

Reconcilable Differences

Philippians 4:2-3

Extravagant Grace, Part 1

One author writes, in family life and in church life, there's always a huge gap between the *ideal* world and the *real* world.

For example, every autumn my family likes to go apple picking. Here's the *ideal* day of apple picking. The leaves are golden and rusty, the sky is beautiful, and it's 75 degrees outside.

We happily pile into the van and start singing and laughing as we merrily drove the 3 hours to the orchard. We arrived early enough that morning with plenty of time to enjoy the orchard. Surprisingly, the folks at the apple orchard say to us, "Today apples are free for families."

So our kids guzzle apple cider and stuff themselves with apple donuts—and don't even get a sugar high!

Finally, after a perfect day at the orchard, we drive home as our children keep saying over and over again, "Thanks so much, Mom and Dad . . . you guys are great!" But the *real* day often looks vastly different.

Here's what actually happened. It was a disaster from the start. We were late leaving and I had to basically order everyone into the van. I called ahead and found out the apple orchard closed at 5:00 PM, and we weren't going to get there until after 4:00.

Because we had were already so late, we hadn't stopped for lunch and for three hours everyone was hungry and irritated. Even my wife and I started arguing. I thought it was her fault that we left late; she said it was my fault . . . which it wasn't.

We argued about it until the kids interrupted us with their own series of arguments. I turned around, nearly driving off the road and yelled, "Knock it off . . . I'm arguing with your mom."

When we pulled into the apple orchard, we ended up with only an hour before closing time. The entrance fee was outrageous because they knew we wouldn't stay long – but they didn't budge.

We parked and I told the kids, "Hurry up and get out, so you can have some fun."

By this time of the day all the good apples are gone, the Cider samples were gone and nothing was free.

After what seemed like a few minutes, we had to load the kids back in the van. On the way home, we stopped at McDonald's and got everyone an apple turnover. That was as close as we got to tasting any apples that day.

This father – who is also a pastor – applies the event as he writes, "Unfortunately, family life and church life are often the same; the events, surprises, and situations of life aren't usually ideal. That's why we have to practice grace . . . grace in the midst of real life and real community among real people just like us."ⁱ

Well put. Grace is defined as unmerited favor. We often think of the word grace when we think of how God treats us – with unmerited, undeserved favor.

But the truth is, grace is not only something we receive from God, it's something we give to others in gracious acts and in a gracious attitude.

It's as refreshing as the spray from a waterfall on a hot day; or a cool drink of water to parched lips.

The Old Testament word for grace describes a spirit of stooping low toward others. The New Testament word for grace focuses as well on favor bestowed on someone undeserving.

Grace is used in the New Testament for gracious words and a lovely spirit; it carries the idea of acceptance and welcome.ⁱⁱ

Now the thing to keep in mind is that nobody can simply say they are a person of grace unless they actually stoop low in action and attitude toward someone else.

Most Christians talk about grace and sing about grace . . . far fewer actually live it out.

The truth is, grace is difficult, if not impossible. Why? Because life is difficult . . . and people can be impossible. It's true, isn't it? People can be impossible. Not you . . . I'm thinking of people who live in Chapel Hill.

I appreciated the story told by Warren Wiersbe, the former pastor of Moody Church and a radio Bible teacher with Back to the Bible for many years; he wrote, "One day my elementary school-aged daughter jumped off the school bus as it stopped in front of our house and slammed her way through the front door. She stomped up the stairs into her room and again slammed the door. All the while she was muttering, "People, People, People!" I went up and knocked softly, "May I come in." She said, "No!" I tried again, and she again said, "No!" I asked, "Why can't I come in?" And she answered, "Because you're a people!"ⁱⁱⁱ

There's a reason this poem was written that goes like this:

To live above with the saints we love,
Oh that will be wonder and glory;
But to live below with the saints we know,
Well, that's another story.

You don't even have to read in between the lines to quickly learn that the church in Philippi was in need of a refreshing demonstration of grace.

As *Philippians chapter 4* opens, in Paul's letter to the Philippian church, he does something that he only does under critically important moments – he mentions people by name.

