

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, Philippians: Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ,

Session 5: Live as Citizens of God's Kingdom

Philippians 1:27-30

BiblicalLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. Matthew S. Harmon in his teaching on the book of Philippians. Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is session 5, Live as Citizens of God's Kingdom, Philippians 1:27-30.

Welcome to session five of our study in Philippians. This session, we are entitling Live as Citizens of God's Kingdom, and the focus will be on Philippians 1:27-30. And we will read that text in just a moment.

But as we have been doing, we're going to do a brief recap of our previous session, the progress of the gospel, which we looked at Philippians one, verses 18 through 26, where Paul talked about his future plans and his future desires, and how the gospel was shaping his preferences when it came to whether he would continue on in this life in a fruitful ministry or to die and be with Christ. And his ultimate goal was to see Christ glorified in the gospel advance through his life circumstances. And that was the end of the introduction of the letter to the Philippians.

And so now, as we turn our attention to Philippians 127 and following, we are entering the main letter body. And so I want to, before we dive into the specific passage for this session, I wanted to pull out a few observations about the letter body as a whole. So in Philippians, the letter body begins in chapter 1:27.

And I would argue it goes all the way through chapter four, verse three. And so in this chart that you see here, I've highlighted several parallel ideas that show up at the beginning here in chapter one, verse 27, through two, verse four, and then chapter three, verse 17, through chapter four, verse three, that help unite this section as a coherent literary unit. And so we see in both of these a mention of citizenship.

And we'll talk about more of that in our session now, when it comes to Philippians 127 through 30. But we see that mentioned in chapter one, verse 27. And we see it again in chapter three, verse 20.

We see Paul talking about standing firm both in 127. And in chapter four, verse one. In chapter one, verse 28, he talks about not being threatened by opponents.

And then in chapter three, verse 18, he talks about enemies of the cross of Christ. In 127, he talks about striving side by side for the faith of the gospel. And then he uses similar language in chapter four, verse three, to talk about two women in the congregation who have labored side by side with Paul in the gospel.

He talks about the destruction of the opponents to the gospel in 128. And then he comes back to the idea in chapter three, verse 19, talking about the destruction of the enemies of the cross of Christ. Then in chapter one, verse 28, Paul talks about their salvation.

And then in chapter three, verse 21, he talks about how we await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. In chapter two, verse one, he talks about encouragement in Christ. And then in chapter four, verse two, he says, I entreat you, and I entreat Syntyche.

Hard to see this in our English translation, but those are the same Greek word family of encouragement and entreat or encourage. And then lastly, in chapter two, verse two, Paul talks about completing his joy. And then in Philippians 4:1-2, he refers to the Philippians as his joy and crown.

So those parallels help us to see that this should be understood as a coherent literary unit. Sometimes that's referred to as *inclusio* or brackets or an envelope, regardless of what you call it. This is a way of helping you to see what the author intends to put together as a coherent section of the letter.

So the letter body starts in chapter one, verse 27, and it goes through chapter four, verse three. Now, in addition to these parallels, these statements that match, I would suggest that there's probably- I'm going to say this somewhat tentatively; I'm not going to get dogmatic about this- but I think you can see a chiasmic structure in this letter body. Now, chiasm is sort of a structure where you have matching parallels.

And you see on the screen there, you've got an A, a B, and then a C at the center, and then a B prime and an A prime. And these are going to be parallel thoughts that show up. And so whether you think this is legitimately there or not, I do think it's a helpful way of thinking about the structure of this letter body.

So first, in chapter one, verses 27 through 30, we're going to see Paul give a call to live as kingdom citizens worthy of the gospel. And then he moves on to talk about a joy that is rooted in a shared life that is produced by the gospel. And then at the center is what I will refer to as Christ as the exemplar, the ultimate embodiment of this reality.

And so he is the ultimate picture of this. And I would suggest to you that this is the centerpiece of the letter body. And then from this, he went on to talk about giving a call to work out their own salvation, which I would say is linked to this idea of joy rooted in a shared life produced by the gospel.

And then the last section, which is the longest, is giving examples of a life that is governed by the mindset of Christ or which is parallel to the idea of living as a citizen of God's kingdom. So in that section, he's going to talk about Timothy, he's going to talk about Epaphroditus, and he's going to talk about his own life as examples of what it looks like to live out the mindset of Christ. The big thing that I want you to take away from this, even if you think some of the parallels are not as persuasive to you, is that the so-called Christ hymn in chapter two, verses five through 11, is, I would argue, the center, both literarily and also theologically, of the entirety of the letter to the Philippians.

