

## **Stand Firm**

Trinity CRC, June 14, 2020  
Series on Philippians

Philippians 3:12-4:1 (3:13-14 & 4:1)  
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Fellow friends of Jesus Christ,

The prayer of any pastor for his congregation is that we stand firm. Paul concludes our passage for today with these words:

*Php 4:1 Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!*

There is such wonderful warmth in those words as Paul calls the Philippians his brothers and sisters and dear friends. He speaks to people he loves dearly and has built a relationship with. This is not just some generic congregation. There is a tone of passion and love in Paul's word choice. Experienced pastors often reflect that we all serve a church that for one reason or another has a special place in our heart. I certainly echo Paul's sense of friendship and love with this congregation. And like Paul, I want to say to you: stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!

So what does it mean to stand firm? Does Paul mean to stand at attention like a soldier, not moving a muscle? Does he mean we should stay stiff, not budge or never change? Does standing firm in the Lord mean that the church must always do things exactly like mom and dad and grandpa and grandma did it? If someone suggests we change something, must our answer be "No, we are standing firm in the Lord"?

When a baseball team is winning, the coach sometimes says, "Okay team, now let's keep our lead. Don't do anything crazy. Just try to stand firm and hold our ground." By saying, "stand firm", he does not mean, let's all sit down and stop playing. If all the players stood at attention like soldiers, simply staring at the coach but not watching the play, the team would lose their lead. When the coach says, "stand firm, team", he means continue to play very hard. At the very least, you should play more defensively. Better still, you should play offensively as well. Don't just try to hold on to what you have; also try to get ahead. Be ready to hit, run and slide. Do whatever it takes to catch the ball. When batting, belt it out of the park if you can! And don't sit tight on third base; try to steal home and get another run in." The coach's hope is that the team won't lose any ground, but stand its ground and even get ahead.

Similarly, Paul reminds us that we're on the winning team when you're God's child! But you can't become content with your lead. You can't take a win for granted. So what then must we do to stand firm? To understand Paul's words, we must do what we always do: consider his words in context.

Chapter 4:1 is the conclusion of chapter 3. The "therefore" of 4:1 comes as result of what has been written before it. Thus, Paul is saying, if you want to stand firm in the Lord, do what I just said. And so we turn our attention to chapter 3, particularly verses 13 & 14 where Paul introduces this point about standing firm.

Here Paul encourages us to stand firm in the Lord by, one, forgetting what it behind" and, two, "straining toward what is ahead, pressing on to win the prize for which

God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus.” We are on God's team and called to stand firm. We need to live for the Lord to our full potential. But in order to do so, we need, first of all, to forget what is behind.

## **Forget What is Behind**

Boys and girls, did you ever try to walk forward while looking backward? That's pretty tough. You're likely to bump into things (*walk into the wall*) and trip over stuff. You'll probably fall and get hurt. Paul is saying we can't make progress in our faith if we just look backwards. To be sure, this means we can't dwell on past sin. To stand firm in the Lord, you have to forget all the rotten stuff in your past and even in your present. Surrender it to Jesus.

If a pitcher makes a lousy pitch, he cannot dwell on it. If all he thinks about is the bad pitch and not about how to correct the problem and pitch better, then he's going to be in trouble. Similarly, we need to put our bad memories behind us. We need to surrender our sin once and for all to Jesus and be confident that it is forgiven. We can't stand firm by constantly living in the past and failing to accept the forgiveness and healing that Christ has earned for us.

Think of the Apostle Paul's terrible past and the great guilt he, no doubt, felt. Here is a man who sinned against God as a Pharisee by expecting that he could live a life holy enough for God to accept him without any help from Jesus. What an insult to God's holiness and the sacrifice of Jesus. Moreover, because of his self-righteous zeal Paul persecuted and killed Christians. What an offense against those Christians and God! That all leads us to wonder how effective Paul could have been as a Christian apostle if he dwelt on the past all the time. Without a doubt, Paul needed to come to the point of sorrow for his sins. And he did. He needed to confess his sins to Jesus. And he did. He needed to forget the past and move ahead in the confidence that Christ had made him new. And he did. In Christ, Paul is now free to do new things for the Lord. He could not experience the power of Christ and the joy of standing firm if he continued to agonize over the brokenness of his past. Only looking back is paralyzing.

