

“Our Citizenship Is in Heaven”

The Seventh in a Series of Sermons on Philippians

Texts: Philippians 3:12–4:1; Isaiah 45:14–25

Whatever we say about Paul and the importance of his doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, we must not overlook the fact that Paul is an eschatological thinker—his focus is always on the time of the end regardless of whatever real life issues he must deal with in his letters. Even while Paul remains under house arrest in Rome awaiting the outcome of his trial before Caesar (Nero), Paul desires to know better the resurrection power of Jesus through which he will attain to the resurrection of his body at the end of the age. Even as the Apostle exhorts the Philippians to stand firm in the face of persecution from without (Greco-Roman pagans) and from within (the Judaizers who had recently arrived in Philippi and were beginning to torment the church), Paul repeatedly tells the Philippians to do the things necessary to stand firm. They are to be of one mind, one accord, and love one another, in light of the day of Christ Jesus (our Lord’s second advent). While the theme of the entire Philippian letter can be summed up in one word, “rejoice,” Paul’s own joy in the midst of suffering is thoroughly grounded in his knowledge that Jesus directs all of human history to his appointed end (eschatology). Whatever comes to pass serves to bring us closer to the day of “Christ Jesus.” Yet, there is much to do until that day comes. This requires that the Philippians stand firm in the face of persecution and as far as humanly possible put into practice those things which Paul has exhorted them to do, and all the while keep their eyes fixed on the finish line.

We are returning to our series on Paul’s letter to the Philippians, and we have made our way as far as the second half of the third chapter (vv. 3:12–4:1). As we saw last time, Paul warned the Philippians about the presence of Judaizers in their congregation (3:2), identifying these men as enemies of the gospel. Paul uses very strong language in this regard. He calls these false teachers dogs, evil-doers, and mutilators of the flesh—men who boast about their own personal righteousness all the while speaking despairingly of those Gentile Christians who dare reject their heretical teaching.

While we might be a bit dismayed that Paul would use such harsh language of others, Paul has skillfully demonstrated that it is the Judaizers who deserve the same derogatory names which they had been using of their opponents. The Judaizers claim to be righteous through their good works, specifically circumcision, but they must realize that the very same Apostle Paul, whom they seem to despise, can put them all to shame when comes to claiming human merit before God. If any circumcised Jew with a zeal to obey the law of God had grounds to boast, it was Paul. Paul was a true Hebrew of Hebrews, a well trained Pharisee. But after Jesus appeared to him while Paul was on his way to hunt down and arrest Christians in Damascus, Paul came to see that his own personal righteousness (which he describes as “blameless”) was really only so much “rubbish.” Paul’s reflection upon being “found in him” (Jesus) and possessing a righteous not his own, which instead comes from God, and which justifies, requires a bit of qualification so as to make sure his words cannot be distorted by the Judaizers. This was an ever-present threat as Paul knows all too well.

Once Paul has revealed his heartfelt desire to know Christ’s resurrection power and attain the resurrection from the dead (Philippians 3:10–11), he must now clarify that this is something for which he longs—this is not something he’s already attained through his own accomplishments, even those things

he has accomplished in his office as apostle. The Judaizers may boast about their attainment of perfection in the flesh, but Paul will not even consider boasting about such things—even though he could. Of course, there is the sense, as the author to the Book of Hebrews makes plain, that believers in Jesus are presently reckoned as perfect, as when he says in Hebrews 10:14, “*for by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.*” In one sense our salvation is a settled matter and God regards us as perfected when we first believe in Jesus and are united to him, even as we begin the lifetime process of being sanctified as the sinful nature is progressively weakened.

The course of the Christian life involves our striving to become what we already are in Christ. In fact, the goal (or aim) of the Christian life is perfection (completion—reaching the goal), but Paul teaches that this goal will be reached upon our death or Christ’s return, whichever comes first. This perfection cannot and will not be attained through the flesh, through law-keeping, or through circumcision. It can only come to us through faith in Jesus, who then over the course of our lives molds into his own image (what we commonly speak of as sanctification). The one (being rendered “perfected” in Jesus through faith alone) is the basis for the other (the process of being conformed to the image of Christ).