Let's pick our study back up where we left off at *verse 2 where Paul writes, I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord.*

Now if anybody was dozing off in the Sunday morning service while this letter was being read, they were wide awake now! And as you can imagine, all eyes were on these two women sitting in the assembly.^{iv}

And Paul diplomatically doesn't give the details behind the disharmony, but something is obviously

not only wrong, but dangerously at work in this assembly.

In fact, this disunity has reached a serious enough level to make its way from Philippi all the way to Rome from where Paul is writing this letter.^v

Now what might immediately seem rather blunt is actually a case study in gracious confrontation.

Paul does two things right off the bat; first, he repeats this verb, *I urge Euodia . . . I urge Syntyche.*

The verb could be translated, I entreat, or I appeal, or even, I encourage you. Paul had every right to throw his apostolic weight around and basically order these two women to get it straightened out.^{vi}

But instead he calls them by name and then personally appeals to them to be reconciled. Obviously the issue of disharmony is serious enough to call out. Paul understands that the danger of false teachers, he talked about in chapter 3 is just as crippling to a church as disharmony. Even if a church's doctrine is sound, disunity robs a church of its power and can easily destroy the testimony of the church.^{vii}

Just google church fights sometime and you'll get more video snippets and major news reports than you'd ever wanna see or have time to surf.

Paul fully knew that discord and disunity and conflict could devastate the integrity of the Philippian church's testimony.^{viii}

It was probably already splashed on the front page of the Roman News and Observer – and the headline reads: Church Fight in Philippi.

Yes, Paul calls them out by name but he uses a gracious approach in appealing to these women; then he does something else. Notice how Paul refuses to take sides.

Would you notice that Paul does *not* write, "I urge Euodia to live in harmony with Syntyche"; or "I urge Syntyche to live in harmony with Euodia."

By appealing to them both, Paul doesn't take sides with either one of them.

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord.

Both of you – *live in harmony* – literally, have the same mind, *in the Lord.*

In other words, go back to your common ground in the Lord and make up your mind to live in harmony because of what you share *in the Lord.*

You can't agree about a lot of things in life, but you can agree about the most important things in life – so return to that common ground you have in Christ.

One commentator wrote it this way: Paul knew that if they got right [in] the Lord, they would be right with each other.^{ix}

The next thing Paul does is this; instead of taking sides and going into all the details and spreading it all out in front of the church, instead of berating these women, Paul actually begins to praise these women.

Notice the middle part of *verse 3; these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel together with Clement also and the rest of my fellow workers.*

They shared in Paul's struggle for the gospel there in Philippi.

That tells us at least three things about them;

1. First, they were church members, not outsiders.
2. Secondly, they were active members, not inactive or absent church members.
3. Thirdly, they were long term members – having personally shared in Paul's difficult days of establishing the gospel there in Philippi.

By the way, just review the history of this church and you'll discover that women were deeply involved in the very inception of this congregation.

- When Paul arrived, the first group of people he preached to were women who had gathered at the edge of the river to pray.
- And after Paul preached, a prominent businesswoman named Lydia believed the gospel and was saved.
- She immediately opened her home to Paul which became the location of this early church.
- It isn't long before Paul and Silas are thrown into prison for creating a disturbance and at midnight
- God miraculously frees their bonds and they end up leading the Philippian jailer to faith in the Lord Jesus.
- Paul and Silas are eventually asked to leave town by the city officials.

- Through all of this, a number of additional women – more than likely from that original prayer group – trusted Christ and endured the challenges and difficulties of establishing a church in Lydia's home.

And I review all of that to simply provide the background for what Paul commends these two women – they had put their lives on the line. They weren't sitting on the sidelines. They were deeply involved and invested in the church in Philippi.

Another observation worth making is that this divisive issue was not a doctrinal issue. Had it been doctrinal error, Paul would have followed his customary response in calling out the false doctrine and reinforcing correct doctrine.

But that doesn't happen here. And that point needs to be made simply because the issues that often distract and divide and bring disharmony to a local church are not typically doctrinal issues, are they?

Travel around this country and you'll find churches embroiled and at logger heads, not over doctrines, but over leadership decisions, the annual budget, the number of committees, the style of music, the delegation of authority and the color of the carpet.

