

No Room for Superstars

Moving Forward, Part 7

Philippians 1:27b

Pat Riley has had a storied career in the world of professional basketball. He's the first North American sports figure of all sports, to win a championship as a player, as a coach, and as a team executive.

In his book entitled the Winner Within, Riley tells the story of one of his most regrettable coaching seasons. He was the assistant coach of the famous Los Angeles Lakers, who in 1980 had won the World Championship. They were heavily favored to sweep the 1981 season as well – with players like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and a rookie named Magic Johnson.

Within weeks of their 1981 season opener, their star rookie tore some cartilage in his knee and was out for several months.

Undeterred, the rest of the team rallied and pressed on and – to the surprise of the many in the sports world, won 70% of their next games.

At the end of three months, Magic Johnson was cleared to return to the basketball court – and the basketball world was elated. In fact, they focused more attention on what the team could do when he returned than what the team had done while he had been recovering on the bench.

Every newspaper and every sportscaster heaped praise on this star rookie and publicity grew incredibly as the date of Magic Johnson's return drew near.

In the meantime, all the efforts of his teammates were ignored. They weren't exactly poor players either – and they didn't like the fact that their talents

were being overlooked. Disunity and jealousy and resentment among these teammates grew.

The night Magic Johnson returned to the lineup was packed with excitement. The stadium had sold out and the standing ovation – the cheering – was long and loud. The fans knew that their team would be undefeatable now that their new star player was back on the court.

That night, the Lakers nearly lost the game – playing terribly together – even though the opposing team wasn't nearly as talented.

The season went downhill from there. Team morale collapsed; the head coach and then the General Manager; Riley was then appointed as the new Head coach.

But none of that seemed to help. Riley made this interesting observation about this terrible season. He writes, "Because of pettiness and resentment, we executed one of the fastest falls in NBA history – and it was all because of the disease of 'me'."¹

The disease of me – that was Riley's phrase when all the players focused on themselves – their stats, their performance, their public image . . . and the team failed to deliver.

The truth is – a team sport – any team sport – doesn't have the word "me" in it – it has the word "us".

One professional athlete recently said – and it caught my attention – teams with a star player win games; rarely do they win championships.

I find it fascinating that the Apostle Paul will make a direct connection between a sports team and a local church in order to challenge them – and us –

that we should act like we belong not only to Jesus Christ, but to each other.

In the final paragraph in chapter 1, of Paul's letter to the Philippian church, he drives home the main point of his entire letter.

We began to unpack that main point in our last study together.

Let's go back and read *verse 27*. ***Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I may hear [this] about you . . .***

And here's where Paul delivers 3 aspects of good conduct – good citizenship belonging to heaven. These are three aspects he wants to hear the Philippian church is living out – and every church.

We looked at the first aspect in our last study – he wanted to hear that they were **committed to repairing a dis-unifying spirit**. Notice again – ***I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit***.

Standing firm – the word Paul uses provides a word picture for an army, unified as one force.

Like an unbreakable bundle of pencils – in our demonstration last Lord's day – one pencil was easily broken; 4 pencils were easily broken; even a dozen pencils were unexpectedly – miraculously broken; but not that bundle of 36 pencils.

There is strength in numbers – and especially in unified numbers; which is why the enemy attempts to divide in order to conquer . . . or even discourage and defeat; but the church unified is able to advance.

So first, Paul writes, standing firm in one spirit – which demands that stay alert to any form of disunity – and seek to repair it.

That's the first aspect of conducting yourselves worthy of the gospel.

There are two more aspects here . . . and I want to deal with the second one today.

Paul effectively writes, "I not only want to hear that you are repairing a dis-unifying spirit; secondly, I want to hear that you are:

2. Rejecting a disengaging attitude

In other words, you're going to refuse to act and worship and live in isolation.

Notice the last part of *verse 27b*. ***with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel***.

It's fascinating that Paul once again paints a word picture for us.

He changes his metaphor from that of an army standing firm, to that of a team working together – it's the word striving together – and we'll look at that in a moment.

In this last phrase here in *verse 27*, Paul effectively describes a team – and the teamwork – of a local church. And if we look closely at his word picture and sort of take this last phrase of *verse 27* apart, we'll be able to break his definition down into three elements.

Let me give them to you.

First, Paul emphasizes that:

a. A team is committed to the same desire

Paul emphasizes here that the church is moving forward – notice here, ***with one mind***.

