

Steps to Spiritual Stability: Resolve to Live in Harmony with Other Christians

Philippians 4:1-3

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Good evening. Welcome to Sunday Evening Online. You know this past week we celebrated the end of World War II. I was thinking about the fact that several years ago, I had the opportunity to read Stephen Ambrose's book *D-Day*. He records all that transpired during that remarkable day. Of course, Omaha Beach had the worst of all that transpired during that fateful day. High seas swamped the landing crafts during the ten-mile run to shore. Survivors reached land sea sick, unable to fight. Over half of the amphibious tanks sank in heavy seas as they tried to make their way to land. Strong winds and currents pushed many away from their landing sites. The bombing attacks from the Allies that were meant to soften the German positions had been completely ineffective. The pilots had been blinded by heavy clouds. They'd been concerned about bombing their own troops, and so the pilots overshot their targets and dropped their loads, in some cases, up to three miles inland. The beach itself, once they arrived, was a tangle of obstructions. The Germans had used a line of cliffs, some four miles long and up to 150 feet high, strategically to protect the coast. But, you know, in spite of all of that, there were some heroes on Omaha Beach that day, many of them. In fact, there were three companies of Rangers that had been assigned to destroy six 155mm guns that were on top of the cliffs. They managed to make their way up to the top of the cliff and, when they arrived there, they discovered that the guns themselves had been moved several hundred yards inland. They fought their way to the guns. They destroyed them, and then they held their position for two days against recurring waves of German attack. They were down to their last 90 men when reinforcements finally arrived. That's standing firm in the face of fire.

And that's exactly what Paul wants each of us to do in the spiritual war in which we're engaged: is to stand firm, to be spiritually stable. And he makes this point for us powerfully, I think, in a text we've already looked at, but I want to go back there and look again because there is more to learn here, more to discover. So, if you have your Bible, turn with me to Philippians chapter four. Notice, verse one. Paul writes, "Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, my beloved." Paul, of course, begins, as he so often

does, by affirming his love for the members of this dear church. He thought of them as his own brothers and sisters. The word *beloved* occurs twice here in this short span. He longs to see them, he says. And he says you cause me joy now and you'll be my joy and crown at the judgment. You'll be the source of honor to me at the judgment. That was Paul's heart for these dear people.

Verse 1 is really a transition kind of verse. You'll notice the word *therefore*. It looks back. It looks back to the end of chapter three. And at the end of chapter three, Paul mentions the return of Christ and the anticipation of that return. And so, he begins chapter four by saying as a practical consequence of Christ's return, I want you to stand firm. Stand firm till he comes.

Paul uses this word *stand firm* throughout his epistles. I think you can best understand what it means by looking at one text. I won't have you turn there, but in Romans chapter 14 verse 4, Paul compares two things. He says there's standing firm and there's falling. Those are the two alternatives. You either stand or you fall. And, I think that's a remarkable reality, isn't it? I mean those are the two alternatives in the Christian life. You either stand firm or you fall. There's nothing in between. This expression *stand firm* means "to be stable, to remain steadfast, not to be moved from how you live and what you believe." And it's often used of a soldier, a soldier who remains at his post regardless of what happens to him. That kind of spiritual stability is the goal of every Christian. It's the goal the Lord has for you and for me as well. A lack of spiritual stability is what characterizes the spiritually immature. You remember in Ephesians 4, Paul says the spiritually immature are driven here and there, they're like children who are not discerning, and every little wind of doctrine that comes along blows them here and blows them there and they're swept along, carried along, and there's no stability. Their lives are more like a small little boat bobbing on the surface of the ocean. Paul says, instead, I want you believers to stand firm. That's Paul's desire for each of us—that we can become spiritually stable.

But how do we do that? Well, there's a word in verse one that explains. It's translated here in our text *in this way*. It means "in this manner." We could translate it like this: "stand firm in this manner; stand firm in this way." And then, there's a series of imperatives that begin in verse 2 and run down through verse 9 that outline the path to spiritual stability. In fact, in these verses as I noted for you the last time we looked at this text, we discovered six specific steps to spiritual stability. I want us to look just for a few moments at the very first one. And it might surprise you. It's this: Resolve to live in harmony with other Christians. Resolve to live in harmony with other

Christians. That's the message of verses 2 and 3. And it's the first issue that Paul addresses. Look at verses 2 and 3:

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord.

