

## **“Striving Side by Side”**

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Lowe’s has a program for kids called “Build and Grow.” Each month, kids and their parents can come to the store and build something for free. The projects are small and simple. Usually, kids or, more likely, their parents drive some nails through some pre-cut pieces of wood, add some stickers, and—voilà!—you have a birdhouse or car. This summer, Lowe’s offered something better: the opportunity to make superheroes. Every other week, the kids could build a different member of The Avengers: Iron Man, Hulk, Captain America, Black Widow, Hawkeye, and Thor. Our kids went each time and built the superhero figure and also a base for the superhero figure to stand on. When they finished, the six bases fit together to form a circle, and all the superheroes, in all their wood-and-sticker glory, now stand together, ready to save the world.

If you haven’t noticed, my kids love superheroes. And they love The Avengers. The Avengers are a big deal. Over the last nine years, there have been three Iron Man movies, three Captain America movies, a couple of Thor movies, and two Avengers movies. The latest movie, *Captain America: Civil War*, made over a billion dollars this year. Last year’s Avengers movie, *The Avengers: Age of Ultron*, made \$1.4 billion at the box office. The first *Avengers* film made \$1.5 billion. Four of the top twelve highest-grossing movies of all time have featured Avengers superheroes.

Part of the attraction is that these movies feature multiple superheroes. It used to be that in superhero movies, there would be the one hero who would have to stop the one supervillain. But, lately, it seems that it’s become more interesting to combine superheroes. In The Avengers movies, these heroes all have different personality types and somewhat different strengths. If they are going to defeat the bad guy, they all have to work together. The real drama in these movies is not whether they’ll beat the bad guy. You know that’s going to happen. The drama is if they are going to work together to accomplish that goal. That’s what’s behind the two Avengers movies and the latest Captain America movie. That’s the real drama in the latest Superman-and-Batman movie, too. If only the superheroes would only work together, they could defeat the evil superhero. If they don’t learn to work together, the human race or even the whole world is doomed.

I realize that some of you may not be superhero fans. That's okay. You can see this same concept in sports. The team with the best individual players is not always the best team. In team sports, what matters is how the players work together. That's particularly true in a sport like basketball. Every player on a basketball team has a reasonable shot at scoring points. But if each player is trying to score the most points, they won't work together. You need some players to pass, some to set picks, and some to focus more on defense and rebounding. If every player is trying to be the top scorer, the team won't win. Then again, if every player is afraid to take a shot, the team won't win, either. Everyone needs to perform their role in order for the team to do well. Last year, the Golden State Warriors won 73 regular-season games, a record. They almost won the NBA Finals, but lost to LeBron James and the Cleveland Cavaliers. In the offseason, the Warriors acquired another All-Star, Kevin Durant. They already had three All-Stars (Stephen Curry, Draymond Green, and Klay Thompson), so now they have four. Stephen Curry won the scoring title last year, and Durant has four scoring titles. Will this team be better than last year? Will they win 74 games? We'll see. They won't be a better team if those four players don't each learn to get fewer points per game. There are five players on the court, but only one basketball.

Now, if you're not into superheroes or basketball, another typically masculine analogy might not resonate with you. But the same concept applies in the military. Everyone has a role and everyone must perform it, or the enemy won't be defeated. A different sort of analogy is an orchestra: every member has a role to play, whether it's the first violinist (the concertmaster) or the percussionist who plays the triangle just once. Every member of the orchestra is important. If each one doesn't play his or her part in harmony, in the same tempo, with the other members, the music won't sound good.

And that's what the church is like. We're like a team, or even an army, working together to defeat an enemy. We're like an orchestra, in which all the members are playing different instruments while playing the same piece of music. If we don't all work together, or play together, we won't be successful. We won't be in harmony.

I believe the overall message of the New Testament is that every Christian is a member of the body of Christ, and every Christian should use whatever God has given them to serve the body of Christ. And I believe this is best reflected in the local church, which is a miniature body of Christ. This church, the local church, should reflect the larger body of Christ. That means that

if you're a Christian and you consider this your home church, you should serve here. You should pitch in. You should be a valuable member of the team, a vital member of the orchestra.