Another analogy that I like to use is when you throw a rock or a stone into a pot, the entry point, you get the biggest sort of splash effect where the rock enters the pot. But there are ripple effects that go throughout the surrounding area where the rock was thrown in. And I would suggest to you that the Christ hymn is like the rock that is dropped in the center of the letter that has ripple effects that are felt throughout the rest of at least the letter body and probably throughout the rest of the letter.

So that's a little bit of orientation to the totality of the letter body. And now I want us to move to looking at that first section, living as citizens of God's kingdom, Philippians chapter one, verses 27 through 30. So I invite you to follow along as I read the text.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or I'm absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a sign, a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ, you should not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

So let's take a look. We'll start by looking at the command that gets things started here. And you'll see that I've summarized this command as living as a citizen of God's kingdom.

And you might immediately be wondering, where did this citizenship come from, or what is this citizenship? Where did this kingdom language come from? Because at least from the ESV, they translate that opening line, only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ. So I need to explain where we're getting this citizenship language. The first thing is that this is the first imperative or command in the entire letter.

Everything up to this point has been statements of what's happening. And now Paul, for the first time, tells the Philippians specifically something they must do. Then it's set off by this word *man on or only*.

And it says, if what Paul is saying is that if you just get this right, everything else is going to fall into place. If you get this idea of living as a citizen of God's kingdom, correct. Everything else I'm going to talk about is downstream from that; it is an expression of that.

So where is this citizenship language? Well, it comes from the specific Greek verb that Paul uses here. He uses the verb, which has the specific sense of living as a citizen. So Paul often will use language that talks about walking or living in a certain way, and he uses different verbs for that.

He uses different verbs when he just has a general sense of living this way, walking this way. Here, though, he uses a very particular verb. And even if you've listened to it, right? Politically, you can hear our eventual English word coming from that word family of politics, right? It's rooted in the idea of a city or an organization or a kingdom.

And so Paul specifically is saying here, live as a citizen in a manner worthy of the gospel. Now, that raises the question of citizen: a citizen of what, a citizen of where? And you might

be tempted, or people might be tempted to think, oh, so he's talking about living as a citizen of Philippi. Live as a citizen of Philippi in a manner worthy of the gospel.

Here's the challenge with that. Citizenship had a very specific set of ideas connected with it in the Roman world. To be a Roman citizen came with certain benefits and privileges.

But only a small percentage of the actual population of Philippi would have been citizens. And most of the people in the church of Philippi likely would not have been citizens. And so it seems unlikely that Paul is saying to live as a citizen of Philippi.

Instead, I think he's talking about living as a citizen of God's kingdom. And further evidence from this, I think, shows up later in the letter. I'll talk about that in a moment.

So I think what Paul is saying here is live as a citizen, and implied then, of God's kingdom in a manner worthy of the gospel. And so this language would have been particularly striking to the Philippians because it was a city that valued Roman citizenship with the specific benefits and privileges that came with that. And if you recall, back in session one, when we introduced Philippians and sort of the origins story of the church in Philippi, you might recall that when Paul and Silas were in prison, the next day when the Roman officials came and were ready to release them, Paul and Silas said, wait a minute, you mistreated us and we are Roman citizens.

And that caused this great sense of fear and panic in these magistrates because Roman citizens were not permitted to be beaten like Paul and Silas were before they were charged. And so now all of a sudden, the Roman magistrates realized, we've made a big mistake here, and we could be legally liable for being charged with mistreatment of these Roman citizens. But that raises a question.

You see, Paul didn't reveal his Roman citizenship until after the fact. Now you might think, well, that seems so strange, because, I mean, if we were in their shoes, we would be very tempted to go, whoa, whoa, whoa. Hey, before this escalates, I'm a Roman citizen.

You can't do this to me. So that raises the question of then, why doesn't Paul do that? Why doesn't he play his Roman citizenship trump card before the beatings and the mistreatment of us? And although the text doesn't say this, I think a reasonable conclusion is that he wants to set an example of willingness to suffer for Christ and for the gospel. And he wants to be able to put that example forward to people who don't have the same trump card as Paul does.

It'd be easy for someone to say, oh, sure, Paul, easy for you to say. You can get out of a beating if you want by showing your Roman citizenship and proving that you're not able to be beaten for that. I can't do that because I'm not a Roman citizen.

So it's easy for you to claim that. But how does that help me? So I think Paul is setting an example of willingness to suffer for Christ and the gospel, even though legally he could have avoided. In any case, when we get back here to Philippians, I think when you understand how much Roman citizenship was prized and valued and all the benefits, I think Paul is, in one sense, using that as an analogy to say, as great as Roman citizenship can be and its benefits, you have a far greater citizenship in the kingdom of God.

