

Striving Side by Side

September 20, 2026

Scriptures: Philippians 1:21-30

²¹ Because for me, living serves Christ and dying is even better. ²² If I continue to live in this world, I get results from my work. ²³ But I don't know what I prefer. I'm torn between the two because I want to leave this life and be with Christ, which is far better. ²⁴ However, it's more important for me to stay in this world for your sake. ²⁵ I'm sure of this: I will stay alive and remain with all of you to help your progress and the joy of your faith, ²⁶ and to increase your pride in Christ Jesus through my presence when I visit you again.

²⁷ Most important, live together in a manner worthy of Christ's gospel. Do this, whether I come and see you or I'm absent and hear about you. Do this so that you stand firm, united in one spirit and mind as you struggle together to remain faithful to the gospel. ²⁸ That way, you won't be afraid of anything your enemies do. Your faithfulness and courage are a sign of their coming destruction and your salvation, which is from God. ²⁹ God has generously granted you the privilege, not only of believing in Christ but also of suffering for Christ's sake. ³⁰ You are having the same struggle that you saw me face and now hear that I'm still facing.



Paul writes the letter to the Philippians from prison. He has been arrested and is in Rome, awaiting trial before Caesar. Paul is fairly certain about how this will all end. As we work through this series, “Pressing On,” knowing that Paul sits on what we would call “death row” as he writes these words, well, it adds an important dimension to his words. For example, next week, when we press on and Paul asks us to have the same mind as Christ, does that request feel different knowing that Paul is incarcerated by the empire?

And then, in week three, when Paul tells us his story of suffering and of privilege, does it land differently for us knowing that Paul writes while bound in chains because of his faith? And in the last week, when Paul tells us to rejoice – and not just some of the time, but always – does that proclamation have a different ring to it when we realize that it is being shouted through the bars of his prison cell?



Paul begins his letter to the church in Philippi reminding them that he is praying for them even while bound in chains for Christ. When we read these words in verses 12 and 13, it feels like it should be the other way around. It feels like Paul should be asking the church to pray for him, given his present situation. But Paul does not despair in his present reality. It is almost the opposite. Paul rejoices that his situation is bringing more attention to Jesus. Others are speaking of their faith in bolder and braver ways. Paul is glad that Christ is being “*proclaimed in every possible way.*” He understands the big picture.

As we prepare to enter into this time exploring part of Paul’s letter to the Philippians, let us begin with this centering prayer...

Holy One, in your grace you give us all that we need, each moment, each day, to live as your beloved ones. Grant that we may always be mindful of your Spirit, alive in us and in all. And now, O God, I ask that you would bless the words of my mouth and that the meditation of all of our hearts would be pleasing in your sight. You are our rock and our redeemer, our Christ and our king. Amen.

Even though Paul understands the big picture, in our text this week, Paul wrestles with life and death. His wrestling, though, isn’t the usual prison, end-of-life despair.

Paul's wrestling is an inner debate about the purpose of faith and life. Paul begins this inner debate as he muses, in verse 21, *"Because for me, living serves Christ and dying is even better."* As he lives, he works for Christ and he gets *"results."* Paul is a successful evangelist, bringing many people to a saving relationship in Christ. And part of Paul also longs for heaven. In verse 23 he makes this confession: *"I want to leave this life and be with Christ, which is far better."* Paul understands heaven to be a place far more beautiful, far more amazing, far more glorious than this life. Heaven will surely be better than this life. But, at this present time, I believe that most of us would choose life.



While I believe that is true for most of us, there are folks who do long for heaven. At times in this life, people come to a place of being worn out, of being oh so tired. They have fought the good fight and are ready to rest from their labors. Others battle loneliness or chronic poor health. The loss of a loved one late in life can lead someone to want to depart this world, to join their loved one in eternity. They are out there. I have ministered to people in each of these situations.

