companion" here is the Greek word *suzugos*, which is a compound word made up of the prefix *sun-*, which means "together with," and the word *zugos*, which is the common word for "yoke," as if referring to oxen. Paul addresses this man as his "true yokefellow" in the ministry. And the imagery is marvelous. Paul is likening both himself and this man, in their labor on behalf of the Gospel, to two oxen bound by a single yoke, plowing along in a field, but bearing that load *together*. It speaks of one who shares a common burden (MacArthur, 272). And so he's saying to this person, "I have known you to be a true companion—a true yokefellow—a proven fellow-laborer in the Gospel ministry who bears the needs of the saints. And I request of you now to help these women."

And there has been much ink spilled in trying to identify this true yokefellow. Some have thought that he was one of Paul's ministry companions, such as Timothy or Epaphroditus themselves, since they're already named in the letter; or Silas, since he was often Paul's traveling companion; or Luke, since we know from the first person plural pronouns in the Book of Acts that Luke was with Paul in Philippi. Others suggest that Paul was using the term figuratively, and as a collective singular, to refer to the Philippian church as a whole as his yokefellow. Still others suggest it might have been Lydia, though there's virtually no support for that, and still less support is there for the fanciful idea that this may have been Paul's wife. And then, of course, there's the possibility that Paul simply intended to leave the person unnamed.

Well with all that disagreement is there any hope in answering the question? I think there is. First, we know that it can't refer to a woman, because the adjective "true" that comes before the word "yokefellow" is a masculine word. And using the singular to refer to the entire church is awkward and unlikely, as it has no analog through the rest of the New Testament. Further, it makes little sense to me that it could be Timothy or Epaphroditus, because they're there with him in Rome, and what Paul wants to tell them he could simply say to them face-to-face. And some people say, "Well, he put that in their for the Philippians' benefit." But in that case I would expect Paul to speak to the Philippians about them in the third person, just as he had done in chapter 2. So after all of that, we're down to just the unnamed man in Philippi.

But there's one other option that I didn't mention, and that is that this word, *suzugos*, is to be left untranslated, because it is a proper name. That is to say, Paul is referring to a man whose name is *Syzygus*. Certainly that would make sense, given how many proper names he's used in the context of these two verses: Euodia, Syntyche, and Clement. And so by calling the man, "true Syzygus," Paul employs a play on words and saying, effectively, "You who are a 'yokefellow' by name, now live up to your name, and be a true yokefellow, and help these dear women." And this seems to me to be the most likely option. We know that Paul has done a similar kind of thing before. You remember Onesimus, that runaway slave whom Paul writes on behalf of in Philemon. Well, the name *Onesimus* means "useful" in Greek, and Paul writes to Philemon and says in verses 10 and 11, "I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, who formerly was *useless* to you, but now is *useful* both to you and to me." And so in the same manner, Paul entreats Syzygus to live up to his name in the lives of Euodia and Syntyche.

And note what he **requests** him to do: "**Help** these women." And this word for "help" is a wonderful word that emphasizes camaraderie, and fellow-labor. One way to translate this word is "to take hold of together" (BDAG, 955). And perhaps the best illustration of it comes in Luke chapter 5. Turn there with me. In Luke 5, the men had been fishing all night long but had caught nothing, but Jesus instructs Peter to put out his nets for a catch. And in verse 6 Luke tells us, "When they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of fish, and their nets began to break; so they signaled to their partners in the other boat for them to come and **help** them." And that is the image of the **request** Paul makes of Syzygus, this true yokefellow. He's saying, "Dear Syzygus, you whom I've known to be a true friend of the saints, one who has proven that he can take up the yoke of Gospel ministry and plow forward in unity with the saints—these women have come upon a conflict that they're unable to solve on their own, a catch of fish that is too great and too cumbersome for them to handle without help. Dear friend, live up to your name, be a true yokefellow, come alongside these dear fellow soldiers of the Gospel, and **help** them bear this burden that has gotten the better of them."