With that bit of review of the ground we have covered in previous weeks, we turn to our text, Philippians 3:12-4:1. Paul begins his clarifications in verse 12-14, by making clear to the Philippians that perfection is a goal for which we strive, but cannot be reached through efforts we make in “the flesh.” The flesh, in this sense, does not refer to our bodies (physical), but to our sinful nature (ethical/moral). In the flesh, we cannot obtain perfection no matter how many good works we do, no matter how many sins we avoid, or whether or not we have undergone religious rituals like circumcision or baptism, or anything else we can do for that matter. The righteousness which justifies (that which comes from God—Philippians 3:9) only becomes ours through faith in Jesus. The perfection for which we strive is the desire to conform our lives to what we have already been declared to be in Jesus. The Holy Spirit works this desire in us through the so called “means of grace”: the preached Word and the sacraments. It is as Paul has already told us in Philippians 2:13, God is already working within us to will and do of his good pleasure.

Then, in verses 15-16, Paul encourages the Philippians to be “Christ-centered” in all that they do, before reminding them in verses 17-21 that our true citizenship is a heavenly one. This not only gives us hope for the future—even in the midst of present suffering—but the realization in the present of a foretaste of the future glories of such a heavenly citizenship, gives us God’s perspective on life in the present evil age. Our passage ends in 4:1, with another impassioned plea from Paul to the Philippians to stand firm.

So, as turn to the first section of our passage, (vv. 12-14), the Apostle clarifies his statement in verses 10-11, “*not that I have already obtained this [the resurrection] or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.*” For Paul, this is a matter of proper perspective—and a proper eschatology (or how we view the last things). “*Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*”

We have all known people who are so interested in Bible prophecy that we can say of them, “they are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good.” That does not describe Paul, who while focusing upon our future hope, never loses sight of how his forward-looking theology enables us to stand firm in the face of unbelief and persecution in the present. For Paul, his desire to know the power of Christ’s resurrection is tied to the fact that the Risen Jesus appeared to him at least once—perhaps several times. Paul knows he is already righteous “in Christ” (as are we, if we trust in him), yet Paul has not entered

into that heavenly Sabbath rest which is promised to all those who die in Christ. There is a profound sense of the “already” and “not yet” underlying the Christian life.

Paul’s point to the Judaizers—or those giving them serious consideration—is that while a perfect righteousness is given us when we are found in Christ, the necessity of striving for perfection—in the sense of being conformed to Christ’s righteousness in our daily lives—still remains. Paul puts it rather bluntly; *“not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect.* Since this is the only place in the New Testament where Paul uses the verb “*teleioo*,” (“have already been perfected”) there is the possibility that Paul is actually using the same terms as the Judaizers were using to make his point.¹ Paul is “found in Christ,” but he has not yet reached the goal—perfection. Clearly, Paul does not want the Judaizers to twist his words so as to say, “Paul is claiming that he has already attained personal perfection in Christ,” i.e., that he’s reached the goal of his earthly existence and ministry.

No, Paul is saying because he is already righteous in Christ, he will press on to reach the goal—even as he desires to know more about the power of the risen Christ. He believes that he will attain the resurrection from the dead, but he still must strive for perfection in this life so as to be prepared for the next life, regardless of what happens to him while in Rome. Paul has not yet attained “perfection,” in the sense of that term that the Judaizers were holding out to their followers. Paul presses on, precisely because he is found in Christ and possesses a righteousness from God. Paul is the bond-servant of Jesus, and Jesus will never disappoint him, or fail to keep his promises. The very fact that Paul desires to know more and more about the resurrection power of Christ is the proof that he has not yet reached the goal—the resurrection from the dead.

