



Paul's letter to the

PHILIPPIANS

LESSON 7

PHILIPPIANS 3:17-4:1

The House of Love

Do not be afraid, have no fear,” is the voice we most need to hear. This voice was heard by Zechariah when Gabriel, the angel of the Lord, appeared to him in the temple and told him that his wife, Elizabeth, would bear a son.

This voice was heard by Mary when the same angel entered her house in Nazareth and announced that she would conceive, bear a child, and name him Jesus.

This voice was also heard by the women who came to the tomb and saw that the stone was rolled away.

“Do not be afraid, do not be afraid, do not be afraid.”

The voice uttering these words sounds all through history as the voice of God’s messengers, be they angels or saints. It is the voice that announces a whole new way of being, a being in the house of love, the house of the Lord. The house of love is not simply a place in the afterlife, beyond this world. Jesus offers us this house right in the midst of our anxious world.

If we could just be, for a few minutes each day, fully where we are, we would indeed discover that we are not alone and that the One who is with us wants only one thing: to give us love.

– Henri Nouwen, *Lifesigns*

Philippians 3:17–4:1 (NIV)

¹⁷Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. ¹⁸For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. **4** Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends.

Philippians 3:17–4:1



Follow My Example

In Philippians 3:17 we see Paul offering himself as a model for how to stand firm as a Christ follower. When Paul arrived in a new town and was announcing the gospel, he knew that they had never before seen anyone living the way that he believed Jesus called him to live. So he knew that it was up to him to model this way of life. And as many of us can attest, we learn much more by watching than simply by hearing. The hearing reinforces the watching, and if there's a mismatch between what we hear and what we see, we tend to go with what we see. So Paul says, “Join together in imitating me.”

1. “Join together in following my example” (3:17)

Paul appeals to his readers to imitate him and those who follow his example, like Timothy and Epaphroditus (see 2:19-30). The word “example” translates the Greek word *typos* in 3:17 (*typos* refers to an impression that leaves an imprint, like what is left by a stamp or a seal). In moral discourse, the word came to refer to an example or pattern. Paul presents his own life as the *typos* that has made an imprint upon the lives of his associates and that is worthy of imitation. But Paul himself is not the archetype. Paul models his life on Christ, reflected in the words “for to me, living is Christ and dying is gain” (1:22).

For Paul, all of life is captured in Christ so that everything Paul does is generated by Christ and done for his sake. For this reason, Paul provides Jesus Christ as the quintessential example for his audience to follow. He calls them to think and act in humility and self-sacrificial service towards each other (2:1-4). They are to look at Jesus, who acted in humility and self-sacrificial service towards humanity in his incarnation and in his crucifixion (2:5-11). Jesus Christ is the archetype, the *typos* that made an imprint on the life of Paul. This is a certain kind of living that requires a certain mindset: not asserting your own rights, considering the needs of others as more important than your own. It took Jesus to the cross. It landed Paul in prison. Paul's call to imitate him is, in fact, a call to imitate Jesus. (E. Shively, “Philippians 3:17-4:1”)

2. “Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ” (3:18-19)

Here, and throughout most of the letter, Paul is wanting the Philippians to think differently, to think with the mind of Christ in the shape of the cross and resurrection. Paul is teaching the Philippians to look with new eyes at certain styles of behavior that up until now they might have taken for granted and considered as normal ways of being.

It is crucial to note that verses 18 and 19 feature *a pattern of life*. Paul is not referring to individual sins as such but to an entire way of being. In other words, their mindset, actions and orientation oppose everything Paul considers Christian. Paul is saying these lifestyles are dehumanizing and destroying people who God made in his image and loves and wants to rescue. Instead of being guided by self-sacrificial service to others, they are guided by their own desires, choosing a way of life that is immediately satisfying and filling in the here and now (“their god is their belly”). What is in view is their self-serving practices. This is in stark contrast to the way that Paul and his companions have lived with a quiet acceptance of suffering – imprisonment (1:17), death (1:21), sacrifice (2:17), and the loss of all things (3:8). These people have not denied Christ by their confession or words, but have denied Christ by their behavior. They are enemies of the cross of Christ because they refuse to conform to the pattern of humility and self-sacrifice that led Jesus there.

To those who look at the world and all of its lifestyles and behaviors and think it's normal, Paul says, “No, this is destructive!” He sees that these lifestyles are all about self-indulgence and worshipping whatever is self-gratifying. As Paul says, that style of behavior is at radical odds with the cross of Christ. It seems then that there is an expectation that those who are disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ will, in some way, be “friends of the cross.” To be an enemy of the cross is to live on a path that would not be familiar to the Lord Jesus. Their whole manner of living is a denial of God revealed in Christ, whose self-emptying led to death on the cross.

Instead of having a mind set on Christ, they have “minds set on earthly things” – which Paul will contrast with the heavenly citizenship of faithful imitators of Christ. For Paul, heaven and earth go together. They come together in Jesus and through the Spirit. They come together in God's people as well, citizens of heaven, which Paul speaks of in 3:20.

