

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Where You Live and How You Live

Philippians 3:17-4:9

Today we come to the seventh sermon in our series on Paul's letter to the Philippians. During the first six messages, we've developed a growing sense of the deep relationship between Paul and this particular community of Christians. And in the process, we've been listening for how God is speaking to us, individually and together, especially as we move further into this season of transition in our congregation's life.

So far we've witnessed Paul's gratitude and prayerfulness for the Christians in Philippi. We've noted their shared confidence in God's faithfulness to complete the work of salvation that he has begun among them through the gospel. This gospel, the good news that Jesus is Lord, is progressing in their lives and in the world, often in spite of, and actually through, Paul and the Philippians' mutual suffering and hardships. With Christ as their main subject, the Philippians are called to practice their loyalty to Jesus in the midst of resistance and opposition, living in unity with one another by exhibiting humility.

This humility comes through having the "mind of Christ," the primary exemplar whose self-emptying and exaltation was described in the Christ hymn, the story that defines the church and its purpose, and holds it together. This inward unity that comes from having the mind of Christ then strengthens them in their outward witness in the world. Both their inward unity and their outward witness require that they have models of the gospel around them, individuals who exemplify the way of Christ, people like Timothy and Epaphroditus. In last Sunday's text, Paul retold some of his own story, in order to describe the way that the pattern of Christ has taken shape in his own experience and to keep himself and the Philippians facing forward, and living forward, toward the consummation of all things in Christ. Though Paul and the Philippians are far from spiritually perfect, he reminded them to "live up to what we have already attained" (3:16).

Today we pick up with the remainder of chapter 3 and progress into chapter 4. In 3:17, Paul says, "Join with others in following my example, brothers and sisters, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you." As we noted two Sundays ago, it's important for believers to have models of the gospel around them. Especially as you go further into this season of change in our church's life, you'll need to keep displaying to each other the way of Christ and reflecting to each other the mind of Christ, so that his self-emptying for the sake of others, and his exaltation by the resurrecting power of God, take shape in our congregation.

That's what Paul is doing in the opening of today's text. He's offering himself as someone for the Philippians to emulate. Though some might interpret this as a little arrogant, there were lots of other ancient writers who encouraged those under their instruction to imitate them. Moreover, when Paul tells the Philippians to imitate him, it's based on the fact that he's imitating Christ. This was, and still is, one of the primary ways we get formed into Christlikeness, by having mature, Christlike individuals around us.

These spiritual role models not only help form us in the way of Christ but also help us guard against influences that can work against the way of Christ. Paul warns the Philippians, "For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ" (v. 18). It's hard to tell exactly who these "enemies of the cross" are. Paul doesn't give us a detailed profile. They could be the Jewish Christian missionaries whom we encountered in last Sunday's text. They could be others who preach a version of the gospel different from Paul's. Or they could be people outside the life of the church in Philippi, individuals who live self-indulgently and violently. Whoever they are, what Paul sees in them is not only individual sins but a pattern of life, an entire way of being. "Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame" (v. 19). Their lives do reflect a commitment, but it's a commitment to personal comfort and present satisfaction. For them, satisfying the human cravings of the here and now is what matters. But this is a path and a pattern that only leads to alienation from God and separation from his presence.

So choose your models wisely, says Paul. There are some who, though professing the name of Christ, aren't really running the same race that you are. They've opted for other paths, other goals. "Their mind is on earthly things" (v. 19).

But that's not who you are or what you're supposed to be. "Our citizenship," says Paul, "is in heaven" (v. 20). Some are focused totally and completely on this present life, this present world. That's the only space where they want to live. But you live elsewhere. Your address is in a different domain. You belong to a different realm. Recall that the question of "citizenship" is a live issue for these believers in Philippi, living under Caesar's authority, in a colony of the capital, a miniature Rome. But Rome is not the same thing as the reign of God. God's reign is your address. That's where the world's only true Savior rules, and he's coming to bring his kingdom to this world.

Paul writes, "The Lord Jesus Christ, who, 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" (v. 21). Eugene Peterson has a great way of rendering this verse: "But there's far more to life for us. We're citizens of high heaven! We're waiting the arrival of the Savior, the Master, Jesus Christ, who will transform our earthy bodies into glorious bodies like his own. He'll make us beautiful and whole with the same powerful skill by which he is putting everything as it should be, under and around him" (The Message).

While we wait, we're supposed to be living as a colony of heaven. In other words, our congregation is an outpost of the life of the world to come. This isn't easy to do, what with the struggles and challenges of life within the church, combined with external pressures that offer us ways of life other than the way of Christ. That's why Paul tells the Philippians, "Stand firm in the Lord" (4:1). In last Sunday's text, Paul used the image of a race to picture the Christian life. But in today's text, he speaks of standing firm in one place. This image helps us remember the importance of being grounded, of having a center of gravity in our life together as believers. That grounding is the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ as Lord, and his presence among us.