I think this is a very important message for our church, and that's why I'm focusing on it today. This church, at this time, needs everyone to work together toward the same goal if we're going to be successful. If we're going to be a healthy church, we need everyone to pitch in. We need all hands on deck. We need Batman to work with Superman, and Iron Man to work with Captain America. We need every violinist and every triangle player to be ready to play in the grand symphony that God has composed. I want to encourage every Christian here today to join the church and actively serve in the church according to your talents, spiritual gifts, experiences, and current abilities.

So today I'm going to look at some passages in Philippians that speak about the importance of the whole church being engaged in the ministry of the gospel. This is fitting because last week we finished a long series of sermons through the book of Acts. At the end of Acts, we find the apostle Paul under house arrest in Rome. Paul probably wrote his letter to the Philippians toward the end of that period of time. And in that letter, he writes about some important themes, including participating in gospel ministry, pressing forward, and serving. We'll look at those themes this morning.

We'll start at the beginning of the letter. We see that Paul, along with his colleague Timothy, writes to the whole church in the city of Philippi. Let's read verses 1 and 2 of chapter 1:

<sup>1</sup> Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:

<sup>2</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Paul is the real author of the letter. But Timothy was with him. You may remember that Paul preached with Silas in Philippi. That's where Lydia became a Christian. It's also where Paul and Silas were put in prison, when an earthquake struck, the jailer panicked because the prison cells were opened, and where Paul told the jailer how to be saved. Paul is writing to the church that was formed there.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Notice that Paul identifies himself as a servant of Christ Jesus. That's how he saw himself. Literally, he thought of himself as a slave of Jesus. That's important, as we'll see.

Notice also that he writes to "all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi." Paul is clearly addressing all the Christians in that city. That's what a saint is. A saint is someone who has been made holy by Jesus. A saint is someone who is now able to serve Jesus because he or she has been cleansed of his or her sins. So Paul is addressing everyone in the church. But he also addresses the overseers, which is another term for "elder" or "pastor." He's writing to the leaders of the church, because they need to help establish the direction of the church. And he's writing to the deacons. Deacons are not pastors or shepherds. But they are set apart for roles of service in the church. And Paul is going to highlight the importance of service in the life of the church.

After the greeting, Paul starts into the body of the letter. In the first paragraph, he tells the Philippians he always thanks God for them all. Again, Paul is talking to the whole church. He also tells them what he prays for. Let's read verses 3–11:

<sup>3</sup> I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, <sup>4</sup> always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, <sup>5</sup> because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. <sup>6</sup> And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup> It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. <sup>8</sup> For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. <sup>9</sup> And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, <sup>10</sup> so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, <sup>11</sup> filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Notice the "all" language. Paul prays for "you all" and feels that God will complete what he started among "you all." Paul yearns for "you all." It seems that Paul feels this way because all of the Philippians had partnered with him in the gospel. At the end of the letter, Paul thanks them for a financial gift, which must have helped pay for his living expenses while he was in Rome (Phil. 4:14–16; cf. Acts 28:30). That gift to Paul was one of the reasons why he wrote the letter. But I think Paul means more than that. He says that they "are all partakers with [Paul] of grace, both in [his] imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel" (v. 7). The Philippians were many miles away from Paul. But they partnered with him by supporting him

financially. They probably supported him through prayer. And, I would be willing to guess, Paul knew that they were active in evangelism and apologetics. That is, they were active in telling other people about Jesus and showing other people why it's true, defending the faith against objections.

Some people think that the ministry of the church is the pastor's job, but that's not true. According to Paul's letter to the Ephesians, the pastor's role is to equip the saints for ministry (Eph. 4:11–16). The pastor isn't the only player on the team. He's more like a coach-player. He's on the field and in the game, but his biggest role is coaching the other members of the team to go out and play their roles. Everyone in the church has a role to play in ministry. We won't all do the same things. Some will be better evangelists and some will be better at doing physical tasks of service. Some will be better at encouraging others and some will be more generous and someone will be better at prayer. But all of us should be in the game.

