

Philippians: Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ - Study Guide

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

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Abstract:

In this lecture, Dr. Matthew S. Harmon examines the biblical passage of Philippians 3:15–4:3, emphasizing the importance of **spiritual maturity** and the **intentional imitation** of Christlike role models. He contrasts the behavior of faithful believers with "enemies of the cross," noting that mature Christians focus on their **heavenly citizenship** rather than earthly desires. The text highlights how a future hope in the **resurrection** and Christ's power should motivate believers to **stand firm** in their current faith. Harmon also addresses a specific call for **communal reconciliation** by discussing a public disagreement between two women in the early church. Ultimately, the source serves as a guide for identifying **godly examples** and maintaining unity within a religious community.

Briefing Document:

Briefing on Philippians 3:15–4:3: The Call to Imitate Paul and His Coworkers

Executive Summary

This briefing analyzes the theological and practical instruction provided in Philippians 3:15–4:3, as presented by Dr. Matthew S. Harmon. The passage centers on the imperative for believers to pursue spiritual maturity by imitating faithful examples while remaining vigilant against those who oppose the gospel.

Key takeaways include:

- **Maturity Over Perfection:** Spiritual maturity is a corporate, intentional pursuit characterized by a single-minded focus on Christ and an acknowledgment that growth is an ongoing process.
- **The Conflict of Citizenships:** A sharp contrast is drawn between "enemies of the cross," who are defined by earthly desires and impending destruction, and citizens of heaven, who await the transformative return of Jesus Christ.
- **Eschatological Hope:** The return of Christ promises the physical transformation of the "lowly body" into a "glorious body" and the subjection of all creation to His rule.

- **The Necessity of Reconciliation:** The call to "stand firm" is practically applied to internal church life, specifically requiring the resolution of conflict between fellow laborers to maintain gospel unity.

Theological Context and Intertextuality

The passage functions as an extension of the themes introduced earlier in the letter, particularly the "Christ Hymn" of Philippians 2:5–11. Dr. Harmon identifies several linguistic and thematic parallels that ground the call to imitation in the character of Christ.

Parallels with the Christ Hymn (Phil 2:5–11)

Theme	Philippians 2:5–11 (The Christ Hymn)	Philippians 3:15–4:3
Mindset	"Have this mind among yourselves"	"Let those of us who are mature think this way"
The Cross	Obedient to the point of death on a cross	Enemies of the cross of Christ
Universal Rule	Every knee will bow in heaven and on earth	Power to subject all things to himself
Humility/Lowliness	Christ took the form of a servant; humbled himself	Transformation of our "lowly" or "humiliated" bodies
Lordship	Jesus Christ is Lord	Awaiting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ

The Nature of Spiritual Maturity

Paul presents himself and his coworkers as models for imitation. This is not a call to surface-level mimicry but an intentional observation of their mindset and interactions.

Characteristics of a Spiritually Mature Person

1. **Single-Minded Focus:** They are not overwhelmed or distracted by life's busyness but remain steadfast in their pursuit of Christ.
2. **Awareness of Incompleteness:** A mark of maturity is the realization of how much growth remains. The belief that one has "arrived" is a dangerous spiritual state.

3. **Future Orientation:** They are not paralyzed by the past; instead, they look forward to what Christ has accomplished and will do.
4. **Communal Mindset:** Maturity is a "corporate project" pursued within the community rather than in isolation.

Warning Against "Enemies of the Cross"

In contrast to the mature, Paul identifies a group of individuals whose lives oppose the gospel. Dr. Harmon suggests these are likely unbelievers, perhaps former associates of the church, whose trajectory is defined by earthly fixations.

Profiles of Gospel Opponents

- **Destined for Destruction:** Their path leads away from salvation, a connection previously made in Philippians 1:28.
- **Driven by "The Belly":** This refers to base desires and "gut inclinations" rather than just gluttony. They are controlled by their fallen impulses.
- **Glorying in Shame:** They celebrate and delight in things that are biblically shameful, representing a total reversal of values.
- **Earthly Mindset:** Their entire outlook is consumed by the fallen, temporary realities of the world.