And so he's reminding them that. And ultimately, I think the sort of definitive evidence in my mind that he has this in view is that when we get to chapter 3, verse 20, and he says, "Our citizenship is in heaven, he uses the related Greek noun, *politeuma*. So I think that's a very intentional use of that, that clearly has the sense of citizenship in heaven.

And we can use that to then interpret what Paul means back in chapter 1, verse 27. And so Paul is calling them to live as citizens of God's kingdom. And I think that is something that is just as relevant for us today as it was for the Philippians in the first century.

That our primary allegiance is to Christ and his kingdom. That is our true home, our true citizenship. And as a result, that should shape the way that we think of any other earthly loyalty to a particular nation state that we might be a part of.

So the command, live as citizens of God's kingdom. But it doesn't just stop there. He says, in a manner worthy of the gospel.

And so we have to ask ourselves, what does it mean to live in a manner worthy of the gospel? An analogy we could use here is we could think of the gospel almost like the constitution of God's kingdom. It's the governing document that shapes the way that we should live as God's people. And you think of other passages; those are helpful to give us a sense of this, of walking in a manner worthy of the gospel.

We see this in passages like Ephesians 4.1 and Colossians 1.10 and 1 Thessalonians 2.12. But when we think of what we mean by the term gospel, I think we need to be clear. On the one hand, we mean a message that announces what God has done for us in Christ. It is good news.

It is an announcement of what God has done for us. And yet at the same time, it is what we could call a measuring stick, a benchmark against which we evaluate our own lives. That the way that we live should be consistent with the truth of the gospel.

And so we see similar language like this in other places, but we're going to see it especially emerge in chapter 2:5-11 in the so-called Christ hymn that those who call Christ their king should live in a way that reflects him. It makes sense that if we claim to be followers of Christ, then we should live in a way that reflects who Christ is. So believers live as citizens of God's kingdom while physically living in this fallen world that is ruled by fallen human leaders.

That's part of the tension we experience: yes, we are citizens of God's kingdom, and yet physically we live in a world that is ruled by fallen human leaders. And so that creates this tension that we should be experiencing as believers, where the values and the priorities of the state and the nation sometimes, at least, will be in conflict with our identity as citizens of God's kingdom. And ultimately, our obedience to Christ should not depend on the presence of others.

You see, Paul kind of mentioned that in passing, right? There in chapter 1 verse 27, he said, So that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit. Now, all of us recognize the very natural tendency to be more obedient to

authority when authority is present versus when authority is absent. And perhaps the clearest example of this is when you're driving on the highway.

And you're driving on the highway. And the speed limit says 60 miles per hour. And you're thinking, I see no reason why I shouldn't be able to go 70 or maybe 75.

It seems wide open here. There's no danger. What's wrong with this? And then suddenly we come around that corner, and we see the police officer.

And he's sitting in the median. And what do we always do? We immediately tap on those brakes. Because we know, uh oh, oh no, I was exceeding the speed limit there.

And if that police officer so chooses and he timed it right, he could pull me over and give me a ticket because I wasn't obeying the law. Because I thought, well, there's no authority here immediately around me to enforce that. And so I should be able to get away with going a little over the speed limit if I want.

Now that's a seemingly perhaps silly analogy or explanation. But the reality is we see it with children too, don't we? We see it with kids, right? Sometimes if kids are playing in the playroom there, and they don't know that mom or dad or grandma or grandpa are actually able to see them. And they think that they're on their own.

They might do things or say things that they know mom or dad or grandma or grandpa would not approve of. But they think they can get away with it because they think they're out of sight and out of mind. It's just a human tendency.

And Paul's saying, I want to hear that you're standing firm, even if I'm not there with you. So what does it mean then to stand firm? Paul says he wants to hear that they are standing firm in the spirit. So what does that basic idea mean, standing firm? Well, in the most basic sense, I think it means to hold one's ground in the face of opposition.

And so if you are a sports fan and you watch American football, if you think of the offensive line, and the idea is there to stand firm, they're to keep their position linked together to provide protection for the quarterback who stands behind them. And so it's the idea of holding one's ground in the face of opposition. Now, Paul likes this language of standing firm.

He uses it several times elsewhere. But I think it's noteworthy that he uses the expression stand firm in to indicate the sphere in which one stands. But then that raises a question, because if you're looking back at the text again, chapter one, verse 27, at the end, he says that you are standing firm in one spirit.

