

Standing Together

Philippians

Don't you just hate it when you go to a country that is not your own, and at immigration control, you have to stand in a line marked "Aliens". Standing in that line says "You don't belong here". But isn't it a good feeling when you get to your own country and there is a fast track for you, because you hold a passport for your country. When I get to my own country, I belong. Because I'm a citizen, I have rights and privileges and responsibilities of citizenship. It's a wonderful thing to know you belong.

1. Standing Together As Children Of The King.

Do you know who you are as a Christian? You belong to Jesus Christ. You have been bought with the precious blood of Jesus. You have been adopted into the family of God. Your name is written in the Lambs Book of Life. Peter the Apostle puts it like this **"You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."** (1 Peter 2:9 &10) You and I have the enormous privilege of having our citizenship in heaven. Now here's the deal that Paul reminds us of. **"Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ."** (Philippians 1:27) We are to behave in such a way that we are a credit to our heavenly Father. At all times, whether in front of unbelievers, or in front of believers, or when only God is watching, we are to act in such a way that people will think well of our Father. Before he died in Paris in 1972, the Duke of Windsor did a TV interview, where he answered questions about his upbringing, his brief reign and his abdication to marry Wallis Simpson. Recalling his boyhood as Prince of Wales, he said: 'My Father, King George V was a strict disciplinarian. Sometimes when I had done something wrong, he would admonish me saying, "My dear boy, you must always remember who you are."'

As Christians, we are citizens of heaven, and while we are on earth God expects us to behave like citizens of heaven. Just as Philippi was a colony of Rome, and it's citizens were expected to act like Roman citizens, you and I are a colony of heaven on earth. Our behaviour together is supposed to be a live model of what's happening in heaven. Last week I was teaching about rejoicing, no matter what prison you are in. This time I'm teaching about living as a child of the King, no matter what person you are with. The way we get along together as Christians has to advertise Christ. Our community together is meant to be a supernatural demonstration of how the life of Christ in each of us, holds us together. In the Philippian church, there were Jews and Greeks who got along together. There were rich and poor loving one another. It was a living demonstration of what Christ can do in bringing people together.

2. Standing Together Against Opposition From The Outside The Family.

Because the Christians at Philippi were so committed to the gospel, Paul expected they would be persecuted. This is what he said **"Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. 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, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you."** (Philippians 1:27 – 28)

When we first become Christians, it doesn't take us long to figure out what it is that puts us offside with the rest of society. It's when we speak out the gospel. If all we ever did was to feed the hungry, educate the uneducated, run parenting programmes, nurse the sick, care for the dying and give money to the poor, no one is going to get offended at that. Jesus didn't get put on trial and crucified because he fed 5000 hungry people. The Apostle Paul didn't get beaten up and thrown into prison because people didn't like the shape of his nose. It was the preaching of the Gospel that got people mad. It was when Jesus said that he was the way, the truth and the life, that peoples blood pressure went up. It was when

Paul declared that Jesus was the only way by which people could be saved that people got mad. It was when Peter stood up on the day of Pentecost and told people that they were the ones who had killed the Messiah that the opposition came. It was when Stephen told people about Jesus, that people picked up rocks and stoned him to death. You will find that when you start talking about Jesus, you will meet opposition. Not everyone finds the gospel to be good news. Being a Christian and following Jesus doesn't offend too many people, until you start talking about the gospel of salvation. And for many Christians, that's a no go area. We play it safe. For in an age of tolerance, it's pretty uncomfortable to declare that Jesus is the only means by which people can be saved.

That phrase that Paul uses "**contending as one man for the faith of the gospel**" is actually a word taken from athletics. It's a football word, or a cricket word, or a basketball word. It's a team game word. Paul is reminding the Philippians that it's team work that wins victories. These Christians at Philippi stood as a tiny island of commitment to the gospel amidst a raging sea of pagan antagonism. They were not exactly flavour of the month. They were experiencing opposition, and Paul is warning them that they should expect more. His word to them is "Don't be afraid of the opposition you are experiencing from outside the church". That's normal. He reminds them that God is going to deal with those who persecute his people. It may not happen straight away, but it will happen.

When that opposition comes, and it will come, we have to stand together. When I was at school there were two brothers from the same family in my class. They didn't always get along together very well, but it didn't take us long to notice an interesting phenomenon. If one of them was being bullied or being put down, the other would always rush to his defence. To attack one was to attack them both. Do you know how those early Christians coped with persecution from the Romans? They stood together. They loved those who persecuted them. They responded to anger with kindness. They never retaliated against those who wronged them. They kept pointing out to their detractors the lifestyle of those who were Christians. These Christians were living as children of the King, and people could see it. It was a powerful argument that won others to Christ.

