

## ‘ACT LIKE A WINNER’

### Philippians 1:27-30

Dr. John Crocker, Crossroads Church, Albert Lea, MN  
March 13, 2011

Winning isn't always pretty. It can also be ugly.

Some sports teams have a reputation for *winning ugly*. They play a sloppy game, but somehow they scratch out a win.

They would scoff at the old dictum: *'It isn't whether you win or lose; it's how you play the game.'*

Adolph Rupp was the head basketball coach at the University of Kentucky for 42 years. He compiled a phenomenal 82% winning record. Rupp asked: *If winning isn't important, why keep score?*

Let's admit it, in any important contest the issue is, *Who is the winner?*

- Even the Apostle Paul would agree with that.

He explained that Christ's Church is engaged in a fierce spiritual contest—with a powerful opposition.

But Paul would have nothing to do with this *winning ugly* business either.

He taught that Christians are supposed to act like winners.

- The theme of our Scripture text this morning is living victoriously as a Christian.

Paul was in prison for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He wrote a letter to the church he had founded some ten years earlier in the city of Philippi in Macedonia

He challenged the Philippian Church to *act like a winner*.

I don't see Paul writing, *It matters not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game*

- This is sad to say, but some Christians are just limping along as spiritual cripples, holding on to a wobbly crutch called *eternal life*—something they're not sure enough about to put all their full weight on it.

But the truth is, every Christian has more than enough power in the Holy Spirit to stand up and not fold up.

- Let's look at the Apostle Paul's poignant pep talk to Christians to act like winners!

1:27 *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 one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel*

1:28 *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.*

1:29 *For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him,*

1:30 *since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.*

There's something important here that we all should understand. All the second-person pronouns, *you*, are plural. It's "you all." Paul's appeal is to the whole church—to all the Christians.

To stand firm and be effective in contending for the faith of the gospel, we need each other.

In this paragraph the Apostle Paul gives some crucial instructions that a church needs in order to carry out its mission like a winner.

#### I. BE STRONG LIKE A TEAM THAT IS JOINED IN SOUL. Philippians 1:27

As Christians we have a lot to live up to.

**1:27** *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 one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel*

The expression, '*conduct yourselves*' translates the Greek verb *politeuomai*, which originally meant to *live as a citizen is supposed to live*.

Just a few verses ahead, in 3:20, Paul writes '*But our citizenship (politeuma) is in heaven . . .*'

What Paul says in verse 27 has some of that sense: '*Live as responsibly as the citizens of heaven.*'

- What does this mean?

No matter how hard it gets, don't give up! You're a winning team.

So '*stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.*' Lit.: '*stand in one spirit striving together with one soul in the faith of the gospel.*'

Christians are soul-partners contending for the same goal.

- This is one of those places where the etymology of the words is helpful. I want to refer again to the Greek word that is translated *striving together*.

It's the word *sunathleo*. The prefix *sun* means *with*. And the *athleo* is the source of our word, *athlete*. This word communicated action and energy.

It's about a team that wins because the members are '*Striving together with one soul.*' That's synergy.

This is ice hockey country, so I'm sure many of you remember it well. You watched it on television or you've seen the movie about it. I'm talking about the 1980 Ice Hockey competition in the Winter Olympic games in Lake Placid, New York.

The US team ranked seventh in the eight-team field and it had the toughest schedule. The deck was stacked against them. Everyone expected the team to be left out of medal contention.

The first team they faced was Sweden. Down Sweden went to defeat. The team started to gain confidence. Next came Norway, then the Czechs, then Romania, and West Germany. The surprising American team was one victory away from the gold medal. But they had to face the Soviets, the Russians. Remember, there were no professional hockey players allowed on the American team in 1980. They were all amateurs. But the Russian team was essentially a professional team in that the players had no other employment except to train and play for the national team.

The US upstart team of amateurs was like a small college football team taking on the Super Bowl Champs. But when the horn sounded to end the final game, the score was the US 4 and the Soviets (USSR) 3.

Probably the greatest upset in Winter Olympic history!

