

Five Weeks in Philippi

Session Four - Philippians Chapter 3 & 4

3:1-3 - Jewish vs Gentile Christians

3 Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. 2 Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. 3 For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh.

It is surprising to us, so far removed from the world of the New Testament, to learn that Christianity was initially a “Jewish-only” faith. Despite Jesus quite clearly reaching out to both Jews and non-Jews in his ministry, nonetheless it took quite a revolution in understanding for the disciples to begin to extend the Christian message beyond their own fellow Jews.

The first major breakthrough came to Peter, through both a powerful vision and, following that, the conversion of a Roman Centurion, Cornelius, together with “his relatives and close friends.” The story is so important that it is told in Acts Chapter 10, repeated in Acts 11, and referred to again in Acts 15.

Upon Peter’s retelling of the Cornelius story to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem, their reaction was, “*When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, ‘So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.’*” Acts 11:18. In the very next verse, it talks about Christians “spreading the word only among Jews,” but, that in some areas they also began to share the Gospel with Greeks, who began to believe.

In Pisidian Antioch (now in Central Turkey), Paul and Barnabas were speaking in the synagogue, to an audience comprised of “Fellow Israelites and you gentiles who worship God (Acts 13:16).” These “God-fearing Gentiles” were sympathetic to Jewish teaching, and attended Jewish services of worship, but were not converts to Judaism. They turned out to be particularly receptive to the Gospel. When the message was not so readily accepted by the Jews in Antioch, Paul responded by quoting Isaiah 49:6 and saying (Acts 13:46-48):

“We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’” When the Gentiles heard this,

they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed

Upon Paul and Barnabas returning from their mission journey to their home base in Syrian Antioch, we read the following (Acts 14:27): *On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.*

But this did not mean that all was well. There was still the belief that in order to be Christians, Gentiles first had to convert to Judaism – Christianity was still understood as a part of a Jewish, not Gentile, world. The dispute is summarised in Acts 15:1 - *Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.”*

This was a serious issue, and one which was causing a breach in the church. A council was convened in Jerusalem, sometime between 48-50 AD. Peter was one of the speakers, and said the following, based upon his experience with Cornelius:

“Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. 8 God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” (Acts 15:7-11)

The “yoke” to which Peter is referring is the system of rules and regulations which Jews followed, such as eating only kosher foods, etc. The short-hand term for this was either “law” or “circumcision,” which was the outward mark of all Jewish males, performed either at 8 days of age, or upon conversion. As the Pharisees who had become Christians complained, *“The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.”* So, the biggest question in the early Church: Are we saved by God’s grace through faith in Christ, or by that plus the full observance of Jewish ceremonial law?

The council in Jerusalem, led by Jesus’ brother James, arrived at the following conclusion (Acts 15:19-21):

“It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled

animals and from blood. For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”

In other words, non-Jewish Christians were to not make sacrifice to pagan gods, maintain Jewish norms of conservative sexual propriety, and abstain from any participation in pagan practices (such as eating strangled meat or blood, which were regarded by pagan cultures as transferring the life-force of the animal to the eater) which would be particularly offensive to Jewish Christian brothers and sisters. These are viewed as the most basic distinguishing characteristics of followers of the one true God.

Paul, ministering in areas composed largely of non-Jews, and establishing many congregations of largely Gentile believers, faced constant struggles against those who, like the Pharisee Christians, believed that to be Christian meant to be Jewish in observation, while Christian in belief. In this passage (Philippians 3:1-3), he uses very harsh language to reject these beliefs, and those who were attempting to sway the Philippians in this direction.

While these issues seem rather beside the point to us today, all of us have experienced the divisions which arise between denominations, who, while believing in Jesus, have nonetheless strongly condemned their differences in belief and practice, believing that only their specific expression of the Christian faith can lead to salvation.

3:4-6 Paul’s Spiritual Autobiography

- though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

Paul is outlining his faultless credentials as a Jew – no-one could accuse him of not being able to claim a good standing before God in terms of Jewish standards.

3:7-9 – Salvation through Faith

7 But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 8 What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

Here is the centre of Paul's belief – again using strong language, he regards his impeccable Jewish heritage as worthless, compared to knowing Christ as Saviour and Lord. For Paul, it is not our own righteousness (observance of religious law) which can bring us into right relationship with God, since we inevitably fall short. Instead, it is our faith in Christ which saves us.

3:10-11 – The centrality of the Resurrection

10 I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

It is the death and resurrection of Christ which guarantees our own resurrection from the dead. Paul is longing to come to a deeper knowledge of this, even through the experience of his own suffering.

3:12-14 – Winning the Prize

12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

As he does elsewhere, Paul uses the illustration of athletic competition to illustrate the effort and discipline of the Christian life, as we face struggles and hardship, yet continue in our faith and in our efforts to share the faith in word and deed. Here are two examples of many:

1 Corinthians 9:25-26 - Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air.

2 Timothy 4:7 - I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

3:15-16 - Paul's confidence

15 All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. 16 Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

One of my favourite insights into Paul's character: If you don't agree with me, it's because your faith is not mature, and God will soon straighten you out! But he gets more inclusive, by saying we all need to live up to the high standards we profess. We need not only to practice what we preach, but what we believe!

3:17-21 - Following Good Examples

17 Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. 18 For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 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.

Speaking of those high standards, Paul encourages us to live up to those who model the faith at its best. He immediately condemns those who are making a profit from their faith – “enemies of the cross,” he calls them, those who are opposed to any form of self-sacrifice.

