

Keeping Our Flock Together

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As we saw just a few moments ago, Jesus is a wonderful Shepherd for us. Even though our elders were effective leaders during their time, they were never anything more than His instruments. The same boundless love and boundless compassion that led Jesus to give His life to defend us will lead Him also to be with us and to bless us.

However, this does not mean that we can kick back, relax, and wait for Jesus to do His thing. God has never worked like that. Instead, He has always used godly men and godly women as the messengers of His word and the instruments of His will. When those men and women were willing to serve, God blessed them, and His people prospered. When they were neutralized by apathy and sin, God refused to bless His people, and they suffered.

The same thing is true for us today. The power is God's, just as the power has always been God's. When we give ourselves over to that power and put our trust in Him, our victory is inevitable. However, even though the power is God's, the decision is ours. God can make any of us into a mighty servant of His will, but He won't do that if it isn't our will too. God doesn't want robots. He wants free moral agents who voluntarily devote themselves to Him. That willing obedience is precious to Him, but if we are to be truly willing, He must also give us the right to reject Him and fail Him.

This is the choice that is before us this morning. As individuals and as a congregation, we can turn to God and succeed, or we can turn away from Him and fail. The dissolution of the eldership has left each one of us in a position of heightened responsibility. There aren't any more elders to do our work or chase down our straying brethren or calm our quarrels. If those things are to be done, we must do them ourselves. Let's look, then, at keeping our flock together.

Philippians 1:27-2:5

For our texts this morning, we're going to look exclusively at Paul's epistle to Philippians. Unity is one of the main themes of Philippians, and it contains many exhortations that are useful for us today. The first of these exhortations is to **LIVE WORTHY**. Paul encourages the Philippians to do this in Philippians 1:27. Unity is extremely important, friends, and we must be united, but we cannot be united as a social club or a recreation league. We must be united as a church belonging to Christ, and the only way we can do that is if each one of us as individuals also belongs to Christ. The thought should not even cross our minds that because we don't have elders anymore, we can do whatever we want, and there aren't going to be consequences. As a congregation, we cannot remain in fellowship with those who willfully reject the gospel, and I know that the men of this congregation will not shrink from making those hard choices should they become necessary. What is more, even though I know that Joe, John, and many of the other brethren here will continue to reach out to the spiritually weak, no one is going to be able to do that with the authority of the elder. That means that if we've been relying on the elders to keep us faithful, we can't do that anymore, and we need to make the commitment ourselves to live up to what God expects. We are entrusted with caring for our own souls, and we need to act like it.

Second, we must **BE LIKE-MINDED**. We read this in Philippians 2:1-2. As Christians, we cannot be united in fact unless we are also united in mind and in spirit. This is one of the great challenges for any congregation, and it will be even more challenging for us. This does not mean that every one of us must agree on every last little doctrinal detail. I don't even agree with my wife on everything in Scripture, much less with all of you. If that is what the Bible means by unity, a united church would be practically impossible. Instead, we must be united in the way that we look at the Scripture. We must all acknowledge that it is the inspired word of God, and that God has equipped us all as ordinary saints to understand it. We must work to shed our preconceived notions and come to the text honestly, seeking to find what God has revealed and not what we want to see. When brethren reach different conclusions than we have, we must give those viewpoints a fair and open hearing. We must never be afraid to acknowledge when we are wrong, either to ourselves or to others. Above all, we must constantly seek to carry out God's will and glorify Him. Even if we all share this mind, we will still have differences, but the devil will be unable to use our differences to hinder our work.

Third, we must **PUT OTHERS FIRST**. Paul brings this up in Philippians 2:3. Most of the time, when churches experience division, the root cause of the division is not an honest Scriptural disagreement. Churches can work through those. Instead, the division is usually caused by people who are selfishly ambitious, who want to run the church their way, and will use some convenient Scriptural issue as a stalking horse for their disagreement. Brethren, if any of us get to thinking that way, we don't have elders to muzzle us anymore. Any of the men here can now make a big, destructive stink about anything they want to. That means that from here on out, none of us can dare to advance our own little agendas and our own little pet projects, and our own little pet peeves. None of us can dare ask what's best for us and what we want. Instead, we must ask what is best for others and what they want. We must each seek to elevate others and to diminish ourselves, to better the lives of others even at the expense of our own discomfort. It's not our job to take care of ourselves and stick up for ourselves. It's our job to take care of others and stick up for them.