Coach Herb Brooks attributed their victory to synergy. They were just young chaps, averaging 22 years of age. They were good young hockey players as individuals. But as a team, they were a synergistic winning machine that became the best ice hockey team in the world in 1980.

They won the gold medal because they had been *striving together with one soul*. That became their reputation.

Paul wrote in verse 27, '*I want to hear that you have gained the reputation that you are united in spirit and soul as a church in the work of the gospel.*'

- We don't need *individual heroes* in the church today. We need Christians who '*stand in one spirit, striving with one soul for the faith of the gospel.*'

Jesus Christ is the only legitimate hero of the church.

We should resist the inclination to lift up individual Christian leaders, speakers, musicians as our stars and heroes.

That sort of thing belongs to the world, not in Christ's church.

Paul warned against this tendency in 1 Corinthians 3:3-5, 21 '*You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men? What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task . . . So then, no more boasting about men!*'

- We are the body of Christ. There is a dynamic in the body that is more than the sum of its individual parts.

It's a spiritual synergy.

This is what Paul wanted the church at Philippi to be known for.

- What do we as Crossroads want to be known for?

This is our priority as Crossroads, literally, to '*. . . stand in one spirit with one soul striving together for the faith of the gospel.*' (Verse 27)

- So, how does this happen?

It is a work of God's Spirit. It's not something we can create.

But this is exactly where it's so easy for a church to fail and become a loser.

I have learned that churches eventually tend to slip into the mindset that if they get everything properly organized they will succeed as a church. So a church that's a winner is a church that is well organized.

Now it's true that bad organization will seriously compromise a church's effectiveness.

But good organization by itself does not guarantee a church's success.

There are well-organized churches that are dismal failures in terms of holding out the gospel to desperate people.

The Crossroads Church Board has been studying a book entitled, *The Trellis and the Vine*. The trellis is the structure that supports the vine. The vine has the life and bears the fruit.

The trellis exists to serve the vine. It's utter idiocy to devote all one's attention to building a beautiful, elaborate trellis that people will admire, while the vine rots and shrivels and dies. In fact, a good trellis serves its purpose best when it becomes invisible because the vine growing on it is so lush and fruitful.

This is a point on which every church must be extremely careful. Our human nature likes the organization, the trellis.

Why, because we can look at something we did, and where we're in control.

That's not the way it is in the church of our Lord. Anything that is not done by the power of the Spirit of God and the Word of God isn't worth much. It certainly doesn't make a winner.

- What was Paul looking for in the Church at Philippi? He wanted to know that they were *standing in one spirit with one soul striving for the faith of the gospel*.

There's no evidence that he was concerned about how they were keeping the church's organizational machinery running.

Yes, we need effective organization, and we do need some programs and committees. Without them we would have, at best, well-intentioned chaos.

But the priority of a winning church is to work together to make an eternal difference in the lives of spiritually lost and hurting people.

We are *striving together for the faith of the gospel*.

## **II. BE FEARLESS LIKE A FORCE THAT IS ASSURED OF SUCCESS. Philippians 1:28-30**

Don't be afraid.

1:28 *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.*

They call it trash talking in sports. Trash talking is a kind of verbal abuse and posturing intended to unnerve the opposition.

A few years ago, Liz and I drove up from Illinois to Green Bay for the Monday Night football game between the Packers and the 49ers. We were in Packer territory, especially on that stretch of Hwy 43 from Milwaukee up to Green Bay. If you're not a Packers fan, you almost need a visa to travel that road during football season. We were either bold or stupid because we put a 49er hat in the back window of our car. That's like flying an enemy flag. The convoys of Packer fans took offense. A few were very gracious and waved to us; but many were clearly aggravated and didn't use all their digits when they waved.

I can't say in Paul's words of verse 28 that we were *frightened by those who opposed us*, but we decided discretion was the better part of valor and removed the hat from the window.

- Sometimes it's prudent to exercise caution.

The word '*frightened*' in verse 28 is *pturo*.

It was the word used for spooking horses into an uncontrollable stampede.

