

The Main Thing

Moving Forward, Part 6

Philippians 1:27

Then there is the interesting Greek legend, some say came from the Pen of Aesop, of Aesop's Fables. This was the tale of a beautiful woman named Atlanta and her long line of hopeful suitors.

Atlanta loved to run . . . and, legend had it, she was the fastest runner in her Greek city state. Since her parents were insisting that she choose a suitor, she decided to challenge them all to a race. With one condition; she would marry the man who won a footrace against her, but all those who lost would be put to death.

Well, that's one way to end your dating life – but actually, a number of young men accepted her challenge, convinced they could outrun her. No one told them she would take them to a Mall, where no man can keep up with a woman . . . okay, I made that part up.

One race commenced and then another and still another . . . all the men lost and all of them lost their lives.

But then a rather brilliant young man came along named Hippomenes. He also accepted the challenge, yet before entering the footrace against her, he had a jeweler fashion three small apples made of solid gold. Before the race began, he tucked them inside his clothing.

When the race began, Atlanta began to pull ahead of him, fairly easily, but he took from his pocket a golden apple and tossed it in front of her. The glitter of that exquisite jewelry caught her eye, and as she stopped to pick it up and as she did, he shot past her and was off and away.

Atlanta recovered and caught up . . . the race was halfway there and she began to outdistance him once again.

Another golden apple rolled off the track ahead of her and again, she was struck by the glitter of the gold and she ran over to pick it up, allowing Hippomenes again to sweep past her.

The goal line was now in sight and Atlanta ran like she'd never run before.

As they neared the goal, she once more edged ahead and, one last time, she spotted an exquisite golden apple just off the track. As she momentarily wavered between her greed and the goal, Hippomenes swept past her and won the race.

Legend has it that they were married and lived happily ever after.

I seriously doubt that part . . . the rest of it could be true – not really.

As with any of Aesop's Fables, they all come with a moral to the story.

In this case, it would be to buy your wife jewelry if you want to stay ahead of her.

More than likely, the moral of the story is to never take your eyes off the goal . . . no matter what glitters just off the path.

The Philippians were running well . . . their focus was on the gospel of Christ and the glory of God.

But Paul is still concerned. He knows the wolves are running along that path as well; ready to take any advantage they can against the flock of Christ's church.

More than anything, Paul wants the church to stay focused on the main thing.

In fact, that's the way he begins his next few words to them, in *Philippians chapter 1*.

Paul lifts his hand in warning them to make sure they keep the main thing, the main thing.

Someone once said, “The main thing in life is to keep the main thing, the main thing.”

And just what is that – for the believer today?

If you’re reading through Paul’s letter, many agree that *Philippians chapter 1 and verse 27* is the primary thesis of Paul’s letter. These next few verses provide Paul’s main idea from which all other ideas are hinged.

As *verse 27* opens, Paul will deliver to these runners in the faith, the main thing in the Christian’s goal in life.

Let’s go back and pick it up at *verse 25*. *And convinced of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, 26. so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again. Now verse 27. Only . . . stop.*

Only!

Linguists point out that this word, monos (μονος), would be like lifting your finger in warning – to make a [very critical] point.ⁱ

Only this!

You could paraphrase it, “Just one thing!”ⁱⁱ

Only this one thing . . . used by your mother, one author wrote, who told you that you could do anything you wanted while she was away, “**Only . . . only . . .** get the dishes done and do your homework first.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In other words, there is something that takes priority over everything else.

Paul is saying, “I want you to keep just this one main thing in mind!”

He’s about to deliver the primary thing on his to-do list for the believer.

Imagine if Paul were to show up and say to us today, “Listen, as you live out your Christian life in the family and work and school and play . . . there’s one thing that I want you to do above everything else – and that one thing is to – _____.

What would that one thing – that main thing for you to do as a Christian. The main thing to keep in mind as a Christian is _____.

Here’s what Paul says is the main thing – notice – **Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.**

Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy – by the way, that’s 6 English words that translate one Greek word.