For Paul, there is a "however." We find it in verse 24: *"However, it's more important for me to stay in this world for your sake."* What grace we find in these words! As much as Paul longs to be with Jesus in heaven, he realizes that his purpose remains on earth. It is not his own good that is driving this decision. It is the good of the flock that follows him that drives this decision. Paul knows that he can still serve the flock in Philippi – and in Ephesus and Corinth and Rome and Colosse and Jerusalem and... From prison, Paul shares that he is motivated to live and work for Christ because of the flock and for the flock.



In his mind, Paul was considering giving up ministry and waiting for the sentence to be pronounced. Ultimately the sentence was given, and Paul did die for his faith. I do not think anyone would have faulted Paul, at this point, for sitting back and worrying about his fate. Instead, though, he sets himself aside to continue encouraging and building up the community of faith. Paul was as physically alone as he could be – isolated in a prison cell. Yet in spirit he was fully present to and surrounded by the community of faith. In many ways, this is an amazing act of self-sacrifice and humble service, grounded in his trust in God.

In the next verse Paul assures his fellow believers that he will be with them – in spirit – and will continue to help their progress in the faith and will hear about their growth with joy. Paul will continue to do all he can for as long as he can so that these followers of Jesus can continue to become more and more like Christ. Paul fleshes out what this should look like as we turn to verses 27-30. These are mostly words of encouragement, but they also contain the honest truth about how the walk of faith can be hard at times.

In verse 27 Paul gives this instruction: *“Most important, live together in a manner worthy of Christ’s gospel.”* Paul is encouraging them to live their lives as Christ would live his. *“Live together.”* This

is first a call to unity, to live in the community, to share in the mission and ministry of the church. It is a call to strive together for the building of the kingdom of God here on earth. This is how the church is designed to operate. This unity, this shared living, this is where strength comes from. In community, we find support and encouragement and accountability. Within community, there is the belief that we are responsible to one another and for one another’s well-being. God, of course models these ideas. In this week’s Old Testament reading from Exodus 16, God meets the peoples’ needs, providing manna and quail.



There were also accountability and trust modeled and learned in this passage. The Israelites were to gather just the manna needed for the day, trusting that God would provide again the next day. It was each person's responsibility to gather only what one needs for the day. To gather too much would be selfish. It would spoil. This is how God kept them accountable.

We also find strength when we work together. A group of people working one day can accomplish much more than one person working many days can accomplish. It is the old adage: many hands make light work. But it is more than this. When we are able to give up some of the control and invite others into the decision-making process and into the creative process, then the end result is so much better. Others think of things that we would never think of alone and this adds to the product or event or whatever the team is working on.

And lastly, when we are living together in unity, we are able to "*stand firm*." In the rest of verse 27, Paul connects unity to having "*one mind and spirit*." The one mind and one spirit that Paul is inviting us to have is the mind and spirit of Christ. When we are united together, moving in a common direction with a gospel-centered focus, then we are able to stand firm and to strive side by side as we seek to be faithful to sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. When this is how we understand and seek to live out our faith in community, then amazing and beautiful things can happen.

Monday at the lectionary-message study group we talked about times when we have experienced this idea of one mind and one spirit, working together to share the good news of Jesus Christ with the world. It just so happened that three of us had volunteered at the HOPE Center in Rapid City. The unifying force was a desire to help people who were struggling with issues of poverty and homelessness. Whether sharing in the Upper Room devotional or helping someone with clothes for an interview, Christ's love drove all of our actions.

Kristin and I recalled the time when our good friends lost their son during the summer before his junior year of high school. A community formed around Greg and Sue. Some of the folks in the community were Greg and Sue's friends who came and were present, who brought food or helped with needed tasks. Some of the folks were Ryan's friends. They came by the house regularly to share stories of Ryan and to let Greg and Sue know what an impactful life Ryan had lived. The support and the encouragement helped them through a most difficult time in their lives. The unifying force was a desire to walk with and to love on these "neighbors" in a time of great tragedy.