And if you're looking at your English translation, most English translations have a small lowercase s spirit, indicating that they think it's the human spirit in view, or a shared attitude or kind of commonality there. And I would suggest to you that actually what Paul has in mind here is this is a reference to the Holy Spirit, not just a human spirit or not just some sense of shared value. But I would suggest that what Paul is actually saying here is that we are to stand firm in the Holy Spirit.

And that he is stressing that the Spirit is the one who enables that standing firm. And it's the one who unifies believers to do it together. Even if you disagree, I think the point is pretty clear: the idea of unified standing firm in the face of opposition.

So he moves on from that and says that from standing firm in one spirit, he moves on to with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel. So this idea of striving together for the faith of the gospel. What does Paul mean by that expression? Well, again, I think the picture is a concerted or concentrated effort together.

That it's working together for the faith of the gospel. What's striking here is that this is the only place other than later in Philippians to have this language of striving together. And so Paul uses it here in Philippians 1. And he uses it again in Philippians 4:3. And so I think that the point that is emerging from this is this idea of close-knit community.

And how crucial that is for the Christian life. One of the features of modern Western thinking and culture of life is the rugged individual. I can do this on my own.

And there are some versions almost of Christianity that kind of presented as, well, it's just me, and my Bible and Jesus, and that's all I need. And I think, well, that leaves out a pretty big piece. It's called the church.

That when God saves us, he doesn't just save us as individuals. He saves us as individuals and places us into a body to be united. Not just with Christ, but with other believers.

And so you can't really live out this idea of striving together for the faith of the gospel if you're not together with other believers. And now the nature of that community can take different shapes and forms depending on your circumstances. But we need each other to help us progress and grow in the Christian life.

I'll never forget when I was a seminary student, I was at a church, and our pastor was preaching through a series on Hebrews. And he entitled that entire series, which I thought was clever; he called it, Help Me Get to Heaven. And his point was that in Hebrews, the thrust is the need to continue to persevere in trusting in Jesus.

And that that's not just a solo project. It's a corporate project. We need each other.

I need other believers in my life reminding me of who God is, what Christ has done for me, the truths of the gospel. I need that in my life. And every believer needs that in their lives.

Now, he goes on to talk about the proclamation of the gospel, producing faith in our hearts. I think that's what Paul means when he talks about striving together for the faith of the gospel. That expression by itself, faith of the gospel, could be interpreted in different ways.

But I think it makes sense to understand it in light of what Paul says in Romans 10, when he talks about faith comes from hearing and hearing from the word of Christ. That when God's word is spoken and read and reflected on and studied, God uses that to produce faith. And so as a result, the gospel is proclaimed in our lives.

We need to be reminding ourselves of the truths of the gospel, and it produces faith in our lives. So that sets the stage then for him to move on in verse 28 to a bit of a fork in the road. He talks about really two kinds of avenues, so to speak here.

One is fear and opposition, and the other is indifference. So he talks there in verse 28 about not being frightened by anything from your opponents. So we don't know who these opponents are.

Paul doesn't really specify. My sense is, I think it's probably pagans, people who worshipped false gods, exerting pressure, maybe social pressure, maybe economic pressure, maybe even political pressure. Though it's hard to see specifically what Paul has in mind here.

Of course, remember back in Acts 16, when Paul and Silas were brought before the Roman authorities, the accusers said, these Jews are advocating for ideas that are contrary to what we as Romans can believe and practice. And so perhaps that tension continued to grow in the city of Philippi. Regardless, it's noteworthy that the term that Paul uses for frightened is a term that would also occur in contexts that would talk about horses being spooked in battle.

So if you had that imagery in your mind of horses fighting in battle, and then suddenly a loud noise or something happens to startle them, they act very unpredictably and can be very dangerous. And so Paul's saying, don't be like that when you face opposition to the gospel. And interestingly enough, he says that when you're not frightened, this is actually demonstrating the reality of what the gospel says is true: that those who oppose God face eternal destruction.

And so as we stand firm in the face of opposition, it is in fact a confirmation of the reality of who Christ is and the truth of the gospel. So that brings us then to this final section here in verses 29 and 30. And he's going to talk about God's gracious gifts.

So if you look again at chapter 1 verse 29, Paul writes, For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ, you should not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake, engage in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have. What I want you to see here is that the term that the ESV renders as granted has the sense of graciously granted. It's a gift of grace.

It's not something that's earned or deserved. It's a gift that's been given. And then Paul lays out two gifts that we have been given for the sake of Christ.

So the first one is to believe. We've been given the gift of believing in Christ. Ephesians 2 also talks about faith as a gift from God.

Ephesians 2:8 through 10. So Paul mentions this as the first gift. And we think, cool, I love that gift.