As part of this, we must **LOOK TO OTHERS' INTERESTS**. Read with me from Philippians 2:4. This attitude of concern for others isn't just something that should keep us from advancing our own agendas. It is something

that should lead us to consider our walk with Christ in terms of how we can serve one another. Over the past week, I've had many conversations with the men of this congregation, and one of the themes that I've heard is the men talking about what they want to do. Some men have said that they want to be more involved in taking care of various projects around the building. Great. Do that. We need people doing that. Others have said that they want to encourage the brethren to associate with one another more outside of the assembly. Great. Do that. We need people doing that too. Still others have said that they want to work behind the scenes, reaching out to the struggling Christians on the fringes and helping them spiritually. Great. Do that. We REALLY need people doing that. Don't wait for somebody to come up to you and give you permission to do it. Get out there, do it, and keep doing it. Obviously, there are some limits on this. We don't need anybody deciding on his own authority to commit the church to a \$100,000 tuckpointing project. However, that's not usually the problem. We don't suffer from people overreaching and trying to do too much. We suffer from people who see a need and are equipped to fill the need, but are so unsure about themselves that they never actually do anything about it. We can no longer afford this kind of indecision. We all need to step up and do the work before us.

In all things, we must **HAVE THE MIND OF CHRIST**. This is the way that Paul summarizes the preceding discussion in Philippians 2:5. In the next several verses, Paul summarizes the career of Christ, the way that He surrendered everything, from His high position in heaven to His own life, to serve God and serve others. As His disciples, this must be the goal for all of us. Every one of us is needed, every one of us is useful, and every one of us can do something useful to help others. When Lauren and I were in Houston, we spent some time with her grandmother. Mimi is in her 80's, her health isn't the best, and she isn't able to get out and do all the things that she used to. However, she still has the capacity to send people cards, and that's what she does. Every year, she sends out hundreds and hundreds of cards, to people who are in the hospital, people who are struggling with long-term illnesses, preachers whom the congregation supports, and members whom the elders there have expressed concern about. I can't tell you, friends, how much I admire her for that. She's just an old widow lady, but she reminds me of the widow whom Jesus saw at the temple. She doesn't have much to give, but she gives what she has. Brethren, if there is any key for this congregation going forward, it is that each one of us take what we have, and give it to serve others.

Philippians 2:14-4:5

The flip side of this coin is that we must learn **NOT TO GRUMBLE**. Paul is pretty blunt about this, in Philippians 2:14-15. There are few things that are more damaging to a congregation than brethren who speak ill of other brethren and get in quarrels with them. This is a common problem, but it is almost always caused by ignorance and lack of love. We see a brother who misses services sometimes, and so we start talking about him out of the corners of our mouths, but we don't know that there are some serious family medical problems that he's dealing with. We see another brother take a strong stand in Bible class that we don't agree with, but we've never sat down with him and discussed it, so that we don't know his background and we don't know where he's coming from. The only cure for this is for us to spend as much time with each other as we can, especially with the people we're tempted to disapprove of. I have to tell you, friends, I have an easy time getting upset with brethren when I'm not with them, and brooding about them and stewing over all that I think they've done, but when I see them face to face, and I look them in the eyes, my heart just melts, and I remember why I love them instead. We must regard one another with understanding and compassion, and a desire to help, not with arrogance and a desire to condemn. The better we get to know one another, the easier that will be.

Similarly, we must **REJOICE**. As many of us know, this idea appears in Philippians 4:4. A lot of people, myself included, have a naturally pessimistic frame of mind. We tend to focus on the problems and the difficulties, instead of on all the things that are going well. If we aren't careful, this attitude can poison the way we consider our brethren and our church. Not only is that not helpful, but it isn't even justified. This church isn't perfect, no, but no church is, and in this congregation, we have an awful lot of wonderful people who truly want to serve God. What is more, even though we aren't perfect, we serve a God who is, a God who loved us enough to give His only Son to die for us, who loves us enough that He wants each one of us to spend eternity with Him in heaven. Those things are the important things, and they are reason enough for us to rejoice not sometimes, not most of the time, but always. Let's remember that.

Finally, we must never forget, no matter the provocation, to **BE REASONABLE**. Paul instructs us to do this in Philippians 4:5. This is easy to say, but it's hard to do, and I know this from personal experience. When I get good and mad about something or somebody, those angry words can come gushing out of me, but in all my life, I cannot think of a single time when I spoke out of anger and was later glad that I did. Sometimes, it's very satisfying to speak out of anger, and not nearly as satisfying to wait until we can speak out of love instead, but instead of doing what feels right, we need to make sure that we are doing what is right. God expects us to be people who are moderate, temperate, and thoughtful in what we say to others, especially in what we say to other Christians. God also expects us to be people who are quick to hear and slow to speak. He wants us to have perspective and not get caught up in the heat of the moment. I've heard it said that the unexamined life is not worth living. It is also true that the unconsidered word is not worth speaking.