The Strength of the Church – Phil 1:27 – 2:11

Introduction

Good morning. I’m Mike Rohrer and I am one of the Deacons here at Parkway. We’re not really sure where Dan is so they asked me if I could stand in for him this morning. No, that’s not true. Dan is enjoying some vacation time with his family and he offered me the opportunity to speak this morning.  

Searching for a Church

Unless you were born and raised in Parkway Community Church, you have most likely found yourself in the position of looking for a church. That can be an intimidating task and maybe there is someone here this morning who is here for that very purpose. People find themselves in that position for a variety of reasons. It could be that they were regular attenders of a church but for one or more reasons, felt that they needed to look for a different place to worship. These people are usually looking for something different than they experienced at their former church. There are others who were in a church that they really liked but have had to move and now find themselves looking for a church that is similar to the one that they left.

When it comes to evaluating a church, there are a lot of different things that could be examined. For some people, size is important. Some folks don’t feel comfortable outside of a small church; say 100 people or less. Others are looking for a medium sized church like Parkway. They like the variety of programs that a church that size can offer. It’s sort of a Goldilocks church, not too big, not too small. My son is interning this summer at a church in Southern California called Saddleback Church. This place is enormous, 1000’s of people there. They actually call it a mega-church. They have a lot to offer including a nationally known pastor but it’s not everyone’s cup of tea. So size is one factor that people examine.

Another might be your denominational affiliation. Are you looking for a Catholic or a Protestant church? And then even further, is it a Baptist or Methodist, or Lutheran, or Church of Christ or Church of God in Christ, or 4 Square Gospel. The list of denominations could go on and on or maybe you are looking for an independent church that isn’t tied to a denomination. Would you characterize the church you’re looking for as Reformed or Evangelical or Charismatic or Pentecostal?

Is the worship at the church you’re looking for traditional or contemporary or do they offer both? Is it high tech or low tech? Is the worship liturgical like the Catholic or Episcopal churches? How long does the worship last? And then, depending on the age and make up of your family, what is the Youth Group like? Is there a good children’s program? What is the Sunday school program like? Is there a young adult ministry or a singles ministry or a seniors ministry?

Of course, people want to know what a church’s set of core beliefs are. You will want to examine their Statement of Faith. At Parkway, it is listed on our web site as What We Believe.
You want to feel like your understanding of Biblical doctrine aligns with what the church believes and teaches. You may also want to look at the leadership in the church. Do they have teaching pastors who are women? Do they have a board of Elders or is the church run by a senior pastor, where he is sort of a pastor / CEO? Is the church congregational where everyone joins in on making the decisions?

To get an idea of what people look for a church, I did a web search and found some interesting results. Read them.

Now, in all of those ways that I mentioned of evaluating churches (and we only scratched the surface) they don’t really get to the heart of what makes a church truly strong. Is the strength of a church measured in the excellence of its youth programs or of its preaching? Is it found in how well the music and singing is delivered? I think the only response that I read that really got to the heart of the matter is the one that I read last. In fact, I think he may have read Paul’s letter to the Philippians. The Apostle Paul gives a succinct set of encouragement and commands for a church that is undergoing some persecution.

**Paul’s exhortation to the Philippian Church**

If you have your Bibles, turn with me to the book of Philippians, chapter 1 and we will begin with verse 27. I'll give you my trick for finding Philippians. After the gospels (Matthew, Mark Luke and John) Acts, Romans, and 1st & 2nd Corinthians, remember the phrase, “Go eat pop corn”. Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians.

