

Together as One
Philippians 1:27
August 14, 2022

I always love an opportunity to visit a place I've never been to. This could be overseas, or in another part of the U.S. that I've not yet visited. Traveling domestically is pretty easy, but venturing to a new country requires a bit of documentation.

Imagine with me that you've been granted dual citizenship. In addition to your home country, you now hold another passport. If you could choose one other country where you held citizenship, where would it be? Imagine being able to travel without restriction. You wouldn't need to obtain a Visa before making your plans. You would have all the rights and privileges of a citizen of that nation.

Earlier this summer, during our sermon series through Statement of Faith, we came across a Scripture that spoke of our status as Christians. In Philippians 3:20, the Apostle Paul reminded the church in Philippi that,

“[O]ur citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil. 3:20, NIV).

Think about that for a moment. If you're a believer in Jesus Christ, in addition to your earthly citizenship, you also belong to the kingdom of God. This not only means that you've been promised a home in heaven, but it also means that here and now you are declared to be a citizen of heaven.

When Paul wrote to the church in Colossae, he reminded them of how we become citizens of heaven.

“For [God the Father] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13-14, NIV).

God took the initiative to rescue us from darkness. He made a way to bring us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, Jesus by forgiving all of our sins. Our redemption was bought with the shed blood of Jesus Christ, the one who died in our place and who made us righteous in him.

With these things in mind, turn with me to the end of Philippians chapter 1, verses 27-30. Our primary focus today will be on verse 27. This exhortation first given to the church in Philippi is something that we need to consider today. Paul said,

“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27, NIV).

As believers in Jesus and as citizens of heaven, we are called to live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

I don't usually second-guess the choices made by a Bible translation committee. Men and women who are far more knowledgeable about biblical studies have translated the Scriptures from their original Hebrew and Greek texts into the English Bibles we use today. However, if the NIV Translation Committee were to give me a call and ask my opinion (which they won't), I might offer a suggestion. My translation of the first part of verse 27 would sound something like this:

Your first priority as citizens of heaven is to live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

The wording that Paul used here in verse 27 is closely related to the phrase I referenced earlier where he said,

“[O]ur *citizenship* is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil. 3:20, NIV).

As residents of the city of Philippi, and as citizens of the Roman Empire, these first-century Christians were starting to feel the tension that came with holding dual citizenship in opposing kingdoms. New Testament scholar, Gordon Fee describes their situation well:

“Philippi owed its existence as a Roman colony to the special grace of the first Roman emperor, thus ensuring that the city would always have special devotion for the emperor. By the time of our letter, the primary titles for the emperor were [lord] and [savior]. ...In a city like Philippi this would have meant that every public event ...and much else within its boundaries would have taken place in the context to giving honor to the emperor, with the acknowledgment that (in this case) Nero was “lord and savior.” ...[But the Philippian believer’s] allegiance was to another [Lord], Jesus Christ ...and their allegiance was to another [Savior], whose coming from heaven they awaited with eager expectation.”¹

It's with this tension in mind that Paul gave his charge to the church in Philippi: *Your first priority as citizens of heaven is to live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.*

I want us to consider together what this text has to say to us today as twenty-first-century believers, those who likewise hold dual citizenship in this world as well as in heaven. What does it mean to *live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ?*

¹ Paul's Letter to the Philippians, NICNT, Gordon D. Fee, p. 31.

But first, I don't want us to miss the fact that this exhortation was *not* given to believers as individuals; Paul's command was a corporate charge issued to the church.

Certainly, each of us as deeply devoted followers of Jesus should aim to live our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. But in this passage, this command was expected to be lived out corporately. Living as citizens of heaven in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ was a shared responsibility.

In the remainder of this verse, we're going to observe two characteristics of a church committed to its calling as citizens of heaven to live together in a manner worthy of the gospel. Paul urged these believers first, to stand firm in the unity of the Spirit, and second, to strive together for the faith of the gospel. **Stand firm in the unity of the Spirit. Strive together for the faith of the gospel.** We're going to unpack these two ideas to better understand what they mean and then we're going to apply what we discover to our own context.

