

Stand Firm in the Lord
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March 13, 2022

It's good to see all of you! I pray God's blessings upon you! I want to read a passage from the book of Philippians, chapter 3, starting with verse 17. The Apostle Paul is writing to the church at Philippi. He says:

Join with others in following my example, brothers and sisters, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that we will be like his glorious body. Therefore, brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends. May God bless the reading of His Word.

A long, long time ago in a land far, far away, in my first church, those folks loved me and I loved them. The two and a half years I served there, I think I learned more in ministry than I have at any other time in my life. They taught me so many lessons and they have given me innumerable sermon examples, for which I am certainly grateful. Here's one. One Saturday morning I was out calling. Now, how many of you know that term? A few of you know that term. But for you that don't know that term, calling has nothing to do with the telephone. In the old South, it was the custom of pastors to go call. That meant I just showed up at your house unannounced. Thank goodness, that died a long time ago (and I gave it up before it died!) But I was out one Saturday morning calling and I went to a young couple's home. The dad answered the door. He was wearing a cut-off white T-shirt, cut-off blue jean shorts and flip-flops. That was summer in the South. Walking up behind him was his little son, about four years old or maybe five, in a cut-off white T-shirt, cut-off blue jean shorts and flip-flops. I said, "Son, you better be very careful. That kid is going to do everything you do!" He said, "That ain't nothing. Watch this." We went and sat down on the couch. After a few minutes the dad gets up, goes to the bedroom, comes back wearing a cut-off T-shirt, cut-off blue jean shorts and cowboy boots. His son gets up, goes to his bedroom, comes back out and has on a T-shirt, cut-off shorts and cowboy boots. A few minutes later the dad gets up again and goes to the bedroom, comes back out with a blue formal shirt on, opened up in the front, cut-off shorts and boots. A couple of minutes later the son comes back in with---well, you know the drill. About six to eight months later I was out calling again and I wound up at their home again and the son was conspicuous by his absence. And trust me when I tell you, when he was there, you knew it. When he wasn't there, you realized it. He was conspicuous by his absence and I asked the dad, "Where's your son?" He laughed. He said, "Well, at the moment he's in the bathroom. You see, he got into my snuff and ate a bunch of it." He said, "I told him and told him and told him not to do that." Now, does that "do as I say and not as I do," work?

People are watching. I didn't realize how much people watched you until I became a pastor. And when I became a pastor, I noticed it. And my wife, she's looking down at the ground, because they notice the pastor's wife, too. They notice. Now, I understand

people noticing my accent. It can be pretty obvious at times. But you know what people notice about me more than my accent? My boots. I counted this morning: there were five people who said something about my boots. This morning! People are watching. Now, most of us would not be as bold as the Apostle Paul. Paul said, "Follow me as I follow the Lord." He didn't just say, "Listen to my words." He said, "Follow my example." People that he was writing to at Philippi, some of them were setting a very bad example and leading people astray. And part of the book of Philippians was written to address that. Who was Paul writing to? Well, when they were full-grown, when the movement and the philosophy was mature, they were known as the Gnostics. Gnosticism was a philosophy. It is said that Rome conquered Greece, but Greek culture conquered Rome. And the Greeks were obsessed with philosophies and they developed philosophies for many things, and this was born out of the Christian faith. This was the early form of Gnosticism. In Gnosticism, the philosophy was that the spirit was absolutely pure and good, and all matter, whether it be this matter (a physical object) or this matter (a person's body), was evil. And since the body was made up of matter, it didn't matter what you did to it or with it. The people Paul addressed were Christians who were perverting grace. Now, how in the world do you pervert something as beautiful and as lovely as grace? The word grace in Greek means gift. God's grace is God's gift. Grace is God's unmerited favor bestowed on the undeserving. How in the world do you pervert grace? Well, their philosophy was: since grace can cover all sin, let's let it. Let's let it. And since the spirit is altogether pure and good, and the body or matter is altogether evil, we should plumb the depths of sin and scale the heights of virtue to experience everything that life has to offer. They used grace to justify indulging their sinful nature. Let me pause here for just a moment. You take the Bible and if you pervert it enough, and you isolate it enough, and you try hard enough, you can make it say just about anything you want it to say, when you take it out of context. What's even worse today is you can get on the internet and find somebody who agrees with you!

Their motto was, since God likes to forgive sin, let's give Him something to forgive. And Paul said, "No, no, no, no, no! We are to imitate Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who is our example. We are to follow his example." And I would like to say what Paul was saying to the church at Philippi is, "Join me in being a fellow imitator of Jesus Christ, so that we can set an example we would not be ashamed of people following." Paul does that by first of all reminding them of who they are, that they are citizens of heaven. Now, when I was a junior in high school, my best friend was a guy by the name of Jerry. Jerry was one of nine kids. He was number six. His older sister was a very popular cheerleader. All of his brothers played football. Some of them were stars. His family had a great reputation in our community. It meant something to be a member of that family. And every time I would go over and pick Jerry up to go do something, his mother said the same thing every time we left their house: "Jerry, remember who you are. Jerry, remember who you are." Paul reminds the church at Philippi who they were. They are citizens of heaven. Now, being a citizen meant something to the church at Philippi. Philippi was a Roman colony. Roman colonies were largely composed of retired military personnel. If you lived long enough in the Roman legion, when you retired you got two gifts from the Roman government. You got Roman citizenship, and you got property and possessions in a Roman colony to see you through your retirement. Their colonies imitated Rome. They were little Romes. They dressed like Romans, they cut their hair like Romans, their architecture was Roman. If you walked into a Roman colony, you would think you were in Rome. They even spoke Latin, no matter where they were. And citizenship was a big deal. Paul said, "Remember that your real citizenship is in heaven. We are to imitate Christ. We are Christians, little Christs. We are in this world but not of

