

# Euodia and Syntyche: A Case Study

Isaiah 25:1-9 | Psalm 23 | Philippians 4:1-9 | Matthew 22:1-14

## PHILIPPIANS 4:1-9

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. <sup>2</sup> I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. <sup>3</sup> Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. <sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. <sup>9</sup> Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

## INTRODUCTION

*Love the sin and hate the sinner.* This is a well-known phrase and sentiment. But it is also an idea which seems to be losing its social value in our day and age, when disagreeing with people inevitably leads to demonizing people. While the idea behind it is ancient, arguably the modern source of the particular phrase comes from Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.<sup>1</sup>

Man and his deed are two distinct things. Whereas a good deed should call forth approbation and a wicked deed disapprobation, the doer of the deed, whether good or wicked always deserves respect or pity as the case may be. ‘Hate the sin and not the sinner’ is a precept which, though easy enough to understand, is rarely practised, and that is why the poison of hatred spreads in the world.<sup>2</sup>

Gandhi noted that an inability to distinguish between someone’s sin, someone’s reprehensible behaviours or ideas or actions, and the person, is poisoning society. And this observation raises, I think, questions for us: What does it mean to disagree well? Especially as Christians, what does it look like to disagree in a Christian way? I would suggest that our reading from Philippians will help us to think about these questions as Paul offers three main exhortations.

## 1. STAND FIRM IN THE LORD

First, Paul opens with a striking intimacy: “*brothers (and sisters), whom I love and long for, my joy and crown.*”<sup>3</sup> Paul addresses them as family—as those who are bound together, in part, by love

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine is often cited as the origin of this phrase based on an idea he articulated in a letter to a group of nuns: *Cum dilectione hominum et odio vitiorum*. It can be translated as “with love for mankind and hatred of sins.” Augustine, *Letter 211*, in Jacques Paul Migne, ed., *Patrologiae Latinae*, Vol. 33 (Paris: 1845). Similar phrases are found in Alexander Pope’s poem *Eloise and Abelard* (written in 1717) and William Mason’s notes to John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (written sometime between 1777 and 1786).

<sup>2</sup> Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Victoria: Reading Essentials, 1927), 250.

<sup>3</sup> Phil 4:1.

for one another. And on this basis, he urges them with this first command: “*Stand firm in the Lord in this way.*”<sup>4</sup> Whatever the challenges they face as a family, Paul urges them to steadfastness in their circumstances, reiterating a point from the first chapter:

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that... I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel and are in no way intimidated by your opponents.<sup>5</sup>

In the broadest terms possible, Paul ties together their manner of life and their unity to the result, then, of being steadfast. But notice, even there, he suggests they need to be of one mind, and it is “in the Lord” — a phrase to which we’ll return in a moment.

## 2. BE OF THE SAME MIND IN THE LORD

This brings us then to the second exhortation: “*Be of the same mind in the Lord.*”<sup>6</sup> Here, Paul acknowledges a situation that challenges their ability to stand firm. He identifies two women in the church who, for whatever reason, have been at odds with one another. Notice that he also identifies them these women as fellow workers in the cause of the gospel—literally contending at his side, the same word as in that earlier passage: “*striving side by side.*”<sup>7</sup> What they disagreed about we simply do not know. Unsurprisingly, commentators throughout history have speculated as to the nature of this dispute.<sup>8</sup> But everything we know about these two women is here and takes up exactly 38 words. Whatever the dispute, he urges them to “*be of the same mind in the Lord.*”<sup>9</sup> This phrase can be broken down into two parts.

First, *being of the same mind* is a repeated concept. This idea of *mind*, really attitude or mindset here, is thematic throughout the letter, from Paul’s mindset toward them, to their same-mindedness being a mark of maturity, to their concern for Paul just after our passage.<sup>10</sup> This exact phrase, an exhortation to be of the same mind, appears back in the second chapter: “*...make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.*”<sup>11</sup> He urges the whole church to be of the same mind. And how? He goes on just a few verses later in one of the most well-known passages of the New Testament:

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<sup>4</sup> Several commentators argue that this first statement is a conclusion to the preceding chapters, having arrived at the final thoughts of the letter. While this is true, the sentiment is also the foundation for the rest of this passage. I would suggest, in rhetorical terms, that it is the beginning of the peroration.