Knowing this to be true and facing the possibility of imminent death at the hands of Caesar, Paul focuses on the prize which comes to those who finish the race—not the race itself. He puts it this way: *But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*” Like a runner feeling their legs about to give out, or the burning sensation in their windpipe making them want to quit, Paul presses on because he sees the goal ahead. The Christian life is much like a marathon. We must be in it for the long haul. Paul will not look back and play “woulda, coulda, shoulda.” He looks ahead to the goal.

Paul endures the struggles of the Christian life, straining to become in his daily life what he already is in Christ, perfect (righteous). He does not look back, but instead looks ahead to the finish line, zealous of reaching his goal, which he now identifies as the prize of the “*upward call of Christ*.” If Paul counts everything he has accomplished in his life before coming to faith in Jesus as only so much rubbish, then this is the prize he seeks because he followed Jesus instead of seeking to be righteous in himself. Paul’s desire is to gain Christ, so as to be “found in him” and know the power of his resurrection.² Paul’s desire is that the Philippians follow him in this, so that they too are found in Jesus and gain the prize.

In verse 15, Paul is speaking directly to those in Philippi who may have grown lax or discouraged in the face of the struggles facing their congregation. He tells them, *“let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.”* There were those, apparently, who considered themselves “mature” in the faith, Paul using a term *teleioi* of them, often

¹ O’Brien, Philippians, 422-23; Silva, Philippians, 201.

² O’Brien, Philippians, 433

translated (based on context) as one who is mature—i.e., whole, complete.³ The question arises as to whether or not Paul is being facetious here and once again using the terminology of the Judaizers to call attention to fact that they may consider themselves to have “arrived,” but should instead reconsider their own self-righteous attitudes in light of the attitude of Jesus (who humbled himself).⁴

The problem with this understanding is simply this—Paul includes himself among the “mature.” This instead points us in the direction that Paul is speaking to those in the congregation who are truly mature (“complete”) in the Christian faith and he is challenging his Philippian readers/hearers to give due consideration to whether or not they belong in the mature group or not. The mature group will realize that what Paul is saying is true, and his exhortations have merit. Paul trusts that God will reveal this to them. To put it yet another way, Paul is asking those in the Philippian congregation to pray for the proper attitude about the instructions he is now bringing to them. If others think differently about these things than Paul does, he challenges them to submit their opinions to God, knowing that God will ensure that the truth will triumph in the end. Paul’s point is that those in Philippi who are growing weary, ought not give up the good fight of faith. Let them think like Paul—giving up self-righteous pursuits so as to instead seek with everything in them the upward call of Christ, a thing certainly worthwhile. Don’t give up yet, Paul is saying. Reconsider. Get back in the race and join Paul, seeking that goal of running the race so as to complete it and reach the finish line!

What truly matters, as Paul points out in verse 16, is his exhortation, “*let us hold true to what we have attained.*” Paul wants the Philippians to walk in the truth (this means understanding that justifying righteousness is a gift of God received through the means of faith alone) and to attain their goal (perfection) by completing the race. The ultimate focus of Paul’s language of the “upward call of Christ” is, of course, what Paul mentioned previously in verse 11, the resurrection of the body. But those Philippians who give up and give in to the Judaizers just to keep the peace, or who, because of the reality of persecution from their Greek and Roman friends and family and then just give up and leave the faith, risk missing out on the reward—the upward call of Jesus and all the things which he has promised to give his own once their race is complete. This is like the marathon runner who misses out on the prize by giving up, dropping out because they are not prepared, or the going is simply too tough.