In my annual GreenHouse new member's class, every session we cover disruptive issues.

And I tell them all the same thing. The average evangelical church in our country isn't gonna divide over the deity of Christ, or the Trinity; or the literal resurrection of Christ. We believe all of that and we don't even need to spend time discussing it. You're here because you obviously know we believe it and you're in agreement with it.

But what will divide a church are far less significant issues than the Trinity and the resurrection of Christ.

What will divide a church are core values – their philosophy of ministry; their purpose for worship services; their use of money and facilities; their organizational structure; their view on baptism or divorce and remarriage; their view on the role of women preaching; their view on speaking in tongues and on and on and on, right?

That's the really divisive stuff, right – and the church had better know where they stand and where the Bible defends their position. It will be divisive and potentially dangerous to hold certain views –

even though they are not eternally determinative doctrines.

I've heard of people leaving this church because they didn't like the music; I've heard of people leaving because the sermons were too short . . . okay, I made that one up.

Beloved, let me encourage you – this is not a new problem.

The greatest threat to the church in Philippi wasn't their view on the deity of Christ or His resurrection – it was disharmony between two faithful charter members; and the church had begun taking sides – one group was siding with Euodia and the other group was siding with Syntyche – and a third group was simply trying to stay out of the way.

And the enemy of the Church was licking his chops.

I've heard it said that in any church fight, the Devil doesn't take sides – he just provides both sides with ammunition.

And this had become a dangerous threat that Paul must deal with, head on.

Let me give you three principles that come from what we've been able to uncover so far in this verse.

- **First, disagreements and differences of opinion are inevitable in the church**

Whether it's your own family's disagreement on where to eat lunch or go on vacation or what to do about schooling. And the church is made up of families – single and married, young and old – and the potential for a thousand disagreements is constantly bubbling away in the kettle on the stove.

I have a small plaque that for many years perched on the top of doorframe in my office here at church. It reads; Where 2 or 3 are gathered together in my name, there will be disagreement as to what the Bible teaches.

Once our church grew beyond 2 people (Marsha and me, in those early days), the potential for disagreement was unavoidable. Even with just the two of us, the vote wasn't always unanimous.

Disagreements are inevitable.

- **Secondly, mature Christians don't always disagree agreeably.**

You're looking here in this text at two women who were veteran saints – they weren't beginner Christians.

But something had happened . . . more than likely, based on Paul's hint of pride and a power struggle in chapter 2, most New Testament commentators believe these women were either vying for the same position, or wanting a different choice for some position of authority – perhaps for their own husbands – and neither one of them could gain any ground against the other.

Discussions and debates were coalescing in taking sides. The name-calling had begun. It was beginning to look like a presidential debate . . . words were flying . . . heat was rising . . . disharmony was spreading.

- **Here's a third principle; if left unchecked, disagreements between a few can harm many.**

Imagine, this started out with a disagreement between two faithful women in the church – and now it has become the prevailing issue that threatens the disunity of the entire church.

And that's because personal grudges have no desire to remain anonymous. Gossip has no interest in staying quiet . . . both relish a growing audience.

Most New Testament scholars I read believe that Paul hinted around the edges of this issue 3 or 4 times in this letter before finally coming out with what everyone knew was the elephant in the room.

This had affected everyone . . . and it was finally on the table; which is why Paul now provides a recommendation to put it to an end.

Notice back in *verse 3*. ***Indeed, true comrade/companion, I ask you also to help these women who have shared in my struggle.***

Now Paul doesn't name the true comrade here – the noun can be translated *yokefellow*; *companion*, *comrade*.

But Paul is clearly enlisting a leader to help these women and the church evidently knew who that man was.

I've read a dozen different viewpoints on who he was; some believe it was Timothy; he was certainly Paul's true companion; others suggest it was Silas, Paul's traveling companion and fellow evangelist; some that the term was a metaphor for the entire Philippian church; some believe it's to be translated as a proper name – *Suzuge* (συζυγε) – a name that

means to bring together; to yoke together; some others have suggested that this term refers to Paul's wife since the term companion can refer to a wife.^x

There are all kinds of different opinions. I personally would throw my vote to Epaphroditus; he was called Paul's co-worker and fellow-soldier earlier in chapter 2 – he was the one carrying this letter to the Philippian church and he was likely the man who more than likely would have been reading this letter to the assembly in Philippi.

