

Philippians 3:15-4:1

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 June 2022

Preacher: Rev. Ben Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Grab a seat. Well, good morning, everyone. I think that after going through the Athanasian Creed, the words of Paul seem incredibly straightforward, don't they?

Well, let's pick up, if you're not there already, let's open our Bibles to Philippians 3, and we start at verse 15. So what we heard about last week, what we've just finished was Paul sharing his testimony.

That was the first half of the chapter. And he described how he gained Christ and the joy and life found in Christ by letting go of his curated credentials and receiving the gift of Christ's right standing with God.

And he explained that now that he's been found in Christ, his life is shaped by radical satisfaction and radical dissatisfaction. He knows that everything he needs is already his in Jesus, but at the same time, he wants to know Jesus more deeply.

He wants to grow in his faithfulness. Now, sometimes we use the saying, the now and the not yet, or the already and the not yet, to talk about this idea in the Christian life.

[1 : 1 9] We know that now, already, we are counted righteous in Christ, and we know life and peace and joy. But we're not yet fully transformed.

We sin. We easily lose our way. We don't know him fully, even though we want to. And this is what we're going to look at this morning in the rest of the chapter. Now, Paul's testimony describes, where he describes this experience, it runs all the way through the first 14 verses.

He's speaking from experience. He's talking about the experience of the now and the not yet of the Christian life. He says, I have suffered loss in order that I might gain Christ. I have not obtained it.

I press on. But as we come into verse 15, you'll notice a change. He shifts from testimony to takeaway. He says, let those of us who are mature think this way.

In other words, the experience just described in the first half of the chapter, it isn't just for Paul. It's for you. It's for me.

[2 : 2 5] And since chapter two, we've seen example and example and example, and now we're given exhortation. You've seen it in Christ. You've seen it in other Christians. You've seen it in me. Now you, Philippians, you, Vancouverites, you must stand firm in just the same way that I've described it.

Not being led astray by bad examples, but counting on the promise that we have in Jesus. I've got three points to help us get through this.

So the first point is maturing. The second point is warning. And the third point is belonging. So we'll see maturing. We get into that right away, don't we, in verse 15.

Now if you go up a few verses, you'll see in verse 12 that Paul describes his own maturity there. He says, not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus had made me his own.

Christ has made me his own, Paul says. That's the now. It's already happened. But I struggle to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

[3 : 35] That's not yet. I haven't obtained it. I'm not perfect. Paul's in it, but he's not through it. And maybe you can relate to this.

I hope that you can. I certainly can. Feeling unfinished. Something real has happened to you in Christ. You know that. He's the one your soul loves.

He's the one you know that you need. But you also know ongoing failure in pursuing him. The surprising message that we get in verse 15 is that that's normal Christianity.

That's not a situation we need to escape. It's a situation we need to stand firm in. So verse 15 says, let those of us who are mature think this way.

And he's talking about verse 12. So the word translated perfect in verse 12, that's the same Greek word as mature in verse 15. And it's almost like he's writing this with a smile on his face.

[4 : 35] He's saying, brothers, sisters, join the club of the mature. It's all of us that haven't obtained it yet, but we want to. It's all of us that want to be like Christ, but aren't.

The mature in Christ are in the messy middle. If you can see in your life Christ's goodness and your own lack, then you are on the road to Christian maturity.

That's how all of us feel. That tension, the joy and frustration is a sign of Christ's grip on you. That's what transformation feels like.

Like, it's not like a training montage from a movie. I love those. Those are the best parts of movies, aren't they? That 30 seconds where you see them go from just kind of this slobby, you know, beginner to fully trained, ready to box a world champion.

That's what we imagine it might be like, but it's not like that. It's grinding. It's lifelong. It feels like suffering. It feels like losing. And it's because that road of transformation is cross-shaped.

[5 : 46] It's painful. And then when you encounter that, you think you're walking a cross-shaped life, and then you encounter that thing and you have to pick it up. And the length of this process is why we have to hold true.

We have to stand firm in what we've obtained. He says that right at the beginning of the passage and again at the end of this section, chapter four, verse one, stand firm. Why do we have to stand firm? It's really tempting to despair or to give up.

We think it just costs too much. It's just too hard. It's too humbling. There must be an easier way. But this is the gospel, and this is how we are transformed, and we must stand firm in it.

And he says, if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you, which is how I'm going to start signing my emails. That's a great line, isn't it? He says, are you a spiritual superstar?

Walk a mile further with Christ. Now walk a year. Now walk 10 years. Now walk 50 years. And God will confirm that this is the way. This is how you grow in Christ.

[6 : 53] It's the only way. There's no secret that you're going to discover that hasn't been told to you in the gospel. There's no key to be found. There's no way to skip that uncomfortability, the pain of formation.