It is for us too. We are no different than Paul with respect to sin. After becoming a Christian, he was quick to admit, as in v.12, that he was not perfect. That's why he put no confidence in the flesh, **not** claiming to have any righteousness in himself, but claiming Christ's credit. Paul's confidence rested in Christ's righteousness which became Paul's—like ours—by faith. Paul's own life was far from perfect, but he didn't let that stop him from standing firm in the Lord. In fact, it drove him to the stand on the Lord.

Many of us as God's people **do** let our sin stop us. We stop ourselves from enjoying Christ's righteousness because we are still trying to show God our own. We are self righteous and proud. With Paul, we need to learn to sing, "Nothing in myself I bring, simply to thy cross I cling." When we can say that, we can forget the past because it all has "**Paid in Full**" stamped on it with the red blood of Christ. We are free to move ahead.

I'm told that during this time when people are staying home more than in the past, people are falling into sin more readily. Apparently porn consumption is up 20% in the past few months. We're looking in the wrong direction in our boredom. Looking at ourselves instead of at Christ. Some of these struggles we face are hard. Very hard. But the solution starts with looking at Jesus and knowing without a doubt that Christ's righteousness is credited to our account. We are not slaves to our sin—whether sins of the past or the present. Jesus has them covered.

In addition to not focusing on **our own** past sin, Christians also cannot focus on the past sins of others if we want to stand firm in Christ. Next to Jesus, **few other people** mentioned in the Bible suffered more as a Christian than Paul. Paul had been sinned against. Beaten by the Romans. Jailed for the sake of Christ. Even viewed with suspicion by other Christians. But, says Paul, I must put that behind me and keep moving ahead. And that too is only possible through Christ. Likewise, my friends, we must put behind us not only our own sins but also the sins others have committed against us. Otherwise we can't stand firm in the Lord. Continually dwelling on the offenses of the past will ruin your joy in the Lord for the present and the future. Let it go. Give it to Jesus who has paid for it in full.

Are you harbouring hatred toward others? Are you having trouble forgiving them?

As Christians called to imitate God, if I have forgiven my neighbour for the sins he or she has committed against me, then one way of testing my sincerity is to measure how much I dwell on those past sins. Do I hang out old dirty laundry? Or am I content to leave those sins or offenses alone? Will I continually drag up the past so that the offender's reputation is repeatedly called into question? Or can I recognize that I myself am as guilty of sin as any other person? Can I set aside my hurt and accept the hard words of Jesus, *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*? Jesus imitated God perfectly and we must seek to do likewise. In that way we find the peace and calm in our life that Jesus had even as he hung on the cross while his enemies looked on. Think of the loving, forgiving spirit that enabled him to say, *Father forgive them*. His prayer for his enemies reveals that he did not hate them or even wish them harm.

Forgiving for the Christian means living like sin—our own sins and those of others—no longer effects our present life because we have surrendered them all to Christ and put them behind us by his grace and strength.

## **Press Forward**

But standing firm not only calls us to forget what is behind. We must also strain toward what is ahead. Paul tells us to press on. This is a call to grow in your faith and love for the Lord. Just as you have to put your faith into action to forget the past, you must do so in forging ahead. Because God accepts us through Christ we cannot constantly look backwards, except to remember what took place for us on the cross. We must heed the call to press forward, to be the kind of Christians we would be if we were already in heaven. Just because we are still bound by sin is no reason to quit fighting against it. When we give in to sin, we are like the baseball team that gives up in the 5<sup>th</sup>

inning: we look hopeless, we lose our morale, we show no joy. We stop being a living example to the world of what Jesus has done for us. We must not live as enemies of the cross, but as ambassadors of Jesus so that Christ can make his appeal to the world through us.