Once again—in verses 17-21—Paul exhorts the Philippians to act in a certain way so as to receive the prize for which they have been running. In verse 17, he writes, “*brothers,*” a term of affection, “*join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.*” Including them among the mature—folks who will desire to do what Paul exhorts them to do—Paul presses the Philippians to imitate him and others in the churches they have known, who do indeed seek with everything in them to know the resurrection power of God and to attain to resurrection from the dead. The Philippians are to follow the example of those who have run the race determined to win the prize. It is important to remind ourselves here that the language of how one walks is a metaphor for how people live the Christian life. The unbelievers of Paul’s day are called a twisted and crooked generation because they chose not to walk the straight line of the light of God’s self-revelation in Christ. God has given his church examples to follow, all of them stemming from imitating the humble attitude of Jesus.

In fact, Paul makes this very point in the next verse. His beloved brothers are to unite in imitating Paul

³ O’Brien, Philippians, 422-23

⁴ See the discussions in, Martin, Philippians, 140; and O’Brien, Philippians, 434-435.

and others (i.e., Timothy and Epaphroditus) who, in turn, follow the example of Jesus, “*who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*” (Philippians 2:6–8). Given the serious threat posed by the Judaizers, in causing people to give up on the race and instead to seek perfection in the flesh, Paul is not so much asking that people imitate him (i.e., that he is a successful Christian who properly lives the victorious Christian life), but rather that Paul is to be followed because he is an apostle, because he was hand-picked by the supreme example of humility, the Lord Jesus, to serve as apostle to the Gentiles.⁵

Sadly, not everyone has stayed in the race. Some of the Philippians have dropped out. As Paul tells us in verse 18, in a tone which is as much of a lament as it is a warning, “*for many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.*” There are those—presumably known by Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus, and well as known to the Philippian church—who once sought the upward call of Christ for a time, but who, for whatever reason, gave up and returned to seeking to establish a righteousness of their own.

There are many such people influenced by Judaizers to seek righteousness through human effort (the flesh). There are also those found the persecution and rejection by the world to be painful enough to become in their minds a sufficient reason for giving up. They have not done as Paul cautioned them—keep their eye on the goal. When false doctrine sounded good (that they could reach perfection or their goal) in the flesh, they sought to do so. When the Greco-Romans shamed them for following an obscure and recently invented “god” named Jesus, they felt it no longer worth struggling and simply dropped out. The Philippians knew who these people were. Just as we know people within our own midst who have done this. Paul wept for such people. So too should we, when someone walks away from the faith to their eternal peril.

That Paul is speaking primarily of Judaizers in Philippi becomes clear when he speaks of these people as enemies of the cross of Christ. Anyone who teaches that justification comes about when we believe in Jesus, but teaches that we must add to his merits the merits of our own good works or religious rites such as circumcision, or add anything else for that matter, they have made themselves an enemy of God’s plan of salvation (the cross). Such people are saying their way is better than God’s way. This is a serious enough offense that Paul tells the Galatians that even if an angel from heaven teaches such a thing, they are to be considered anathema.

Keeping his eye on the future, Paul knows the fate of all those who walk as enemies of the cross. According to verse 19, “*their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.*” The destiny of those who reject the cross of Jesus is eternal destruction and not merely temporal judgment (i.e., bad things will happen to them). Paul’s warning resounds with echoes from Isaiah 45:20-22 (part of our Old Testament lesson). YHWH says to the nations, those who worship idols (or their own bellies), “*assemble yourselves and come; draw near together, you survivors of the nations! They have no knowledge who carry about their wooden idols, and keep on praying to a god that cannot save. Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together! Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all*

⁵ Martin, Philippians, 142.

the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: ‘To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.’ “Only in the LORD, it shall be said of me, are righteousness and strength; to him shall come and be ashamed all who were incensed against him. In the LORD all the offspring of Israel shall be justified and shall glory.”

Building upon the prophets such as Isaiah, the New Testament is clear and universal in its teaching—all those who perish apart from Christ will stand before God in their own righteousness (rubbish). Having sinned against the holy God and having freely rejected and then renounced God’s means of saving sinners (through the saving merits of Jesus), all those apart from Christ will face eternal punishment, because as Paul says, their god is their belly.

