

## **Sermon Brief**

Andre Riendeau

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**Text:** Philippians 1:27-30

**Title:** “*Standing Firm Together in a Strange Land*”

**Subject:** Paul wants the Philippians to live lives worthy of the gospel.

**Complement:** This requires standing firm as one in the midst of strong opposition.

**Textual Idea:** Paul wants the Philippians to live lives worthy of the gospel which requires standing firm as one in the midst of strong opposition.

**Sermon Idea:** Living out the gospel means living courageously as one.

**Interrogative:** Am I easily intimidated?

**Key word/Transitional sentence:** The believer in Christ has a new reality to live out of: the gospel of the kingdom.

### **Key Points:**

We can stand firm in a world opposed to the gospel by:

1. Community: stay together as a “gospel” team
2. Courage: refuse to be intimidated
3. Commitment: accept the “gift” of suffering for Christ

**What do I want people to know?** I want people to know that gospel-honoring life is one that requires strong community, courage and commitment to suffer.

**What do I want people to do?** I want people to commit to unity around the gospel, pray for courage to stand firm and to be willing to suffer for Christ.

**What need am I addressing?** I am addressing the need for living a God-honoring life.

## ***“Standing Firm Together in a Strange Land”***

Philippians 1:27-30

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Living out the gospel means living courageously as one.

Have you ever felt intimidated? In his commentary on Philippians, scholar N.T. Wright talks about when he was seven years old and a **(LCD) big dog** came towards him. He began to panic but his aunt told him, “Don’t let him see you’re afraid.” He’d been bitten by a small dog the year before so he wondered what a big dog could do! Swallowing his feelings, he listened to his aunt and kept walking next her. The big dog came up to him, smelled him up and down and then went back where he had come from. He adds that had the dog known that Tom was scared out of his mind and wanting to run, it might have ended up differently. Sticking close to his aunt made the difference.

It’s terrible feeling intimidated yet that’s precisely how many believers feel in our present culture. Biblical ideas aren’t exactly popular in our day. We can easily feel intimidated by culture that surrounds us and slip into a scared silence or break out in an all-out run away from the world. Yet we’re called to be salt and light in this world. How are we to stand firm when the “big dogs” of intimidation show up in our schools, workplaces and homes?

We’re in a sermon series on the book of Philippians. It’s been four weeks since we were last in the book so let me remind you that the series is entitled, **(LCD) “One Love, One Joy.”** It’s the story of a joyful church focused on one love: Jesus Christ. And from that one love comes one joy: to see Jesus exalted. My title for today is **(LCD) “Standing Firm Together in a Strange Land.”** As Christians, we are aliens in this world – don’t you feel that way at times? How do we not give into fear and intimidation as the church of Christ in this strange world – a world that rejects the very One who created it?

We’re picking up in chapter 1, verse 27 this morning. Just to refresh your memories – in the first 26 verses, Paul has greeted them, prayed for them, and let them know that he’s doing well - in spite of being in a Roman prison the gospel is advancing. Also, he’s confident that he’ll be coming back to see them. At this point, in verse 27, he shifts away from his own affairs and starts exhorting them and this will last to the end of the epistle.

The first thing he tells them is in verse 27, *“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel 28 without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God.29 For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, 30 since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.”*

Verse 27 starts in the Greek with one word, monon, “only.” The NIV translates it *“whatever happens.”* Paul is saying I know what I have to do – stay here on earth in order to help you grow; as for you, only remember this – keep this one thing only in

mind. Karl Barth said that it is like Paul is wagging a warning finger at them, “I’ll do my part, but you do yours...” which is, “...conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.”

What does that mean? The word Paul uses here for “conduct” is crucial. It is a word that Paul only uses this one time in his letters. It is **(LCD) politeoumai** which can mean to be a citizen, to be a head of state or simply to lead one’s life. Now Paul seems to be using it as leading one’s life but what’s weird is that when he talks about leading one’s life in his letters he doesn’t use this word. He uses the normal Greek word for leading one’s life – peripatao – dozens of times. So why the change here and what does it mean?

First, notice that the root of the word is polis which means ‘city.’ This is a political word. It refers to citizenship and all the status, duties and privileges that go with it. Now in my first sermon on Philippians, I told you that Philippi was a Roman colony. That is significant. Only five cities in all of Macedonia were Roman colonies. To be a Roman colony meant that you enjoyed the privileges of Rome like being governed by Roman law and no taxation. Along with that came duties to honor the Emperor and participate in his worship cult as a god on earth. All of this was something that any citizen of Philippi would be proud of.

