

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, Philippians, Session 11, Podcast Audio Overview

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So I want you to imagine, just for a second, that you are, like, sitting in this crowded, slightly stuffy room in the ancient world. Oh, man, probably terribly ventilated, too. Oh, absolutely.

No AC. You're just packed in, shoulder-to-shoulder with your friends, your neighbors, the people you work with in the marketplace. Right.

And you are all listening to this beautiful, just deeply encouraging, letter being read aloud. The author is someone you deeply respect. A founding figure of your community.

Exactly. And he's currently sitting in a prison cell. So everyone is nodding along.

You know, the room is just captivated. Hanging on every word. Yeah.

And then, completely out of nowhere, the person reading the letters suddenly calls out two people sitting right across the room from you. By name. And tells them, in front of absolutely everyone, to stop bickering and just get along.

I mean, the sheer suffocating awkwardness of that moment is almost hard to comprehend. The silence in that room would have been absolutely deafening. It is the ancient equivalent of a CEO caging two mid-level managers in a company-wide email.

Yes, that's exactly it. And it actually happened. It was permanently recorded right there in the Bible.

So for today's deep dive, we are looking at Dr. Matthew S. Harmon's Session 11 lecture on Philippians 3:15 through 4:3, titled "The Call to Imitate Paul and His Coworkers." Right. And what's wild is how Paul structures this whole thing.

Well, what makes this specific section of the letter so compelling is that Paul takes these massive, sweeping, almost incomprehensible cosmic realities. Like the end of the universe, resurrected bodies, stuff like that. Exactly.

Eternal citizenship. And he just crashes them directly into the messy, uncomfortable reality of everyday human relationships. Which is exactly our mission today.

We're going to take a deep dive into this text to uncover what Paul says are the true marks of spiritual maturity. Because it's not what most people think. Definitely not.

And we're going to look at the very real danger of following your gut. Which is, you know, a phrase we hear a lot today. We do.

Constantly. And we'll explore how this cosmic, mind-bending promise of heaven is supposed to directly resolve the awkward, frustrating conflicts we face with each other right this very minute. It's extremely practical theology.

It really is. So, okay. Let's unpack this.

Before we even get to the public call-out, or who we are supposed to be imitating, we have to define the actual goal of the Christian life. Right. And spoiler alert, according to Dr. Harmon's reading of Paul, the goal is not flawless perfection.

And honestly, knowing that is a profound relief. Oh, 100%. I mean, in Philippians 3.15, Paul says, let those of us who are mature think this way.

And Dr. Harmon points out something crucial about the original language here. The Greek word, right? Right. The Greek word Paul uses is teleos.

Now, historically, that word can sometimes be translated as perfect. Which is where I think a lot of us get tripped up. Exactly.

But in this specific context, Harmon argues it absolutely means spiritual maturity, not moral flawlessness. Let's drill into that word teleos for a second. Because when we hear perfect, we immediately think of like a test score with zero mistakes.

100% on the exam. Yeah. But that's not really what the Greek implies, is it? Not at all.

The etymology of teleos is tied to the concept of a tele, an end, a goal, or a purpose. Okay. Think of a hammer, right? A hammer is teleos, or perfect, if it successfully drives a nail into a piece of wood.

It fulfills its designed purpose. So it's not about being entirely free of scratches or dents. No, not at all.

So when Paul calls believers to be mature, he is calling them to functionally fulfill their intended design, which is reflecting Christ. Wow. And Harmon knew that Paul makes this incredibly clear because true, flawless perfection just isn't going to happen on the side of glory.

Where fundamentally works in progress. Exactly. And what stands out in Harmon's framing is that this maturity isn't a solo mission.

Like Paul says, those of us. Right. He includes himself.

Yeah. He purposefully includes himself in the group of people who are still growing. It is a corporate project.

It's something you do in a community rather than, you know, isolated in a monastery. And that corporate aspect is vital because you just cannot practice the virtues Paul talks about in a vacuum. You need other people.