And in order to understand what the main thing was in Paul’s mind, we’d better understand the emphasis of one verb.

The word Paul uses is the verb from politeuomai (πολιτευομαι) from which we get our word, politics, or political allegiances.

Polis is the Greek noun for city.

Paul is effectively saying, “Live in your city as a worthy citizen [of the gospel of Christ].”

Now this obviously meant something to the Philippians because Paul didn’t have to go into an elaborate explanation on what it meant to be a citizen of their city-state – as citizens belonging to their city.

Remember, Philippi was a Roman colony. It had been granted the prestigious “Italian right” from the Emperor which granted the city the right to be viewed as an extension of capital city of Rome.^{iv}

As a result, there was a sense of incredible patriotic pride.

Mention the Roman emperor and these citizens would be quick to praise him; mention the Roman Empire and these citizens of Philippi would swell with pride; mention being a **citizen** of Rome and they would stand even taller.

We know from history that these Roman colonies were considered miniature Romes throughout the Empire. The people dressed as if they lived within the capital city. They wore Latin togas, spoke the Latin language, called their leaders by Latin names and never forgot their citizenship – no matter how far away they were from the capital – they belonged to Rome.^v

What this meant in practical terms was that these Philippians would be:

- highly devoted in their occupation to the betterment of their city;
- they would be careful not to discredit the polis – their city;
- they would be loyal in their political viewpoints so that they lined up with the empire;
- they would want to live in such a way that they would be considered honorable citizens.

When you understand that kind of context, you can easily make the connection. Paul is effectively saying:

- Be highly devoted in your occupation to the betterment of God’s purposes on earth;
- Be careful not to discredit the city of God;
- Be loyal in your viewpoints to the word of God ;

- Live in such a way so that you will be honorable members of the family of God.

Paul is effectively telling these believers to live as worthy citizens – and not necessarily to the city of Philippi – although good Christians make the most productive citizens – but as citizens belonging to the city and people of God.

In other words, if the citizens of Philippi were so devoted to the honor of their human kingdom, how much more should we be devoted to the church of our Lord today on earth and to His coming Kingdom?^{vi}

I mean, listen, if the average citizen of Philippi was so careful not to discredit his city and his emperor, imagine how seriously we should view anything that will discredit the church and weaken the credibility of our gospel message?

What kind of citizens are we for the sake of our city here on earth. But even more – what kind of citizens are we for the sake of our Savior in Heaven?

John MacArthur writes in his commentary on Philippians – When the unsaved look at the church and do not see holiness, purity and virtue, there appears to be no reason to believe the gospel it proclaims . . . when Pastor’s commit gross sins without [consequences]; when church members lie, steal, cheat, gossip and quarrel; and when congregations seem to care little about sin and hypocrisy in their minds, the world is understandably repulsed by their claims to love and serve God and the name of Christ is dishonored.^{vii}

You see, Paul is appealing to the basic desire every Philippian had to represent well his Roman citizenship.

Why? Because what people thought of him, they would think of Rome and the Roman Emperor.

Now don’t misunderstand, Paul isn’t saying that we need to live perfectly so that we can be worthy of salvation. Paul is writing to Christians here.

We don’t behave so that we can go to heaven; we behave as good citizens of heaven because we’re going there; and here’s the main thing to keep in mind as we travel there – make sure that heaven has a good reputation on earth by the way we behave.

I’ve traveled to many places in the world, and it’s always interesting to find out how people in other countries view Americans.

Some people are suspicious; some people are awkward; some people are angry and unkind; others are generous and grateful.

I remember traveling to one particular country 20 years ago and I remember walking through the marketplace in one town with one of our global development teammates. And I noticed people just sort of looking at me . . . just kind of staring. They knew I was a visitor and they knew I was more than likely an American.

I asked my friend what they were thinking of me as an American. He laughed and said, “Many of these people automatically think that since you’re an American, you are sexually promiscuous and you are carrying a gun.”

How’s that for a starting place?