Most commentators, and I agree with them, believe that Paul is very intentionally reminding the Philippians that though they are indeed citizens of Philippi and owe allegiance to Rome, they have an even higher allegiance – the kingdom of heaven and her king, Jesus – and they must remember the status, duties and privileges that come along with that as well. This would not have been easy for the Philippians. One commentator explains, **(LCD) “The Philippian Christians must have stuck out like a sore thumb in this society. They were not willing to participate in the popular cult of the Roman emperor, nor were they willing to conduct the traditional funerary rites at the graves of their ancestors. Neither step would have endeared them to government officials or to unbelieving family members. Both groups would have viewed them as bad citizens, a cause for shame for both city and family.”**

Am I willing to stick out like a sore thumb in my school? My home? My workplace? What does being a citizen of heaven look like in today’s culture? Last week at the Iron Sharpens Iron conference, we had the privilege of hearing from **(LCD) the Benham Brothers**. You may remember them. They had an HGTV show that was cancelled because of comments they tweeted about what they believed about same-sex marriage and abortion. The result was a firestorm that would have intimidated most of us – not these guys! I got permission to show you this summary of what happened and how they reacted. Please pay close attention to what they say. **(show video)**

Did you pick up on some of the things they said? Share a few. Here are some I caught, **(LCD) “If our faith costs us a television show, so be it.”**  
**“We weren’t fired for having an opinion; we were fired for voicing an opinion.”**  
**“Aren’t you upset at HGTV? That’s okay, I’m not a victim.”**

**“When you give your heart to the Lord, you’ve now entered the battle between good and evil. When you make your peace with God, you declare war on the Devil.”**  
**“Now is the time to live for Jesus whatever the cost.”**

These guys are modern examples of heavenly citizens. What’s said of the saints of old who lived by faith could be said of them now, **(LCD) “People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own...they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”** Is that true of us? Is there evidence of our heavenly DNA in the way that we live?

So the question becomes how – how do we live like aliens in a strange land under so much opposition? I see three keys in the next few verses, let’s go back to verse 27, *“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel...”* Whether Paul ever visits them or not, he exhorts them to live as heavenly citizens by first *“standing firm in one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel.”* Paul uses two vivid word pictures here. First, the word Paul uses for *“standing firm”* is a military term referring to a soldier who is determined to not give an inch of his post. The word for *“striving together”* is an athletic term, **(LCD) sunathleo, sun (together) and athleo (effort). Sound familiar? It is where we get our word ‘athlete’ from. The word means “to struggle together ⇔ contend together, to struggle alongside of another or others; conceived of as competing alongside of another or others.”** The idea is one teamwork amid a great struggle like a football team running a play.

Why use these words? One commentator suggested that Romans would connect with the military term and Greeks could connect with the athletic word. Maybe so. What comes to my mind right away is a blend of the two in that **(LCD) great scene from the movie Gladiator** when Maximus is sent into the Colosseum with other prisoners to die. Instead, Maximus asks them if they’d served in the army. They said ‘yes.’ He then says, “If we stay together, we survive,” and when the moment comes they lock their shields together. Their unity results in their survival. This is exactly what Paul is suggesting. Sounds something like an old Ethiopian proverb, **(LCD) “When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion.”** No need to be intimidated if we lock shields together.

The first thing that will enable us to stand firm is **(LCD) community – staying together as a “gospel” team.** Paul tells them to stand firm and strive together for the faith of the gospel. This is what unifies them – the common vision of proclaiming to the world that Jesus Christ, not Caesar, is Lord of all. It is the gospel that brings us together and that unity is brought about by *“one Spirit”* Paul says. When we trust in Christ we are baptized in God’s Spirit and become one body, **(LCD) “For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.”** All of us here who believe in Jesus are on the same “gospel” team – all of us. The Spirit gives us the gift of community – we are to maintain

it by “*striving together as one.*” Literally the Greek says, “as one soul” meaning our heart, desire, mind.

Being one in the Spirit is a gift from God; being one in soul is a state we must maintain. Paul will have lots to say about that in the next two chapters. Suffice it to say that anything that would compromise our unity must be rooted out. It doesn’t mean we have to all have the same exact opinions but it does mean that we must be committed to love above all things. How are we doing with that? Am I holding my shield in the colosseum of life, protecting my brother’s and sister’s back or am I leaving the body exposed to the enemy through prayerlessness, gossip, bad reports, unforgiveness, etc.. Again, we’ll have lots to say about all these things over the next few months. Unity is absolutely essential if we’re going to stand firm together in a strange land.

Another key to standing firm is found in verse 28, “...*without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God.*” The second thing that will enable us to stand firm is **(LCD) courage – a refusal to be intimidated.** The word for “frightened” was used of horses that are easily startled and who run off in fear. It carries the sense of being easily intimidated; the opposite of the Benham brothers!