Right. In fact, Harmon pulls three specific marks of a mature person straight from this text. What's the first one? The first is having a single-minded pursuit of Christ, even amidst all the busyness of life.

Which is harder than ever right now. Oh, totally. The commitments pile up.

The distractions are everywhere. But the mature person remains steadfast in that pursuit. The second mark is the realization that they haven't actually arrived yet.

Which implies we need to completely shift how we view spiritual growth. Makes me think of learning a complex instrument or climbing a mountain. How so? Well, the longer you walk with Christ or the higher you climb up the mountain, the more you look up and realize just how far you still have to go.

Yes, that's a great way to put it. The most dangerous state to be in is thinking you've reached the final peak. You know, you sit down and just assume there's no more climbing to do.

What's fascinating here is how this connects back to the broader context of Philippians chapter two. OK, lay it on me. True maturity isn't just this intense internal focus on your own spiritual stats.

It's deeply relational. Meaning what exactly? It means humbly pursuing a shared mindset and looking out for the interests of others, just as Christ did. So spiritual maturity is inextricably linked to how we treat the people around us.

Right. It always comes back to the community. Always.

And that leads right into Harmon's third mark of maturity. Right. A mature person is not paralyzed by the past, but is constantly looking forward.

Yes. And that paralysis from the past can happen in two ways. We can be paralyzed by the guilt of our past failures.

Just assuming we are too broken to move forward. Or on the flip side, we can be paralyzed by the pride of our past successes. Resting on our laurels.

Exactly. Thinking we've done enough and just coasting. Both completely halt your spiritual growth.

So because we know maturity is the goal, how do we actually get there? According to Paul, we do it by intentionally observing and imitating the right people. Which is easier said than done. Seriously.

Yeah. In a world where we only see the highly curated, digitally filtered versions of people's lives. How do we observe someone deeply enough to genuinely imitate them? That is the defining struggle of the modern era, isn't it? It really is.

Paul tells the believers in verse 17 to keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. So it's active. Very active.

Harman emphasizes that this requires proximity and deep, intentional observation. You cannot imitate a public figure you only see on a screen. Because you only see what they want you to see.

Right. You have to look at the mature people in your actual physical life and study how they act when the flight gets delayed. Yes.

Or how they handle financial pressure. Or how they speak to their spouse behind closed doors. You need to see them in those unfiltered moments.

You need to see them, like dropping a bag of groceries in the parking lot, to see what kind of language spills out. Precisely. It is all about observing the unguarded moments, which logically means we also need to know who not to imitate.

OK, wait, this is where I need to push back a little. Sure, go ahead. Because in verse 18, Paul does this jarring pivot.

He goes from imitating these great examples to suddenly warning them about a group of people he calls the enemies of the cross of Christ. It is a sharp turn, yeah. And he says their God is their belly.

That sounds incredibly harsh. Honestly, it sounds exactly like the toxic dunk on your enemies Internet outrage that we see everywhere today. I can see why you'd say that.

So what does this all mean for us today? When we see people celebrating things we disagree with, the instinct is often to get angry or dunk on them online. But Paul doesn't do that here, does he? How does he get away with this language without just being another angry voice in the culture war? Well, it definitely sounds harsh to our modern ears, but Harmon provides some crucial context that completely changes the framing. OK, I'm listening.

First, let's look at the phrase their God is their belly. While some scholars have tried to link this to Jewish food laws or gluttony, Harmon clarifies that in the Greek mind, the belly or the gut was understood to be the seat of base animalistic desires. It's the core of your inclinations, right? It's about being driven by base urges, which is fascinating because today we are constantly told to trust your gut.

Oh, all the time. We treat it like this mystical, universally positive intuition. But Paul is using it to describe the lowest, most selfish impulses a human has.

Exactly. Saying their God is their belly means these people are entirely driven by whatever temporary appetite they have in that exact moment. They are tossed to and fro.