The other thing to note about that paragraph in Philippians 1 is how important growth, or progress, is in the Christian life. First of all, Paul says, in verse 6, "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." That statement implies that the Philippians are not complete. The good work that God began in them isn't finished yet. God will finish it, but there's more room to grow. Then, in verses 9–11, Paul reveals his prayer for the Christians in Philippi. He wants to grow in their love, their knowledge and discernment, their ability to approve what is excellent, and their righteousness and holiness. So he wants them to love more, know more, and live out what they know in love. Again, the idea is that they need to keep growing. The whole book of Philippians is about pressing forward. We don't have time to read chapter 3, but there Paul says he is not satisfied with where he is. Even toward the end of his remarkable life, he wants to know Jesus better. He wants to accomplish more for Jesus. There's no thought of retiring or resting on his laurels. To keep the sports metaphor alive, Paul wants to leave it all on the field.

What Paul doesn't tell us is *how* we are supposed to grow. Sure, we can pray, and if God doesn't cause the growth in us, it's not going to happen. But when we think of praying and hoping for growth, we often expect some kind of mystical experience. We expect that, like a lightning bolt strikes a tree, God will strike us with immediate growth in love, knowledge, and moral purity. And when we don't experience such growth, we figure that it's not time yet. God hasn't seen fit to cause us to grow.

I think growth comes in far more mundane and ordinary ways. Growth comes from doing simple things like reading the Bible and praying on a regular basis. Ideally, we should do this every day. But we tend to think in very individualistic ways, so our tendency is to think only of *our* growth. We think, “If I read the Bible alone and pray alone every day, then I’ll grow.” And that’s true, but I think we can grow even more if we do these things together, in community. We need to think not only about our own growth, but also about the growth of others.

We can also grow simply by showing up to worship services every week, whether we feel like it or not. Now, some people might hear that and think, “Oh, he’s being legalistic.” No, I’m not. We’re told in Scripture that we should not forsake meeting together. This is what Hebrews 10:24–25 says,

<sup>24</sup> And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, <sup>25</sup> not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Think about what that passage says. Why should we not neglect to meet together? There are at least two reasons offered. One, when we meet together, we stir up one another to love and good works. We can challenge each other, or serve as examples for one another. Two, when we meet together, we encourage one another.

Do you want to know what encourages me as a pastor? When I see that people are here! Do you know that when more people are here, it encourages others, too? We are so individualistic, and we have such a selfish, consumer-model view of church, that we often fail to consider how our presence—or our absence—affects others. When you’re here, you have a positive impact on people. And when you’re not here, you are missed. We need to reject the toxic individualism that thinks that church is all about us, our needs, and our desires. Guess what? Church is not primarily about you. It’s primarily about God. And it’s not a product you buy. It’s a gift from God. It’s his family. It’s a group of people you get to know and love and serve as they serve you. It’s a community. We’re united with each other to Jesus. That’s what community means (“with” + “union”). Jesus and the Holy Spirit are what bond us together. And that bond should be visible when we come together on the Lord’s Day.

So simply showing up and being part of things helps you and others grow. But more than that, serving helps you grow. Our character is improved when we serve others. And we are better able to love others when we serve. Sometimes we think that we shouldn’t serve other people

until we feel that we love them. We think, “If I don’t feel loving towards others, but I do good things for others, then I’ll be a hypocrite. I won’t be my authentic self!” That’s nonsense. Sometimes, we need to develop habits in order to nurture our love for others. Is there any one of us who are married who hasn’t forced ourselves to love our spouse, particularly when we don’t feel like it? I have, on more than one occasion (in the distant past, of course), forced myself to do something nice for Kathy—usually a very small something nice—when I didn’t feel in love with her. And the result each time was that things improved between us. Doing something nice for someone else softens your heart toward that person.

In the same way, serving in the church when you don’t feel like it helps soften your heart towards the church at large. It’s like exercising: you don’t always feel like doing it, but you’re glad you did when you’re done. And like exercise, the more you do it, the more you want to do it.

Now, I know that some people may be thinking, “Why do I have to serve in the church to experience that growth? Can I just serve my family?” Well, serving your family is a good and right thing to do and I’m sure it helps you grow as a Christian. But I think we have a natural desire, or at least a natural sense of duty, to love our family. Even if it doesn’t come easy, most of us know we should love and serve our spouses and our children, or we should obey our parents and honor them and treat our siblings well. But the church is a bit different. In any local church, there are going to be people that—let’s be honest—you wouldn’t hang around with otherwise. Our common focal point in the church is Jesus and our common bond is the Holy Spirit. If it weren’t for God knitting us together into a community, some of us would never hang around each other. And if that’s the case, that means that serving each other and loving each other doesn’t come naturally. In the local church, we have to love others who are different from us. We have to care for people who look different, have different hobbies, and have different social, economic, and educational backgrounds. And there’s something about loving and serving people who are very different from us that causes us to grow.