The word translated mind is from *psuche* (ψυχη); it can be translated soul; of one psyche – of one soul.

One linguist writes that this word here in this context indicates the mind or the soul is viewed as the seat of sensation and desire.ⁱⁱ

So a team that works together is literally of one sensation . . . one desire – they are one psyche.

And to this day we refer to a team being psyched . . . they are psyched up for the game.

Before the football game they're jumping up and down together as the captain yells out some cheer – or delivers some impassioned speech; grown men, 300 pounds plus are holding hands like schoolchildren on the sidelines as they shout together in unison before the game.

And by the way, pros that compete in individual sporting events will tell you that one of the most difficult parts of their game is that very fact – they are acting as individuals . . . they play alone.

What an incredible advantage to play in partnership with other teammates with the same desire.

In our culture today, that desire might be scoring a goal, or sending someone across home plate, or making a touchdown.

Today, if you're going to watch any football, the entire Green Bay Packer team will be committed to their unified desire of scoring more touchdowns than the Seahawks – and later on the Colts will be unified in their desire to defeat the New England Patriots, which I'm hoping is the will of God.

Which means Super Bowl 49 will be between the Packers and the Colts – and the Packers are going to win by 13.

That’s right here in Philippians chapter 37.

Maybe not – you’re going to find out today that I’m not a prophet.

One thing we do know – every team will go out there on the field today with the same unified desire – the same mind – the same psyche.

And Paul here applies that same kind of passion and desire to the church.

With one mind – one commentator writes that this means the church has the same affections and moral energies; we feel the same about what we consider valuable and worth-while in life.ⁱⁱⁱ

Imagine the revolutionary impact of the gospel then on us, first and foremost.

As different as we are in so many tastes and talents and skills and backgrounds and languages and accents – we have in the church the same desire – as Paul puts it – living in a manner that reveals we belong to a different kingdom.

And we belong to each other.

Beloved, being a Christian doesn’t mean we live perfectly, but it does mean that we live differently.^{iv}

Imagine how differently the original members of this church in Philippi began to live and think and relate to one another.

Remember, this church was planted back when Paul and Silas first visited Philippi.

The first convert was a wealthy businesswoman named Lydia came to faith in Christ and then opened her home where the church would hold their worship services.

But then came a slave girl who had been controlled by demons that Paul delivered her from – and she also became a new believer. But because this demonized little fortune teller was now useless, her master accused Paul and Silas of revolutionary designs and they were imprisoned and beaten.

But that prison was shaken by God at midnight, like you’d shake that little container of dice as you attempt to defeat your family members in a game of Yahtzee. And all the prisoner’s chains were shaken loose. And ultimately that Jailor gave his life to Jesus Christ – along every member of his family – the text reads – they also believed and were baptized (**Acts 16**).

Now how in the world is a polished, wealthy businesswoman going to relate to a former demon possessed young woman; and how in the world will

either of these women fit in with the Prison Warden and his family.

Here’s how . . . by grace. And an understanding that they’d not only joined the same family, but were now playing on the same team with the same desire. Any team is made up of all sorts of talent and skill and background and size and weight and training . . . but they have the same desire . . . they are of one psyche – to glorify Christ and point others to His soon coming kingdom.

I remember getting a letter from a woman who’d joined our church, along with her husband. He was a successful executive with a firm in our area. When they moved into our area, they had searched for a church. By the time they visited Colonial they had done their research and found there was agreement with our philosophy of ministry and doctrinal position. She wrote, however, that it was something else that made up their minds.

The Sunday they visited they were struck by the beauty of our facilities and excellence in our materials; they sat in here in one of the back sections – where many of you long to sit.

They ended up sitting directly behind another couple about their age and during the service, that man put his arm around his wife’s shoulders. They noticed that his calloused hand and fingernails had been scrubbed, but still showed the tinge of black grease under his finger nails from obvious hours spent working in a repair shop.

They looked at each other and knew . . . a church that welcomed all walks of life this would be the church for them.

This is the local church . . . this is to be the same team:

- Where the white collar and blue collar sacrificially give toward the same vision;
- Where the Mexican and the Portuguese serve together;
- Where the white man and the black man pray together in the same Bible study;
- Where the doctor makes coffee in a classroom while the mechanic gets ready to teach;
- Where the businesswoman invites a housewife out to coffee;
- Where the old man determines to understand the young man;
- Where the young man decides to value the old man;

- Where the single appreciates the ministries to couples;
- Where the childless pray for and encourage parents;
- Where the widow volunteers in the nursery;
- Where the CEO serves as an usher;
- Where the drummer thanks God for the violinist;
- Where PhD's attend a class taught by a college dropout.