Indeed, true companion, I ask you also to help these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel, together with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Now, first of all, it's important for you to understand what this doesn't mean. Paul is not saying that we should, to enjoy unity, somehow compromise some fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith, or we should overlook a pattern of unrepentant sin in the life of a fellow believer. There are lots of other passages that deal with this. As far as fundamental doctrines, you have Paul himself writing in Galatians 2, who confronted Peter publicly to his face when the gospel was at stake. So, he's not urging a sort of surface unity here that ignores important doctrine. Nor, is he saying that you should overlook unrepentant sin. You have Matthew 18. You also have Paul's own public confrontation of the man who was sinning in 1 Corinthians 5, and he's saying that you shouldn't even associate with a professed believer who's living in an open, unrepentant pattern of sin later in that same chapter. So, that's not what's being described here; that's not the kind of unity or one mindedness Paul's describing.

What is he talking about? Well, understand that when you talk about unity, spiritual immaturity is always the enemy of Christian unity. Wherever there's immaturity, there's going to be disunity. I've shared with you often the story that my father-in-law told about the small southern church that split over the color of the roofing shingles, and each side had their half of the roof that was shingled in the color they wanted, and they sat under that side. That's just rampant spiritual immaturity.

But that wasn't what was going on in Philippi. In fact, these two women were not peripheral people with a reputation for bad tempers and wagging tongues and spiritual immaturity. I mean look at how this passage describes them. They were obviously members of the church, but Paul says they were also genuine believers. He says their "names are written in the book of life." They

were active in ministry. He says they have “shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel.” They had shown the ability to work and serve with others. He said they’ve worked “together with Clement also, and the rest of the fellow workers.” So, these women were mature, godly women, but they had come to disagree over an issue that didn’t involve fundamental doctrine or sin. It’s important to acknowledge that this is going to happen. This will happen. I mean, after all, it even happened between Paul and Barnabas. In Acts 15, it’s described. Disagreements happen, but what’s important is how we choose to respond to those disagreements.

Our response has to begin with an understanding of the Biblical priority of unity. God hates divisions, and He hates those who cause them. If you doubt that, read throughout the Scriptures, but read Proverbs 6 verses 16-19, where the writer of Proverbs assembles these statements which say God hates those who cause discord between brothers. He hates disunity. And in Corinth, with all the issues in that church, where does Paul begin? He begins with the divisions that existed in the early chapters of 1 Corinthians. When there are disagreements, we have to determine that we’re not going to allow that disagreement to become a point of division—that we’re going to work through it. We’re going to resolve it. That’s the mature Christian response.

Disagreements come and even conflict comes. What’s the difference? Well, disagreement we have all the time. You have an opinion I have an opinion about some issue, whatever it might be. The problem isn’t the disagreement. The problem is when that disagreement escalates to conflict. And usually what that means is now pride and anger have become involved in the disagreement, often accompanied by sins of speech, that Paul describes in Ephesians 4. So, how do you deal with that? How do you deal with the disagreements that have ratcheted up and become conflict? Now, there’s anger involved potentially.

Well, you know, you need to understand this. When neither a fundamental doctrine nor a clear Biblical sin is involved, how do you work to resolve it? You know I think you start by understanding how important resolution is. There are even clues in this text that point to how important this issue was to Paul. Notice the word he uses. He says, verse 2, “I urge Euodia,” and he repeats it a second time, “and I urge Syntyche.” The word *urge* means “to beg or to plead.” And he repeats the word as if he’s talking individually to each of these women. He mentions them by name which is very, very uncommon in the New Testament in this kind of situation. So, understand how important that resolution is, and then work toward resolution. Now, please don’t

misunderstand. Conflict resolution is not compromise. So many people think that. They think if you give a little and I give a little, then we've resolved the conflict. No, you haven't because neither of you feels like it's truly resolved. Both of you feel as if you've gotten the short end of the stick. It hasn't gone your way, and so you both leave a compromise feeling that that conflict has not truly been resolved. You just sort of buried it. You've pretended in some way it doesn't exist by agreeing to a compromise of some kind. But there is still a disagreement. There is still an animosity potentially. So, we're not talking about that. We're talking about complete understanding and resolution. That's what Paul describes here.