Application

And so we have examined the identity of Euodia and Syntyche, the exhortation to unity that Paul levies upon them, and now the request for help he makes on their behalf. And I trust, by the illuminating power of the Spirit that the meaning of Paul's words has been made clear to you this morning. But now we turn to ask what lessons this text has to teach us, in our own lives, as we diligently seek to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. And in answering that question I want to draw **five lines of application**.

The Supreme Importance of Unity

First, we need to grasp **the supreme importance of unity** within the body of Christ. We've already observed the great emphasis that Paul has placed on unity throughout this letter. And that emphasis is well summarized by Paul's words to another congregation that was in the throes of the fractures of disunity, as he writes in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 10, "Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment." And we observe this **supreme importance** of unity by considering what lengths Paul went to in order to resolve this problem in Philippi. He thought this problem so serious that he resorted to the naming of names—to a public rebuke before the whole church!

I can only imagine what it would have been like for Euodia and Syntyche that Sunday morning—when Epaphroditus had delivered the letter and it was to be read to the congregation—how excited they must have been to hear from Paul, and to hear of his rejoicing amidst his trial, and hear the exhortations to *stand firm* amidst conflict, which would bring back such sweet memories of their laborers alongside him in those early days for the sake of the Gospel! And then to come to chapter 4 and hear that profusion of affection—my brethren, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown—and then hear *their* names read! And to have what follows be not a commendation for their past labors, but a rebuke for their immaturity (cf. Martin).

You say, "Paul, now was that really necessary? I mean, we've established that this is not *doctrinal* defection here. You've just been speaking about all these lofty realities in chapter 3: these solemn warnings against the most insidious kind of false teaching; the glorious communion to be had with Christ now in sanctification and at His coming in glorification; the deep love and tender affection that exists between believers; and the call to steadfastness against anything that would hinder us. And now, unity? Over *non-doctrinal* issues? You've got to call these two women out *by name* to tell them to get along?" You see, that ought only to show us how serious a problem is disunity among the brethren—that it is fit to be mentioned right alongside the rankest and most heretical forms of false doctrine. Disunity within the church is a cancer so serious that it must not be allowed to fester. If it does, it has the potential to metastasize and infect the rest of the congregation. And that kind of division destroys a church's ability to *stand firm* against the persecution, opposition, and false teaching that the Philippians were facing.

Pastor John writes, "Since conflict between influential people in a church will generate instability throughout the congregation, the two quarreling women at Philippi posed a danger to the entire church's stability. There was a real possibility that the Philippians would become critical, bitter, vengeful, hostile, unforgiving, and proud. Paul knew that unless decisive action was taken quickly, the Philippian church could dissolve into divisive, hostile factions. . . . Even if its doctrine is sound, disunity robs a church of its power and destroys its testimony. And a church

facing hostile external enemies cannot afford to have its members fighting among themselves” (270).

Dear friends, we need to grasp **the supreme importance of unity** within the body of Christ. Proverbs 17:14 says, “The beginning of strife is like letting out water, So abandon the quarrel before it breaks out.” It’s like a dam that has a tiny crack at the top. And the pressure of discord un-dealt-with is like the building pressure of that water. Over time, that crack gets larger and larger, until eventually a deluge breaks the dam wide open and destroys the lives of all those in its wake. Oh friends, how diligent we must be to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace among our brethren here (cf. Eph 4:3)!

Mature Believers Can Be the Cause of Disunity

Secondly, we learn from this text that **mature Christians can be the cause of disunity**. I remind you again how Paul describes these two women. First of all they are Christians—there is no doubt in Paul’s mind that their names, verse 3, are written in the book of life. They are among those enrolled as citizens on the register of heaven, which he spoke about in chapter 3 verse 20. And not only are they Christians, they are well-loved by the Apostle Paul. All of the endearing and affectionate designations of verse 1 apply to them, otherwise he wouldn’t mention them immediately afterwards! And not only are they beloved sisters whom have gained Paul’s confidence for their salvation; these are his faithful fellow-workers and fellow-soldiers, who have shared in his struggle for the cause of the Gospel in the earlier days of his ministry in Philippi! They were courageous—faithful to endure in ministry even in the midst of persecution!