What do people think about the church – little extensions of the Empire of Heaven? What do people in your world think of Christianity? More than likely, it isn’t necessarily positive; and one of the primary reasons is because they’re going to think immediately of the Christians they know – and draw their conclusion.

Listen, if we’re living in a manner worthy of the gospel, then we should be demonstrating to our world that the gospel has the power to change lives because it is changing ours!

And the truth is, the world around us will only know the power of the gospel by what it sees the gospel doing to us.

You may have heard it before, but the truth remains – your life may be the only Bible people around you will ever read.

The classic little poem reads:

*You are writing a gospel
A chapter each day
By the deeds that you do
And the words that you say
Men may read what you write
Whether faithful or true;
Say, what is the gospel
According to you?^{viii}*

Paul writes here – **Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.**

How do you do that, Christian? How do we do that, church?

Paul will go on to deliver three different aspects of how to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

We’ll cover the first one today.

Notice – the middle part of **verse 27** – **so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I may hear of you . . .** in other words, Paul effectively holds up his finger and says, “Now listen – this takes

priority – this is what I want to hear about your lives and your testimony and your reputation – whether someone else tells me or I see it first hand –

And by the way, word about each local church was spreading!

Paul wrote to the church in Rome – I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world (Romans 1:8)

He wrote to the Corinthian church – It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you (1 Corinthians 5:1)

To the Galatian church he wrote that he had heard that they were so quickly deserted the one who called you by the grace of Christ (Galatians 1:6-7)

To the Thessalonian church he wrote, Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love (1 Thessalonians 3:6)

Paul knew.

This isn't a threat, by the way – later on Paul is going to tell the Philippians that he expects to rejoice when he hears how they're doing.

And this is what Paul wants to hear about this church and these believers:

1. Let me put it this way: I want to hear that **your conduct is committed to repairing a dis-unifying spirit**

Notice – *that you are standing firm in one spirit.*

One spirit refers to a common spirit – a common ambition – a common purpose and a unified goal. More than likely there is Semitic parallels between Paul's use of *one spirit*, and then in the next phrase, *one mind*.

The key point is oneness – unity.

The church in Philippi was to dig in their heels and stand firm in unity – they were to be committed to repairing any disunified issue or spirit among them.

That'll be hard work, right?

That isn't easy in a family and it's even harder in a church family.

And the more people involved the harder it is!

I did a little research and found the formula for potential relationships within a family of 4. The number is 6.

- Dad can have a relationship with his son and with his daughter. That's 2 different relationships.

- And mom will have a different relationship and rapport with her son and with her daughter. That's 2 more relationships.
- And then the mother and father can have a relationship, which is a good thing too.
- And the son and the daughter can have a relationship – hopefully it doesn't end in bloodshed.

6 possible relationships – 6 different conversations – in a family of 4.

If you have 7 children and you're a family of 9, you have the possibility of 36 different relationships.

That's why trips in the car are so much fun. And that's why there's at least one argument going on at any given moment – until everybody's asleep.

Listen, the more people, the more you have to continually repair disunity.

By the way, if you'd like to do the math on your own, for your business or your family, the formula is $R = N(N-1) / 2$ (for relationship) $R = N$ (number of people) times $N-1$ divided by 2.

You're going to need to know this to get into heaven.

$$R = N \times N-1 \sim 2$$

I remember coming across this dynamic potential years ago when our church reached 150 people. I remember it vividly because I couldn't quite understand how opinions and misinterpretations and even confusion could so easily – and so quickly – spread – within 24 hours.

- Here's why. In a church of 150 people – even if you never talk to everybody, you will be influenced by the body, by the way –
- whether or not they were happy when you sat near them
- whether or not they sang in church, or sang a little too loudly and off key,
- or some volunteer forgot to come serve in the nursery,
- or someone complained to you over the phone –
- or some unnamed person made it possible for you to have a cup of coffee this morning – that influenced in a godly way;
- some friendly person shook your hand when you walked in or handed you Communique;
- someone you haven't even met has been praying for your family

- someone you don't know sent a card or a meal to your home when you were sick
- someone called you and passed along some news or opinions they had.