In fact, I think loving and serving people who aren’t naturally the kind of people we think of us as lovely makes us more like God. Think about another one of Paul’s letters, this time his letter to the Romans. Here’s what Paul writes in Romans 5:6–11:

<sup>6</sup>For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

<sup>7</sup>For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—<sup>8</sup> but God shows his love for us in that while

we were still sinners, Christ died for us. <sup>9</sup> Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. <sup>10</sup> For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. <sup>11</sup> More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

God loved unlovely people like you and me while were his enemies, not his friends and children. God reconciled rebels and enemies like us to himself because Jesus died for our sins and rose for our justification. In other words, Jesus paid the penalty for our sins when he died on the cross and his life—particularly his resurrected life—causes us to be regarded as innocent and righteous in God’s eyes. So when we love and serve people who are different from us, we become more like God. And my experience is that this kind of growth happens in the local church. Our natural tendency is to hang out with people who look like us, like the things we like, are our age, and have similar backgrounds. The local church forces us out of that natural tendency.

I want to move on to another idea that we find in Philippians 1, this time toward the end of chapter 1. So let’s turn to verse 27 and read to the end of the chapter:

<sup>27</sup> Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, <sup>28</sup> and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. <sup>29</sup> For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, <sup>30</sup> engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Paul wrote this letter while in chains. And he was writing to people in a city where he had spent time in prison. He knew that Christianity was opposed by many different types of people, both Jews and Gentiles. Paul knew that Christians shouldn’t seek to be antagonistic. We shouldn’t pick enemies and be argumentative. Paul knew that non-Christians weren’t the real and ultimate enemy, of course. He knew that our real enemies are supernatural evil forces (Eph. 6:12). But as long as evil is in this world, Christianity is going to have its opponents.

In a world opposed to God, how do we live? There are two things we need to do, both found in verse 27. The English Standard Version says, “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel.” If translated more literally, this clause could read, “Only live as citizens worthy of the gospel.” Philippi was not just a city; it was a Roman colony. That meant it had more

freedoms than other cities. It was like an outpost of the city of Rome though it was hundreds of miles away. In Philippians 3:20, Paul writes, “But our citizenship is in heaven.” If you’re a Christian, that is your true citizenship. So live like a citizen of the heavenly city while you’re here on earth. In other words, “on earth as it is in heaven.” And in heaven, there is unity. In eternity, the Lord’s servants will worship him (Rev. 22:3). So, serve and worship him here on earth and show others what it’s like to be a part of the kingdom of God.

Here’s the second thing we see in verse 27: Paul says he wants to hear “that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.” The verb that’s translated as “striving side by side” was used for athletic competitions. The language of standing firm (cf. Eph. 6:13) and striving side by side also calls to mind military formations. In particular, it reminds us of the phalanx, in which soldiers carrying shields stood side by side in a tight formation, creating a human wall. This formation remained strong as long as no one broke rank. Each soldier carried a shield in one hand and a spear in the other, able to attack from above that human wall.

I think that’s an important image. If this church is going to be healthy, we need to work together. And we’re stronger together than we are apart, just as each cinder block in this building is stronger together. Or, to use another metaphor for the church, each of us is a living stone that is part of a spiritual house, the temple of God (1 Pet. 2:5). Each of us plays a vital part of that structure.

Like a military formation, we must all move in the same direction. In which direction do we go? Jesus, the Great Shepherd, establishes the direction. He is “the way.” The pastor or pastors of the church are shepherds of the local church and they are responsible for leading the way each church should go. Each person is not free to do what is right in their own eyes.

As in athletics and in the military, discipline is involved in the church. We need to commit to working together. We need to “train” by using the spiritual disciplines of Bible reading, prayer, and worship.

Unfortunately, it seems like the church—and I don’t mean *this church* specifically, but the church generally—rarely looks like this. Instead of striving side by side in a disciplined manner, fighting against the enemy, we’re often disjointed, undisciplined, lazy, and fighting against each other. It’s no wonder that we’re not that effective. Imagine what the church would

be like if everyone worked in the same direction, if everyone served, if everyone *had* each other's backs instead of *bit* each other's backs!

