

Text: Phil. 4:1-5

Title: "Caring for the joyful unity of the local church"

Time: 2/6/2022 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: We have come to the final chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians, and as we begin, I thought it would be helpful to glance back at the ground that we have already covered.

Philippians is about the goal of the believer's life to become more like Christ. In chapter one, Paul emphasized praying like Christ and evangelizing like Christ. Chapter two is about serving like Christ, which can only be done with a Christlike selflessness. More recently, we saw that chapter three is about dying like Christ through suffering and living like Christ through resurrection power.

And now as we come to the final chapter, as is true in so many of Paul's epistles, we find that becoming more like Christ will have a very practical effect on the way a believer cares for his local church. Philippians 4 is about caring for the church like Christ.

Years ago, I found myself sitting in the kitchen with a brother in the Lord who had not been out to church in a long time. He was the brother of a pastor friend of mine, and he had come to one of our men's morning sessions during some evangelistic meetings we had hosted.

When I asked this brother why it was that he had not been out to church for so long, he explained to me that his wife was Roman Catholic and that he believed the Lord Jesus wanted him to love his wife and not offend her by going to a Bible-believing Protestant church without her on Sunday.

He seemed sincere as he spoke of the necessity of avoiding church so that he could love his wife properly.

As I heard his explanation, one passage came to my mind. It was Paul's instruction that we love our wives *as Christ loved the church* (Eph. 5:25-27, "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish").

I explained to my friend that Jesus wants us to love our wives the way He loves His church. So we cannot truly love our wives the way Jesus wants us to while at the same time failing to love Jesus's bride, the church. Jesus would never want us to love our wives by loving His church less, which is His wife. My friend was unconvinced by my exhortation, and he continued to believe that neglecting Jesus's church was the key to loving his wife.

Jesus had no human wife except His church. Paul too had been called to a life of marital singleness so that he might better love Christ's church (1 Cor. 7:8, "I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, it is good for them if they abide even as I."). Deep in the heart of Jesus, and deep in the heart of the Apostle Paul, was a loving care for local churches like our own. Philippians 4 encourages us to become more like Christ in that way.

We will focus this morning only on the first five verses of the Chapter, which I have entitled, "Caring for the joyful unity of the local church." I will mention three truths about caring for our local church's joyful unity as we become more like our Savior in this very practical way.

I. Care for our church's joyful unity by patiently developing Christian love for one-another (v. 1).

Illustration: As Valentine's Day approaches, we are reminded that the world in which we live likes to talk a lot about "falling in love." While living in South Carolina, our family attended a church where our godly pastor reminded us often that you fall in mudpuddles, not in love. True Christian love is not something you simply fall in and out of.

Application: The Apostle Paul dearly loved the Philippian church. He calls them his "dearly beloved ones" twice in verse 1. His love for them was strong like the love of a family. They were his brothers and sisters. This love meant that he longed for them when he was absent from them. You did not have to tell Paul that the New Testament requirement for believers is that they do not forsake the assembling of themselves together (Heb. 10:25). Paul could not always be there, but his love always made him long to be there. He was always there when he could be because of his love.

Connecting with the Philippian church and ministering his gifts to them was the joy and reward of his life (*crown = stephanos* – the wreath worn by the victor in the Greek games). Serving the church made life worth living. He did all he could to encourage these fellow believers to stand fast in the Lord, and he did so because he dearly loved them. He felt it was up to him to keep them from discouragement.

We do not naturally fall into the Christian love that Paul expresses for this local church. We do not walk into a church for the first time and feel what Paul felt for the people who are gathered there. Paul did not "fall in love" with the Philippian church. Their Christian love for each other came from a history of faithful ministry and some difficult suffering together. They had prayed together and worshipped to-

gether and served together and wept together. They had eaten together and had spent time together. Especially for us today, the gift of time is one of the most expensive gifts we can give our fellow believers. Christian love gives that gift.

We need to care for our church with this Christian love. This Christian love is foundational to any hope we have for the joyful unity we need in order to be blessed of the Lord in our ministry. Do you love your fellow believers at New Boston Baptist Church with true Christian love?

If you and I can honestly say we do this morning, we will have to confess in the same breath that we love the people of this church, not because we fell in love with them, but because in the grace of God His Spirit has empowered us to pray together and worship together and serve together and weep together. The grace of God's Spirit has enabled us to care for the joyful unity of our church through the love that Christ has for His church. Jesus died for us. He loves us. Therefore, to be like Him we must love one another.

II. Care for our church's joyful unity by facing challenges to our love for one another (vv. 2-3).

Illustration: Years ago the New York Yankees were playing the Baltimore Orioles for the American League Championship. It was during the fourth inning of game four of a seven game series that something strange happened. The catcher put down the sign for the pitch that he wanted the pitcher to throw, but the pitcher kept shaking his head waving off the sign and asking for something different.