First, these heavenly citizens were to be characterized by a spirit of unity as one church, empowered by the Holy Spirit to stand firm against opposition to the gospel.

Paul hoped that even if his return to Philippi were delayed, he would at least hear encouraging reports of how the church was standing firm together against their opponents. At this point in history, Christians were not yet feeling the full weight of persecution for their faith. However, commitment to Christ and to living in a manner worthy of his gospel was surely counter-cultural.

It's not hard to imagine how a commitment to biblical ethics might find resistance in a pagan society. We can imagine the pressure believers might feel to follow Christ when the rest of their families remained loyal to the gods of Rome. We might be able to sympathize with those who were thinking through when they should render unto Caesar what was Caesar's and give to God what was God's.

When Paul spoke of standing firm, it was as if he pictured a platoon of soldiers engaged in battle and holding the line against the enemy's advance. A less violent, but more modern picture might be that of the offensive line of a football team protecting their quarterback from a hungry defense.² Of course, in either scenario, that line is only as strong as its weakest members.

I hope that all of us would be quick to admit our own weaknesses and would confess our need for help in order to stand firm against opposition to the gospel and cultural pressure to conform. This is why living in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ is

² Philippians, Matthew Harmon, p. 167.

intended to be a corporate activity. This is why Paul said that his desire was to hear that they were “stand[ing] firm in the one Spirit.”

If you’re reading from an NIV Bible, you’ll notice that the word *Spirit* is capitalized in verse 27. This is a reference to the Holy Spirit and is a reminder that our unity as the church is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

But how does a church stand firm together in the Spirit? What does this look like when we as a church put this into practice? One of the primary ways we can obey this command is by committing to pray together.

It’s no coincidence that in Paul’s teaching on the armor of God found in his letter to the Ephesians, that following his list of pieces made available to the church to withstand spiritual warfare, Paul concludes that passage with these words:

“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people. Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should” (Eph. 6:18–20, NIV)

How does the church stand firm in the Spirit as they seek to live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ? She commits herself to corporate prayer. Yes, it’s important that we commit to prayer in our private devotions, and to pray with our family, with our Life Group, or with our ministry team. But that’s not the same thing as the church—the whole church—committing to pray together.

A church that neglects a commitment to corporate prayer is not living out its calling as citizens of heaven and will struggle to live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Scripture is full of examples of God’s people praying together. We’ll look at two specific examples in a moment. But first, I need to clarify a misconception about corporate prayer. The purpose of corporate prayer isn’t amplification; the purpose of corporate prayer is unification. Let me explain.

Too often we get it in our minds that the more people we have praying, the more likely that prayer will be answered. If two people praying together is good, then ten people are better. If twenty gather for prayer, that’s great, but if one hundred show up to pray, watch out! To me, this feels like some kind of prayer lottery, where the more ping-pong balls we can get into the hopper, the more likely we will win a prize.

But that's not the picture Scripture gives us. Instead, one of the primary purposes of corporate prayer is to foster unity, that same concept of standing together in the Spirit that Paul spoke of.

One example of this is found in this same letter in verses 18-19 of Philippians chapter 1. Right after Paul finished wrestling with whether it was better for him to face death and be with Christ or to continue on in fruitful ministry on earth, Paul shared these words with his friends in Philippi:

“Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance” (Phil. 1:18b-19, NIV).

That's a picture of corporate prayer at work. The Philippian church had been praying for Paul while he was in prison. We don't get specifics of what they prayed for, but Paul was confident that his deliverance would be the result of their prayers and the Spirit's sovereign work. They were united in purpose, praying for Paul's release.

But my favorite example of corporate prayer and unity in the Spirit is found in Acts chapter 4. The passage is a little longer, so bear with me, but as I read, listen to how the church prayed and notice how the Holy Spirit was at work through their prayer. For context, this passage immediately follows the story of Peter and John's arrest for preaching the gospel.

“On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

“‘Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.’

Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly” (Acts 4:23-31, NIV)

I can't say that I've ever been to a church prayer meeting where we said, "Amen!" and then God answered by shaking the building. But I have left many prayer meetings with the confidence that God was already at work not only in answering our requests but also in uniting us together in the Spirit as those who prayed together.

There's a second characteristic of heavenly citizens who live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ found in this verse. Paul also expected that these believers would strive together as one church for the faith of the gospel.

We're less than a month from the start of a new school year, and at our house that also means the start of soccer season. I didn't play soccer when I was in school, but two of my girls have chosen it as their sport. Because of their interest in soccer, I've tried to watch a professional match on TV to better understand the game.

One of the things I've noticed is how many soccer teams (or in most of the world, football clubs) have the word *united* as part of their club name. For example, Manchester United and Leeds United in the English Premier League. In the U.S. the MLS includes the Atlanta United FC, D.C. United, or closer to home, our own Minnesota United.

I was curious as to why this was a trend. It turns out that one of the reasons is that historically when two or more clubs joined together to form one team, they would rename the new club and include the word *united*. So if there were a Bemidji North FC and a Bemidji South FC, they might join together to form the Bemidji United FC.

As a church, we're a bit like that, aren't we? Some of us are from the Bemidji area, and others of us are transplants. Some of us grew up in the Free Church, and others of us are former Lutherans, Methodists, Catholics, Baptists, and Presbyterians. Some of us are from Christian homes, and others have no spiritual heritage. Some of us know the old hymns by heart, and others prefer a more modern sound. Some of us would rather wear jeans to church, and others wear their Sunday best. You get the picture.

If we were a soccer team, would we be E-Free United? When the Bemidji community looks at what's going on here, do they see a church striving together for the faith of the gospel, or do they see a group that resembles a soccer team of six-year-olds all going for the ball at the same time and kicking each other in the shins?

How might we become E-Free United? How might we grow in striving together as one for the faith of the gospel? Again, I think one of the primary answers is by committing ourselves as a church to corporate prayer.

One of the blessings of a church of our size is that there are a variety of ministries and opportunities for spiritual growth. And yet our size can also present us with some real

challenges. Are all of our ministries and our programs committed to a common purpose? Are we all committed to *becoming deeply devoted followers of Jesus together*? How does the music ministry relate to the men's ministry? Is there any overlap between our women's ministry and our Wednesday night Kids Club? Do our youth and young adults have much in common with Senior Connection? To return to our soccer analogy, are our forwards, midfielders, defenders, and goalie playing the same game?

If we want to be a church pulling together in the same direction—striving together for the faith of the gospel, then we need to be a church that prays together regularly. Let me say that another way: if we're not praying together, then most likely we're not pulling together.

So let me invite you to put these things into practice. Let's aim to stand firm in the unity of the Spirit and to strive together for the faith of the gospel by committing as one church to corporate prayer.

It just so happens that today is the second Sunday of the month. Tonight we're gathering for Second Sunday Prayer at 6:30 PM. We set aside every second Sunday for this purpose: to come together as one church for corporate prayer.

Let me say again: the purpose of corporate prayer isn't amplification, it's unification. I'm not asking for more of you to come tonight so that our collective voice is loud enough to reach heaven. That's not how it works. No, I want to see more of us praying together so that more of us are pulling together for the sake of the gospel. I want to see more of our church family linking arms in prayer so that together we might stand firm in the Spirit as together we might engage a world that holds Jesus at arm's length.

By the way, I'm so encouraged to know that a group of you have committed to gather for prayer on Sunday mornings at 8:00 AM. Thank you for praying for our staff, our musicians, our volunteers, and for all that goes into preparing for our Sunday worship services. If that sound's like something you would like to be a part of, please join that group next Sunday at 8:00 AM in the Fireside Room.

Our first priority as citizens of heaven is to live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. We are called as one church to stand firm in the unity of the Spirit and to strive together for the faith of the gospel. I can think of no better way to come together as the church with these goals in mind than by committing to one another as the church family to come together for corporate prayer.

Let's pray.