I'm all for getting that gift. Lord, give me that gift. But then he mentions the second gift.

And we're maybe a little less excited about this one. He says that suffering is a gift. Suffering is a gift.

And if we're honest, that's a gift that we typically don't want. You know, it's like being there on Christmas morning, and you get one gift that you're really excited about, and you open it. You're like, yes, this is exactly what I've asked for.

And then you open the next gift, and you get something that's maybe a sweater. That you don't really want. It's not really the color you like.

It doesn't really seem to fit you the way you want. And you're like, oh, well, I guess this is nice, too. Thank you.

Right? That's kind of our natural reaction to suffering: it's a gift. But I think there are at least two aspects to this that we should consider. The first is that suffering forces us to focus on what truly matters.

It forces us to focus on what truly matters. We can so easily get distracted by things that ultimately are not that significant in the grand scheme of eternity. And then all of a sudden, suffering comes into our lives, and we start to narrow it down and say, OK, this is what really matters.

This is actually a phenomenon that's been studied in patients who've received terminal diagnoses. When they receive terminal diagnoses, suddenly they have a heightened sense of narrowing down what is in their life to focus on the most essential things. And it's actually been studied that those who receive these sort of terminal diagnoses and then actually go into remission, they eventually revert back to the way that they thought before their terminal diagnosis because the crisis is gone.

And suddenly life kind of returns back to normal. And they suddenly no longer have that razor-sharp focus of If I've only got so much time left and I've got to focus it on the things that really matter, that suffering has a tendency to focus our attention on what really matters. And secondly, I think it tends to reveal what we truly treasure.

That suffering tends to reveal what we truly treasure. And so in those ways, I would suggest that that's why Paul can say that suffering is, in fact, the gift. And again, I want to stress, I'm not saying that lightly.

I'm not saying that makes it easy. I'm not saying that it makes it suddenly, oh, it's no big deal that I'm going through this. No, it's still hard.

It's still difficult. You still feel the pain of whatever that circumstance is. Sure.

But it's a gift in that it tends to focus our attention on who and what truly matters. And so as we come back to the big picture here of what we see in Philippians 1:27-30, here's how I would summarize what Paul is telling us. And what God is saying to us through this text today is that we must live out our heavenly citizenship according to the pattern of the gospel.

Basically, that opening command is the central idea of this particular passage. Live as citizens of God's kingdom in a manner worthy of the gospel. And in this passage, I think we can summarize it as giving us two reasons that we need to do this.

First, opposition to the gospel demands standing firm in the spirit together. Opposition to the gospel demands standing firm in the spirit together. And so standing firm means working together for greater gospel-produced faith.

Standing firm means not being intimidated by gospel abundance. Second reason that we need to live out our citizenship in God's kingdom is that God has graciously given both faith and suffering to his people. So we're identified with Christ by faith, and we are identified as Christ's by suffering because of him.

So let's think about some application from this passage. Lots that we could talk about here. Here are four that I will draw your attention to.

First, think or understand. We need to understand that the gospel is the measuring stick for the constitution of the Christian life. It's not merely how we become a Christian; it's how we live as Christians by continuing to trust in, understand, and apply the message of the gospel to our lives.

Second, we need to believe that suffering is a gift from God. I'm talking about at the heart level of believing that, not just at the intellectual level of saying, well, the Bible says it, so I believe it. That's the starting point, but it needs to take root in our hearts so that when God brings suffering into our lives, we embrace it as a gift.

Third, we should have confidence in God's power to enable us to stand firm in the spirit. Confidence in God's power to enable us to stand firm in the spirit. Sometimes we face circumstances where we are tempted to despair; we are tempted to be frightened, and this is where we need the body of believers around us to remind us that God is able to enable us to stand firm together in the spirit.

Sometimes I think that we make our experience of suffering harder because we isolate ourselves rather than leaning into the community that God has put around us. And so we need to be confident that God is capable of doing that through other believers' eyes. And lastly, do pursue intentional community with other believers.

The specific shape of this will likely differ depending on your life circumstances and what your church context might be like, but our tendency can often be to isolate ourselves, to live the Christian life by ourselves rather than intentionally pursue community with others. And here I will just stress: community can be messy. Like, let's be honest, being involved in the lives of other people can be messy and can be draining and can be challenging.

And yet, that's part of what it means to be in the body of Christ together: to bear one another's burdens and thus fulfill the law of Christ, as Galatians chapter 6, verse 2 tells us. And so that's a look at the opening section of the main letter body here in Philippians. Our next session will deal with Philippians chapter 2, verses 1 through.

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