Let me come back to those struggle with porn or anything else for that matter. Is that wrong? Yes. Should you keep doing it? No! But how? Start by looking at Jesus. I'm serious. Start by thanking him every day for forgiving you. Don't focus on how bad you are or how bad you feel. Focus on how good Jesus is. I assure you that you will start to gain victory over your struggle. Not instantly. Maybe not completely but you have to look at Jesus and see his smiling face warmly loving you. Does he like it that you feel crappy about your sin? No. He loves you and he's not holding your sin against you. Start looking forward instead of backwards. Move ahead with Jesus. Go with him to get professional help with your addictions. Go with him to talk to someone else or to an accountability group. Stop beating yourself up. Go forward with your loving and faithful Savior at your side and in your heart.

I'm told that 80% of employees during this pandemic confess to feeling lazy and not doing their work as in the past. I'm sure there are all kinds of good reasons for that. It makes sense when you're not in the usual environment and maybe not being held accountable in the same way as usual. But giving in to laziness is not essential. Giving in to a spirit of "good enough" isn't wise either. Again, see Jesus beside you. Know that he's with you. Look to him for strength. Pray. Maybe talk to your boss, especially if you're not feeling good about yourself and your work. Don't let misery or half-heartedness define you. The Lord can help us move forward. He recognizes our human nature and the weaknesses we feel. He wants to help us overcome them.

And in this time of a heightened awareness about racism, let's confess our own lack of sensitivity in this regard. Let's confess our sins of racism—the way we look with suspicion on certain people without any real reason other than skin colour. Let's get past that. Look at Jesus and ask him to help you see everyone as a sister or brother. No matter our skin colour, we're all created in the image of God. He made us all beautiful. Pray for the Holy Spirit to help you see people with the eyes of God. Pray for courage to confront your own prejudice and to treat people as Christ treated the Samaritan woman at the well, for example. As Paul treated Gentiles as his coheirs with Christ. As Philip welcomed the Ethiopian eunuch. As the Apostle John peered into heaven in the book of Revelation and saw a church of all nations before the throne of God. Let us look on all people with the eyes of Jesus and begin to treat one another on earth as we will in heaven. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you confront your own prejudice by reaching out to new people and learning their story and loving them for who they are.

In short, let us seek to live as people who look forward to what awaits us. We can stand up under the temporary abuses, trials and also challenges of this world because we have our eyes on heaven. There we see our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who himself pressed on in this world toward the cross of Calvary so that he could win the crown of eternal life for us, so that we could be united with him and with one another. Even Jesus while on earth wanted to give up sometimes and yet he pressed on to fulfill the calling God his Father had placed upon him. He stood firm.

Think about what Jesus did whenever he was weary and tired. What did he do when he questioned whether he could carry out his task? When he felt it was nearly impossible to press on or move forward? He often withdrew to a quiet place to be alone with his Father. In solitude and sometimes with his disciples, he would pray. Therein lies our example.

Writing to the Philippians from his prison, Paul imitates Christ, praying for and encouraging the struggling church in Philippi. The call to strain for what is ahead is the call for the Christian to live up to what we have already attained, as Paul says in v.16. That means we need to put into practice what we already know to be true and to be our victory and destiny in Christ. To press onward we need to have our eyes on the goal.

We don't just sit around and endure our sin or the brokenness of this world this until we get to heaven and everything is made right. No, we live for Christ in the present. We seek to live with an eye on heaven where's God will is done perfectly, where his kingdom is all encompassing. We let that inspire and guide us in our lives right now.

If a team wants to win first prize, the players have to work together for the goals that the coach prescribes. The spirit of competition has no place among brothers and sisters in the Lord who are working toward the same ends. So in a pastoral tone, Paul says in v.15,

*All of us who are mature (Christians) should take such a view of things. And if on some point you should think differently (than your brother or sister), that too God will make clear to you. Only live up to what you have already attained.*

Isn't that wise?! Pressing on with heavenly goals means we don't have time or energy to waste on fighting each other in the kingdom. There's a whole world lost and dying, living as enemies of the cross, a world that can only see Christ in us as we press on together with God's heavenly agenda, seeing ourselves and others through the eyes of Christ's redeeming love.

Remember that standing firm doesn't mean standing still. It means forgetting the past. Actively embracing the forgiveness of Christ and extending it to others. And it means focusing on Christ's agenda and moving ahead as a team that stands up in Christ's strength and stands for him in every area of our lives. We are people who follow Jesus' lead and seek to do the will of God on earth as it is in heaven.

May God help us to stand firm.