Note on Tone: Paul provides this warning "even with tears." His motivation is not anger or condemnation, but grief over the wickedness and its impact on the community.

Heavenly Citizenship and Future Hope

The document emphasizes that the believer's primary identity is not found in earthly political states but in a heavenly kingdom. This citizenship carries both privileges and responsibilities.

The Return of the Savior

The central hope of the heavenly citizen is the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, which will result in two major transformations:

- **Physical Transformation:** Christ will transform the "lowly body"—subject to disease, aging, and the effects of the fall—to be like His "glorious body." This fulfills the original intent for human functioning.

- **Universal Subjection:** Christ will exercise the rule that Adam was originally commissioned to perform. He will bring the entire creation into its right order, a state characterized by *shalom* (peace and proper placement).

Practical Application: Reconciliation in the Body

The mandate to "stand firm" concludes with a specific, public call to resolve conflict within the Philippian church.

The Case of Euodia and Syntyche

Paul explicitly names two women, Euodia and Syntyche, entreating them to "agree in the Lord."

- **Nature of the Conflict:** While the specific cause is unknown, it was significant enough to threaten the unity of the church and cause people to take sides.
- **Status of the Women:** Paul affirms they are "fellow laborers" who worked side-by-side with him in the gospel. Their names are written in the "Book of Life," underscoring their shared identity in God's family.
- **The "True Companion":** Paul calls upon an unnamed "true companion" (possibly a proper name, *Syzygous*) to intervene and help these women reconcile.

Conclusion: Summary of Application

Based on the analysis of the source text, the following imperatives are established for the audience:

- **Think:** Recognize that God has provided tangible models of Christ-like living for us to observe and follow.
- **Believe:** Understand that while the past shapes us, it does not determine our identity in Christ.
- **Desire:** Actively long for and "daydream" about the return of Christ and the restoration of all things.
- **Do:** Be proactive in the "messy" work of reconciliation, helping fellow believers resolve conflicts to preserve gospel unity.

Study Guide:

Philippians Study Guide: The Call to Imitate Paul and His Coworkers (Philippians 3:15–4:3)

This study guide provides a comprehensive review of the analysis provided by Dr. Matthew S. Harmon regarding the call to spiritual maturity and imitation in the book of Philippians. The following sections include a short-answer quiz, essay prompts for deeper reflection, and a glossary of key theological terms.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

1. What is the distinction between maturity and perfection as outlined in Philippians

3:15? Paul emphasizes that the goal for the believer is spiritual maturity rather than absolute perfection. While perfection is the ultimate aim, the text acknowledges that it will not be fully realized on this side of glory, focusing instead on a progressive state of spiritual growth.

2. How does Paul describe the "corporate" nature of spiritual growth? Spiritual maturity is presented as a community project rather than an isolated pursuit, as evidenced by Paul including himself in the group of those who are "mature." He suggests that the community should think together and that God will reveal areas of misalignment to the group to ensure they hold true to what they have attained.

3. According to the text, what are the three primary characteristics of a spiritually mature person? A mature person maintains a single-minded focus on Christ despite the distractions and busyness of life. Additionally, they recognize that they have not yet "arrived" spiritually and are not paralyzed by their past, but rather look forward to what Christ has done for them.

4. What is Paul's emotional posture toward those he labels as "enemies of the cross," and why is this significant? Paul speaks of these individuals with tears, indicating a heart grieved by their wickedness and its effects rather than one of mere anger or condemnation. This highlights that his warnings are rooted in deep concern for the Philippians and sorrow for the lost, rather than a self-righteous spirit.

5. How should the phrase "their God is their belly" be understood in its original context? This expression refers to individuals driven by base desires and "gut inclinations" rather than the mind of Christ. While some suggest it refers to Jewish dietary laws, it is more likely a broader reference to being controlled by fallen, earthly appetites and impulses.