Look again at what he says. He says, "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord." Literally, I urge them to be of the same mind—to have the same mind. That's conflict resolution. When two people who are in disagreement, in significant disagreement, perhaps involving pride and anger and estrangement, which appears to be in this case, when they come to be of one mind, that's the goal in conflict resolution. So, how do you get there?

I want to take just a moment and share with you just some very practical steps. Let me tell you where these come from. About a year into Sheila and my marriage, we had the privilege of enjoying marriage discipleship by an older godly couple named Fred and Mary Barshaw at Grace Community Church. They were just a delight and became dear friends. We had the privilege of using their material in helping other couples. But in that process, they worked through just the practical side of resolving conflict and coming to this one mindedness that Paul is urging here. These are not inspired, but they do give you a context, a path to resolve conflict, whether it's with your spouse or whether it's in your family or whether it's outside of your family—friend, coworker, whatever it might be. Okay, so let me just walk through these steps to resolution:

Number one, stop the escalation. Stop the escalation. By the way, I use this in premarital counseling because this is so crucial, such an important set of skills to have if you're going to resolve conflict. Conflict is inevitable because you have two fallen people interacting—whether it's in marriage or any other context. So, conflict will happen. How are you going to respond? So, the first step is to stop the escalation. You see what's happening in conflict is a simple disagreement about something has begun to escalate, and as I said, pride has been added, perhaps anger, perhaps verbal retaliation, and maybe more—maybe blowing up, clamming up, expressions of anger, maybe other sorts of alienation, other sorts of responses to this

disagreement. Somebody, one person, has to stop the escalation. All it takes is one. And it might be, for example, in a marriage it might be one spouse this week and the other spouse at some point in the future. So, it can change depending on the issue, depending on the circumstance. But, somebody, somebody in the relationship has to say, wait a minute, my relationship with this person is more important than this issue over which we now are having conflict. And they have to stop the escalation. How does that happen? Proverbs 15:1: “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” So, somebody has to begin to step it down, tone it down. Maybe it’s as simple as saying this, let’s put it in the context of a marriage, “Sweetheart, we love each other. We’re having a pretty significant disagreement, but we love each other too much to let this divide us. Let’s take a minute and calm down and” then:

Number two, “let’s agree to sit down and discuss the issue.” So, take a moment, compose yourself if you need to, if you can’t do it right then, but agree to make an appointment. The help of that is it’s not on the spur of the moment. Often conflicts occur just sort of randomly in life. You’re doing something and it occurs unexpectedly, and suddenly your relationship is divided by conflict. And so, agree that you’re going to actually sit down together and discuss this issue.

Thirdly, seek to understand the other person’s perspective. This is so crucial. Because what do we usually want to do when there’s conflict, when there’s disagreement? We want to make sure the other person understands us. We want to make sure we get our point across. But if we’re really going to resolve conflict, if we really love that other person, then it starts not with communicating, that is communicating our thoughts, but the kind of communication that listens to the other person’s perspective. And so, you listen. So, it starts like this, “Okay, we disagree about this issue. Please help me understand your perspective about this.” And so, you then listen carefully. You let them explain. You try to really listen to what they’re saying, to their meaning, to their heart.

Fourthly, reword and repeat what you heard. In other words, once they’ve explained their perspective, you reword it in your own words, and you repeat it to them. Why do you do that? Because I can’t tell you how many times in Sheila and my marriage, we’ve done that and I will say, “Okay, let me see if I understand what you’re saying; you’re saying this,” to which Sheila will say, “No, that’s not what I’m saying at all,” and then she will clarify. So, I misunderstood what she’s communicating. And so, this is the hard part of communication. But, you listen, you

repeat and say, “Here’s what I think you’re saying,” and you give that person the chance to say, “Yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying,” or “No, that’s not exactly what I’m saying,” or “No, that’s not it at all. Here again is what I’m really saying.” And you keep that going until the other person says, “Yes, that is what I mean.” You both do that by the way, obviously—both of the people that are in the point of conflict.