Philippians 3:17–4:1



3. “Our citizenship is in heaven” (3:20)

When Paul says “we are citizens of heaven,” we naturally suppose he means “and so we’re waiting until we can go and live in heaven where we belong.” But that’s not what he says, and it’s certainly not what he means. As N.T. Wright explains:

Philippi was a Roman colony, and it’s likely that many of the local people in that area of northern Greece saw Rome and the colonial administration as taking their land by force and squashing their ancient culture. In 42 BC, about a hundred years before Paul came to the area, Philippi was the setting for one of the great battles in the Roman civil war that had broken out after the death of Julius Caesar. The two victorious generals, Antony and Octavian (the future Emperor Augustus), had found themselves with a lot of soldiers in northern Greece with nothing more to do. They certainly didn’t want to bring them all back to Rome, or even to Italy. It would be dangerous to have thousands of soldiers suddenly arriving in the capital. So they gave them land in and around Philippi, making it a colony of Rome.

*If someone in Philippi said, ‘We are citizens of Rome,’ they wouldn’t mean, ‘so we’re looking forward to going to live there.’ Being a colony works the other way around. The last thing the emperors wanted was a whole lot of colonists coming back to Rome. The task of the Roman citizen in a place like Philippi was to bring Roman culture and rule to northern Greece, to expand Roman influence there. (N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*, 125-26)*

That’s how Paul’s image works here. When he says we are ‘citizens of heaven,’ this has nothing to do with having the right of return. The point is to bring the life and culture and civilization of heaven to birth in the very contested space called earth so that the people who are only thinking about earthly things may be surprised to discover that there is a new way to live on earth. Paul is telling the Philippians to expand the kingdom of God by embodying kingdom values right there in Philippi.

Paul’s audience were Roman citizens with rights and benefits of which they were proud. Paul himself invokes these benefits when he first visits Philippi (Acts 16). But here Paul redefines the citizenship of the Christian. The Philippians – and we as Christians – are citizens of Christ’s city, governed by the gospel. Paul uses the present tense, “our citizenship is in heaven,” which calls them to enact their true citizenship now in a foreign land. The Philippians are to be about kingdom work *right where they are*. Their lives, transformed by being caught up into the body of Christ, now have different values, different sources of power, different goals than those who are not living that life (cf. 3:18-19).

There is an old adage: “Don’t be so heavenly minded that you’re of no earthly good.” Paul’s point, however, is that we must be heavenly minded if we are to be any earthly good. To enact our heavenly citizenship is to follow the example of Christ as modeled in Paul, acting in humility and self-sacrificial service to others. The church is at present a colony of heaven, but we live in a foreign land where self-indulgence and self-satisfaction are prized. As citizens of heaven, we have the responsibility (as we say in the Lord’s Prayer) for bringing the life and rule of heaven to bear on earth, which is what happens when the Spirit goes to work in and through the people who follow Christ. (Shively, “Philippians 3:17-4:1”)

4. “We eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ...” (3:20-21)

Paul’s point about us being citizens of heaven echoes the words of Philippians 2:6-11. We are eagerly awaiting Jesus to come from there to transform our bodies, “so that they will be like his glorious body.” We find ourselves back in that story of Philippians 2:6-11 with the Jesus who humbled himself even to death on the cross, and who therefore has been highly exalted as truly human and as the sign that the living God has come to dwell in person as Jesus.

Paul uses that passage as a model to say that Jesus is going to come from heaven to transform the whole world, and within that, to transform us. So instead of treating one’s body the way that people do within the behavior pattern that he describes in 3:18-19, Paul says the body is already a citizen of heaven. Therefore, Jesus will transform it by the power which makes him able to bring everything into line under his authority.

Philippians 3:17–4:1



The goal then is to be Jesus people, people of the new creation who are living under God and in the world through the pattern of Jesus' co-suffering love:

- Love is not passive.
- Love is active, expressed through acts of forgiveness, mercy, kindness.
- Love is relational, healing deep wounds and restoring broken bonds.
- Love is creative, even in the midst of destruction.
- Love is hopeful, even in the midst of despair.

This is seen in the thousands of people who rarely make headlines but who are doing the work of Jesus by making the world around them a place where love, generosity, healing, and hope come to birth. And when that happens we see the beginning of the glory that shines out when God's people become genuine human beings and turn outward to face the world with the wisdom and love of God.

5. "Stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends" (4:1)

Paul's confidence is held by the way in which Jesus approached the cross. Jesus faithfully loved. Even as he died he continued to love and to trust in his Father. It was in love that his Father raised him from the dead. It is this power of love that is the greatest power. It is in this power that Paul appeals for his Christ-following family to stand firm.

Paul has done his best to model this way of life in his own life and teaching and relationships. Now he says to the Philippians, "Stand firm! Don't be tossed left or right. You are citizens of heaven. You are called not to live in the way the pagan world lives. You've had your eyes opened to what this is all about. Live as people whose bodies will be transformed at the Lord's return when he comes to renew all things."

