

The Book of Philippians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 3: Worthy of the Gospel; United and Unafraid

Philippians 1:27–2:4

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

What is doctrinally at stake here is the connection between belief and behavior, the nature and purpose of Christian unity, and a right understanding of suffering for Christ. Paul insists that the gospel is not merely something we hold in our heads but a citizenship that shapes how we live. He grounds unity not in shared opinion or personality but in our common participation in Christ and the Spirit. And he teaches that faithful suffering is a gift granted by God, a sign of salvation rather than a sign of God's displeasure. Be ready to help your class hold conduct and creed together, against any version of faith that divorces what we believe from how we live.

This passage is also intensely formational, because it names the quiet sins that wreck congregations and homes. Selfish ambition and conceit rarely announce themselves, yet they are the acids that dissolve unity. Paul's remedy is not a technique but a reorientation of the heart, humility that counts others more significant than ourselves and looks to their interests. This sets up the great hymn of Christ in 2:5–11, which your class will reach next week. The humility Paul commands here is the humility Christ embodied there.

So aim at both targets. Strengthen your students' conviction that the gospel must be lived, not merely believed, and that suffering for Christ is an honor; and at the same time press gently on the pride and self-interest that divide the body, calling them toward the self-forgetful humility that makes unity possible.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul urges them to "let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ" (1:27), using language that pictures living as citizens of a heavenly commonwealth. What does it mean for our conduct to be worthy of the gospel, and why does Paul tie behavior so closely to belief?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The verb Paul uses is drawn from the world of citizenship. It might be paraphrased, live as citizens in a manner worthy of the gospel. Philippi was a proud Roman colony, and its residents knew what it meant to represent a greater city in a distant place. Paul tells the church they represent a greater commonwealth still, and their daily conduct is the uniform they wear.

Worthy does not mean earning the gospel. It means fitting the gospel, living in a way that matches and adorns the good news we claim. A life of grumbling, dishonesty, and division

makes the gospel look false. A life of love, integrity, and unity makes it believable. Conduct preaches.

Notice how tightly Paul binds behavior to belief. For Paul there is no Christianity that lives in the head alone. What we truly believe shows up in how we live, and how we live either commends or contradicts what we say we believe. This is a recurring New Testament theme, that genuine faith is a working, obedient faith.

Help your students see this as freeing rather than crushing. Worthy living is not anxious performance to keep God's approval. It is the natural expression of people who belong to a new city and a new King, learning to live now in the way they will live forever.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gospel as a citizenship that shapes daily conduct, not merely a belief held in the head
- Worthy meaning fitting and adorning the gospel, not earning it
- The inseparable link between belief and behavior in the New Testament
- Conduct as a witness that either commends or contradicts the gospel
- Genuine faith as a working, obedient faith

Discussion Prompts

- How does the picture of citizenship shape the way you understand Christian conduct?
- Why does Paul refuse to separate belief from behavior?
- Where does your conduct currently preach the gospel, and where does it contradict it?

Question 2

Student Question:

Think about an area of your daily life, your speech, your work, your habits at home, where your conduct does not yet match the gospel you profess. What would it look like this week to bring that area into line with what you believe?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question moves the previous truth into one concrete corner of the student's life. The aim is one named area, not a vague resolve to do better. Specificity is where formation actually happens.

Help students search the ordinary places, the tone they take with family, their honesty at work, what they watch and say when no one is checking, how they drive, how they spend. The gap between profession and practice usually hides in the mundane.

Resist the drift toward guilt for its own sake. The goal is repentance that moves, a single area surrendered and a single step taken. Encourage students to name both the area and the action, so the lesson does not end in mere awareness.

Close by reconnecting to grace. We bring our conduct into line not to earn God's love but because we already belong to him. The motive is gratitude and belonging, not fear, and that motive makes the change sustainable.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Naming one concrete area where practice lags behind profession
- Locating the gap in ordinary, mundane places
- Repentance that moves rather than guilt that merely informs
- Obedience flowing from belonging and gratitude, not fear

Discussion Prompts

- Which area came to mind first, and why that one?
- What single step would bring it into line this week?
- How does belonging to Christ change your motive for the change?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul wants them "standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel" (1:27). What does this teach us about the importance of unity in the Lord's church, and what is that unity actually for?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul's images are vivid and military. Standing firm pictures soldiers holding a line, and striving side by side pictures a team contending together. Unity here is not a vague sentiment but a shared stance and a shared labor under pressure.