this world.” He also reminded them that we have something to look forward to, that one day not only are we to imitate Christ here, we’re going to be like Christ. We’re going to have glorified bodies. Therefore, in this world, we are to imitate Christ. The way we do that is by standing firm in God. We cannot do it on our own, in our own power, in our own strength, but we can if we stand firm in God. The Greek word that Paul uses for “stand firm” means to stand in the face of extreme danger. It was often used of a soldier standing firm, holding their ground, in the face of an enemy. Paul says, “If you stand firm in God, you will set a proper example.”

The only way to stand firm in the Lord is to be in the Lord, who is our help and our strength. With His help, we can set an example that we would not be offended for others to follow. And if we stand firm in the Lord, if we follow the Spirit’s direction, if we expect God to speak, God to lead, God to direct, God will. Virtually every week, God drives that lesson home to me. And if you stand firm in the Lord, following His direction and His leadership, listening and expecting God to speak, God will. And it takes amazingly little to make a huge impact in people’s lives. Early this week, I woke up thinking of a friend of ours who has leukemia. (He’s probably watching today. John and Connie, I hope you guys are having as good a day as you possibly can.) I sent John a text. I said, “John, I just woke up thinking about you and praying for you this morning. I just wanted you to know that.” It wasn’t long before I got a text back. He said, “You don’t know how much that means to me that you’re thinking about me and praying for me. Keep it up. Thank you.”

If we are in the Lord, if we are standing firm, if we are listening, we don’t have to watch what we say or what we do. We do what comes naturally. But if we don’t stand firm in the Lord, the opposite is also true. It takes amazingly little to turn people off. At one of my churches there was a lady who was a very devout member of the congregation who had a son who was a commercial fisherman, and he and I got to be friends. (Surprise, surprise!). He was a God-fearer but not a church-attender. And I kept trying to get him to come to church and he wouldn’t come and finally one day he said, “You know, Preacher, I would come but I don’t have anything to wear.” Now to be fair, in that place, in that time, in that era, it was the custom to get dressed up to the nines to go to church. It was. But I happened to know that he and his wife loved to line dance. I said, “Well, what do you wear when you go line dancing?” He said, “Well, I wear my western shirt and jeans and boots.” I said, “I’ll tell you what. You tell me when you’re coming and I will wear my jeans and boots and western wear.” (Thus, the outfit today. That’s why I’m wearing it.) He said, “Alright, alright.” So, the day arrived. Church started and he wasn’t there. But about halfway through the service, he and his wife came in the back door and slipped into the back pew. I said, “Yes!” And my seat, where I was standing, was basically directly behind the pulpit and back there in that era, I wore a black robe. So I stepped out from behind the pulpit and I pulled up my robe like this to show him my jeans and he gave me a thumbs-up. And we sang the rest of the hymn and the next act in the service was the passing of the peace. Do you all know what that is? We passed the peace, we stood up and we greeted one another and said, “The peace of Christ be with you,” and we walked around and welcomed one another in the name of the Lord. And I made my way back to where they were and I got there just in time to hear one of our dear old saints say, “If you’re going to come to church, at least you should dress appropriately.” We got people to come back from the passing of the peace by singing a chorus, and by the time we finished the chorus, they were gone. They slipped out the door and they never came back. I have to remind myself from time to time that I have forgiven that old woman.

We wouldn't do that, would we? Have you ever been in church when there was a toddler making noise behind you and you turned around and gave them the evil eye? I know people who stopped coming to church because of that. Have you ever complained about cracker crumbs on the carpet because of kids eating their crackers in church? Have you ever told somebody not to bring their cup of coffee into the sanctuary? Did you know that those things can turn people off and they'll never come back? Did you know that? Do you know that we have these wonderful devices called vacuum cleaners? We've got some of them. They pick up those crumbs so well. Did you know that this entire sanctuary is covered with little squares of carpet? There's not just one whole carpet, there's little squares. If somebody spills coffee on one of those squares, guess what we do. We jerk that sucker up, put another one down, and it's gone.

Watch your mouth. Watch what you do. Watch what you say. People are watching. They are listening. And it takes amazingly little to have a profound positive impact on people's lives and it takes amazingly little to have a negative impact. So, watch it. Remember that our goal is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, not to keep our carpets clean. Our goal is to produce little Christs, not to keep scars off the walls. Growing churches are noisy. They are messy. They can be dirty. Children are noisy. They're messy, they're dirty, they're destructive, and they're expensive. Get over it! They're also our present and our future. So, remember, somebody is watching. Make sure you set an example. Let us pray.

Hear our prayers, O Lord. Lord, help us to stand our ground in You. Help us to stand firm. Help us to be imitators of Christ. Help us to realize and know what is important and what is not. Help us to lead people to You instead of driving people away. In Jesus' Name.