

Paul's Letter to the Philippians

Session Eleven June 3, 2020

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Paul encourages the Philippians to follow models of Messianic servanthood, like Paul, rather than other models whose focus is anything other than Christ Jesus.

Paul also reminds the Philippians that their “citizenship of heaven” manifests itself through their servanthood on earth through the transforming power of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit into a New Creation.

Opening Question...

(1) Has standing for your faith or for a godly principle ever cost you something?

Last week, Paul shared with the Philippian church the importance of the “in between” – the time of coming to faith at baptism and then either our death or the return of Jesus Christ. Paul emphasized to the Philippians the importance of living out the Messianic model that he previously talked about in chapters two and earlier in chapter three. He went on to discuss the individual Christian goal and the Christian church’s goal of maturity in Jesus Christ. Paul later used irony to remind the Philippians that just because one was baptized does not mean that a believer has “already arrived” at full maturity, but that this goal is a lifelong pursuit.

This week in Philippians 3:17-4:1, Paul talks about the importance of following proper Christian models in the pursuit of Christian discipleship. He also warns the Philippians about the lure of falling in the pattern of following lifestyles that once seemed normal, but looking at the world with a fresh set of eyes – a new perspective! Paul also reminds the Philippians that heavenly citizenship starts now, through transformation on earth by Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, living as servants in this world.

3:17 – Following the “Messianic” Models before you...

Last week, Paul reminded the Philippians that he was continuing to strive towards maturity in Christ. He continues this theme in verse seventeen by encouraging the church to follow the Messianic models before them. Specifically, Paul was talking about himself, but we have to

remember that in the first century there were not Christian leaders and pastors sitting on every street corner. (As a pastor in today's society, I would hesitate to put myself up on a pedestal like Paul does here!) Remember as Paul entered a new town like Philippi, and lived out his Christian ministry, his way of life would be foreign to everyone who observed it. Paul had to be that model for the early church. For most everyone, we learn more by watching than listening. Usually, hearing reinforces our watching. If there is a mismatch, we lean towards our observation.

However, we might be asking, how are the Philippians supposed to model Paul's giving up his Jewishness, like he talked about the last two weeks? Remember, most of the Philippians did not have a Jewish heritage. Paul is encouraging the Philippians to start thinking about this. To start thinking about their faith individually – to start figuring it out (look back at last week's session!). There may be times where there Roman culture would conflict with their new Christian faith (i.e. ceremonies honoring Caesar as Lord). How are they going to handle this? Paul is challenging them to start figuring this out.

3:18-19 – Don't follow the Other Models...

Paul told the Philippians there are many models out there to follow, but these models are enemies to the cross. Their focus is on anything but what our focus should be on. Who are these others? Some scholars argue these are Jewish followers again, mentioned in previous passages. Some argue that these are Christians that are falling away from the church. N.T. Wright seems to think that these others are just pagans or citizens from Roman society who are following Hellenistic culture. Paul is challenging the Philippian church to look at the world with a new set of eyes! Once, this way of life seemed normal and harmless. Now, however, with our focus on the cross, resurrection, and Messianic living, we see that this focus is corrupt and dehumanizing. God wants to rescue His creation and us. We have to think differently. Paul was reminding the Philippians that true human life is saying "no" to the worldly ways of living (what the Hellenistic world was promoting) and coming alive to a new way of being human. Their sole focus is on the earth, which leads to destruction.

3:20 – "Citizenship is in heaven"...

Philippians 3:20 has often been stated as one of the most misunderstood verses in the Pauline corpus. What did Paul mean by saying our “citizenship is in heaven”? To take it completely out of the historical context, one might think that Paul is stating that it does not matter what happens here on earth, that our residence is in heaven, and that when we leave this earthly dwelling, we say goodbye and do not worry about it anymore. It is gone. Out of sight. Out of mind. Done with. The end. Period. (Moreover, many books have been written on that concept too!). However, we cannot forget the historical context of Paul’s writing. He is writing to the members at Philippi. Remember, many of the Philippians carried with them the status as citizens of Rome. However, they were “moved” to this area of Northern Greece to spread the ideology and benefits of Roman civilization to this area. Rome did not want them to come back to the capital city. Paul was using this concept in his mind when talking about “citizenship in heaven”. Yes, Christians are citizens in heaven (just as residents in Philippi may have been citizens in Rome), but Paul was reminding the Philippians that they were called to bring the benefits of this heavenly citizenship to the contested realm of earth. For those whose sole focus was on earth (like the enemies mentioned previously), they might be surprised by a new way of living – a new heavenly “Messianic” way. This echoes Paul’s message from chapter 2 again. This would be the work of the Spirit working through God’s people.

3:21 – Awaiting the “Savior”, Transforming the World...

Paul reminds the Philippians that it is not about the work that we do, but the transforming work of Jesus Christ, our Savior. (One interesting note about Paul’s use of Savior in verse 20. Paul infrequently uses this term to talk about Jesus throughout his letters. “Savior” was a common term used by the Roman Caesars to denote an image to his nation. This again is Paul using irony to show who the true Savior is and what the true saving act was.) Paul is blending many Pauline themes in wrapping up chapter three and starting chapter four. (These Messianic themes can also be read in the Psalms – Psalm 2, 8, 72, and 110). Jesus is coming back from heaven to transform the world. In this transformation, humanity will be transformed (in the process) and all creation with it. In the midst of this transformation, our goal is to be Messianic people – people of a new creation – under God, over the world. However, we stand in this role as a

servant. Paul is sharing with the Philippians that this is what I have tried to model, and that this is what you should be modeling to your community.

4:1 – My Joy and My Crown

Paul concludes this section of the letter by encouraging the Philippians to stand strong no matter what might come. Paul knew the temptation of the Hellenistic culture and the false models that stood out there. Paul also knew that the Philippians were his true “joy and crown” – he had a special adoration for this church that come weather whatever storm might come. He encouraged the Philippians to keep their eyes open and focused, but to keep moving forward.

Paul encouraged the Philippians to follow his Messianic model and not be swayed by the “other” models that existed in Hellenistic culture.

Paul also reminded the Philippians that “heavenly citizenship” meant providing Messianic models in their “earthly” community now to show the transforming power of Jesus Christ.

Follow Up Questions...

How might “thinking with the mind of the Messiah” reshape your perception of what is considered “ordinary behavior” in our culture? What are some examples?

Where are some places right now where you feel your faith is in conflict with what the world considers ordinary? What might Christ be calling you to?

How might your citizenship in heaven change, recondition, or create tension with your earthly citizenship?

****SPECIAL NOTE****

**NEXT WEEK’S STUDY WILL TAKE PLACE ON TUESDAY, JUNE 9
AT 6:30 PM!**