This went on for a while until finally the catcher went to the mound to see if they could get this confusion straightened out. They could not, and soon it became obvious that they were having a strong disagreement about the matter right

there on the mound, in front of their teammates, the crowded stadium, and the national TV audience. After a few minutes of this, the pitching coach came out to try to bring the two players to an agreement, and soon the pitcher was yelling at him too.

As a member of the national TV audience, I was not in the game. I was on my couch at home. I am neither a Yankees fan nor an Orioles fan, and so as I sat there on my couch I really did not care much about who might win the game. I thought the weird argument was an unnecessary delay in the entertainment the game was supposed to be providing my viewership. With my remote control in hand, I threatened to bring the whole sad state of affairs to an ignominious end by changing the channel. I thought the way the Oriole players were acting was a bit unnecessary, and I wished they would just pick a pitch and get on with the game.

Application: What made that pitcher and catcher so argumentative over the next pitch to be thrown was how much they cared about winning the game. They were in the game, and they cared who won. On my couch at home, I thought the argument was a bit silly because I did not care much about the game in the first place.

Euodia and Syntyche were like those Oriole baseball players. Paul describes them as players in the game of local church gospel ministry. They were a couple of sisters in the Lord who cared deeply about the work of their local church. They had labored with Paul and Clement and others, and their names were known to be in the book of life. Their lives of faithfulness had backed up their professions of faith.

So that is the kind of believer who gets trapped in a loveless dispute with another believer. It is easy not to be involved in a dispute like this if you are not in the game. I might claim

that I was much more agreeable sitting on my couch with my remote control in hand than those two Orioles players were when it came to the decision about the next pitch. But they cared whether they won, and I did not. One sure way to never have a disagreement with a fellow-church member is to never be a church member. But the work of the gospel is too important to true believers for that approach.

So, it is safe to say that among people like Euodia and Syntyche, who care deeply about the well-being of the local church, disagreements will arise that challenge the health of the joyful unity of the local church. You may be experiencing a disagreement like that in relation to another believer.

What can we do if this is the case? Our passage suggests two things.

First, we need to be of the same mind in the Lord. Most of the things that divide the Euodias and Syntyches of local churches have little to do with what it really means to be “in the Lord.” At times, the difference we are disputing does determine whether or not we can say with confidence that we are together in the Lord. More often, the difference being debated is not that important. We recover from this division only when we let what is truly important in the Lord be more important than what divides us.

If a professing believer raises a dispute against sola fide — that we are saved by faith and not works, or sola Christus — the Jesus is God’s Son and our only Savior, or sola scriptura — that Scripture is our only rule of faith and practice, then we have a situation that precludes our being of the same mind in the Lord with this disputant.

But if a sister in Christ gets upset because the Sunday schedule has been rearranged, or a brother is upset because the

repair job has been delayed, then we have a situation in which people who care about the Lord's work need to remind themselves about what is truly important – to be of the same mind in the Lord, to major on the “in the Lord” majors, and to not make a big deal about issues that have nothing to do with whether or not we shall be “in the Lord.”

The second thing we have to do as a congregation to face love challenges is to help one another. Paul calls on a “true yokefellow” to help these women (v. 3). He addresses this one as though everyone would know to whom he is referring, because he does not use a name. We do not know who this one was, but the Philippian church knew immediately.

When it comes to the maintenance of unity between two believers, who should help with the situation is often equally obvious. I believe this yokefellow was Lydia. She would have been affected by the dispute between fellow sisters in Christ in a way few others in the church would have been.

The command “help” is in the middle voice, meaning that Paul encourages this person to help herself by helping them. This form of the verb is used in Luke 5, where a boat of fishermen call to another boat to help them bring in a catch that was too great for them (v. 7). Helping another boat with their catch is a great way to share in that catch, to help yourself. That is the idea here. In every case, disputes like this harm us all. Helping to resolve disputes like this provides the help we all need. So any dispute between our Euodias and our Syntyches needs our help to work out and correct.

III. Care for our church's joyful unity by rejoicing in the Lord (vv. 4-5).

Application: In the end, the joyful unity of our relationship to one another depends on each of our relationships with the

Lord. It takes strength to care for a local church's joyful unity, and strength comes from the joy we experience in our Lord. The joy of the Lord is our strength (Neh. 8:10).

Do you and I have enough spiritual strength this morning to be a local church that cares for its joyful unity? Do we have strength to love, strength to correct face our love challenges, and strength to display a gentle spirit toward one another? This strength can only come to us as we joy in the Lord.

Conclusion: Why go through all this trouble? Why spend your days caring for a local church's joyful unity? Why love and face love's challenges? In one phrase, Paul tells us why – *the Lord is at hand*. Jesus is at hand, right at the door. He will come suddenly. He is coming as the One who loves His church the way husbands are supposed to love their wives. He will ask us whether we have loved her too, whether we cared for her joyful unity. Becoming more like Christ means sharing in a greater way His love for His church.

“A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction – the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*