

Live Worthy of the Gospel

A Study of *Philippians*, Sermon 3

Philippians 1:27-2:4 | November 19, 2023

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I wonder if you've ever been part of a uniform ceremony. Students at a military academy assembling for the first time in official dress; a White Coat ceremony for doctors or nurses? Maybe you can picture Olympic athletes parading behind their flag, appearing for the first time in their nation's uniform. Perhaps you're a coach and know what it's like to see a young man or woman put on their school's jersey for the first time.

Years ago, I was a graduate student at a school in England founded in 1209. It had lots of traditions. One happened early in the fall and was known as matriculation day. Students had to present themselves wearing their academic gown—a flowing jet-black gown with no sleeves. I remember putting on my college tie with its university crest, then the academic gown, then walking down the cobblestone streets beneath the ancient spires on the way to the matriculation class photo.

Something comes over us at moments like these—when, by some ceremony or official dress, we are made part of something far bigger than ourselves. We feel a sense of personal worth, on the one hand. Something of the collected valor of a nation, or the pride of a school, or the reputation of an academy, is imparted to us. We can't help but stand a bit taller.

But there is something more than a heightened sense of our worth that arises. We also feel a new sense of calling, of responsibility—what the French call *noblesse oblige*, with a noble calling comes a noble obligation. As I walked across campus that matriculation day, now an official part of this ancient fraternity of students, a great surge welled up inside me: I will work with all my might, to live worthy of such an institution.

It's with this obligation of a noble calling in mind, that Paul turns to instructions for the Philippian Christians. He opens in verse 27—as though holding a single finger high in the air—saying:

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ (1:27).

“Live worthy of the Gospel,” Paul says, “live up to your noble calling as God’s sons and daughters, as representatives of Christ’s kingdom.”

Of course, the Philippians would know Paul does not mean they must become worthy to receive the Gospel. The Gospel is a message about grace, a fundamental premise of which is not our worthiness, but unworthiness: “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

The Gospel is not a set of moral commands we must do, not advice we must keep in order to earn God’s favor. The Gospel is not advice, it’s news—the good news about what God has done for us, done to us. The Gospel is the message of God’s grace, offered to us not because of our merit, but because of God’s mercy.

But while the Gospel is free grace, it is not cheap grace. Clothed in the righteousness of Christ, called sons and daughters of God, made ambassadors of Christ’s kingdom—this noble calling comes with noble responsibilities. Live out of this grace, and live up to this Gospel, is Paul’s message for us today.

Those of us who are Christians must therefore allow Paul’s command to hit us squarely: what does it mean to live worthy of God’s sacrificial grace towards us? Paul offers us two marks in our passage.

I. Stand Firm (1:27-30)

The first quality of a life worthy of the Gospel is that it stands firm:

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm.... (1:27).

Paul’s calling them to stand firm because he has in mind various forms of opposition that these Christians face. He goes on in verse 28 to tell them to “not be frightened in anything by your opponents” (v28), then in verses 29-30 that it’s been granted to them to “suffer for Christ,” engaged in a “conflict” similar to his. Religion and public life were intertwined in the culture of Rome. The Philippian Christian’s recent change in allegiance from calling Caesar Lord to calling Jesus Lord

probably was being felt in how they participated in all sorts of public events and professional associations (guilds).

Jesus said his followers would face persecution. Paul models this in his imprisonment. And though absent from them, he is eager to call them to stand firm in the face of it.

What marks a life that is worthy of the Son of God, who stood firm in the face of opposition, who for our sake faced the dark powers of sin and death? Not a fickle commitment but resolved fortitude. Jesus calls his followers “the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14-16). Paul will call these Philippians to “shine as lights in a dark world” (2:15). But we must not picture a Christian as a quaint candlestick.

We are more like a lighthouse, built at the far point of a promontory jutting out into the sea. We must be built in such a way not only to shine brightly but to stand firmly. The lighthouse, with its strong foundation and carefully laid brick, is built to stand firm in the midst of storms—and if it won’t, if it can’t, if it crumbles and caves, it does no one any good.

How then do we stand firm? Paul gives us three keys: to stand firm we must have (1) convictions, (2) comrades, and (3) composure.

Notice that the language of “striving” follows the call to stand in verse 27: “standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.”

What are they striving for? They are striving “for the faith of the gospel,” which means the apostolic teaching, the doctrines of Christianity.

To stand firm, we must be for something. Notice Paul is not calling them to stand against something. Those who only know how to be against are not nearly as strong as those who have something to stand for.

