

## INTRODUCTION

Encouragement strengthens relationship. A sincere “thank you” can cheer people up. We need to show our gratitude in the church often and intentionally. It makes coworkers feel that you are not taking their effort for granted. Of all these years since I became a Christian I have only met one person who did not appreciate my appreciation. That brother told me: “Pastor, please don’t say things like ‘good job’ that made me feel like a kid.” But for most of us, words of motivation can go a long way. An old story was told about a guy who always got off work late at night. Without exception he took a short cut to walk back home. He had to pass through a cemetery. At one particular night the moon was hidden behind the clouds. It was completely dark. All of a sudden, the man slipped into a hole in the ground. It was prepared to hold someone’s casket. He tried hard to jump and crawl his way out. He could not get a good grip because the wall was muddy from a previous storm. He finally gave up and sat down at a corner, thinking that he might as well wait till the next morning for the workers to rescue him. Then he heard a voice whispering from the far end: “It is useless. You can’t get out from here.” The man mustered all his strength like a Shaolin martial art master and escaped. The other fellow was a drunken guy dropped into the pit earlier. People can do amazing things when being motivated! The apostle Paul knew the power of encouragement too. When we come to the final chapter of the Philippian letter Paul encouraged his readers to preserve their unity in Christ. How? In this passage Paul told us peace is the means to maintain unity in the church.

## EXPLANATION

### 1. Plead for Unity 合一的懇求 (v. 2-3)

Paul began this section with a plea for unity. There was some unknown conflict between Euodia and Syntyche. We do not know their background, nor the nature of the problem. The only thing we are certain is that they were coworkers of Paul. How did Paul help bring harmony back to the sisters? In **verse 2** Paul urged them “...to agree with each other in the Lord.” Paul used the same expression in **2:5** when he said: Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. The context is about not being self-centered but care for others’ interest. Just like Jesus who forsook His glory for us, the sisters should lay their own benefits aside. There should not be an attitude of me versus you in the church. Going back to chapter 4. Next, Paul requested a “loyal yokefellow” to help those two sisters sort things out. The text does not specify who that person may be. Remember Paul was in jail and away from Philippi. Therefore, that person must be trustworthy to serve as a mediator. Thirdly, Paul pointed out their common core value. He said in **verse 3** that the two sisters “have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel.” Paul used almost the same wordings in **1:27** when he praised the believers that: ...I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel. Paul reminded the sisters that they were on the same team in the gospel ministry. Finally, Paul said in 4:3 that God had written their names in the book of life. In order words, they were saved. To sum up, Paul reminded them why they were doing what they were doing. It was as if Paul were saying: “Ladies, was who’s right and who’s wrong so critical compared to proclaiming God’s name?” Bear in mind is that this

letter was not a private correspondence. It would be read aloud publicly to the whole church. In Paul's letters it was rare for him to address people by names when there was a problem. Even when he wrote to the Corinthian church to rebuke them of condoning immoral sins Paul did not disclose any name. Therefore, his purpose for naming Euodia and Syntyche was not to shame them. Instead, he raised everyone's attention so that believers could pray for their tension and facilitate reconciliation. Satan is an expert in fanning disagreement to disrupt our unity in Christ. We have many highly skillful people among us. We should not let our personal opinion hinder our unity. It is normal for us to disagree over many issues. At one Council meeting a proposal was brought up. I shared my viewpoint why the suggestion might not resolve our concern. Finally, a vote was called and the motion was passed. I voted no. What should I do next? I could have vented my frustration to everyone that it was their decision, not mine. Instead, I let it go because it had nothing to do with our missions to witness for Christ and disciple believers. Later a brother asked me about the issue. I replied: "The Council discussed it. The new measure was a corporate decision. Everyone learned to submit to each other." Very often we pick a wrong battle and waste a lot of time arguing about minor things. Why insist on your own opinion when the matter is not about Biblical doctrines? Unity does not mean that we agree on everything. My wife and my kids never agree on what to have for dinner. We still eat happily ever after. Say we need to change the carpet in our church. If we do a survey we may come up with 100 different suggestions – color, brand and thickness. Should I listen to you or you listen to me? There are more important decisions to make in our church other than carpet. Unity means we can agree to disagree. Our difference should not affect our relationship in Christ and our effort to serve together. We continue to love and respect each other. You may prefer red carpet, but blue one is not unbiblical either. Ultimately, we put our trust in the Lord, believing that He will give wisdom and guidance to our coworkers to make the right choice. That is why it is so important to pray for our coworkers. That is the next topic Paul brought up.