There is a story that comes out of Britain in the days when the Romans occupied it. No one knows if the story is true or not, but it has come down the generations until today. Forty Celtic Christians had been captured by the Romans in high midwinter, and were required to renounce their faith in Jesus Christ and to declare their allegiance to Caesar, not just as Emperor, but as God. The Christians refused. They were stripped naked and taken to a lake which was iced over, in freezing conditions. They were made to stand in the lake, in icy water up to their necks, until such time as they would recant and acknowledge Caesar. On the shores of the lake, the Romans had their tents, with fires roaring and water boiling for hot baths, and food cooking on the spit. Soldiers patrolled the lake, watching and waiting for the Christians to cry out for mercy. But the forty stood silent and still. Suddenly, one, overcome with cold and fearing death, cried out: 'I renounce the Christ and acknowledge Caesar! Take me out of this!' He was hauled to shore and taken away to be bathed in hot water and fed. But to one side stood a Roman soldier who watched the event, and who pondered the remaining thirty-nine who stood, proud and defiant, proclaiming the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Finally the soldier couldn't stand it any more. He tore off his armour and clothing, and leapt into the lake, shouting, 'There should have been forty to die for the Lord Jesus Christ! And forty there shall be!' And he took the place of the deserter, and remained with the others until death claimed them all. That's what it means to contend as one man for the sake of the gospel.

3. Standing United Against Division From Within.

In the church in Philippi there was division. There were a couple of women who were not getting along with each other and the members of the fellowship were taking sides. Two prominent members of the church were quarrelling with one another. Euodia and Syntyche, or Odious and Soon - touchy as they have been nicknamed, were valuable co-workers in Paul's ministry, but somehow they had fallen out with each other. Their dispute was spreading like a disease, infecting the rest of the church. The division in the church was stopping the work of the gospel, because the credibility of the gospel was called into

question. In his letter, Paul is urging these Christians to remain steadfast in the midst of persecution from the outside, and urging them not to succumb to the destructive forces of disunity that have arisen within church. He is urging them to unite around the advancement of the gospel. We have lots of issues where we disagree as Christians. We have different preferences for styles of worship. We disagree over ways of church government. We disagree about whether women should be in leadership. Some of us disagree about believers' baptism and the baptism of babies. Lots of us disagree about when and how Jesus is coming back again. But the thing that unites us is the gospel. All of those differences don't seem to matter when we start telling people about the eternal life there is in Jesus Christ.

There is an interesting phenomenon that happens to churches when they take mission off the front page agenda of the church, and the church begins to focus inwards. When people stop being concerned about the lost, they start bickering over petty things – the stains on the carpet; how many hymns we sing; what time we have our church services; the print in the church newsletter is too small;- the list is endless. The way to get disunity off the front-page agenda of the church is to focus on reaching people with the gospel. If we are going to advance the gospel, we have to be like minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. The enemy is always happy to see internal divisions in a local ministry. If he can set us against one another it frustrates the work of the gospel. It's only as we stand together that we overcome the evil one. We have to be single minded, all working together on the same team to achieve the same ends.

One of the Pastors I had that was really influential in my life was David Metcalfe. David could sometimes be a prickly character, but more than anything else, he wanted people to come to know Christ. Many years ago he told a story, and I've never forgotten it. It was of a General who was visiting his troops during a big battle.

First the General went to inspect the troops who weren't involved in the front line battle. These were the headquarters staff, the cooks and mechanics and drivers and signallers. "How's it going soldier?" "Well sir, last night in the mess the food was cold. The food we get here isn't nearly as good as my mother's home cooking. This morning I found a cockroach in my boot. The bed I slept in was lumpy and the Sergeant made me go for a run at 7 o'clock in the morning, even though I've got a blister on my foot! It's really tough being a soldier. It's such an uncomfortable life, with so many deprivations during wartime."

Then the General went to the front line. "How's it going men?" he asked. A junior officer pulled himself to his feet and saluted. He was filthy dirty. His eyes were bloodshot, for he hadn't slept in four days. Blood ran down his face where a bullet had grazed him. "Well sir, it's been a tough fight but we have taken this hill. We ran out of ammunition and it's been hand to hand fighting. We haven't eaten for two days and our medical supplies are low. But we are winning sir. We have got the enemy on the run. Another day or two of this, and we will capture the city!" And the General said "Well done men! I'm so proud of you!"

Where are you in the battle to reach men and women for Jesus Christ? The point is not whether you are in the front line, or among the support troops in the rear, but whether you are in the fight at all. It all depends on our attitude. If we don't understand why God has put us on this earth, then we are just going to whinge and complain, and find fault with everything. But if we see ourselves as people who are called to contend for the sake of the gospel, then we will put up with any hardship, make any sacrifice, endure any discomfort, give any support and fight any battle to see men and women, teenagers, and children set free. Is there an attitude in you that God needs to change today? Our mission is **"Helping People Become Lifelong Followers Of Jesus Christ"**. Will you commit yourself to stand with other believers in this place to achieve that mission? Are you willing to live as a child of the King, and to stand together?

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