They've literally made a deity out of their own temporary desires. Yes, they glory in their shame, similar to Romans 1, celebrating the exact things they should be ashamed of. But to address your pushback about this sounding like toxic Internet outrage, the difference is entirely in Paul's posture.

Because he isn't just angrily typing this out to score points. No, he is dictating this, as he explicitly says in verse 18, even with tears, with tears in his eyes. Right.

That is the fundamental difference. It is not an angry condemnation from a moral pedestal. Paul is deeply grieved over the destructive effect that this lifestyle is having on them.

He's heartbroken. There is a vast, unbridgeable chasm between righteous grief over someone's sin and the toxic, angry outrage we default to when we just want to win an argument online. That shifts the whole perspective.

It's the difference between celebrating a culture war victory and weeping over a tragedy. Exactly. So if we aren't supposed to set our minds on earthly things and follow our gut desires as our ultimate guide, what is the alternative? Paul points straight upward to our heavenly citizenship.

He does. In Philippians 3.20, Paul declares our citizenship is in heaven. Which would have resonated hugely in Philippi.

Oh, massively. Like in Chapter 1, citizenship comes with a specific dual package in the Roman world. Immense privileges and serious responsibilities.

Harmon addresses this old saying- you've probably heard it- that someone is so heavenly-minded they're of no earthly good. Yeah, the caricature of a person who has their head so far up in the clouds debating theology that they don't actually help their neighbor fix a flat tire. Right.

And Harmon calls that idea fundamentally misguided. His argument is that the person who is truly heavenly-minded will inevitably do immense earthly good. Because the two are linked.

Exactly. Because they tangibly demonstrate their love for God by actively loving and serving others. You can't separate them.

Here's where it gets really interesting for me. Think about it like being an ambassador. OK, I like that.

If you are an ambassador representing your home country in a foreign land, your citizenship is back home. But being a good ambassador doesn't mean you just lock yourself inside the embassy, stare at a picture of your home flag and completely ignore the foreign country you're living in. Right.

That would make you a terrible ambassador. Exactly. A good ambassador actively engages.

They bring the culture, the aid, the laws, and the diplomacy of their home country to the exact place they are stationed. Being heavenly minded means acting as an ambassador to Earth. That is a brilliant way to conceptualize it.

Thanks. And if we connect this to the bigger picture, part of that heavenly reality we are anticipating as ambassadors is the physical promise of what Christ will do when he returns. The resurrection of the body.

Right. Paul says in verse 21 that Christ will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body. Harmon mentions that the term for lowly body can also be understood as the body of our humiliation.

Because our bodies right now are marked by the fall. Yes, they decay. They're subject to disease, aging, random aches and pains that just show up one morning and never leave.

Exactly. And Harmon emphasizes how profoundly comforting this theology is for anyone aging or dealing with disabilities. It's not just a metaphorical hope.

No, it's a physical promise. The promise of waking up one day in a fully restored body, perfectly functioning, completely free from the humiliation of the fall. No more chronic pain.

No more weakness. A fully restored, glorious body. But it isn't just an individual upgrade.

It is on a cosmic scale. Cosmic? How so? Paul writes that Christ will subject all things to himself. This is the restoration of the entire created order.

Oh, wow. Everything put back in its right place, bringing true peace and shalom. Harmon references Psalms 8 and 110 and Daniel 7, explaining that Christ is going to fulfill the rule that Adam failed to exercise in the garden.

Because Adam was supposed to rule and cultivate the earth, but he utterly failed. Right. And Christ succeeds, bringing the entire universe into perfect shalom.

So Paul has just painted this breathtaking, epic picture for the Philippians. Resurrected, indestructible bodies. Ultimate peace.

The entire universe brought under the kingship of Christ. He has taken the listeners up to the absolute heights of theological wonder. And then he slams on the brakes.

He hits the brakes so hard you get whiplash. We go straight from the cosmic restoration of the universe to, like, dealing with Kevin and counting. It is the ultimate tunnel shift.