Paul seems to regard these Christians with special delight, his "joy and crown." This may have something to do with the fact that in Acts 16 it seems that he's making a new beginning as he's called to go from Turkey into Greece and into a new culture. He finds that the Philippians and the Thessalonians are very special to him. God has done something new here and something new for him, so Paul regards them with particular delight.

The heart of this delight is that under the reign of Christ, rather than Caesar, there is heaven on earth. The language that Paul uses about Jesus in 3:20-21 is language which would have undoubtedly resonated in Philippi with language about Caesar. The words "Savior" and "Lord" were already Caesar words. The idea of somebody being king already carried Caesar overtones. And particularly the idea of somebody having "the power to bring everything under control under his own authority" was, in the Philippians' world, an idea associated with Caesar.

And now Paul says it belongs to Jesus. And it's by holding fast to Jesus that one can stand firm.

Reflections

1

What Will Following This Example Look Like?

Throughout this chapter Paul has been talking about the way in which he renounced his pride of status, whether that be civic status, ethnic status, or cultural status, in order to gain Jesus. They are to look at Jesus, who acted in humility and self-sacrificial service towards humanity in his incarnation and in his crucifixion (2:5-11). In addition, by appealing to the Philippians to “follow his example” and declaring that their “citizenship is in heaven,” Paul is navigating and negotiating a new civic space in which the Christians who acknowledge that Jesus is Lord will have to find a new way of being. There may even come a time when their civic status as Roman citizens living in Philippi and their allegiance to Jesus as Lord may come into conflict, and they need to think ahead of time of what to do when that comes to pass.

After all, in Philippi, as in every city in the Greco-Roman world, there would be all kinds of local cult celebrations and festivals celebrating *Caesar* as *lord*, of which the Christians wouldn't or shouldn't take part. As a result, they would stand out. People would notice. Their neighbors would know. They would be regarded as strange, ungrateful, or even traitorous. This will be difficult, so Paul wants them to be prepared to let go of any privilege they have, just as he has done. He is telling the Philippians that in contrast to the values of the Roman empire, they ought to embody the values of the *kingdom of heaven*, where their citizenship belongs. They are a colony of heaven which happens to be in the city of Philippi.

2

Stand Firm in the Lord in This Way

Throughout this letter Paul is trying to clarify what the "this way" in Philippians 4:1 really means for followers of Jesus. The Philippians are asked to continue their behavior and not abandon what it means to "stand firm" in Christ—that is, living according to God in Christ ("heavenly citizenship" 3:20), as Paul and others are trying to do (3:17). "Keep on imitating...keep on observing" so that you may continue to live not as an enemy of the cross of Christ, but as one "standing firm" in the Christ who himself went to that cross.

It is a powerful passage, offering a calling that is counter-cultural for the original recipients and perhaps even more so for us. The promise of life for those who have their citizenship in heaven is continued transformation into the body of Christ's glory (3:21). That transformative action is written of in the future tense, beginning with incorporation into that body through baptism. It is really important to recognize that neither "heavenly citizenship" nor full future transformation refer only to some reality beyond that of earthly life. The Philippians, like Jesus and Paul and others, are to live here on earth as citizens whose constitution (the gospel, cf. 1:27) comes from God, not from any other gods or emperors. Their lives, transformed by being caught up into the body of Christ, now have different values, different sources of power, different goals than those who are not living that life. (Dr. Sarah Henrich, "Philippians 3:17-4:1")

3

Trust & Transformation in Community

This letter, so marked by joy (Philippians 1:4, 25; 2:2, 29; 4:1) and affection, helps the Philippians understand that true joy and hope flow from trust in God's promises, the presence of the transforming Holy Spirit, and a life lived in accordance with the "mind of Christ." Such joy is corporate rather than individual and is known in lives lived for the well-being of the neighbor rather than a life lived for the sake of one's own achievement. Paul sees himself and others who share God's love in Christ as living in this same way, that of giving up privilege and power in order to persuade others by and for God's love. The kind of living to which Paul calls us is not a solitary job, but is necessarily done in community.

Discussion

1. Paul invites the Philippians to imitate his example (3:17). Name some people who have been an example for you in the way that Paul was for the Philippians. How have you been helped by their example?
2. Paul admits that he weeps at the behavior of people who are enemies of the cross (3:18). When have you been deeply affected by the actions of people who don't follow Christ?
3. How has Paul's personal encounter with Jesus reshaped his understanding of what others might see as "ordinary behavior" in the world around them (3:18-19)? How has "thinking with the mind of Christ Jesus" (2:5) reshaped your perception of self-gratifying and self-indulging behavior, which is normative in our culture? In what ways has it reshaped your own actions and desires? Give some examples.
4. In 3:20 Paul redefines the citizenship of the Christian. He uses the present tense, "our citizenship is in heaven," which calls them to enact their true citizenship now in a foreign land. Paul is telling the Philippians to expand the kingdom of God by embodying kingdom values right there in Philippi.

As citizens of heaven living in the United States, what does it mean to embody the kingdom values in our world today? If our church fellowship is to live as a colony of heaven on earth, with the responsibility for bringing the life, love, healing, and hope of heaven to bear in our world, what does this look like? What is one way you can contribute to that this week?