<sup>5</sup> Phil 1:27-28a.

<sup>6</sup> Phil 4:2.

<sup>7</sup> The majority of manuscripts, however, render the names in the feminine form and the feminine pronoun and relative in the next verse indicate they should be rendered as such. See Phil 1:27 for the reference to struggling/striving here (συναθλέω). That there would be leading women in the church in Philippi is unsurprising as the origin of the church itself

<sup>8</sup> The translators of the King James Version render the first name as masculine, in fact, subtly implying this was a marital dispute. The translators of the King James Version were probably influenced by William Tyndale’s 1536 revised translation of the Bible which rendered both names masculine, supposing the women noted in verse 3 were a different group. This is supported by the existence of inscriptions from the time period of the masculine forms of the names. However, for textual and grammatical reasons, it is clear these are both women in the church.

<sup>9</sup> Phil 4:2.

<sup>10</sup> See Phil 1:7, 3:15, and 4:10.

<sup>11</sup> Phil 2:2.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.<sup>12</sup>

How are they to be of the same mind? By adopting the mindset of Christ—the self-sacrificial, thinking not just of yourself, giving up rights and privileges for the good of other people, humble, mindset. Paul urges Euodia and Syntyche here to stop asking the question of how to win the argument, how to crush the opponent, and to instead ask what they can each give up, to join each other and Christ in a mindset that puts the other first.

Second, their agreement is to be “in the Lord.” We’ve just looked at what that means by way of Christ’s example in the cross. But we must also see here that Paul confines the agreement. He limits it with this phrase. That is, he’s not saying: that they can’t disagree, or have different opinions, or draw different conclusions. Whatever the resolution is to their problem—and Paul asks someone to mediate in the very next verse: “...and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women...”<sup>13</sup>—whatever the resolution is, it will involve accommodation, and it will involve compromise. It may involve not getting precisely they want for either of them. But that’s the point, the example of Christ, the posture of deference that leads to serving one another rather than defeating one another. They can disagree about the issue, but they need to have the same mind in the Lord—the same mindset of love and kindness that will allow them to disagree well, rather than tear themselves and the church apart.

### 3. REJOICE IN THE LORD

The third section of our passage, then, takes the next step. Not just these two disagreeing members of the church, but the whole church needs to be known by their gentleness—not their piercing rhetoric and political dominance—but their gentleness.<sup>14</sup> Notice how he actually starts the section, with a third exhortation: “*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.*”<sup>15</sup> This is one of the more well-known phrases from this letter, but, frankly, often misunderstood. People cite this to talk about happiness in a superficial sense, to suggest that Christians are supposed to be cheery people. But we must remember the context. There is a reason that Paul talks about rejoicing so much.<sup>16</sup> The Philippians have pretty good reasons to *not* be joyful.

In chapter 1, we learn that their apostle, Paul, is writing to them from prison.<sup>17</sup> They are, likewise, being opposed and, as such, are struggling.<sup>18</sup> In chapter 2, we learn there is gossip and dissension within the church.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, their messenger and minister, Epaphroditus, has been gravely ill. In the third chapter, we learn they are being attacked by

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<sup>12</sup> Phil 2:5-8.

<sup>13</sup> Phil 4:3.

<sup>14</sup> See Phil 4:5. Cf. 1 Pet 2:18.

<sup>15</sup> Phil 4:4.

<sup>16</sup> Phil 1:18, 2:17-18, 2:28, 3:1, 4:4, 4:10.

<sup>17</sup> Phil 1:7

<sup>18</sup> Phil 1:28-30.

<sup>19</sup> Phil 2:14.

the theological opposition.<sup>20</sup> And here in chapter 4, we see there is outright fighting inside the church too.<sup>21</sup> The Philippian church is in a really difficult way.