This brings us right back to that crowded room I asked you to imagine at the beginning. Philippians 4, verses 2 and 3. Epaphroditus is reading this letter to the whole church. Right.

He gets through all these beautiful, sweeping promises. And then he suddenly reads, I just can't get over the shock of that moment. Imagine a CEO sending a beautifully written, company-wide email about the glorious, world-changing future of the corporation.

And the final paragraph says, He literally tags them publicly. He tags them. But what makes it so heart-wrenching, and Harmon is careful to point this out, is that these aren't just random troublemakers.

No, not at all. Paul says these two women are fellow laborers who have worked side-by-side with him in the trenches to advance the gospel. These are core leaders.

But their personal conflict is causing factions. The church is likely starting to fracture into Team Euodia and Team Syntyche. And Paul basically says, Right.

But he doesn't just leave them to figure it out alone. He calls on someone he refers to as his true companion to help them. Yeah, Harmon mentions this might literally be a guy named Sizzy Ghost.

Which translates to true companion, right? Exactly. Or it might just be a general plea to a trusted leader. Either way, Paul is assigning a mediator.

And this raises an important question about how we handle conflict within our own communities today. Oh, definitely. Harmon observes that people usually fall into two unhealthy extremes.

We are either terrified of conflict and avoid it at all costs. Just letting it fester under the surface. Right.

Or we are way too attracted to the drama and just throw gasoline on the fire. Just gossiping about it endlessly. Exactly.

But Paul shows that true maturity requires us to be proactive in helping others reconcile. We cannot just ignore the mess when the body of believers is fractured. And to force these two women to reconcile, Paul grounds this urgent call to unity in a massive reality check.

He reminds them that their names are permanently written in the Book of Life. And we really need to think about the gravity of that reference. Where does that come from originally? Harmon traces that concept of the Book of Life all the way back to Moses pleading with Yahweh.

In Exodus, the Israelites commit idolatry with the golden calf. God is ready to destroy them. And Moses stands in the gap.

Right. He says, blot my name out of your book if you won't forgive them. Yes.

Moses was willing to lose his own eternal soul for the sake of his people. By invoking that specific book, Paul is telling these two women something incredibly profound. He is saying, look, your shared eternal identity is locked in.

You are in the Book of Life together forever. So you need to figure out how to agree in the Lord right now. He uses the ultimate cosmic reality to completely dwarf their temporary earthly conflict.

It is a brilliant pastoral move. So to pull all these threads together from Dr. Harmon's deep dive into this text, we are left with some very clear practical applications. We really are.

First, we need to actively observe and imitate mature models of Christ-likeness. And importantly, this is not about shallow celebrity Christianity. No, definitely not.

It's not about being a fan of a famous preacher you've never met. It's about finding everyday people in your life and spending enough time in their proximity to learn their habits. We also have to remember that our past, whether it is filled with deep regrets or impressive spiritual resumes, does not determine our identity.

Right. And we are called to be proactive in helping others reconcile. We have to step into the mess.

And finally, Harmon suggests something I absolutely love. He says we need to take time to actively daydream about Christ's return. That is such a powerful practice.

Think about it. We all daydream. Our minds wander when we're doing the dishes or stuck in traffic.

But how much time do you spend daydreaming about a restored, perfect world, a world of total shalom, versus how much time you spend stressing over temporary, earthly things? It completely changes your posture toward daily life when your hope is anchored in that restored creation, rather than just reacting to whatever is trending today. It really does. And it brings us right back to that awkward, suffocating silence in the room with Euodia and Syntyche, which leaves us with a final thought.

I want you to mull over as you go about your week. If our names are securely written in the eternal book of life, how should that permanent cosmic reality completely eliminate our need to win every petty, earthly argument we get into this week? When your eternal identity is locked in, you just don't have to fight so ruthlessly over the footnotes of today. You really don't.

You can let the little things go because the biggest thing is already secured. So keep your eyes upward, keep walking forward, and try to make sure you don't end up as the cautionary tale in the next company-wide email.