

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

Session 11: The Call to Imitate Paul and His Coworkers - Philippians 3:15-4:3

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Welcome to session 11 in our study of Philippians. This session is called The Call to Imitate Paul and His Coworkers, and we will be looking at Philippians 3:15 through chapter 4:3.

Before we read the text, we should remind ourselves of what came before this passage. In Philippians 3:1-14, Paul presents himself as an example of a Christlike mindset, and he does this by giving a negative example of false teachers and what he was like before his conversion, and then a positive example, focusing on his single-minded pursuit of Christ.

And before we read the text here in Philippians 3:15-4:3, I want to highlight a few things to be on the lookout for here, because there are a number of parallels in these verses that we're going to look at with Philippians 2:5-11. So Paul, in Philippians 2:5-11, calls them to have this mind among themselves, and then in verse 15 of chapter 3, Paul's going to talk about Let those who are mature think this way, and it's hard to see that in the English text, but that is the same Greek word there, to have this mind and think.

In the Christ hymn of 2:8, he talks about Christ being obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross, and then he, ironically, in chapter 3:18, talks about those who walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. The Christ hymn concludes with the statement that every knee will bow in heaven and on earth to the glory of God the Father, and he describes these false teachers or these pagan opponents as their God is their belly, their glory and their shame, and their minds are set on earthly things. In the Christ hymn, he talks about how at the name of Jesus, every knee would bow, and he talks about Jesus as Lord.

In Philippians 3:20, Paul states that our citizenship is in heaven, and from it, we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Christ hymn in Philippians 2 talks about Christ being in the form of God, the form of a servant, the likeness of men, and humbling himself, and this passage will talk about Christ transforming our lowly - that term can also be translated as humble - or the bodies of our humiliation, so to speak, to be like Christ's glorious body. And then the parallel to the name of Jesus: every knee should bow. In Philippians 3:21, Paul is going to talk about the power that enables him - that is Christ - even to subject all things to himself.

So those are just a few of the parallels between those two passages to help us see the connections within Philippians itself. And so now we come to Philippians chapter 3, verse 15, and we will read through chapter 4, verse 3, and this will show us the call to imitate Paul and his co-workers. Paul, under the inspiration of the Spirit, writes this: Let those of us who

are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.

Only let us hold true to what we have attained. Brothers, join in imitating me and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.

Their end is destruction, their God is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and my crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

I entreat Euodia, and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Okay, so let's start in the opening verses with the call to imitate. It's important to stress that Paul has in view maturity, not perfection. So in verse 15, the ESV translates it as, let those of us who are mature think this way. And that's the right translation.

That term can also be translated as perfect. But really the sense here in the context is a sense of maturity, of spiritual maturity. And God is saying through Paul that that is our goal, it's maturity.

Obviously, in one sense, our goal is perfection. And yet, we should recognize that this side of glory, perfection is not going to happen. Notice also, it's a corporate project, a community project.

This is not just something we pursue in isolation. In fact, the wording in verse 15, Paul includes himself, right? He says, those of us who are mature, think this way. And he's confident that if there are areas where certain believers don't have that same mindset, he says, God will reveal that to you.

Also, notice also, the intentionality involved. Verse 17, Paul says, keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. So this is something that requires observation, looking around and seeing who the people in my life are who are spiritually mature. And intentionally observing the way that they think, the way that they act, the way that they speak, and then going on to imitate them, not in some surface-level, simplistic way, but in imitating the way that they interact with others, the way that they approach their lives.

So that requires a measure of intentionality. And so I thought it would be helpful for us to think about, from this passage, what are the characteristics of a spiritually mature person? And one starting point is to look at what he said in the previous part of the passage of this single-minded pursuit of Christ, a single-minded focus on Christ. That's a mark of spiritual maturity: that a person who is spiritually mature is not someone who is constantly overwhelmed and distracted by all these things in their life.

And even as the busyness of life and the priorities and the commitments pile up, they remain steadfast in their pursuit of Christ. The second mark of a spiritually mature person is that a spiritually mature person knows they haven't arrived. One of the more initially discouraging elements of getting older and walking with Christ longer is you begin to realize more and more how much growth you still have to go.

That you start the Christian life and you think, oh man, after 10 years of walking with Christ, I'm going to be so far down the road, 20 years or 30 years or 40 years. And then you get there, and you realize, well, I am further down the road, but I still have a long, long way to go. In fact, one of the biggest dangers in one's spiritual life is thinking you've arrived.