Number five, you come to one mind about a workable solution. So, now you’re working on a solution together. Now, you understand each other. You understand each other’s perspective. You understand what the concerns are, why it’s an issue, and now you’re trying to work together to resolve it. You’re both working together. That’s the point. And you’re trying to come to a position where after you’re done, you both say, “I really like where this landed. I really like the decision we made, and the course is set.” So, that’s the goal—one mindedness, back to the word Paul uses. He says, “I urge them to be of one mind.”

Number six, seek forgiveness from each other when you sin. This can happen at any point in this process. Perhaps it should happen earlier before you sit down to discuss or at the beginning of you sitting down to discuss the issue. But regardless, it needs to happen. You seek forgiveness from each other if you have sinned in this process. And, usually if there’s disagreement that’s ratcheted up, there’s sin. How do you ask forgiveness? Let me just say this because so many people are so bad at asking for forgiveness. You start just like you do with God by identifying the sin. You don’t say, “I’m sorry,” or “I’m sorry you misunderstood me,” or “I’m sorry you’re such a blockhead that you can’t get this the first time.” That’s not asking for forgiveness. No, you identify the sin. “Please forgive me for my anger.” “Please forgive me for saying harsh words toward you.” “Please forgive me for not loving you enough to really listen to you.” You identify the sin, and then you ask for forgiveness. Again, you don’t just say, “I’m sorry for,” but you ask for forgiveness. “Would you please forgive me?” Just like you do with God. Here’s the sin, would You please forgive me? And then, of course, the offended spouse has to extend true, heartfelt forgiveness just as God has forgiven him or her. That’s Matthew 18. The end of Matthew 18 talks about that reality—the unforgiving slave. You can’t be forgiven the massive debt that God has forgiven you and refuse to offer forgiveness to others. So, you have to extend that forgiveness from your heart. Then once you’ve done that, once you’ve worked through the issue, once you’ve sought each other’s forgiveness, and it’s done, then take time to pray together.

That's number seven. Pray together, and confess your sin to the Lord, and express your love for the person, and thank the Lord for the fact that you've been able to work through this together in a way that honors Him.

Now, Paul goes on to say here in the resolving of this conflict, there are times when it might be necessary to involve a third party, another mature believer. But, whatever you do, don't leave it unresolved. Notice verse 3. "Indeed, true companion, I ask you also to help these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel." I ask you to help them. We don't know who this true companion is, who this man is. There's a lot of conjecture, but I think it's reasonable to assume that he was either an elder or he's one of Paul's associates that was assigned there. But, regardless, Paul asks him to get involved in helping these two women in settling the issue that separated them. At times, that may be possible. And so don't be afraid to do that. Don't be so proud as to say I don't want anybody to know that I have this issue. No, if there's a conflict you can't resolve with another brother or sister, whether it's in your home or not, you need to seek help. Get somebody to help you work through that issue so that there can be true one mindedness, true resolution in your relationship. Because unresolved disagreements eventually produce true conflict, and unresolved conflict leads to settled conflict and eventually alienation where the relationship itself is dramatically affected by this conflict.

So, here's a question. What happens if after all that you still can't resolve the disagreement, but the issues are still too important to overlook? What do you do? Well, hopefully that doesn't happen. But there are times when it could, and you graciously, in that situation, part ways without sowing discord, still loving, still caring for that person, and yet there is not an immediate working together in the same way there was before. Of course, the classic example of that is Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15 verse 39, "they parted ways," but there's every indication that they remained close friends, dear friends. They just couldn't agree on that specific issue.

What I want you to understand though, the big picture, that we've seen in this text is the first step to spiritual stability is standing firm, is living in harmony, resolving to live in harmony with other brothers and sisters in Christ. Why is that? Because we don't fight this spiritual war on our own. There are no lone soldiers on Christ's battlefield. We are brothers together. We are a band of brothers, and we need each other. And so, if we're going to stand firm, it starts by making sure that there are no unresolved conflicts between us. But that we enjoy, what Paul calls here (and I

love it) being of one mind with those around us. May God give us the grace to do so, so that we can truly stand firm rather than fall. Have a great week.