Paul, knowing this, calls them to rejoice. There it is again, that phrase: *in the Lord*. They do not have to be happy about their circumstances—but they need to have their confidence, their foundation of contentment, firmly built upon the Lord. This is not the rejoicing of superficial happiness, but a defiant joy. He goes on, urging them to commit themselves to prayer and supplication and thanksgiving and intercession and to letting go of anxiety. He urges them to keep their minds on “*whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable.*” He goes on: “...*if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*”<sup>22</sup> And in so doing, they will find the peace of God through this defiant joy in the Lord.

#### 4. LIVING IN THE LORD

Before I conclude, I want to take a step back and revisit these three arguments, but for us:

First, we need to stand firm in the Lord. Brothers and sisters, we are called to steadfastness in the Lord. If you have not yet placed your faith in Christ Jesus, the one who did empty himself of his divinity and died on a cross that we might be reconciled to God, and rose again that we might have eternal life, now is a good time to consider it. Steadfastness in the age to come, and increasingly in this age, is directly related to such a faith.

Second, we need to learn to disagree well in the Lord. I’m deeply troubled by the state of political discourse in my home country. I’m deeply troubled by the state of political discourse in this country too. As a society, we have somehow lost the capacity for seeing past oversimplification, for seeing nuance, for seeing complexity. And in letting these things deteriorate, we have become a bitter, angsty, tired, frustrated, anxious, malicious society that only sees black and white in a beautifully colourful world. And in the church, we have more than just a practical reason to think this through. We have a higher calling. We have Christ Jesus, who set aside his privileges in order to give up his life for others—not just any others, sinful others, rebellious others, those who, themselves, deserve death and brought about his. If we are to share in his mind, how can we not have the same mindset with each other—the mindset of loving one another, of sharing in the spiritual edification of one another, the building up of one another in the Lord—even when we disagree. We need to be able to see both the sinfulness of humanity and also lament the injustice of undeserved deaths. We need to be able to disagree with each other about policies and procedures, without breaking fellowship and straining the church. And it starts with a Christ-like emptying of oneself of pride and ego.

I want to add here: Being of the same mind in the Lord does not necessarily require being of the same theological school. And it certainly does not require being of the same race or ethnicity or culture. If we want to be a truly welcoming church, where real friendships are made across these lines, and where such relationships make it harder to disagree *in the Lord*,

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<sup>20</sup> Phil 3:2-4.

<sup>21</sup> Phil 4:2.

<sup>22</sup> Phil 4:8.

then we could all do a better job of chatting about, discussing, and focusing on that which truly binds us: the things spiritual, our common faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Finally, we need to rejoice in the Lord. But again, this is not the superficial happiness of denial. We live in a world where the news has a bias toward conflict, social media has a bias toward criticism, and both are constantly giving us a lot of reasons to be outraged, annoyed, triggered, and depressed. I can't shake the feeling—between the environment and the pandemic and the systemic racism that keeps resulting in death—that society is broken. Add to that the simple fact that human nature is to complain. My own nature is to complain. And I don't like it what that does to me or to us. In faith, however, we have the gospel truth of Christ's defeat of sin and death. We have an enduring hope that, as the Eucharistic prayer says, there will be a day when "justice and mercy will be seen in all the earth."<sup>23</sup> And so we must rejoice with a defiant contentment built on a confidence in Jesus Christ. This is a true joy, a deep joy, a foundational joy in wilful opposition to this broken world.

### CONCLUSION

I will end with this, a line from a commentary by Gaius Marius Victorinus, a 4th century Roman rhetorician and philosopher, and in his later years, convert to Christianity:

"Rejoice," he says "in the Lord"—this is too little: "again I say rejoice." For when you are joined in heart you rejoice in the Lord, and when you rejoice in the Lord you are joined in heart and stand together in the Lord.<sup>24</sup>

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, help us to stand together, to be of the same mind, and to rejoice in you, our Saviour. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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<sup>23</sup> "Lord of all life, help us to work together for that day when your kingdom comes, and justice and mercy will be seen in all the earth." The Archbishops' Council 2000, *Common Worship*, 197.

<sup>24</sup> Gaius Marius Victorinus, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 4.4-5. This translation is taken from Mark J. Edwards, ed., *The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament Volume 8: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 267.