## 2. Pray without Anxiety 解憂的禱告 (v. 4-7)

After pleading for unity among coworkers Paul motivated the Philippian believers to pray without anxiety. How does prayer connect with unity? When there is no unity, people simply cannot pray with one another. Many married couples can testify to that. They may not even want to talk to each other when they have a fight. When we pray as a group in the church it is not just taking turn to go through the list. Prayer binds us together when we bring our common concerns to the Lord. Your "amen" means that you agree with what others are praying about. In **Verses 6 and 7** Paul told us some valuable promises about prayer: 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. First, Paul asked us to get our mindset right. He said: "Do not be anxious about anything." When we pray, we commit our anxiety to God. We know that He loves us, and He listens to our cry for help. We trust that He has sovereignty over the whole universe, and He has every resource to fulfill our needs. We believe that His timing and solution are the best. We know that all. But we often pray like asking our Lord for a second opinion. We do not feel so desperate when we have money in the bank, all the technology and the best specialists at our disposal. We should always pray like an orphan as if we had nowhere else to turn. But we should also trust God like we are His wealthy kids. Besides mentioning our attitude Paul also told us how to pray. There are three words in verse 6 – prayer, petition and thanksgiving. The word

“Prayer” here is the general term that includes all forms of appeal we bring to God. “Petition” focuses on the asking aspect. The word has a nuance of pleading. You may have submitted an application to the immigration before. The official term for the process is called a petition. It is like you almost have to beg the agency to approve your application. That is a humbling experience. We should come to the Lord with the same attitude. Do we pray like a servant or do we treat God as our servant? We have our own preferences in mind. You say to God: yes Lord, I need a job, but can it be on the west coast rather than Memphis? Yes Lord, I need a wife, but please don’t forget she has to have blonde hair and blue eyes. Who is the boss? If we call God as Lord then we must submit to His final answer. We trust that His response is part of His master plan for our lives. Besides petition Paul told us that we have to add thanksgiving to our prayer too. When you remember to give thanks, you admit God is the Provider. **Psalm 103:2-5** remind us to give thanks to God: 2 Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits – 3 who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, 4 who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, 5 who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s. Don’t forget to give thanks to God. Our Heavenly Father cherishes our relationship with Him more than just giving us stuff. Prayer should be a time to enjoy God’s presence. Paul went on and told us that when we present our petition and thanksgiving to God, He will give us peace that transcends all understanding. As humans our ultimate concern is to get an answer. But God knows that the first step is to take our worries away. God replaces our fear and doubt with His peace. I often encourage people in hardship with Jesus’ promise in **John 14:27** - Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. We need to constantly remember that God is in full control. Then we can have His peace even when we are still in a storm. People around you may be surprised by your calmness. We Chinese say: we are peaceful when there is no trouble. But the Bible tells us that even when we are in a turmoil we can still have the peace from God. His peace takes our anxiety away.