Notice what the unity is for. It is for the faith of the gospel, for advancing and defending the good news together. Christian unity is not unity for its own sake or mere agreeableness. It is the unity of people facing the same direction, contending for the same truth, pulling on the same rope.

This matters doctrinally. The Lord prayed that his people would be one (John 17), and division in the body wounds its witness and disobeys its Lord. The New Testament treats unity in the truth as essential, not optional, a unity grounded in the one faith, one Lord, one baptism (Ephesians 4:4-6).

Help your students see that such unity requires both conviction and humility. A line of soldiers holds together by facing the enemy, not by staring at one another. Congregations find unity not by everyone getting their way but by everyone fixing their eyes on the same gospel and the same Lord.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Unity as a shared stance and shared labor, not vague sentiment
- Unity for the sake of the gospel, not agreeableness for its own sake
- The Lord's own prayer for the oneness of his people (John 17:20-23)
- Unity grounded in one faith, one Lord, one baptism (Ephesians 4:4-6)
- Unity requiring both conviction in the truth and humility toward one another

Discussion Prompts

- What is Christian unity actually for, according to this verse?
- How is unity in the gospel different from everyone simply getting along?
- What threatens the unity of your congregation most, and how is it guarded?

Question 4

Student Question:

Are you, in practice, a source of unity or a source of friction in your congregation and your home? Name one concrete way you could strive side by side with others this week rather than pulling against them.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the call to unity onto the student's own role. Most of us see ourselves as peacemakers and others as the problem, so the question requires real honesty about how we actually function in a room.

Help students identify their patterns. Some pull against unity through criticism and complaint, some through withdrawal, some through needing to be right, some through gossip. Naming the pattern is the first step to changing it.

Move quickly to the constructive side. Striving side by side is active, not merely the absence of conflict. Ask students to name one concrete way to join others in the work this week, a task taken up, an encouragement given, a quarrel laid down, a hand extended.

Close by connecting unity to the gospel's witness. When the body pulls together, the watching world sees something believable. When it pulls apart, the gospel is obscured. Our small choices toward unity have a reach we rarely see.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest self-assessment of whether we build unity or friction
- Common patterns that erode unity: criticism, withdrawal, needing to be right, gossip
- Striving side by side as active partnership, not merely avoiding conflict
- The witness of a united body to a watching world

Discussion Prompts

- In an honest moment, do you tend to build unity or friction?
- What is your particular pattern when tensions rise?
- What is one concrete way to strive side by side this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul says their courage in the face of opponents is “a clear sign” of salvation, and that it has been “granted” to them not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for his sake (1:28–29). What does this teach us about how God views the suffering of his faithful people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul says something that cuts against our instincts. Suffering for Christ is not evidence that God has abandoned his people, it is something granted to them, a word that means graciously given, the same root as grace. The privilege of suffering for Christ is spoken of as a gift.

This reframes opposition entirely. The Philippians might have read their persecution as a sign that something had gone wrong. Paul tells them it is a sign that something is right, a clear token that they belong to the saved and not to those who oppose the gospel. Faithful suffering aligns us with Christ, who also suffered.

Be careful to keep the category precise. Paul is speaking of suffering for the sake of Christ, the cost of faithfulness, not all suffering of every kind, and certainly not suffering brought on by our own foolishness. The honor belongs to suffering that comes from standing with Jesus.