And we must stand for God’s truth, as revealed in God’s Word. If our Christianity is rooted in cultural nostalgia or a social cause we feel Christianity may support, or in our feelings, it will not stand firm.

I remember being downtown some years ago when an important decision came out from the Supreme Court. It was a decision that cut against the teaching of Jesus, and several biblical doctrines. And there was jubilation in the streets—the culture was so happy. As I walked down the street I felt like an alien. I knew this would mean great confusion for Christians, and I imagined it would lead to the falling away of many. I felt like I'd been hit by a wave.

What also happened to me that evening was a sense of wobbling: how could I trust my own convictions? How could I be right, and all these other people be wrong? The only thing that ended up securing me was a careful return to biblical foundations—to God's Word—and the fellowship of other faithful Christians.

This experience taught me something so valuable: the convictions that will stand firm, are not rooted in culture, nor courts, nor feelings. They are rooted in the Word of God. Only when we stand firmly on God's Word, will we stand firmly in this world.

My experience that summer also pointed to the second key to standing firm, comradery. My convictions are stronger when they are our convictions—shared with other Christians. Notice the theme of community, Christian comrades: they do not stand firm alone, but rather are to be “standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving side by side” (v27).

Paul's language is drawn from the arena and the battlefield. We are to picture athletes rowing together, or soldiers standing together. We will not stand firm on our own. “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:12). We stand firm by standing together.

There is a third dimension to firmness Paul mentions, composure.

He goes on in verse 28, “not frightened in anything by your opponents.” The word “frightened” Paul uses appears in Greek literature from the time referring to horses who are easily spooked in battle. “Don't be caught off guard,” Paul says, “when your Christian faith finds opposition from the world.”

These hardships, in as much as they are because of your faith, are divinely appointed:

For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake (v29).

Here is a Christian principle we do well to remember: God has determined that the worth of His Son will be displayed, in part, when His Son's people remain faithful to Him when it's costly. In those moments, Jesus is shown to be the "pearl of great price."

In the very same way that faith has been granted to us, Paul says that so too suffering has been granted to us and for the sake of Christ.

The builder of the lighthouse built knowing storms would come. Christians, prepare yourselves for opposition—do not be like a horse startled at the first sound of cannon fire. Remain composed. Stand firm.

I started working on a document this summer titled, "TFCA at 2050." In it, I list several things I'd want to be true of our church twenty-seven years from now, in 2050. The first goal on that list is this: "To Be Faithful," after which I write:

We did not plant our church. We inherited it. Since 1732 Christians in Northern, VA, established, supported, and loved the Falls Church Anglican. We exist, in part, because of their faithfulness: their prayers, their tithes, their tears, their preaching, their discipleship, their constancy. It would be heart-breaking to be the generation that lets this legacy of faithfulness die—was must stand firm.

Christians, we must never neglect our teaching ministry. We must know and understand the Christian faith. We must catechize, teach, our children. We must strive, side by side, to know the doctrines of our forebearers. We must shrink back when storms come.

If you are here and not a Christian, I would simply pose to you this question: by what convictions do you stand? What upholds you in your storms: the teachings of a philosopher? The opinions of a political leader? Your family? Yourself? Are these really strong enough to steady your soul?

A life worthy of the gospel of Christ stands firm upon the Word of God.

Firmness, however, is not all. In 2:1-4, Paul turns from the circumstances surrounding the community to its inner life. And he turns from firmness to tenderness. Here, then, is the second quality of a life worthy of the gospel: humble love.

II. Humble Love (2:1-4)

The unity and love of the people of God bear witness about God

Before we look at these verses, it will be helpful to recall something about what God is up to in the world. Since the calling of Abraham, God's plan of putting the world to right involves not just saving individuals. It involves saving a people. And God has determined that this people will bear his name before the rest of the world. So in the Old Testament, as the people of God organized themselves around the city of Jerusalem, we hear the Lord say, "In Jerusalem will I put my name" (2 Kings 21:4); "I have chosen Jerusalem for my Name to be there" (2 Chronicles 6:6). When God also calls Israel to be a light to the nations, what he is doing, essentially, is attaching his reputation to this people. People will know the Lord when they know his people.

It is the same in the New Testament, with the Church. The Church is called the body of Christ, we represent Christ to the world. Therefore, the quality of our life together is like a dimmer switch: when it goes up, the Gospel shines brighter; when it goes down, people no longer see anything here worth looking at.

This is why Paul calls, in verses 2:1-4, Christians to be united, and that unity is maintained by humble love.