And yet here they are, with that great spiritual résumé, endangering the unity of the church by clinging to their disagreement with one another. Friends, this teaches us the tragic reality even the most mature Christians—the most faithful servants, the most *zealous* for Christ—can, at times, take their eyes off Christ long enough to become focused on themselves, and in their pride to fracture the unity of the Spirit among God’s people.

And sometimes, the greatest strength of these people—their courage and their boldness and their zeal—is the very thing that proves to be their greatest weakness. In his sermon on this passage Pastor John makes a passing comment that I think is a marvelous observation. He says, “The enemy would twist and pervert any one of us who believes he has some good, noble cause to become the agent of discord if we’re not sensitive.” This disunity can even come as a result of a *noble* goal!

There are people who are extremely zealous that Christian parents protect their children from the influences of the world and not abandon their responsibility to disciple them. That’s a noble desire! But they insist that home-schooling is the *only* way to do that! And they cannot tolerate

anyone who doesn't see home-schooling as the only way! But there is neither any biblical command to home-school nor any biblical prohibition against other schooling choices! Or take another example. There are people who honestly desire the best for the health of their children and the children of others. Again, a noble, loving desire. But then they become convinced that the only way to truly love your child and provide for its health is natural childbirth, or childbirth with the assistance of pain medication; breastfeeding until such-and-such an age, or breastfeeding only until *such*-and-such an age; vaccination, or non-vaccination. And disagree with a mother convinced about these things—these things which have nothing to do with Scripture—and you'll be estranged from that person until you change your mind! Or again: There are people—praise the Lord—who are extremely zealous that Christians be faithful in regularly preaching the Gospel to the unsaved. That is among the noblest of desires! But then they get it in their head that one particular method of evangelism is the only biblical method—whether that be a certain script you go through, or it's the kind of thing that says, "Unless you preach in the open-air, you're not a faithful evangelist." And they go beyond what Scripture says, even with the noblest of goals, and they fracture the unity of the Spirit.

Friends, it was an issue just like these that Euodia and Syntyche were fighting about! Matters of personal opinion or conviction upon which there was no clear comment in Scripture. And their disagreement about this issue caused them to lose their focus—to be shaken loose from that orienting center of their lives: the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

And so even those of you who are mature in the faith and zealous for the things of the Lord—and perhaps you most of all!—need to heed Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 10:12 and apply it to preserving the unity of the Spirit: "Let him who thinks he stands *take heed* that he does not fall." I exhort you: Be of the same mind with your brothers and sisters in Christ!

Observe the Way Paul Carries Out His Pastoral Responsibilities

Third application: There is great instruction for us as we observe the way Paul carries out his pastoral responsibilities. Notice, first, the responsibility of leadership to correct and reprove those who are in their charge. And I won't belabor this because I've already said much about it, but it could not have been a comfortable thought for Paul to consider the embarrassment that Euodia and Syntyche were sure to feel as a result of his rebuke. And yet he was resolute in his responsibility as a shepherd to speak even uncomfortable things to those whom he loved dearly. And the exhortation I have for you all, here, is that you would not be put-off or easily offended by this kind of uncomfortable, yet loving, rebuke.

Could you imagine if, one Sunday when Phil and I were away, we arranged for one of the Bible study shepherds to read a letter from us from the pulpit, and in the letter we rebuked some of you *by name* for sins of yours that were having an adverse effect on the body? Well friends, I have

seen some of you buck against the loving correction of your leaders that is a *fraction* as invasive as that. Remember God’s Word in Hebrews 12:11: “All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.” So *love* correction, friends. Seek after it. Don’t become offended and rebuff against it.