The possibility for interaction and conversation and even relationships skyrockets as the numbers go up.

I remember being amazed as a young pastor how things could so quickly spread – and here's why – a church of 150 adults creates the possibility of just over 11,000 conversations and even potential relationships.

What does that mean for us? In a church of 3,000 adults – we'll leave the children out of it for the moment – the potential exists in our fellowship for 4.5 million conversations.

Wow.

Is it any wonder that Paul holds up his finger and says, listen, if you don't determine to stand firm in one spirit – you'll never be able to conduct yourselves good citizens of Heaven and of the gospel of Christ.

Now what Paul does here to drive home his point, as he often does, is paint a word picture.

The verb here for *standing firm*, is a military metaphor that pictures the Philippian believers serving in the same army, battling the same foe – which in this word picture would represent disunity.

He says, *stand firm in one spirit*.

And he knew they knew – and we might not – that the Roman ground troops fought their enemy not as single soldiers, but in densely packed rows, eight soldiers deep. They moved forward in step – they even moved sideways and backward together – by trumpet or voice commands.

If you've seen the movie *The Hobbit*, by Tolkien, you'll see this vividly demonstrated by the elves and the dwarves in that battle scene.

Furthermore, the Roman shield was beveled on the edges to allow the soldiers to link them together for added strength and stability.

The key was to stay in formation – to strive together in unity – and, one author wrote, defeat could result if even one soldier broke ranks and allowed the enemy to pour through.^{ix}

Their strength was their unity.

Little wonder that the Enemy has had for 2,000 years one primary goal – divide and conquer. Isolate a believer from the fellowship and he'll be easy to pick off.

No wonder Paul throughout this letter will stress the issue of unity of spirit and mind.

Here's the point . . . there is strength in numbers – and the enemy knows it – there is strength when we are bundled, as it were, together in unity.

I came across an Ethiopian proverb in my study that says, "When spider webs unit, they can tie up a lion."^x

Here's the main thing – *live up to your citizenship in Christ and live out the gospel of Christ* – how?

Here's the first way – by becoming a part of the bundle . . . and while you're in it, **continually repairing a dis-unifying spirit!**

Let's put it in practical terms – 8 ways to stand together:

1. Assume personal responsibility for your spiritual nourishment through personal and corporate Bible study and prayer.
2. Participate in the Sunday worship services on a regular basis.
3. Join in the family life of the church through a smaller group context like an Adult Sunday school class.
4. Exercise your spiritual gifts and talents in specific areas of involvement.
5. Support the variety of ministries through prayer and service
6. Contribute financially to the church in a consistent, generous manner.
7. Tell others about your relationship with Christ and support those who proclaim the gospel around the world.
8. Respond positively to the leadership of the elder team as they shepherd the church along.

By the way, what I just read through is a list that we've encouraged in our own church over the years.

But I actually read the wording from a list that comes from another church – First Evangelical Free Church of Fullerton, California.

These 8 ways to develop unity were part of that ministry while their pastor/teacher – Chuck Swindoll – served there for 23 years.

The truth is, these biblical principles work in California . . . and they work in Cary just the same. These are ways to reveal that you are standing firm in one spirit.

So Paul effectively writes here – don't forget you are engaged in a battle – just don't fight each other – fight side by side, engaging the enemies of the cross,

not with literal swords –but with the sword of the spirit and the shield of faith – with a vivid and living demonstration of our own changed lives . . . and the gospel of Christ that still changes lives today.

And no matter what . . . Paul would raise his finger and emphasize – no matter what the world or the flesh or the devil tosses next to the path as we run the race together – no matter how it glitters, or

looks inviting, or sounds interesting . . . make sure we allow nothing that will distract us from the goal ahead – the gospel – and the glory of God.

We'll cover the next way to live in manner worthy of the gospel in our next Sunday morning study together.

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