### 3. Practice Integrity 品格的實踐 (v. 8-9)

Paul plead for unity among the Philippian coworkers. He motivated them to pray without anxiety. Thirdly, Paul encouraged them to practice integrity. In verse 8 he compiled a list of eight descriptive words. I put them on the screen. They define qualities that are positive, visible and delightful. They are natural outflow of the godly characters inside a person. If I can use one word to summarize the eight descriptions it is the term “integrity.” People of integrity do honorable things, with or without others’ attention. Similar to the list Paul put here is the fruit of the Spirit found in **Galatians 5:22-23** – 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control... Please take note that the word “fruit” here is singular in the original Greek text. There is only one fruit but it has nine “flavors.” When we put the two lists side by side we can draw a cause and effect relationship. When believers are filled by the Holy Spirit, they will bear the fruit of the Spirit. Hence, their personalities and behaviors will show up in whatever that is true, noble and right, etc. There are some honest questions we need to ask ourselves. Do we desire after these character traits? If we say we love God, do we want to be more like Him? We all have different issues we need the Lord to deal with. It can be our value system, temper or the way we treat others. Whether we are 20 or 90 years old God can mold us if we submit ourselves to Him. Paul went on to tell the Philippian believers how a person of integrity looked like. **Verse 9** reads: Whatever you have

learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. Paul asked the Philippian church members to follow his example. Paul's integrity was evident in the instructions he gave them, the way they saw how Paul lived and even the things they heard indirectly about him. Was Paul bragging about himself? Of course not. Paul lived the way God wanted him to be. Can we find someone like him in our world? Many of you know that Pastor Billy Graham passed away two months ago. A university professor who wrote a book about Pastor Graham commented: "People who didn't like Billy Graham spent a lot of time trying to find personal violations of his moral and ethical code, and they couldn't. They didn't exist. He was a man who maintained absolute marital fidelity and moral and financial integrity. He was an evangelist who lived the way he preached." Billy Graham is truly a man of God. Unfortunately, examples like that are quite rare. Just this week I read a news about another church pastor. He is accused of committing immoral sins. He leads a megachurch in a big city. The church has a host of various local and worldwide ministries. This man travels on a private jet. He denies all the allegations. To help quiet the storm he took an early retirement and resigned. The incident is still under internal investigation. I understand that the society can sometimes be unforgiving. But the fact is, even when you do 99 things right, all it takes is the one sin to smear your reputation. When a leader goes down, so will the church. Satan is a cunning beast. We will be too dumb to think that we will never fall victim to him. How much do we need to stand with our leaders in prayer, and ask God to protect them from the attack of the evil one? When they do fail please do not step your foot on their heads. Instead, help them to come to repentance and gently bring them back to the right path. Love sinners and hate sins like our Lord does. May I add this too? Your pastor is not a superman. I am a perfectionist but I am far from perfect. I know my weaknesses and so does Satan. Would you pray for me once in a while when you think of me? It does not need to be a 15-minute prayer. I do not even pray that long for myself. Just a few words like: "Lord, would you watch over our pastor, keep him safe from danger and temptation?" That is a big blessing to me. I truly appreciate your kindness.

## CONCLUSION

We mention three things in this passage: plead for unity, pray without anxiety and practice integrity. How can we link them together? The key is God's peace. Peace is the means to maintain unity in the church. When God's peace rules over our heart we can learn to appreciate others' differences. God's peace is the result when we cast our anxiety to the Lord. When we practice integrity God's peace will become evident in our words and deeds. More than likely godly characters will be modeled after, multiplied and they will fill the whole church. A story was told when people passed on an act of kindness from one person to the next. A woman pulled up at the drive-through lane of a Starbucks coffee house in Florida. After she ordered her drink she told the cashier that she would pay for the person in the car behind her. That started a chain reaction. One customer after another returned the favor to the next person in line. The employees started counting. From 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. 378 people did the same thing. The chain finally broke in the evening. When a lady paid for her order the cashier explained what had been going, then he asked if she would like to do the same thing. She declined. A good story comes to an end. But the 378 customers before her shared a common goal. Similarly, a church will continue to thrive when people are united with one heart. It is the only way for a church to function effectively the way God intends.