In the next verse, Paul adds another reason to strive together, side by side, in the faith. In verse 28 he reminds us that we won't need to be afraid of anything that our enemies might do. It is true. When we are closely connected, living in unity, we have one another's back, so to speak. We stand up for and stand beside one another in times of need or trial. But that word – enemies – it can be a complicated word. Some people think that they do not have any enemies, but they do. Maybe it is someone trying to do them harm or to take advantage of them. Maybe it is their pride or need to be in control that is the enemy. Maybe it is a coming health struggle or a relationship issue. Other people think of enemies as people or things to conquer, vanquish, or destroy. Paul would not advise us to take on these or any other enemies through our own power or strength.

Instead, Paul would encourage us to rely on our faith and to trust in one another as protection against our enemies. This battle is about perseverance and commitment to the cause of Jesus, regardless of the obstacles or hardships.

The best way to do this is to do it together. Striving side by side while we stand together is what Paul hopes to see in the church in Philippi and, I believe, would hope to see in all churches today.

Along these same lines, when we are living the faith together, we notice when one of us is maybe stressed or worried or is tired or downcast. This is often when community really matters. When we are pressing on, working to build the kingdom here on earth, we can run out of gas at times. It is then that another can come alongside us, sharing the work or helping to carry the burden. This aligns with Paul's reminder that sometimes the walk of faith is hard. The apostle reminds us that it is a privilege to suffer for Christ. He would call it a gift from God. We may wonder why. In those hard times and trials, it is then that we are tested and refined and purified. We emerge from these difficulties stronger in our faith. As we go through these times as a community, we often learn and grow not because we are in the valley ourselves, but because we chose to walk with another through their valley.

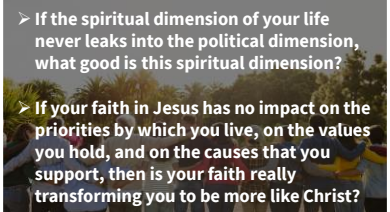
This often occurs when we engage with the world. Make no mistake, striving side by side as we seek to live out our faith is something that we do at church and in the world. In the original Greek, the word for "live together" was *polituesthe*. It is the word that we get "politics" from. So we, as I think Paul would have, could translate verse 27 to read something like this: "conduct yourselves as a citizen in a manner worthy of the gospel." While some may argue or believe that we should keep our faith separate from our political world or that in church we should just be concerned with the spiritual side of things, that is not at all what Paul was talking about here. He is not talking about political parties, but about living in the world.



Paul would argue that there should be no separation between how we conduct ourselves at church and out there in the world. When we try and keep our faith life separate from the rest of our lives, we are compartmentalizing. For Paul, how one conducts oneself as a citizen of the world was very much a faith issue. I believe this is still true today.

To help you process this idea, I now share a few questions from a commentary I read this week that talked about this very issue. Here they are:

- If the spiritual dimension of your life never leaks into the political dimension, what good is this spiritual dimension?
- If your faith in Jesus has no impact on the priorities by which you live, on the values you hold, and on the causes that you support, then is your faith really transforming you to be more like Christ?



With these questions and with Paul's call to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel in all aspects of our lives, we can see the necessity of allowing our faith and the communities in which we live and work and play to grow together, to become intertwined. Our faith should not just "leak into" all of our life. Our faith should be the guiding force for all of our decisions, actions, words, and thoughts – whether in church, at home, or living out there in the world. Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are called, invited, and encouraged to strive side by side as we seek to establish the kingdom of God here on earth – within the walls of the church and outside of these walls too. As we press on in this journey of faith, may it be so for you and for me. Alleluia and amen.



GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. Our discipleship is intended to impact all areas of our lives. Where is this the greatest struggle for you? What changes could you make to be more faithful here?
- 2) *Pray*. Do you know someone at work or elsewhere that might be open to a faith conversation? Seek divine guidance for how to begin and navigate the conversation.
- 3) *Study*. Re-read Matthew 20:1-16. How might your generosity of time or resources or... open someone's heart to the grace of God evident in this story?