6. What does "citizenship in heaven" imply for the believer's life on earth? Citizenship determines both privileges and responsibilities, calling believers to live in a manner worthy of the gospel. It serves as a direct contrast to the "enemies of the cross" who set their minds on earthly things, directing the believer's focus toward heavenly realities and the return of the Savior.

7. In what way does the text address the idea of being "so heavenly minded that one is of no earthly good"? The text argues that this concept is misguided because a truly heavenly-minded person will be of great earthly good. Tangible love for God is demonstrated through the love and care of others, meaning a focus on heavenly citizenship should naturally result in proactive service on earth.

8. What transformation is promised for the believer's physical body upon Christ's return? Christ will transform the "lowly body"—which is currently subject to decay, disease, and the effects of the Fall—to be like his own glorious resurrection body. This promise ensures that believers will one day possess bodies that function perfectly as God originally intended, free from all aches, pains, and disabilities.

9. How does Christ's power to "subject all things to himself" relate to the original commission of Adam? While Adam was commissioned as a "vice regent" to rule over and subdue the earth but ultimately failed, Christ will exercise the perfect rule Adam was intended to have. Christ's subjecting power will bring the entire creation into right order, achieving a state of universal peace and *shalom*.

10. What is the significance of the conflict between Euodia and Syntyche? Despite being fellow laborers who worked side-by-side with Paul to advance the gospel, these two women were in a public conflict that threatened the unity of the church. Paul calls them out by name to urge reconciliation, reminding the congregation that even dedicated workers can fall into dissension that requires communal intervention.

Part II: Essay Questions

- 1. The Theology of Imitation:** Analyze the importance of "intentionality" in the Christian life as presented in the text. Why does Paul command the Philippians to "keep their eyes" on specific examples, and what are the risks of choosing the wrong models for imitation?
- 2. Parallels with the Christ Hymn:** Explore the linguistic and thematic connections between Philippians 2:5–11 and Philippians 3:15–4:3. How does the description of Christ's humiliation and exaltation inform Paul's instructions regarding spiritual maturity and the transformation of the body?
- 3. The Character of the Opponent:** Examine the four-fold description of the "enemies of the cross" found in verse 19. How do these traits (destruction, appetite, shame, and earthly-mindedness) serve as a functional opposite to the life of a citizen of heaven?
- 4. The Restoration of Shalom:** Discuss the concept of Christ as the "New Adam." How does his power to subject all things to himself fulfill the Old Testament expectations found in the Psalms and Daniel, and what does this mean for the future of the created order?

5. **Conflict and Identity:** Using the example of Euodia and Syntyche, discuss the relationship between shared identity and reconciliation. How does the fact that their "names are in the Book of Life" serve as the primary motivation for resolving their personal dispute?

Part III: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Book of Life	A concept rooted in the Old Testament (and seen in Revelation) representing God's record of those who belong to His people and share a common identity in the family of God.
Citizenship (<i>Politeuma</i>)	A term defining the privileges and responsibilities of a believer; Paul asserts this is located in heaven, contrasting it with an earthly-minded outlook.
Enemies of the Cross	A group—likely unbelievers or those who have walked away from the faith—whose lives are characterized by earthly desires and whose end is destruction.
Lowly Body	Also translated as the "body of our humiliation," this refers to the human physical state subject to the Fall, aging, disease, and weakness.
Maturity (<i>Teleios</i>)	A state of spiritual growth and "thinking the same way" as Christ; in the context of Philippians, it refers to a process of growth rather than sinless perfection.
Phreno	The Greek verb for "mindset" or "to think," used to describe the internal disposition or approach one takes toward life and faith.
Shalom	An Old Testament concept capturing the reality of a state where everything is rightly ordered, in its proper place, and functioning as God designed.
True Companion (<i>Syzygous</i>)	An individual (possibly a proper name) addressed by Paul to intervene and help reconcile the conflict between Euodia and Syntyche.
Vice Regent	A subsidiary king or ruler; a term used to describe Adam's original role (and Christ's fulfilled role) as one who rules under the ultimate kingship of God.