Rather than earthly wealth, comfort or prestige, we are to remember that our “citizenship is in heaven.” It is there that our eternity will be spent, and it is to that end that we seek to live for Christ in the here and now, doing what we can, sacrificing what we must for the Gospel.

4:1-3 – A Personal Appeal for Unity

*4 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!
2 I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. 3 Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.*

There has been an overriding theme of Unity throughout this letter, and now Paul is addressing the specific source of division, doubtless reported to him by Epaphroditus. Two key leaders in the Philippian church, Euodia and Syntyche are at odds with one another. Their argument affects the entire congregation, and so Paul takes the unusual approach of addressing specific individuals in a letter intended to be read to the whole congregation.

Who are they? Since they are not mentioned elsewhere in Scripture, all we know of them is they are fellow “contenders” and co-workers with Paul. These are impressive credentials. Paul uses “contenders” elsewhere when referring to those who have faced persecution for the sake of the Gospel. Euodia and Syntyche, then, have bravely withstood persecution alongside Paul, perhaps during the time when he originally preached the gospel in Philippi.

More impressive still, these women were Paul’s “fellow workers,” a word the apostle reserves for a circle of associates who have been especially helpful to him in fulfilling his calling to preach the gospel among the Gentiles. This company included such notables as Priscilla and Aquila (Rom. 16:3; cf. 16:9), Timothy (Rom. 16:21; 1 Thess. 3:2), Titus (2 Cor. 8:23), Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25), Philemon (Philem. 1), Mark (Philem. 24), and Luke (Philem. 24).

The context makes it obvious that Euodia and Syntyche held prominent positions within the Philippian congregation. Perhaps they were even among the “overseers and deacons” whom Paul has mentioned in the letter’s opening (1:1). When we recall the beginnings of the Philippian ministry, founded first among Lydia and her household, later even meeting in Lydia’s home, and now with Euodia and Syntyche identified as leaders among them, we can see this as another example where Paul had women in significant congregational and ministry roles.

In terms of the conflict, Paul asks for help from an unidentified third party, a person whose name we do not know and whom Paul calls simply “my true companion.” This must be the leader (overseer? bishop?) to whom the letter will be delivered, and who will share it with the congregation. The unity and sanctity of the church is too important to consider the dispute a private matter to be settled by the women alone.

Paul is under no illusions, however, that Euodia and Syntyche will end their dispute with one another on some purely human grounds. He adds that their agreement should be “in the Lord.” Their identification as followers of Jesus as Lord overrides any disagreement they have. Paul wants Euodia and Syntyche to put this principle into practice in their relationship with one another.

The unity Paul has urged on the Philippians as a group throughout the letter and in general ways must be implemented in practical ways in specific disputes. Christian unity must be worked out on the ground, one quarrel at a time. Similarly in our own church, no dichotomy can exist between what we believe and what we practice. When relationships within the church are broken, we must work for their reconciliation. It should be unthinkable to confess our faith in Jesus, but to refuse to associate with our brothers and sisters across the church aisle.

4:4-7 – Peace in the Midst of Struggle

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! 5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The Philippian congregation is struggling on several different levels. Their founder, Paul, is imprisoned for the faith. They, too, are undergoing persecution. Additionally, their own congregation is suffering disunity, with local leaders in sharp disagreement. It is in this context that Paul writes to them of peace, and the key to that peace: Rejoice; conduct yourself with “gentleness” (The term “gentleness” – *epieikes* - was often used of an attitude of kindness where the normal or expected response was retaliation); pray; be thankful.

In other words, worship joyfully, interact peaceably with others, pray about your situation, and cultivate an attitude of gratitude. These will allow the peace which comes from God to take root in your life.

4:8-9 – Summing it all up

Finally, brothers and sisters, 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. 9 Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Paul sums up everything he has written by addressing both the internal and the external life of the believer – thoughts and actions – in a way of life which will bring peace. First, we must discipline and direct our thoughts to that which is true, noble, right, pure, lovely and admirable. This has as much to do with “input” as it does with the “power of positive thinking.” Controlling what we feed our minds will go a long way towards affecting what we are thinking about. Following the “Garbage in, garbage out” principle, we need to carefully choose what we watch and read and listen to.

Jesus addresses a similar concern in Matthew 15:19 – *“For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.”* If we are putting such things into our minds, what do we suppose will come out?

Paul then addresses the external life: *“Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice.”* Paul is not afraid to lead by example, rather than “do what I say, not what I do.” Paul is not putting forward an

intellectual exercise, but a practical faith. We are called not only to think good thoughts, but to do good things. Paul taught and lived those things. We can and must do no less.

4:10-13 –Tangible Examples

10 I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. 11 I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 12 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. 13 I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

Paul, connecting to the previous passage, thanks the Philippians for expressing their concern with more than “thoughts and prayers,” but with a tangible response. Paul isn’t saying this to be snarky, but to continue the teaching point of the previous passage – that we are called not only to think good thoughts, but to do good things. In case we think that Paul was desperate, he clarifies *that “he has learned to be content whatever the circumstances,”* demonstrating that he previous comments (4:4-9) are not just hot air, but that he has applied them to his own life as well, resulting in “contentment and peace of mind” even while imprisoned.

4:14-23 - Ending on a High Note

14 Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. 15 Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; 16 for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. 17 Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. 18 I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. 19 And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. 20 To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

21 Greet all God’s people in Christ Jesus. The brothers and sisters who are with me send greetings. 22 All God’s people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar’s household. 23 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen

Paul ends on a note of encouragement, acknowledging the Philippians’ long-time support of his ministry. Tantalisingly, he sends greetings from “those who belong to Caesar’s household;” Paul, even imprisoned, is making inroads among the staff!