

TAKE A STAND FOR JESUS

Taking a stand on any issue requires conviction. You have to believe that what you are standing firm on is somehow the most righteous position you can think of. Without this conviction you will be swayed by persuasive argument to give up your position, or at least to see flaws in it.

Have you ever taken a stand on anything? I am trying to remember when I held my ground on an issue and did not give in and it is difficult to think of one. Not many of us are challenged to take such a stand. Or, because we live in such an age of compromise, we have not learned to dig in our heels and say that we oppose this or that. Besides, people who take a stand are radicals and expose themselves to ridicule and humiliation. Unless of course everyone else is against it too.

To take a stand is a brave and lonely thing. It will mean ostracism and criticism for you if you decide that this or that issue is worth it. And that's the question: Is it worth it?

Charles Colson mentions in one of his books that he saw a picture of a college demonstrator holding up a sign that read, "Nothing is worth dying for." But, Colson wrote, if nothing is worth dying for, then nothing is worth living for either.

I did a quick study of "taking a stand" and found that down through history people have taken a stand against various social evils. People have stood for the abolition of slavery, the rights of women to vote, to end the Vietnam War, to end the Gulf War, for equal rights, for equal pay for men and women in the work place, for civil rights, for children's rights...the list is endless. Some brave people caught in the vice of choosing to stand or compromising with the status quo did decide that some things were worth losing everything for.

Our question this morning is this: Are we willing to take a stand for Jesus, the joy of our salvation, in a world opposed to his message? And are we notable for living the life worthy of the gospel?

1. What it means to stand

a) The conduct of a Christian – This is Paul's question to the Philippians too. Will you stand for Jesus? He says it this way, **"Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ"** (27a).

Missing in some of our English translations is the word "only." It is as if Paul had said, "This thing and this only." So it is not so much a question as an absolute and exclusive command: "Do this one thing and this only." His own creed was "To live is Christ; to die is gain," and he required the Philippians to do no less.

"Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." What does this mean? I began to think of some things that quickly turned into a kind of legalism. Does it mean that we dress differently? Will abstaining from alcohol and television make me worthy of the gospel? Paul's answer to this is clearly in these verses.

To conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel speaks of citizenship, the citizenship of heaven. The word "conduct" is where we get our word "political" and refers to citizenship in particular. The citizens living in Philippi would have quickly picked up on what Paul was saying. Acts 16:12 describes Philippi as **"...Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia."** Philippi was not in Rome proper but was in what we now call Greece, a conquered land. But it had all the privileges of a Roman city. They were not taxed, the architecture and culture were all Roman, while people dressed Roman and had Roman names. This was a great privilege because no other city in the region had such a status. They were honored to be "Little Rome," and the city of Philippi would do nothing to smear that reputation.

In the same way, Paul told the Philippians that while they lived on earth, their habits should reflect heaven, since they were citizens of heaven through the grace of Christ. Our habits, our dress, our

lifestyle, our speech, our manner of life must weigh the same as the gospel we say we believe in. We are citizens of heaven too, and our lives need to match that.

b) Stand firm in one Spirit – Paul goes on to highlight three key characteristics of those who conduct themselves as heavenly citizens. Here's the first, “**Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit...**”(27b).

To “stand firm in one spirit” describes a Roman military formation where soldiers stood shoulder to shoulder, with spears and shields held outwards. In the Napoleonic wars the foot soldiers had a similar formation used for defense called forming square. Infantry was no match for cavalry if the soldiers were all spread out. But if they formed square they formed a little fortress that no cavalry in the world could penetrate.

The picture we get then is of a church that stands together against the enemy be it a social evil or spiritual opposition. This does not mean that we are to be one in opinion but rather one in Christ. The “one spirit” is not an ideal or some philosophy, but the one spirit who binds us together in our faith, the Holy Spirit. It is the same as saying we are one in Christ.

As a church we are supposed to stand together in Christ. If one of us thinks that the church is going in the wrong direction, we must ask “Is this promoting unity?” and evaluate our lone stand. On the other hand, one may be right and all the rest wrong. How are we to know the difference? Christ! If the issue is not grounded on Christ then it is petty. Standing firm in one spirit is to be anchored in Christ, to be one in our love for Jesus and each other.

Paul said to the Romans, “**May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ**”(Rom 15:5-6). This unity of heart and mouth speaks volumes to the world we live in.

c) Contending for the gospel – The second characteristic of the church that stands for Jesus is one that does this: “**...contending as one man for the faith of the gospel...**”(27c).

The word “contending” is an athletic term. It is a picture of an athlete striving to reach the goal, like a running back trying to get extra yards or make a touchdown. But this is a team picture as Paul photographs it. We are to contend as one man, as a unit or as a team for the faith of the gospel.

We have talked already about the importance of unity so we need to look at what we are contending for, the gospel. What is the one thing that unites us as a people here this morning? Our faith in Jesus Christ. But what does that mean? Well, faith in this verse could mean a personal, individual faith...but it doesn't. Faith here speaks of our doctrine, the tenets of our faith. What is this gospel we believe in?

Paul wrote to the Corinthians and gives us a clue: “**Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand...For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...**”(1 Cor 15:1, 3-4).