While you are turning there, let me give you a little background on Paul’s association with the Philippian church. Paul was this incredible missionary; traveling all over the Middle East and Europe to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Phillipi, which is in modern day Greece, was the first place in Europe where the gospel was preached. When Paul arrived there, because there was no Jewish Temple in town, went down to the river figuring that is where the Jews would gather during the day. He met a group of women, one of whom was named Lydia. Paul told her about Jesus Christ and what He had done for her. She believed and became the first new Christian on European soil. She opened up her home for the new Philippian Christians to use as a place to meet. This became their church building, of sorts and set the tone for the kind of generosity that this small church would become known for. They supported Paul when he preached in neighboring cities with gifts. Paul had taken up a collection for the Jerusalem church while he was in Greece and the Philippians were very generous in their support of the poor in the church in Jerusalem. He probably visited Philippi 3 times during his missionary travels and the occasion of this letter to the Philippian church was to thank them for how they supported him while he was imprisoned in Rome. That’s where he is when he is writing this letter. A guy named Epaphroditus had delivered the gifts from Philippi to Paul in Rome and the intention was for him to stay and minister to him. But while in Rome, Epaphroditus got so sick that he almost died and as soon as he was well enough to travel, Paul sent him back to Philippi with this letter. This was a church that Paul had a deep and abiding love for.
So now, not only is he thanking them but he is encouraging them in the suffering and the persecution that they are going through. This persecution was specifically because they were Christians. The instruction, encouragement and commands that Paul gives to the Philippian church in the passage that we are going to look at is intended to strengthen them for the task of standing firm against the persecution and opposition that they are facing.

**Read Phil 1:27 – 2:5**

Phil 1:27 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 in one spirit**, with **one mind striving side by side** for the **faith of the gospel**. :28 and **not frightened in anything by your opponents**. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. :29 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, 30 engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Phil 2:1 So if there is any **encouragement in Christ**, any **comfort from love**, any **participation in the Spirit**, any **affection and sympathy**, 2 complete my joy by being of the **same mind**, having the **same love**, being in full accord and of **one mind**. 3 Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

When writing this letter to them, he was writing to them as individuals but also collectively as the Philippian church. When we read our Bibles, we look for individual application for our own lives but sometimes there is a collective intent and that is what Paul had delivered here. So, let’s unpack this.

**The Strength of the church revealed**

Pay special attention to the plurals and collective terms that Paul uses so you can see which references he is making to the Philippian church. Here’s your spoiler alert, Paul is going to lay some strong expectations on the Philippian church almost to the point where you might say that this is too much to expect these people to accomplish. However, he won’t leave them hanging, trying to figure out how anyone can live in the manner that he is laying down for them. He gives them a clear picture and model to go by.

He first tells the church to “let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ”. The Greek word that is translated as, let manner of life (or some versions say conduct yourselves in a manner), can also be used to refer to citizenship. To a resident of Philippi, citizenship was a huge deal. For a number of politically advantageous reasons, Caesar Augustus had declared that, even though Philippi was in Greece, it was in fact a Roman Colony with all the associated rights and privileges. This meant that the citizens of Philippi actually had all the rights of Roman citizens just as though they were living in Rome. Paul is reminding them that beyond the fact
that they are Roman citizens, they are citizens of the Kingdom of God and they need to conduct themselves in that manner. That they don't just live like every other good Philippian, they have a special calling to live according to the gospel of Christ, to represent the gospel not just with their words but with their lives.

He goes on to add that “whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are:” engaged in these following things. Remember that Paul is in prison and he is hopeful that he will be released, which gives you “whether I come and see you” but he recognizes that he may not get out which would leave him absent. The point is that in either circumstance, this is what he wants to hear about them. That they “are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents.” I really wanted that reference to one spirit to be a reference to the Holy Spirit but when you take into consideration, all three descriptors: standing firm, striving side by side, and not frightened by their opponents you see this picture of an immovable, inviolable force for Christ. Especially when you take into consideration that the word for mind really refers to their soul, you can see this connection between them, unified in heart and mind, unafraid and standing firm. You almost expect a chorus of “Onward Christian Soldiers” to start playing. Paul isn’t just giving them a chuck on the shoulder and encouraging them to “hang in there”. He is preparing this church for battle. And the battle is for the faith of the gospel. Everything that they are contending for is because of and for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

After preparing that exhortation, he tells them that Christ has given them a gift, the gift of suffering. Now that may sound like a cruel joke but in fact it is a normal part of the Christian life and one that constantly confounds us. We are so unprepared for suffering and regard it as an unwanted part of our lives. R.C. Sproul wrote a book entitled “Surprised by Suffering” because we are. But when you consider what God has revealed to us, it shouldn’t come as a surprise and it shouldn’t be unwelcome.

I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” John 16:33

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, James 1:2

God has given you two gifts: faith and suffering. Don’t waste them.