Now, it's helpful to acknowledge growth and spiritual maturity, but the person who thinks they don't have areas of growth to continue to explore is in a very dangerous spiritual state. Lastly, a spiritually mature person is not paralyzed by the past, but is looking forward to who Christ is and what Christ has done for them. So I think these are three characteristics.

There are obviously more marks of a spiritually mature person than are in this passage. In fact, I think if Paul were sitting here with us and having a conversation, he would say, hey, don't forget what I said earlier in the letter. And I described in chapter 2, verses 1 through 4, this pursuit of Christ as not looking out just for your own interest, but the interest of others, of humbly pursuing a shared mindset and a shared life, and pointing back to the Christ in 2: 5 through 11.

He points to all of those things as elements of a mature person spiritually. He points us back to Timothy and to Epaphroditus and says, don't forget about them either. So these are just kind of summary based on the immediate context.

If you want a fuller picture of what spiritual maturity looks like, go back and read through again, starting at the beginning of the letter body in chapter 1 verse 27, and read back through again and start to observe. These are marks of spiritual maturity. And unfortunately, the passage takes a bit of a turn in verse 18, because after he's talked about being on the lookout for these others who share the kind of approach to the Christian life and spiritual maturity as he and Timothy and Epaphroditus do, to observe them and pay careful attention, he changes gears and talks about a different group of people in verse 18.

A group of people that he refers to as enemies of the cross of Christ. Now these just sort of appear almost unexpectedly, and we're limited in our understanding based just on these two verses where Paul's talking about them. And so, scholars have questioned, are these unbelievers or even perhaps believers who have wandered away in some way from the faith? But regardless, I think they are probably unbelievers.

Maybe people who at one point were associated with the church, but then walked away and engaged in beliefs and in attitudes and in practices that are not consistent. Verse 19 begins a kind of rapid-fire list. Paul says first, their end is destruction.

In other words, they are on the path towards destruction, which I would suggest points to them being unbelievers. And if you remember, Paul used that similar terminology back in

chapter 1, verse 28, when he says that believers should not be frightened in anything by our opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction.

So I think he's probably making that connection there. Paul goes on to describe these enemies of the cross as their God is their belly, which is an interesting expression. Again, scholars debate the precise sense of what Paul is saying.

I think what is in view here is that, when you understand the terminology that Paul uses here, and even the Greek mind, rooted desires are not just in the heart, but also in the gut, in the belly. And so it could be specifically a reference to food and gluttony, but I think it's broader than that. In other words, they're driven by their base desires, by their gut inclinations, and they're just going to and fro as they are driven by those desires.

I think that's probably what's in view. Some scholars have suggested, actually, this is a veiled reference to Jews and food laws, but that seems like a bit of a stretch here. Paul doesn't seem to be shy about coming out and saying directly when things like that are in view.

So I think that view is probably unlikely. Next, they glory in their shame. And this is something that I think is a characteristic of people who are given over to their desires.

The things that they should be ashamed of, they glory in. They celebrate. They delight.

And I'm sure we can all think of examples in our contemporary culture where the Bible says certain things are shameful, and there are people who actually celebrate those realities. That's the height of enlightenment. And so I think what Paul is saying here is similar, in one sense, to Romans 1, that there's such a reversal when people are given over to their desires and make those their gods, so to speak, that they glory in things that should be shameful from a biblical perspective.

And then he seems to kind of summarize this in this final phrase, in verse 19, when he says, they have minds set on earthly things. Now, of course, keep in mind, we've seen this language before, right? This mindset language- that's the verb *phreno* in Greek - and this idea of having a mindset, having an approach. And so their outlook, instead of having the mind of Christ, the mindset of Christ, talked about in Philippians 2, verse 5, these individuals have the mindset on earthly things, things that are part of this fallen world and consumed by them.

And so it's a direct contrast. These are all opposites of the kinds of things that should be true of us as believers. But notice, as harsh as this language sounds, Paul is very direct.

Don't miss the fact that he says in verse 18, for many of whom I have often told you, and now tell you, even with tears. This is not Paul in some sort of angry, you know, just kind of condemning. It's this with tears in his eyes, grieved over the wickedness and the sinfulness and the effect that this is having.

And he's saying to the Philippians, those are the opposite kinds of people that you should be focusing on. And so in contrast to these individuals whose God is their belly and set their minds on earthly things, the contrast now comes in verse 20, when Paul says, but our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. And so in

contrast to having this mindset on earthly things, he's saying, Philippian believers, you should have your mindset on heaven, of heavenly realities, on our identity as citizens of God's kingdom.