Help students feel the dignity in this. To suffer for Christ is to be counted worthy to share in something Christ himself endured. The apostles rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name (Acts 5:41). This does not make pain pleasant, but it gives it meaning and even honor.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Suffering for Christ as a gift graciously granted, not a sign of abandonment
- Faithful suffering as a clear sign of belonging to the saved
- The distinction between suffering for Christ and suffering from our own folly
- Sharing in Christ’s sufferings as an honor (Acts 5:41; 1 Peter 4:13)
- Meaning and dignity given to pain endured for the name of Jesus

Discussion Prompts

- Why would Paul call suffering for Christ something granted to us?
- How does this reframe the way you read opposition to your faith?
- What is the difference between suffering for Christ and suffering from folly?

Question 6

Student Question:

When you face opposition, ridicule, or pressure because of your faith, what is your honest response? How does it change things to see faithful suffering as something granted to you rather than as evidence that something has gone wrong?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the previous truth into the student's lived experience of pressure. For most, opposition produces a quiet retreat, a softening of conviction, an embarrassment that leads to silence. Naming the honest response is the start.

Invite students to consider what story they tell themselves under pressure. Do they conclude that faithfulness is too costly, that they have somehow erred, that God has left them? Paul offers a different story, that the pressure itself is a token of belonging to Christ.

Help them see the difference this reframing makes. The same ridicule that feels like defeat can be received as a strange honor when seen rightly. This does not remove the sting, but it changes the meaning, and meaning changes how we bear things.

Close with a concrete encouragement. Ask students to name one situation where they have felt pressure for their faith and to rehearse Paul's reframing over it, that this has been granted to me. The practice of renaming our trials in light of Scripture slowly retrains the heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The common retreat into silence or compromise under pressure
- The stories we tell ourselves when faith becomes costly
- Reframing opposition as a token of belonging to Christ
- Meaning changing how we bear suffering, even when the sting remains

Discussion Prompts

- What is your honest response when faith costs you something socially?
- What story do you tell yourself under that pressure?
- How would Paul's reframing change the way you bear it?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul appeals to them on the basis of “encouragement in Christ,” “comfort from love,” “participation in the Spirit,” and “affection and sympathy” (2:1). What does this teach us about the true foundation of Christian unity, and why can it not rest merely on agreement or personality?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Before Paul commands unity, he names its source. He piles up four realities the Philippians already share, encouragement in Christ, the comfort of his love, common participation in the Spirit, and the affection and sympathy that flow from him. Unity is built on what is already true in Christ, not manufactured by effort.

This is crucial. If unity rested on shared temperament, agreement on every preference, or natural likability, it would be impossible, because no group of real people shares all of that. Christian unity rests on something deeper, that we are all in Christ, indwelt by the same Spirit, recipients of the same love.

Notice the order. Paul does not first demand that we feel unified and then hope it produces Christ. He points to Christ first and lets unity flow from him. The vertical reality, our shared life in Christ, grounds the horizontal reality, our life together.

Help your students apply this where unity is hardest, with the fellow member they find difficult. The basis for loving that person is not that they are easy to love but that Christ has loved them and dwells in them. Unity with the difficult is possible because its foundation is Christ, not chemistry.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Unity grounded in shared life in Christ and the Spirit, not in temperament
- The impossibility of unity built on agreement or likability alone
- The vertical reality in Christ grounding the horizontal life together
- Loving the difficult member on the basis of Christ, not chemistry

Discussion Prompts

- Why can Christian unity not rest on personality or agreement?
- What does it change to ground unity in what is already true in Christ?
- How does this help you love a fellow member you find difficult?

Question 8**Student Question:**

Paul names “selfish ambition” and “conceit” (2:3) as the great enemies of unity. Where do you see these working quietly in your own heart, and how do they show up in the way you relate to others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question names two sins that rarely feel like sins from the inside. Selfish ambition seeks its own advancement, and conceit, literally empty glory, craves the appearance of importance. Both are about the self, and both quietly poison community.

Help students detect these in their subtle forms. Selfish ambition shows up as keeping score, needing to win, resenting others’ success. Conceit shows up as fishing for praise, inflating our part, needing to be seen. Most of us would deny both while practicing them daily.

Connect the diagnosis to the wound it inflicts. A body cannot be united while its members are each maneuvering for position and applause. These sins do not merely harm the self, they pull the church apart, which is why Paul targets them on the way to commanding humility.