And secondly, related to Paul’s pastoral responsibilities, notice not only his correction but the sensitive and tactful way in which he does it. Though he would have been within his rights as an Apostle to *command* Euodia and Syntyche, he employs the language of entreaty. The NAS translates those verbs as “I urge,” but the verb *parakaléō* has a much broader semantic range than that, and in this context means to tenderly entreat, to come alongside someone and speak gently to them. Paul is not barking out orders. He is begging them, pleading with them, encouraging them. And the same is true with Syzygus. It’s very likely that Syzygus was one of the elders of the church, to whom the letter was addressed in the opening verse. And Paul, as an Apostle, could have commanded him, “Get your act together Syzygus! How could you let something like this happen on your watch?! *Help* these women, will you?!” But we find nothing of the sort. Instead, he uses the verb *erōtáō*, which has the connotation of making a polite request. “I politely request, Syzygus, that you would apply what I have known you to do so well to the lives of these dear women in our care.” What a marvelous lesson to those of us who are pastors and elders and Bible study shepherds: of *bold* and yet *humble* spiritual leadership!

The Centrality of the Mind in Maintaining Unity

A fourth application. I want to briefly call attention to **how central the *mind* is in maintaining unity**. The way we think plays a central role in the unity of Christ’s church. His exhortation to Euodia and Syntyche is to “be of the same *mind* in the Lord.” In chapter 2 verse 2, he called them to make his joy complete by being of the same *mind*. In 2:5 he called them to have in themselves this *attitude* of humility—literally, this *mind* of humility—which was also in Christ Jesus. And in 3:15 he says, “Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this *mind*”—“let us think *this way* about this matter.” Friends, thinking properly is essential to spiritual unity. You see, despite what so many these days are *calling* unity, *true* Christian unity is some sort of mushy sentimentalism. It’s not achieved by the disengagement of our minds, the forgetting of our substantive differences, and agreeing to disagree. It’s by fully engaging our minds to grapple with God’s truth, and to have our sound theology be ground of our practice.

The Necessity of the Body in Maintaining Unity

And finally, we must also observe from this text **the necessity of the *body* in maintaining unity**. It may seem funny to say it, but *corporate* unity is not a solely *individual* matter. There is most certainly an individual responsibility to do all that you can—as far as it depends on you—to be at

peace with all men, Romans 12:18. But your responsibility as members of the body of Christ doesn't end there. Notice how Paul enlists the help of Syzygus in mediating this conflict between Euodia and Syntyche. The reason he made it a matter of public knowledge was not in order to shame them, but to enlist the help of the entire congregation to assist them in their need.

And it may be, as particular people have disputes with one another, that, after some concerted effort to arrive at an agreement, they still cannot come to a common mind on things. And so you, as the body, need to be prepared to assist your brothers and sisters. A brother may call upon you to go with him to a sinning brother, to be a witness at step two of the church discipline process outlined in Matthew 18. Don't despise that responsibility. Don't relish it! Don't rejoice over the fact that you get to rebuke someone! But don't abdicate that responsibility of being a peacemaker among the brethren. Or, you may know of a situation in which brothers and sisters are disputing, and they've given up on each other, or are pridefully waiting for the other to come to them first to apologize. My friend—my true yokefellow—consider your responsibility to mediate between these two saints, to be a peacemaker, as you seek to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Conclusion

And that is my final appeal to you. It is Paul's final appeal to us. A plea to all of the Euodias and the Syntyches among us here in GraceLife—dear friends, I exhort you to be of the same mind in the Lord. I exhort you to be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. If there has been a breakdown in your relationship with any of your brothers and sisters in Christ—and that would include even and especially members of your own family—go to the Lord and ask Him to give you a humble heart and a gentle spirit; behold afresh the sufficiency of Christ's provision for your every need on behalf of the Father as a result of His work in the Gospel, and with your heart full and satisfied by all that God is for you in Christ, go to your brother or sister and endeavor to resolve that issue.

And then, not only a plea to the Euodias and Syntyches, but also to the Syzyguses—to the true yokefellows among you: Please, I request of you, be earnest in coming to the aid of your brothers and sisters who have been embroiled in a conflict that is too great a burden for them to bear on their own, and be a peacemaker among them.

We would take much delight in the grace that God has shown us as a church in our ability by grace to be able to *stand firm* through the years amidst conflict. Amidst all sorts of moral and doctrinal compromise, God has been pleased to grant that Grace Church has stood firm in our witness before a watching world. But may we never forget that that kind of resolute steadfastness comes, first of all, by being unified. And so let us, GraceLife, be diligent to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.