So Paul writes '*In no way (be) spooked by those who oppose you.*'

In my opinion one of the greatest track stars ever was Edwin Moses. Do you remember him? For years he was the world champion high hurdler. I think he went over ten years without being defeated. He was not an arrogant fellow; but he wasn't intimidated. At every track meet, he could well have said to each of the guys lined up on either side of him—*you do realize, of course, that to oppose me means to lose. The best any of you can hope for is second place.* And he faced the toughest competition in the world.

Christ's church faces the toughest opposition in the world. But we are not intimidated. To oppose us means ultimately to lose, because we're on Christ's team.

Don't let anyone intimidate you. Paul says those who oppose Christ's church will be destroyed (verse 28)

In Romans 8:37 the Apostle Paul explains that even in the most difficult challenges, '*We overwhelmingly conquer through Christ who loves us.*'

- Who is our opponent/adversary? (28)

Ultimately it's the devil, Satan. He is the enemy of Christ and of all who belong to Christ. Peter said we should be on guard against him because he goes around like a roaring lion preying on Christians (1 Peter 5:8-9).

Paul warned the Ephesian church that '*. . . our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*' (Ephesians 6:12)

And our enemy also uses people, as we see in Philippians 3:18, '*Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.*

- What is the *sign to them that they will be destroyed?* (verse 28)

It's the fact that we're not intimidated.

So Christ's church must act like a winner.

Imagine a boxer in the ring, just after the bell starts the first round, running back to his corner and complaining his trainer, *That other guy tried to hit me!* That's absurd!

Of course he did. He wants to knock you senseless. He'd be just as pleased to scare you so that you throw in the towel. He's your opponent, and he's real.

- Few things are more tragic than a church that is so intimidated by the world that it has capitulated to the enemy and has been taken over by the enemy.

A church like that lets the world set its agenda. All it wants to do is be respectable and not cause any offense to the world that does not obey Christ.

We don't set any value on getting cozy with a fallen, decadent culture. We will love them and share the good news of Christ with them, but we won't get into bed with them.

- Paul explained to the Philippian Christians that they had God's guarantee of eternal salvation—an eternal inheritance with God (28).

He told them not to be afraid that anything might happen to rob them of their salvation. They couldn't lose.

- But we must understand that the opposition is real and it is unrelenting. Expect to suffer.

1:29 *For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him,*

This is surprising. Paul says this opposition that causes suffering is gift of God's favor to us. That's the meaning of the word *granted* in verse 29. It has the same verbal root as *grace*.

Some favor! If God gives favors like that, who needs enemies?

Don't overlook Paul's statement here that the act of believing in Christ is a gift of (God's) grace.

- A Christian who stands up with other Christians for the faith of the gospel (27) can expect to suffer.

1:30 *since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.*

The word for *struggle* is *agón*. Originally it was a word that described the struggle in an athletic contest.

Paul knew that the Philippians were suffering for the same reason as he: because of a commitment to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Again let us use a sports analogy. Toward the end of the regular season, a team clinches the division, while there are still a few games to be played. That team can lose every one of the remaining games, and still be the division champion. But it still has to play out the rest of the season—and the opposition is intent on getting in its licks.

Christ won the victory over sin and death by his suffering, death and resurrection.

By faith, we are on his team. He has clinched the title for his team. But we're playing out the rest of the season, and the opposition is all fired up to humiliate Christ's team.

Listen to the last stanza of Frances Havergal's gospel song, *Who is on the Lord's Side?* (1877) It goes like this.

*Fierce may be the conflict, strong may be the foe, but the King's own army, none can overthrow. Round his standard ranging, vict'ry is secure, for his truth unchanging makes the triumph sure. Joyfully enlisting, by thy grace divine, we are on the Lord's side—Savior, we are thine!*

Expect struggles/suffering. The opposition is real. But in no way be afraid. You are on the winning team.

So act like a winner.

- Have you been bruised by the blows of our spiritual enemy? Are you suffering more than you ever imagined you would as a Christian? Are you're just barely limping along?

I hope the truth of God's word today will strengthen your spirit. If you are a Christian, you are on Christ's team.

He has already won the victory.

You will be in the ticker tape victory procession. Don't lose heart.

- Maybe you have been relying on yourself. You've been carrying your load alone. Remember Paul spoke about standing together, united in soul and spirit with other Christians (27).