Move toward hope. The cure for empty glory is not self-hatred but being filled with a better glory, the love and approval of Christ that frees us from needing the approval of others. Students who rest in Christ’s regard have less need to grasp for everyone else’s.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Selfish ambition and conceit as quiet, self-justifying sins
- Their subtle forms: scorekeeping, needing to win, fishing for praise
- The damage these do to the unity of the body, not just the self
- The cure as being filled with Christ’s approval, not self-hatred

Discussion Prompts

- Where does selfish ambition show up in your relationships?
- Where does conceit, the craving to be seen, show up in yours?
- How does resting in Christ’s regard loosen the grip of both?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul commands, “in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (2:3–4). What does genuine Christian humility actually mean here, and how does this command set the stage for the mind of Christ that Paul describes next?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal and formational climax of the passage, so give it full room. Paul commands a humility that counts others more significant than ourselves. This is not pretending we are worthless, and it is not the false humility that fishes for reassurance. It is a deliberate reckoning, a decision to treat the interests, needs, and worth of others as genuinely outranking our own.

Notice the careful wording in verse 4. Paul says to look not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others. He does not pretend we have no legitimate interests, he asks us to expand the circle so that others' interests become real to us, real enough to act on. Humility here is not self-erasure, it is self-forgetfulness that has room left over for others.

This command is the doorway into the great passage that follows. Paul is about to hold up Jesus, who counted our salvation more significant than his own rightful glory, who looked not to his own interests but to ours, and who descended all the way to a cross to serve us. The humility Paul commands in verse 3 is the humility Christ embodies in verses 5 through 11. We are being asked to have the mind that he had.

Guard against a cultural distortion. The world treats humility as weakness and self-promotion as strength. Scripture reverses this. The truly great in the kingdom are the servants, and the way up is down (Matthew 23:11-12). This is not a strategy for getting ahead, it is the actual shape of Christlike character.

Press the application warmly. To count others more significant is intensely practical, it changes how we listen, how we yield, how we serve, whose comfort we protect, who gets the last word and the better seat. Invite students to imagine one relationship transformed by actually treating the other as more significant than themselves.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Humility as a deliberate reckoning that counts others more significant, not self-hatred
- Looking also to others' interests, expanding the circle rather than erasing the self
- Humility as the doorway into the mind of Christ in 2:5-11
- Christ counting our salvation above his own rightful glory as the pattern
- Scripture's reversal of the world's view: greatness is servanthood (Matthew 23:11-12)
- The practical reach of humility in listening, yielding, serving, and deferring

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to count someone more significant without pretending you are worthless?
- How does verse 4 keep humility from becoming mere self-erasure?
- How does this command prepare us for the mind of Christ in the next passage?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage. Paul calls the church to a life worthy of the gospel, united, unafraid, and humble. Name one specific way Jesus is using these verses to form you, whether toward bolder faithfulness, toward unity, or toward counting someone else as more significant than yourself.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone asks students to gather the whole passage into one personal response. The passage offers several doors, worthy conduct, courageous faithfulness, unity, and humility. Help each student walk through the one Christ is opening for them.

Press for the specific over the general. Not I want to be more humble, but I will let my spouse have the decision they care about this week. Not I want to be braver, but I will stop hiding my faith from this particular coworker. Formation lives in particulars.

Connect the response back to Christ. Every command in this passage flows from him and toward him. We live worthy of his gospel, we are united in him, we are unafraid because we belong to him, and we are humble because we are learning his mind. The aim is not behavior modification but Christlikeness.

Close the lesson in prayer, asking God to grow the class in courage, unity, and humility, and to prepare their hearts for the portrait of Christ they will study next. Invite a concrete step rather than a vague intention.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Gathering the passage into one specific personal response
- Choosing the particular over the general
- Every command flowing from and toward Christ
- Christlikeness, not mere behavior modification, as the aim

Discussion Prompts

- Which door is Christ opening for you in this passage?
- What is the one specific, concrete step you will take?
- How does this prepare you to behold the mind of Christ next?