I suppose, because of our sinful nature, it's somewhat natural for there to be divisions within the church. That's why in chapter 2, Paul tells us not to complain and fight. Let's turn to Philippians 2:14-16:

<sup>14</sup>Do all things without grumbling or disputing, <sup>15</sup>that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, <sup>16</sup>holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.

“Grumbling” is a loaded word in the Bible. It's used frequently in the Old Testament of the Israelites after God rescued them out of slavery in Egypt. As they made their way toward the Promised Land, the people of Israel often grumbled, complaining against their leader, Moses (Exod. 15:24; 16:2, 7–8; 17:3; Num. 14:2, 27, 29). When the people grumbled, they often spoke about how great life was in Egypt and how Moses had led them out into the wilderness to die (Exod. 16:3; Num. 11:5). But when the people grumbled against Moses and his brother, Aaron, they were actually grumbling against God.

That is very clear in Numbers 14. At the beginning of the chapter, we're told, “And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron” (v. 2). God interprets this action as the people grumbling against him. In verse 11, God says, “How long will these people despise me?” In verse 26, God says, “How long will shall this wicked congregation grumble against me? I have heard the grumbings of the people of Israel, which they grumble against me.”

Why do I mention this? Because I sometimes hear, “People are complaining . . .” I don't know the names of these grumblers, or how many of them there are. I have repeatedly said, “If you have an issue, please come talk to me.” Only one or two of you have ever done that. Yet I still hear of grumbings.

To the grumblers, let me say this: I know that some of you may want to go back to the “good old days” of fifty or sixty years ago, just as the Israelites wanted to go back to Egypt, where they claimed they had better food. But those days are gone and they are not coming back. Ecclesiastes 7:10 says, “Say not, ‘Why were the former days better than these?’ For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.” We are not going back to the “good old days.” And even if I could bring them back, I wouldn't. I don't think those were the glory days of this church and the

church in America. If they were so great, things would be different than they are now. We would have more disciples in America and the general culture of this nation would be different. We are where we are and when we are because God has put us here, in this place, in 2016. We have to figure out how to do church in this age and in this culture, and not in another one. And we have to move onward, looking forward, not backward. So there's no use of grumbling about how things are different in the past. We're moving onward.

When you grumble, you aren't praising God. Just as it's impossible to talk and listen at the same time, it's impossible to grumble and be thankful and content at the same time.

When you grumble, it's because you're not fighting in the fight. How many grumblers actually get out there and share the gospel? How many grumblers are faithfully serving? When we take our eyes off of the actual fight, we tend to fight against each other.

If you grumble, you are part of the problem, not the solution. If you want to make things better, be productive and proactive. Don't sit back and grumble among yourselves when you go out to eat after church. Talk to me. Come up with good ideas. Serve.

In Philippians, Paul gives us examples of servants. At the end of chapter 2, he holds up Timothy and Epaphroditus as examples of servants who poured out their life for the church. In chapter 3, Paul himself is the example. But the greatest example is Jesus. This is what Paul writes in Philippians 2:3-11:

<sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. <sup>9</sup> Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

We shouldn't be selfish, but rather we should be humble, looking out for the interests of others. That's what Jesus did. Though Jesus was and is God, he humbled himself to take on a second nature, a human nature. He humbled himself to leave heaven and come to earth. And he came as a servant. He humbled himself by dying on a cross, so that others could live. He didn't go to the cross complaining and grumbling. If you want to be more like Jesus, we need to serve others in

this way. And I think the best way to serve others—people very different from us—is to serve in the local church.

So let me end with this: If you aren't a member of this church, I would encourage you to think of joining. We're going to have a meeting for people who are considering joining on October 1. Showing up to that meeting doesn't obligate you to join. If you can't make it to that meeting, please contact me and we'll set up an alternate time.

If you're a member and you aren't actively serving, there are a lot of ways that you can. We need help with children. We always need people in the nursery. We need help with fixing things, updating things, painting walls, and so forth. We could use help in figuring out how to reach out to our neighbors with the gospel. We need people to pray. We need people to check up on each other and make sure their physical needs are met. We have a number of committees that need members. All of us have something, some talent or spiritual gift, to offer the church. Let us all bring our offerings as we strive side by side for the gospel of Jesus Christ.