We saw this citizenship language earlier, back in chapter 1, verse 27. And we talked there about how citizenship determines our privileges and our responsibilities, that being a citizen of a kingdom or a political state does come with privileges, but also comes with responsibilities. And this is the noun form of the verb that showed up in chapter 1, verse 27, what Paul said, live as citizens worthy of the gospel.

Here it's, our citizenship is in heaven. So that confirms that we're reading chapter 1, verse 27, properly. And this is in contrast; this heavenly citizenship is in contrast to the enemies of the cross of Christ who set their minds on earthly things.

And so because our citizenship is in heaven, that's where we set our hope of our Lord and Savior coming for us. Now I want to address something here at passing before we jump forward a bit. And that's, you may have heard this expression, that person is so heavenly minded, they're of no earthly good.

Now I get what people are probably trying to say by that. What they're probably trying to say is that, you know, their mind is in the clouds so much, and they're so focused on, you know, sort of the realities of heaven that they don't do anything of good here on earth, that they're not actively loving or caring for or helping others. I just want to say, the person who is truly heavenly minded will be of great earthly good, because the way that we tangibly demonstrate our love for God is by our love for others.

And so I understand what that phrase is intended to communicate, but ultimately I think it is misguided. Now, Paul doesn't just say we await our Savior and just kind of leave us there. He tells us what the Lord Jesus Christ is going to do when he returns.

He says, verse 21, who will transform our lowly body? Wittingly, that could be understood as the body of our humiliation or of our humbleness, to be like his glorious body by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. So, the resurrection and Christ's subjecting power. So notice the contrast.

We have these bodies that are marked by lowliness, subject to the fall, decaying, subject to disease and aging, and the products of the fall and the curse. And Paul says, Christ is going to transform our bodies so that they are like his glorious body. And let me just tell you, the older you get and the more you age, the more that promise sounds glorious.

Because there is coming a day where our bodies will no longer be affected by disease, weakness, by any of the effects of the fall. Can you imagine what it'll be like to wake up in the morning and not have aches and pains? It'll be amazing. Can you imagine what it'll be like to have bodies that perfectly function the way that God intended them to function? That's remarkable, especially even for those who suffer specific kinds of disabilities that very much limit their life here in this fallen earth.

To imagine what it'll be like to have the full use of their bodies as God originally intended. That's what Paul is talking about here: that when Christ returns, he's going to transform our bodies so they are like his glorious resurrection body. But lest we think, oh, that's nice.

It's just about individual transformation. No, it's much bigger than that. So the reality is that Christ is going to subject all things to himself.

The creation will be put in its right order and place. Everything will be just as it was intended to be. In essence, it will be a state of peace and shalom.

The Old Testament likes to use that term to capture this reality that everything is rightly ordered and in its proper place and functioning the way God designed it. And that is a remarkable thing to reflect on: that the Lord Jesus Christ will subject all things to himself. We see this reality foretold in places like Psalm 8 and Psalm 110, Daniel 7, and really it's an outworking of what God had commissioned Adam to do.

When God created Adam and Eve, he said, be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, rule over and subdue it. They were to function as vice regents, as subsidiary kings, as a king under the ultimate kingship of God. And of course, Adam failed in that.

And what this text is saying is that Christ will exercise the rule that Adam was intended to exercise, but never did. And we will be with him in resurrected bodies. Now, if you want to see more on this, a text like Romans 8 unpacks this a little bit.

And then of course, Revelation 21 and 22 will also address that reality. Paul concludes this little mini section here by calling the Philippians to stand firm. And notice first what he says about them again; he's going to affirm that they are his brothers, that they are his joy and crown, that he loves them and longs for them.

And based on that, he says, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. Now we've seen that stand firm language before, right? We saw it back in chapter one, verse 27, where Paul had said that he wants to hear that they are standing firm in one spirit. And so this letter body begins with a call to stand firm, and it's going to conclude here with a call to stand firm.

And then there's this fascinating little section here in verses two and three. It almost just kind of comes out of nowhere. In fact, as you're reading along and you get to chapter four, verse one, and you're like, oh, okay, Paul is winding down.

And then you get to verse two, and it's like a splash of cold water to the face. And I want you to picture what this must have been like when Epaphroditus returned. And he likely was the one who read the letter out to the church.

And so news would have come in, hey, Epaphroditus is back. And they would have gathered the church together, and he's got a letter from Paul. And so Epaphroditus gets up, and he opens it up, and he reads the letter, and everyone's loving the letter.

It's like, oh, this is so good. We're loving this. And there's the call to stand firm, thus in the Lord.