Ironically, those who seek to pacify God’s wrath toward human sin by what they eat or do not eat end-up worshiping their own appetites. This is obviously a reference to those Judaizers who see obedience to Israel’s dietary laws and feast days as one of the requirements for justification. Reject the cross of Christ and seek to be righteous by conformity to the law? All who do so worship their bellies, and ends-up glorying in the shame which comes from a mind that is set on earthly things—a mind which does not think God’s thoughts after him, nor seeks God’s wisdom which is revealed in his word.

Such people are oriented towards their own personal opinions. Their feelings are their standard of truth—and if the truth were known, they do not like how God does things, because if they were “God” they would do things differently. Imagine the gall of a sinful creature telling the God who created them that he is not doing it right when it comes to salvation—God should save everybody and not punish anyone, because they “feel” it should be so. This is the prime example of what Paul means when he speaks of “earthly thinking.” It is typically an American way to think. Because such thinking is “earthly,” people who act on feeling and not God’s revelation actually cut themselves off from God’s wisdom and eternal perspective, whether that be matters of sin and salvation, or even divine wisdom which gives us God’s perspective on the day to day events in life.

Note the sharp contrast in verses 20-21. Paul’s focus again is upon how the Christian’s future hope informs the Christian life in the present. *“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.”* All Christians are simultaneously citizens of two kingdoms over which Jesus rules. We are citizens of the nation in which we are born (or reside)—this is our national citizenship. But Christians possess dual citizenship and are at the same time citizens of heaven. This heavenly citizenship informs and indeed transforms our lives in the here and now. Knowing that we are already seated and raised with Christ (as Paul says in Ephesians 2:6 and Colossians 3:1-4), we are to keep a heavenly perspective on earthly things. This keeps us from worshiping our bellies and thinking we are righteous because of what we eat or do not eat, what ceremonies we perform (or not), or that our opinions about what God should and should not do, actually matter to God.

Paul directs us to our heavenly citizenship, where Jesus reigns after his ascension to the Father’s right hand and to live our lives knowing that if we die, we will join Jesus there, and as long as we live, we await his return from heaven. On the day when Jesus comes again, Paul says, we will be transformed from these lowly bodies which became instruments of sin after the Fall, into the same kind of glorified body as Jesus. On that day we will indeed attain unto the resurrection of our bodies, the thing for which Paul longed and which he sees as the ultimate prize at the end of the race. Jesus can do so because he is

God and has the power to raise the dead. He will do so because all things are subject unto himself.

As Paul begins to wrap up this letter (in chapter 4:1), he can, at the same time, put an exclamation point on what he has said so far. “*Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.*” Paul longs to see his beloved brothers and sisters in Philippi whom he loves in Christ. He regards them as his joy and crown, his reward from God arising from the preaching of the gospel. Once again Paul tells them that they are to stand firm in the face of their troubles, trusting in Jesus’ resurrection power which will redeem them.

In heeding Paul’s exhortations to abide in love, be of one mind, and one accord, so as to stand firm, we too should always keep our eyes fixed on the goal—the day of Christ Jesus when every tear will be wiped away, when all sickness, suffering, and sin, comes to an end, and when we receive the prize for which we are running, the resurrection of our bodies. Even as we struggle in this life, our place with Jesus is guaranteed because our citizenship is in heaven, and by faith we are found in Jesus who can and will transform our bodies to be like his own glorious resurrected and glorified body. Everything we do now matters, because Jesus is preparing us to reach perfection (the goal) and live forever in his presence.

I know, some will object and say, this is just pie in the sky and does nothing to help me now. But Paul would beg to differ and remind us (as he does here) to forget what lies behind, strive to reach the goal, knowing that keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus and living like our citizenship is in heaven is the very thing which gives this life meaning, and which enables us to stand firm, even in the deepest troubles and the darkest of days. Beloved our citizenship is in heaven, stand firm.