*John Piper*

Stop regarding all the unpleasant things as interruptions of one’s ‘real’ life. They are precisely one’s real life.

*C.S. Lewis*

There was a news story that came out this week that quickly got overshadowed by the news of the horrific tragedy at the movie theater in Aurora, CO. This was the story of the affirmation of the biblical definition of the family unit by Dan Cathy, the president of Chick-fil-A. Immediately all of the gay rights groups and supporters of gay marriage vilified him. He was painted as a homophobe, a hate monger and thousands have committed to boycotting his restaurants.
mayor of Boston went as far as to say that he didn’t want any Chick-fil-A restaurants in Boston. I’m pretty sure that none of this caught Dan Cathy off guard. He had to realize that when he made a statement of that kind that a firestorm would ensue. He probably also factored in the financial impact that it would have on his restaurant chain. He stepped back into time and became part of the Philippian church. He is standing firm and to him is granted that for the sake of Christ that he will not only believe but also suffer for his sake. The times haven’t changed that much. When you have the opportunity, will you stand firm even if it means that you will be given that same gift of suffering?

Chapter 2 begins with, “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, 2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” Paul had just laid a big load on the shoulders of the Philippian church and now is time to encourage and inspire them. All 4 of these concepts in verse 1 remind the church that they are not alone in this fight and that they will mutually encourage and care for one another. The word that is translated as encouragement is the same word that is used to describe the Holy Spirit as one who comes along side in order to be a comforter. The idea is, that he is telling them when you get beat up in the fight, take comfort from Christ. Next, if there is any comfort from love. This can best be considered as comfort that is spoken and would be communicated mutually, from one church member to another. The participation in the Spirit is the familiar term koinonia which means fellowship. Real koinonia is participation in each other’s lives. Affection and sympathy speak for themselves. Verses 3 & 4 stand out in contrast. He is no longer applying a soothing balm to them after the heat of battle, now he is encouraging them to exhibit extraordinary humility. He tells them that they should count the needs of others as more significant than even their own needs.

Paul has given us this picture of the church in Philippi standing firm with one soul, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, unafraid of those who persecute them. And then he shows them loving, comforting and encouraging each other through the battle so that they don’t lose heart. Lastly, we see the picture of humility among them so that there is no me and mine but only what is best for the considered needs of everyone. This is an incredible picture of unity in the church that mirrors the unity that exists between the Father, the Son and the Spirit. Now he is going to tell them how it is possible to achieve this. It must seem overwhelming to them. These are just ordinary people like us. How do you do something like that?

The model for the Church

5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth
and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Back in verse 27, Paul introduced the idea of acting with one mind. He repeated it again, twice in verse 2. Now he is going to reveal where and what this mind is. It is the mind of Christ exhibited in three magnificent acts.

**Humility**
In verse 6 Jesus displays ultimate humility (he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped). On the surface, it may not seem like Jesus’ act of becoming man cost him very much. After all, he was still fully God. Imagine this, the almighty God of the universe, the creator of all that exists now has to take in food or he will starve. He must drink water or he will die of thirst. He has to sleep because he gets tired. He feels pain. In his divine essence, he is limitless but now He is bound within the confines of a frail human body. This was the most powerful act of humility that ever could be displayed. Nothing or no one could ever display more humility than this.

**Servant hood**
In verse 7, Jesus made himself nothing or “emptied” himself and took the form of a bond servant. A bond servant is one who is pledged or bound to serve someone. In this case, Jesus became the bondservant of God the Father. It is not explicitly stated but, there is no one else in the universe that he could serve. The following verses substantiate his servant hood to the Father.

And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." Matt 26:39

No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father." John 10:18

**Obedience**
In verse 8 we see Jesus demonstrate obedience in the most extreme manner. He became obedient to the point of death. This was the kind of model of obedience that the Philippian church needed. Even if they were obedient to the point of death, they could see ultimate victory. The same people who caused their death would someday bow their knee and declare Jesus Christ as Lord.

This is what makes a church strong. People acting in humility, looking out for the interests of others. They are serving faithfully and displaying obedience in all that they do. That is what enables people to lead a life that is worthy of the gospel of Christ; to stand firm and strive side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel. That is a strong church.