When we keep our focus on the Lordship of Jesus Christ and our citizenship in heaven, we're able to stay strong in the faith. We're able to offer the world a glimpse of what life is like in the kingdom of God. Grace Baptist Church, along with all those who confess Jesus as Lord, is here to be a preview of the future that God has promised in Christ. Now certainly we're an imperfect glimpse. We see that in today's text as Paul moves from stressing our citizenship in heaven to giving exhortations about life here on earth. The first issue he addresses is a disagreement between two of the female leaders in the church, Euodia and

Syntyche. We don't know much about them. It sounds like they may have some kind of important and influential role in the congregation. We also don't know much about why these two individuals are at odds. But whatever their dispute is about, Paul reminds them to view their present, earthly quarrel in light of an eternal heavenly reality. If they do that, peace can prevail in their relationship. Notice how Paul is taking what he had said earlier in the letter about having the "mind of Christ," about "being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose" (2:2), and applying that to this specific case of discord in the congregation. In light of what God has done through the death and resurrection of Christ, Paul pleads for reconciliation.

This is an important word for us too as we reflect on our church's past, present, and future. The life and ministry of our congregation remains, at its core, a life and ministry of reconciliation. In one of his letters to the church in Corinth, Paul captures the heart of the gospel and the essence of our mission: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:17-19).

Reconciliation with God and with one another through Christ. That's what our church is here to preach and to practice. When we do, we announce and embody the reality of heaven, the life of the world to come. We make the hope of Christ visible to the world. Others should be able to see how we relate to one another in this congregation, and we ourselves should be able to see how we relate to one another in this congregation, and think, "That's what God intends and will bring about in humankind through Christ. That's what heaven looks like."

This heavenly, eternal perspective will work itself out in many ways, including one of our society's most enduring and pressing issues, namely, reconciliation and cohesion among people of different races and ethnicities. So here in the present, and going forward, one of the great opportunities and challenges for our congregation is to continue to grow into the kind of fellowship where all people, particularly blacks and whites, find and experience reconciliation, unity, and shared ministry in Christ. The writer in the book of Revelation says, "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb'" (7:9-10). The kind of heavenly life and worship promised at the end works its way back into the here and now in places like Philippi and Bryans Road, as divisions are overcome and relationships are restored through Christ.

In addition to pursuing the ongoing work of reconciliation, Paul reminds the Philippians, and us, to keep on rejoicing. It's easy to get used to Paul's emphasis on joy, until we recall that he's saying this from prison, to people who share in his sufferings, and who have plenty of hardships of their own. Some of these trials and troubles come from people who oppose them. But the Philippians shouldn't let this destroy their joy. Why? Because "the Lord is near" (v. 5). Paul may have in mind the return of Christ, or he may be referring more generally to the closeness of the Lord's presence. Either way, he tells the Philippians, and us, to be gentle to all people, to let our forbearance to be evident to others.

"Do not be anxious anything, says Paul" (v. 6). Paul himself isn't free from all anxieties. He has already told the Philippians that part of his reason for sending Timothy to them is his anxiety for their welfare. So some kinds of anxiety can be appropriate, and can lead to

caring for others. But the kind of anxiety generated by constantly contemplating new threats or keeping an endless mental list of risks, this kind of anxiety can stifle joy in the Lord. According to Paul, we need to counter this type of worry with prayer, offering both thanks and petitions, with the assurance that God's care surrounds us. Paul even uses a strange paradox to describe this "peace of God." He says that it stands guard over our hearts and minds (v. 7).

This is the difference that the presence of Christ makes in our lives, individually and as a congregation. Especially as you move further into this season of change in our church's life, God isn't calling you to completely reinvent yourselves or to shift into an entirely different mode of being a church. Instead, you're called to keep on doing what you've been doing. Not in a repetitive, meaningless manner, but rather as the spiritual infrastructure of this congregation. So keep on rejoicing in the Lord. Keep on trusting in God's promises. Keep on relying upon his presence. Keep on praying. Keep on worshiping. Keep on giving thanks. Keep on reconciling. Keep on serving. Keep on bearing witness. Keep on providing a glimpse of the life of heaven as you wait for the coming of the Lord. Keep on doing these things, and the Lord who is near will guide you into what's ahead for Grace Baptist Church.

Then lastly, Paul tells the Philippians, and us, to focus our minds. "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (v. 8). Paul isn't telling us to just look on the bright side. He isn't urging us to practice positive thinking. He isn't asking us to ignore the painful realities of life in this not yet fully redeemed world. As one commentator has pointed out, Paul is actually holding two realities in view at the same time. She writes:

Yes, there is the immediate reality of a world in which human beings are constantly at war somewhere, betraying one another, brutally suppressing each other in order to get ahead, and so forth. This was true of the Roman Empire, and it is true today. Every day we hear and see a culture that focuses on what is false, dishonorable, unjust, impure, and shameful. We begin to think that to act hopefully in such a world is unrealistic.

But Paul also sees another reality, and it is the reality that holds the future. That is the reality of God's redemption, already here and still drawing near. Training our minds to think of this reality, and thereby to act with hope, is a daily mental discipline.¹

Going forward, let's continue to focus our minds on the kinds of things that are in keeping with the hope of Christ. That hope is alive and visible here in our congregation. So continue to set an example of the gospel for one another. Continue to model the way of Christ. Continue to help each other develop the right habits of heart and mind. Do these things, "and the God of peace will be with you" (v. 9).

¹ Susan Eastman, Commentary on Philippians 4:1-9. Working Preacher. October 9, 2011. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/ordinary-28/commentary-on-philippians-41-9-2> (August 21, 2025).