A church is a living demonstration of grace – we don't live perfectly, but we are determined to live differently – because of the grace we've received.^v

This is being of one mind – one psuche – a team that is committed to the same desire.

b. Secondly, a team is not only committed to the same desire, but a team is moving in the same direction

This is where Paul uses the metaphor of athletics. Notice as he writes – *with one mind striving together*.

Striving together is from sunathleo (συναθλεω); the prefix sun (συν) for with – or side by side – combined with athleo (αθλεω).^{vi}

From which we get our word, *athletics* or *athlete*.

This compound word provides the word picture of athletes working together, which gives us our concept of teamwork.

Steven Runge translates it, “doing something side by side.”^{vii}

Paul is encouraging the church to act as a team, moving with same desire in the same direction.

What one commentator called, “selfless solidarity”.^{viii}

What a description of what the church ought to be.

Demonstrating team effort . . . team work . . . team spirit.

I just propped my legs up on my desk at home and began to think through ways Paul must have seen teamwork among the athletes of his day.

And what it means to our thinking – in our culture – today.

Several things came to mind:

- **A good teammate offers ongoing encouragement.**

Listen, you'll never hear the opponent shouting to the guy he was guarding on the basketball court – “Man, that was a great shot . . . wow!” No . . . teammates do that.

- It even struck me that **a good teammate is willing to cheer from the bench**. No, he isn't able to play – he might be the backup quarterback, but he's cheering on his teammate.

I can remember in Middle School playing on the basketball team. I was not a starter – I was what you could call, the 6th man. What that meant was that as soon as the starting point guard needed a rest, I'd go into the game. Or if the starting guard wasn't doing too well, the coach would holler out – Davey, get in there.

And so what do you think I was thinking on the bench about that starting guard. He puts up a long shot – he makes it. Yay. Way to go.

Man alive, he's on fire . . . I'll never get in.

- **A good teammate understands that the word “us” is more important than the word “me”.**
- **Further, a good teammate recognizes that every position on the team is critical.**

Defense is as critical as offense. They usually don't get to spike the football, but without them, the offense won't get the chance.

- **Here's another: A good teammate sacrifices his comfort for the advancement of the team.**

He's might play hurt . . . he'll sweat it out . . . he'll give it everything he's got.

- **Yet again, a good teammate is willing to accept the assignment of his coach. Not everyone can be a captain or a quarterback.**^{ix}

Every player can't be a wide receiver, or a three point shooter, or the striker on the soccer team.

Someone has coached them, trained them, evaluated them, assigned them to the position they play.

And they have willingly played their role.

The playing field is effectively level – every position on the team matters. Even those who sit on the bench need to cheer.

God has designed us – as a body – to play a role on the team. He’s equipped us, trained us, prepared us, and outfitted us to play a certain role.

There are no promotions in the church – only assignments. The church is not a ladder you climb – that’s the world. That’s the world.

Paul will use the analogy of the human body as he tells the Corinthian church that every part of the body is an assignment from God that helps the body to function.

He writes, *For the body is not one part or member, but many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not the hand, I am not a part of the body,” . . . it is not any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body . . . if the whole body were an eye, where would be hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? (1 Corinthians 12)*

In other words, nobody is volunteering to be the nose . . . who wants to be a nose! I want to be the eye . . . that’s where it’s at. I don’t want to be a foot . . . I can’t see down there, I want to be the hand . . . I want to be a part of the action.

Here’s the point to keep in mind – Paul writes to the Corinthians – *But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.*

In other words, stop vying to be a hand if God has made you a foot; stop trying to be an eye if God has made you an ear.

I remember back to those Middle School years – I was upset much of the time because I was so short and so skinny. Frankie, the neighborhood bully who lived in the cul-de-sac just off my street was big and tough and he terrorized me and all the other kids.

One of my moments of shame was the day he knocked me off my bike and began to pummel me in front of a bunch of kids and my own mother had to come to my rescue. You just never live that down.

Not long after, I saw an advertisement about body-building powder you add to whatever you’re drinking. The big canister had a picture of a man on the front, flexing his biceps. I knew immediately

this was what I was missing in life. My Mom even went along with the plan – she was tired of rescuing me – and every night for several months she made me a milkshake and added this stuff – it looked like sawdust – it felt like sawdust – it tasted like sawdust – but it was going to change my middle school life forever.