But we really don't know . . . and we don't want to fight about it. In the end, *who* he was, isn't as important as *what* he is supposed to do.

I ask you to help these women. The meaning of this verb, to help, carries a strong sense of physical action; to lay hold of; to grasp.^{xi}

- The verb is the same one used to describe the scene in the Garden where the soldiers came and arrested Jesus (Matthew 26:55);
- This is the same verb used to refer to the disciples catching all those fish in Luke 5:9.

For the first and only time, Paul uses this verb in his urgent request for his companion to take decisive personal action to bring these two women together.^{xii}

They have evidently moved in their hearts to far apart that he must urgently and even physically get them in the same room and attempt to draw them together in reconciliation.

Let me pause here again and offer some principles by way of observation:

- **First, conflict is often resolved by the assistance of cooler heads.**

So many times, people embroiled in a conflict could use someone to come along who can offer a fresh perspective; if they're a good listener – and they aren't emotionally attached – they can provide an honest evaluation that gets beyond the details of he said and she said.^{xiii}

They can discern the real issue and help bring clarity.

- **Secondly, when conflicts arise, the church body isn't called to take sides, but to untangle the issues.**

In other words, where there's a divisive problem in the church – this is gonna sound strange – but Paul is recommending that you actually jump into the middle of it . . . not to take sides, but to disarm the conflict.

Don't sit on the sidelines and just watch the conflict grow and take on more energy and more heat. Jump in . . . and help out.

I think this is much of what Paul was thinking when he wrote to the Corinthians, ***I hear that there are divisions among you – they must be so, so that those who are mature will be made evident among you (I Corinthians 11:19).***

In other words, when temperatures start to rise . . . watch for cool heads . . . and wise hearts to weigh in.

They'll be encouraging both parties to stop . . . and stoop low in humility in order to effectively dish out to each other a generous helping of grace.

- **Third, winning a personal argument is never more important than protecting the unity of the Body in the bond of peace.**

As I've mulled over the implications of these two verses, Paul never asked his companion:

- to get rid of these women;
- to take sides with one of these women;
- or even to name a winner among these women.

No . . . just go and build a bridge . . . and lead them back over it – to each other.

I couldn't help but think of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson—two men who fell out with each other over politics and personal slights.

The feud was known around Washington as these two statesmen abandoned all correspondence and any kind of relationship for many years.

But in 1809 another signer of the Declaration of Independence, Dr. Benjamin Rush, began urging these men to renew their friendship and begin corresponding with each other.

Eventually, after several years of pleading with them, Thomas Jefferson sent a very short letter to John Adams – and Adams responded with a rather guarded reply.

One letter followed another until in a letter from John Adams to Jefferson on July 15, 1813 he wrote: "If I write four letters to your one; your one letter is worth more than my four . . . you and I ought not to

die, before we have explained ourselves to each other.”

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, both signers of the Declaration of Independence; both former presidents of the United States—both of them died on the same day—the fourth of July – as the nation celebrated what they had written together, 50 years earlier.^{xiv}

Today their division is not as big a story as their reconciliation before they died. And I think that plays into what I read at the end of this paragraph as Paul concludes his discussion on the matter.

Notice how he ends *verse 3, whose names are in the book of life*

He references *Clement* – of whom we know absolutely nothing; and fellow workers and these two women and a faithful companion who remains anonymous – but notice – all of them have their names written in the book of life.

This final phrase is deeply convicting. It’s as if Paul subtly reminds us, we’re all gonna die. And then – what will be said of us as it relates to the unity and harmony of the church?

Can you imagine – Euodia and Syntyche have been known for 1900 plus years as the two women who couldn’t get along.

But here’s the point – what would Paul say about you – and me? How would our one sentence read? What contribution to the harmony of the church are we making today? But this final phrase is also – not only deeply convicting, but deeply encouraging.

Our names are written in the book of life. As if to remind us – we’re going to heaven.

Resolving problems in the present with grace takes place when we remember we have been given everlasting grace.