Paul adds that this lack of being intimidated is a sign to the opponents that they will be destroyed but believers will be saved – and that by God. Our courage under fire makes them wonder if we’re right after all. I’m reminded of the video clip I showed a few months ago of **(LCD) Richard Wurmbbrand** who was imprisoned for his faith. The guard kept telling him to stop praying or he’d beat him. He wouldn’t stop so the guard kept torturing him. Finally, he found him praying again and the guard raged at him and asked him what he could be praying for and Wurmbbrand said, “I’m praying for you.” The look on the guard’s face is what Paul is talking about in this passage – a realization of his own judgment before such love and such courage. Something that only God can do. What a testimony to the power of God in us when we display this kind of courage under fire. Am I walking in courage?

Finally, Paul gives the reason for this suffering, verse 29, “*For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, 30 since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.*” The reason we suffer is because it is part of the package of following Christ. Remember what Jesus said, **(LCD) “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.” Paul adds this, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...”** Actually, there is something wrong if we’re NOT running into any opposition. Suffering is part of the deal but Paul is adding something more here. The word **(LCD) “granted” in verse 29 is a form of the word charis** which means grace or gift. Paul is saying that both believing in Jesus and suffering for Him are gifts of grace from God. What...suffering is a gift from God?

First, not all suffering is a gift. Notice that the verse says, “...*suffer FOR HIM.*” When we are called upon God to suffer for Jesus whether that is in being mocked in the school

cafeteria or being beaten in a prison, this is a gift of grace. I like how bible scholar David Garland explains it, **(LCD)** *“This assertion would challenge any who mistakenly assume that grace is only connected to receiving mercy and forgiveness. True, but it has also been graciously given to Christians to suffer. Suffering is not a sign of their abandonment by God but a sign of special grace granted to them...One is not delivered from suffering but given the strength to pass through it.”*

God glorifies Himself and reveals His grace through our patience in suffering. Jesus promised that it would lead to blessing, **(LCD)** **“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”** We saw that this morning with the palm branches. They were waved by a multitude in heaven who had gone through great persecution for the gospel.

Suffering for Christ then is a great privilege and that is exactly how the disciples saw it in when they were punished by the Jewish leaders in Acts, **(LCD)** **“The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.”** O how we need this kingdom perspective in our day! And this brings us back to where we started – living lives that are worthy of the gospel of Christ – and that means suffering because in this strange land, the call to submit to the Lordship of Christ does not go over very well. Our third key to standing firm in a strange land, **(LCD)** **commitment – accepting suffering for Christ as a gift of grace from God.**

Community, courage, commitment in suffering – these are the ingredients that make a fearless ambassador of the kingdom of Christ. How are you doing with community? Are you locking shields with other brothers and sisters for the gospel? Our **(LCD)** **Net 3** emphasis is all about that: doing three things (prayer, care, share) for three people with one another. How’s the “with one another” part going? Next week I am praying that we have many guests to hear the gospel. Would you take time to notice the guests among us and reach out to them? It’s a great opportunity to strive together for the gospel.

How about courage? Are you feeling easily intimidated? Finding it hard to step out and stand for Christ where you live and work and study? You’re in good company! Even Paul felt fear in preaching and he asked for prayer, **(LCD)** **“Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.”** Pray for courage and boldness.

I had the opportunity to share with a guy on my flight to Orlando two weeks ago. I hemmed and hawed about how to get into a conversation for hours and finally, after praying for an opening and boldness, he asked me where I was going. That led to an hour and a half conversation which ended with me giving him my Bible and contact info. Praying for an opening and for boldness was key.

As a practical challenge, I’d like us all to take one of **(LCD)** **these Easter invitations.** I started with a growling dog, let me end with a cute bunny! Take one of these and ask the Lord to give you an opening to give it to someone. Yes, you might suffer some

embarrassment but that is nothing compared to the suffering that our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world are undergoing for Christ. The least we can do is commit to the suffering some snickering and a rejection. Pray for boldness...it might just change a life.

Yesterday, we celebrated the life of our beloved **(LCD) Scotty Davis**. Rich told the story of how she came to faith. It was through her kids who had come to faith through other kids risking their reputations and boldly sharing Jesus with them. Someone simply invited the Davis kids to church and an entire family's destiny was altered forever. The family gave Wintonbury a card with beautiful sentiments. One of them was written by Scotty's daughter-in-law, Lori. This is what she wrote to us, *"Dear Wintonbury, I write with tears in my eyes that I owe so much to you. If you had not nurtured my husband Scott, and his entire family in their salvation and growth in Christ, I wouldn't have the family I have today. With thanks, Lori."* We're on the winning side friends...no need to feel intimidated. Community, courage and commitment to suffering...let's get out there invite some friends to Jesus' eternal feast!