I never gained one pound. I finally gave it up.

In fact, when I got married, 33 years ago, I had a 29 inch waist. A 29 inch waist. Now it’s a 30.

Not really . . . today I can gain a pound by simply looking in the direction of a milkshake – being in the same room.

Listen, as a child, part of growing up is coming to terms with how God made you. The same is true spiritually; coming to terms with the way God made you . . . and here’s the good news . . . this is how God equipped you and crafted you and made you and assigned you within His church.

And every assignment is critical to the team effort as we move together in the same direction, side by side, advancing the gospel and glory of Christ.

A team of – in the words of Paul’s metaphor – athletes together is:

- a. **committed to the same desire – one mind,**
- b. **moving in the same direction – striving together**

- c. **Thirdly, a team is delivering the same declaration**

Notice the last part of *verse 27. Striving together for the faith of the gospel.*

This phrase, *for the faith of the gospel*, appears only here in the New Testament. Paul might have in mind the idea of striving together as we place our faith in the gospel; or striving together for the faith that *is* the gospel; or faith that is generated by the gospel. The truth is, Paul might have had all of them in mind.^x

In other words, as a church we are committed to this same desire – we are moving together in this same direction – to declare and deliver to our world the same gospel which is believed in by faith alone – a gospel that which produces true faith.

And because everything other than the gospel and every other faith is false – this declaration has never been needed more.

Paul called it the gospel of Christ (*Galatians 1:7*); to Timothy he called it the glorious gospel of God to whom he'd been entrusted (*1 Timothy 1:11*).

The church is effectively a team effort to deliver and declare the saving gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul has already told this Philippian church that they are actually going to share in his reward for having supported him and prayed for him and co-labored with him in the gospel of grace.

He also viewed himself as a member of their team.

There's one sporting event that I don't normally think of as a team sport – professional auto racing. However, I have learned how critically important a team effort is, even though it's only one man behind the wheel crosses the finish line. And one of the key elements of a successful race is the teamwork of the pit crew.

For instance, in 1950, one article read, an Indy pit crew consisted of four men – which included the driver. No one was allowed to get near the car except this small crew of specialists. A routine pit stop to replace two tires and fill the tank back then took more than 60 seconds. [That still sounds fast to me, right?]

Today, a crew consists of 11 members – excluding the driver – who stays behind the wheel. Six are permitted direct contact with the car. Five serve as behind-the-wall assistants. A full service pit stop that replaces all four tires and tops off the gas tank now takes around 8 seconds.

Formula 1 pit crews are even bigger – sometimes involving over 20 people who all have their role to play. When everyone understands his role, and when everyone on the pit crew does his job with purpose and passion, the team can complete the same job in under 3 seconds.^{xi}

- Every member with an assignment.

- Every member with unified passion – and psyche.
- Every member dedicated to one mission – to advance that car in the race.

The analogies are obvious . . . where is your place in the pit crew of the body of Christ?

I close with this final challenge and then next Lord's day, Lord willing, we will unpack the third and final aspect of living in a manner worthy of our citizenship as we advance the gospel and glory of Christ.

So far, we've heard from the Spirit of God through Paul that:

- We are to repair any disunifying spirit.
- We are to reject any disengaging attitude – where we make up our own team of one.

We'll cover the third aspect next time.

Haddon Robinson told of a visit a man he knew made to an asylum for the criminally insane. During his visit he was surprised at the small number of guards compared to the number of these mentally ill inmates. Finally he asked one of the guards, "Aren't you afraid that the inmates will unite, overcome you and escape?" The guard responded, "No . . . mentally insane inmates never unite . . . they don't know how." Christians do . . . and Christians should.^{xii}

Let's refuse the temptation to disengage . . . to buy into the insanity of our world that we can live only for ourselves and find satisfaction.

Let's engage . . . as members of the Body . . . with an appointment to fill – where's yours? – as we, the church demonstrate teamwork, which is:

- Committing to the same desire,
- Moving in the same direction,
- Delivering to our world the same declaration – true faith in Jesus Christ.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/18/2015 by Stephen Davey.

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ii Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Regency, 1976), p. 548

iii Adapted from J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Philippians* (IVP Academic, 1984), p. 95

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- iv Life Application Bible: Philippians, Colossians & Philemon, editor, Grant Osborne, (Tyndale House, 1995), p. 44
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- vi Rienecker, p. 548
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