Paul says, listen, don’t forget – all of you – your names are *written forever in the book of life.*

The disciples came back rejoicing over their preaching ministry and Jesus said to them, *“Rejoice over this – that your names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20)*

Daniel saw in his Old Testament prophecy the resurrection of everyone *whose name shall be found written in the book (Daniel 12)*

Beloved, one way to endure with grace and offer to live by grace and attempt to demonstrate grace to others is to remember your eternal future is drenched with grace.

We demonstrate the uniqueness of our Lord who stooped low in humility to demonstrate grace . . . and if He did . . . so should we.

I close with this front page article in the San Francisco Chronicle featured in a book by a Christian author from the west coast. The article is about a metro-transit operator named Linda Wilson-Allen.

She demonstrates grace to the people who ride on her bus; she waits for them if they’re late and then makes up the time later on in her route. She learns their names too if she can.

A woman in her eighties named Ivy had some heavy grocery bags and was struggling with them. So Linda got out of her bus driver’s seat to carry Ivy’s grocery bags onto the bus. Now Ivy lets other buses pass so she can ride on Linda’s bus.

On another occasion, Linda noticed a stranger to the area – more than likely a homeless woman in need. She introduced herself and found out the woman was new to the area and lost. It was coming up on Thanksgiving Day, so Linda said to Tanya, “You’re out here all by yourself. You don’t know anybody. Come on over for Thanksgiving and spend it with me and my family.” Now they’re friends – and Tanya has found the help she needed to get settled.

The article went on; Linda the bus driver has built such a little community of blessing on that bus that passengers offer Linda the use of their vacation homes. Sometimes a passenger will bring her a potted plant or some flowers or a scarf like the ones she enjoys wearing to spruce up her bus driver’s uniform.

It doesn’t make her job any easier. In fact, think about what a thankless task driving a bus can look like in our world: cranky passengers, engine breakdowns, traffic jams – cranky passengers (did I mention that already?), gum on the seats and trash in the aisles.

How does she have this attitude of grace The San Francisco Chronicle asked? The reporter answered: her attitude is actually set at 2:30 A.M. As she prepares for a new day and another shift, she spends 30 minutes praying to her Lord and Savior . . . you see, Linda Wilson-Allen is a Christian.

At the close of her shift each day, when she gets to the end of her line, she always hollers out to all her remaining passengers, “I love you all . . . take care.” Have you ever had a city bus driver tell you, “Hey, I love you?”

This article ends by the author applying; if people ever wonder, *where can I find the spirit of God's Kingdom?* – I will tell you – you can find it on the #45 bus riding through San Francisco. If people wanna know, “Where can I see the grace of God at

work?” the answer is, “Right there . . . behind the wheel of metro transit city bus.”^{xv}

I couldn't help but think – if that kind of grace can work on a bus . . . surely it can work in the church.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/06/2016 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Adapted from Stewart Ruch, from his sermon *Shaping the World of Each Child* (Church of the Resurrection, Wheaton, Illinois); citation: preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2011/october/3101011.html

ⁱⁱ Adapted from William E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Thomas Nelson, 1997), p. 500

ⁱⁱⁱ Adapted from Sam Gordon, *Philippians: An Odyssey of Joy* (Ambassador, 2004), p. 148

^{iv} R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel* (Crossway Books, 2007), p. 164

^v J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Joy of Living: A Study of Philippians* (Lamplighter Books, 1973), p. 173

^{vi} Adapted from Dennis E. Johnson, *Philippians* (P & R Publishing, 2013), p. 252

^{vii} John MacArthur, *Philippians* (Moody Publishers, 2001), p. 270

^{viii} *Ibid*

^{ix} *Ibid*, p. 271

^x G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians* (Eerdmans, 2009), p. 284

^{xi} Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Regency, 1976), p. 560

^{xii} Adapted from Hansen, p. 285

^{xiii} Adapted from *Life Application Bible: Philippians, Colossians & Philemon* (Tyndale, 1995), p. 107

^{xiv} Fred Smith, *Forgetting the Little that Divides*, *The Gathering* blog (10-22-15)

^{xv} Adapted from John Ortberg, *All the Places to Go* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2015), p. 70