This may seem simple but you and I know that there are people who deviate from this gospel. They think the church is here for other purposes, for social action, for personal betterment. These are good things but if Christ crucified and resurrected is not the first and foremost truth of our church, then we are not being true to our citizenship. Some would promote ecumenicalism and suggest that we put aside our differences with other denominations of the faith and be one. But we cannot compromise the gospel of Christ crucified as our salvation and all that it means. We must contend for the truth of Jesus Christ and drop everything that doesn't fit.

d) Standing without fear – When we take a stand there will be opposition. So the third characteristic of the church that stands is this: “**...without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you**”(28a).

Here's another Greek word definition: "frightened" means "the uncontrollable stampede of startled horses." A timid horse could get startled by something unexpected in its path or when something jumps out in front of it. Don't be frightened like this, Paul says.

The picture of unity, to form square and stand against the enemy, can be broken. Military squares were known to crumble when a small group of soldiers panicked and ran inside the square for safety. The whole square would implode as a result allowing cavalry to come in and saber their victims. That's what fear does.

There will be opposition when we take a stand. If we are not facing opposition for our faith then we have to ask, "What are we doing wrong?" Jesus said, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first" (John 15:18).

But here's the sunny side of opposition: "This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved – and that by God" (28b). This is the truth that people grimace at and try to avoid. Those who oppose the gospel are separated from God, and if they continue that way they will be eternally lost in what is commonly called "hell." They have sided with Satan and have made themselves enemies of the cross.

We have nothing to fear. Those who oppose the gospel have everything to fear. So why are we afraid to stand for Jesus in our own little worlds? To live is Christ; to die is gain.

2. The Consequences of Standing

a) The gift of suffering – We do feel like we might lose if we stand for Jesus in those specific situations. We might have to suffer the loss of friends, the loss of a job, the loss of our family, or any number of things. It hurts to lose something.

Paul had a different perspective. He saw suffering as a companion gift to faith itself. He said, "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him..." (29).

We know that faith is a gift. Paul told the Ephesians, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is a gift from God" (Eph 2:8). Without this gift we would never have been able to believe in Jesus.

What was foreign to the believers at Philippi, since many of them were from Gentile background, was the idea of suffering for one's God. This was completely new to them. Yet that was the example that the apostles were setting for them. Early in the life of the church the apostles were arrested by the Sanhedrin and thrown in jail and beaten. When they were let go it says this: "The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name" (Acts 5:41).

This is equally foreign to us for two reasons. One is that we don't like to suffer to any degree. If we have discomfort we do everything we can to get comfortable. And two is that we really don't know what it means to suffer for the name of Jesus. Our experience is of extreme comfort compared to that of even our own ancestors who were forced to journey from country to country, not having a country of their own. The problem with being comfortable is that we grow complacent about our faith, even quite lazy.

Suffering for Jesus has its purpose in the life of faith. David Curtis from Berean Bible Church lists seven of these purposes for us to consider:

Suffering matures us. James 1:2-4: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

Suffering weans us from self-reliance 2 Corinthians 1:9: "Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead."

Suffering is an evangelistic tool. Philippians 1:12: “Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.”

Suffering increases our eternal reward Matthew 5:12: “Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Suffering helps us minister to others. 2 Corinthians 1:3-4: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.”

Suffering helps keep down pride. 2 Corinthians 12:7: “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.”

Suffering shows we belong to Christ. Phil 3:10: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.”

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This is the gift that suffering is to us.

b) Sharing the common struggle – Paul relates to the Philippians in their suffering saying that is his struggle too. “...you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have” (30). If one suffers for Christ you can be sure that someone is going through the same thing somewhere. Peter said, “Resist him (the devil), standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings”(1 Peter 5:9).

One woman wrote, “A peach tree stands in our back yard. Unpruned, the tree grew big and leafy. And it was loaded with peaches, although the fruit was disappointingly small and tasteless. The year he was out of work, Larry went to work on the tree. When I came home from school one day and saw how far back he had pruned it, I stared in shock. “You’ve killed it,” I cried. “Now we won’t have any peaches at all.”

I was wrong. That spring the pruned branches burst forth with a beautiful blanketing of pink blossoms. Soon little green peaches replaced the blossoms. “Leave them alone,” I begged. Larry ignored me and thinned the fruit.

By the end of the summer the branches were so heavily laden they had to be propped up. And the peaches—oh, how large and sweet and juicy they were. There was no denying it: the tree was far better off for the painful cutting it endured under Larry’s pruning shears.

No one wants to go through troubles and suffering and pain. But looking back, Larry and I can only say, “Thank you, Lord, for pruning us. Thank you for teaching us to trust you.”

Now here is the problem with this sermon. All of this means nothing if we continue to get swept along with the tide of human pleasure and opinion. Is there no place to take a stand for Jesus in your world? If one of us takes a stand, will the rest of us stand with that person?

Will our young adults take a stand and say no to sex outside of marriage? Will the rest of us say no to the allure of adultery be it real or in cyber space? Can we draw a line and say no to TV programs in our home that do not glorify Christ? Can we say no to anything that does not glorify Christ? Will we take a stand before we don’t know why we are standing anymore?

To conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ we must stand now.

AMEN