And then he reads verse two of chapter four. I entreat or urge Euodia, and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Well, silence would have descended on that.

Like you can just imagine the congregation going, did he just - he called two people out by name. And he's saying, agree in the Lord. Think the same thing is the idea there.

Now, we don't know what the nature of their conflict was. Paul doesn't specify. And there's really no need because everybody in the church probably knew what that conflict was.

In fact, that's the reason, most likely, that Paul is calling them out because this conflict between Euodia and Syntyche was almost certainly beginning to have ripple effects. Maybe people were starting to line up and take sides. Well, I think Euodia's right on this one.

No, no, no, no, no. I'm on Syntyche here. And so you start to see factions forming or dissension.

And Paul is stepping in and saying, you have to resolve this conflict. And he's calling them out in front of the entire congregation. And then he's calling others, saying, get involved, help them solve it.

First, he refers in verse three to, he says, I ask you also, true companion. And there is no end of speculation as to who Paul is talking about. All sorts of suggestions. Some have suggested that it's actually a name, that the Greek word should be understood as a proper name, *syzygous*.

Then he's saying, I ask you also *syzygous*, help these women, that this isn't just a general kind of reference to a beloved friend. It's, no, there was a person with that name whose name meant true companion. That's possible.

Regardless, Paul was confident that person would know who they are when I'm calling them out. Help these women. And then notice he's called out Euodia and Syntyche.

But then he says, look, these women have labored side by side with me in the gospel. And I think that's part of what almost breaks Paul's heart is these are fellow laborers in the gospel. He's worked side by side with them to advance the gospel.

And now he sees this conflict between them. And he wants this true companion to intervene. He says that they have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers.

And then he throws in this last line, which we might just rush past if we're not careful. He says, whose names are written in the book of life. And so he ends this section by reminding them, you share a common identity as fellow laborers in the gospel.

And more importantly, as those whose names are written in the book of life. Now that should be understood against an Old Testament background. Probably the earliest occurrence of that concept shows up when Moses is interceding before Yahweh, saying, please don't wipe out your people.

Instead, blot my name out of your book. And so there's this idea that God has this book, and you see this old book of Revelation of God having a record of who is part of this people. And Paul is affirming these are dear believers.

Yes, we are shared. We have shared identity as part of the family of God. And so based on that, please resolve this conflict at a brief end.

So as we step back and take a look at the bigger picture, I think we can summarize the big idea of this passage like this. Choose carefully whom you imitate. Choose carefully whom you imitate.

And in terms of teaching through this passage, I think you could break it down like this. You have the initial command in verses 15 through 17. Join together in imitating the right people.

Join together in imitating the right people. And then Paul is going to give two reasons in verses 18, 318 through 41. There are enemies of the cross, and we are citizens of heaven.

Those are the reasons that we need to join together in imitating the right people. There are enemies of the cross out there, and we as citizens of heaven need to be focusing on the right people. And then he concludes with an application.

Pursue reconciliation. There's the call to reconcile and the call for others to intervene. I think sometimes we can be too hesitant to get involved to try to bring reconciliation when there's conflict.

Some people are so averse to conflict that they just want to avoid it at all costs. And honestly, some people are a little too attracted to conflict. But regardless, when there is conflict in the body of Christ, it is often necessary for others to intervene to try to bring reconciliation and restoration.

Let's wrap up by talking about application. First, what does God want us to think? He wants us to think that God has provided models of Christ-like lives. Now, of course, we're not talking about a sort of celebrity Christianity here in which we become fans in that sort of thin sense of, oh, I'm a fan of this preacher or that preacher.

That's not what he's talking about. He's talking about finding people whose lives are marked and characterized by Christ-likeness and observing them closely and then imitating them. Second, what does God want us to believe? He wants us to believe that our past does not determine our identity.

It shapes it, but it doesn't determine our identity. Third, God wants us to desire Christ's return, to long for it, to anticipate it, to maybe even find ourselves daydreaming about it. We all end up daydreaming about things.

Our minds wander, and we find ourselves daydreaming about certain things. Do you ever find yourself daydreaming about what it will be like when Christ returns and transforms our bodies, and we dwell with him in a new creation? Lastly, what does God want us to do? I would say one thing is to be proactive in helping others to reconcile. Conflict can be messy, but God has called us as believers to help one another reconcile when there's conflict.

So that brings us to the end of the letter, Bonnie. In our next session, we'll begin the conclusion to the letter and see how Paul calls us to begin to apply some of the things that he's talked about all throughout the letter.

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