Paul begins by reminding the Philippians of the love they have received in Christ:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy (2:1).

The ensuing command for them to love and serve one another is meant to arise from how they have been loved and served by Christ.

The basic form of the command is then spelled out in verses 3-4:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

A life worthy of the sacrificial love of Christ offers sacrificial love to others. If we are to live a life worthy of Christ, we must love the people that Christ loves. Let me remind us of two qualities that fuel such love: humility and commitment:

Paul says, “in humility count others more significant than yourselves (2:3).”

Humility was not a virtue in the ancient world. The word more often carried the sense of servility and weakness. The Greeks and Romans certainly didn't prize it. Historian Tom Holland writes of that culture :

To blaze like a golden flame, and to attain a godlike pitch of strength and valor: this it was ... to be most fully a man.... Iron courage, unbending discipline, mastery of body and soul: these were the qualities that had won the Roman people their rule of the world.... As on the battlefield of Troy, so in the new world order forged by Rome—it was only by putting others in the shade that a man most fully became a man.¹

A local church is not made up of heroes seeking vainglory. We are sinners who need a savior. And what is more, Paul will go on in the next verses to hold up the model of Christ:

Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant... And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:6-8).

Humility—having a proper estimation of your own neediness as a creature and as a sinner—was not a virtue in the ancient world, nor is it one today. We instead prize self-esteem and self-expression.

The Christian Gospel is about God's mercy. "Mercy never thrives among the proud."² A life worthy of the Gospel of mercy is a humble life; a life that looks around a church, asking who can be served, who can be lifted up.

Finally, commitment. Paul says, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interest of others" (2:4).

Who are these others? And what will it entail to look to their interests?

These others were the other people Jesus had called in Philippi—the others who made up the body of Christ there. And one could not look into their interest with a passing glance—this requires a determined commitment to them.

Today is membership Sunday at our church, and we welcome the hundred or so people who've become members in 2023. They've taken our membership course, affirmed our statement of faith, been interviewed by church leadership, and shared their testimony of coming to faith in Christ. And also, they've affirmed our membership covenant.

I want to read a few lines from that covenant to close our sermon—because it is our church's attempt to make clear what it looks like to love Christ with a committed-love toward his people.

These new members have covenanted to:

Gather Regularly Around Our Common Hope: they are committing to be with us on the Lord's day, worshiping and fellowshiping.

Work and Pray for the Unity of the Spirit and Bond of Peace in This Church: they are committing to walk alongside one another in brotherly love; to bear the fruits of the spirit in showing affectionate care and watchfulness over one other... to rejoice in each other's happiness and endeavor with tenderness to bear each other's burdens and sorrows.

And in joining our church, they are being met by our commitment to love them in the same.

Has anyone committed to love you like that?

Friends, in a busy and digital world, where we can become so self-focused, where commitments are thin, how can we live lives worthy of the gospel of Christ? By humble love. By counting others more significant than ourselves. By looking not only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others (2:3-4).

How do you live worthy of the Son of God, who stood firm in the face of sin and death for you? You stand firm—knowing you stand in Him; knowing He stands with you.

How do you live worthy of the Son of God, who tenderly and mercifully loved you, even while you were a sinner? You practice humble love—knowing that it is merely His mercy and tenderness flowing through you.

Stand Firm. Love Humbly. It is only fitting to those of us who have been clothed with Christ, set apart as representatives of His heavenly kingdom.

Questions for small groups:

Members of your small group are encouraged to listen to the sermon if they were not there on Sunday. We also encourage you to begin your small group meeting with prayer and then by reading *Philippians 1:27-2:4*. The below questions are suggestions for how to have a meaningful discussion about the passage—but you may have better questions that come up in your group.

1. Do you feel as though you need to earn God's love for you? Read *John 3:16* and *Romans 5:8*, and be reassured that God's love toward you, in Christ, is sheer grace and mercy. You never have to earn it.
2. If God so loved you that he gave his only Son (*John 3:16*), how does that motivate your heart to act toward others?
3. Do you struggle to stand firm for the Christian faith? What areas of belief feel the most under threat in your life?
4. Do you have a Christian friend who helps you stand firm? If so, what is an example of a time they did so? How might you help someone stand firm?
5. Is there anyone in your church family that you are planning to serve this week? Read *Philippians 2:3-4* and think of one person you can apply this to.

Endnotes

1. Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2019) 32, 46.
2. Amy Dimarcangelo, *Go and Do Likewise: A Call to Follow Jesus in a Life of Mercy and Mission*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023)