There's nothing better out there in the world. There's nothing better in your heart that you're going to discover. What we found in Christ's gospel is it, and we need to stand firm in it. And I think this helps make sense of verse 17, this command, which is what it is.

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me. And keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. That command, join in imitating me, it can come off a little odd, can't it?

But I don't think it's quite maybe how it seems on the face of it. I've thought of it like this this week. I'm not a world-class cyclist. I know how to ride a bike, though. And in fact, I've taught all three of my kids to ride bikes.

And I even taught a neighbor kid how to ride a bike. Really good at it. I'm not an Olympian, but I can ride a bike, and I can teach other kids to ride bikes.

[8 : 04] And I think you see what I mean. Paul's not being proud here. He's not a super saint. He's not better than us. He does know the trail. He knows how to teach us. He knows how to show us the way to walk.

He says, look at me. Do it like this. Keep your eyes up. Keep pedaling. You're a work of grace. It's deeply uncomfortable. Let go of that. Press on towards what's ahead, the upward call in Christ.

Look at him again. I have to admit that every kid that I've taught to ride a bike has crashed. There's a large arbutus bush in front of our house. They all run into that.

and that's why we need good examples so that we don't give up. Our youngest child learned to ride the quickest of all three kids because all the other two kids kept zipping by, zipping by, zipping by and she knew it could be done because she was looking at them and so what Paul encourages us here is to find other Christians that can teach us.

It says find other Christians that talk like this, that walk like this, that say these sorts of things, that can be honest about the cost, that can be honest about their sin and also can tell you that year by year Christ has grown more desirable to them.

[9 : 23] It's more worth it every year they go. Paul says keep your eyes on them. So I'll say the same thing. Keep your eyes on those kind of people.

Find good examples. Seek out mature Christians. If you see someone walking faithfully, then you know that there's somebody to keep your eye on and then find a way to be with them in community.

That's why we have community groups and things like that but it doesn't have to be that formal. Look for the people that walk in this way and glom onto them. Get to know them.

That's what he's saying. Keep your eyes on them. Keep your eyes on me. Imitate me. Look at the good examples and watch out for the bad examples. That's the second point.

That's the warning. Verses 18 and 19. So he's given many good examples in this book and now he gives a bad example, a counter example, a cautionary tale. And we don't know exactly who he's talking about here historically.

[10 : 25] We know that Paul has warned about them before. His tears indicate that they probably had an association with the church. Perhaps they claim to be Christian teachers.

But what we do know is that these people do not walk in maturity. They don't walk in the way that we've been describing. They walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their walk, their manner of life, contrasts the good example in verse 17 that we were just thinking about.

Because they're opposed to, they're enemies of the cross of Christ. And just think about the context again here. Paul writes from prison. He writes to Christians under pressure.

They're facing the daily risk of physical suffering and mocking and death for their faith. And their journey through life mirrors Christ's carrying of the cross. Earlier on, Paul said, it's been granted to you not only to believe, but to suffer for his sake.

In verse 10, he said that part of his pursuit of knowing Christ is sharing in his sufferings. And so, if you make yourself an enemy of the cross, you reject Christ.

[11 : 39] You reject this work of maturation, formation that we've been talking about. It's looking at the cross and saying, his way is too costly. It's painful and it's humbling and it's difficult and it doesn't seem worth it.

But, in God's economy, this is the way. Christ's humiliation and suffering are the path to resurrection and victory. And so, if we reject Christ's cross in this way of humiliation, we also reject his victory and his salvation.

And this is why their end is destruction. The reason they can't abide suffering is because their God is their belly. So, their Lord, their God, is not Jesus, but it's their own appetites and pleasures.

Now, we have to be careful here because many of our desires in life are good. They're for things that are necessary. They're gifts of God. We hunger for things we need, like food and family and friendship, and those are good things.

And our desires can remind us that we need to look for ultimate satisfaction in God. So, the issue here is not the presence of appetite, but its ultimacy. They're ruled by their appetites.

[12 : 48] They're consumers who are being consumed by appetites that they've made into their God. In your life, in my life, we probably notice that following our appetites is the path of least resistance.

It's the easiest thing to do. But it's not the path of salvation. And the instability and insatiability of appetite makes it a very poor God.

I noticed over the course of a year that there were at least three fads in my children's school. And the first was Beyblades, which is a kind of spinning top, and you fight other spinning tops with it.

It's very fun. But soon, they had Beyblades, and then they were on to Pokemon cards. And the more Pokemon cards you could get, the better. And then, inexplicably, it was tennis balls.

Just like having a tennis ball and coming to school with a really nice tennis ball was the thing that you needed to do. And it's very silly, but I think we're just as silly, aren't we?

[13 : 51] Our appetites put us on this hedonistic treadmill. As soon as we have the one thing we want, we're on to the next thing. It's a treadmill because our wants are endless.

Satisfaction is always just out of reach. And we spend our whole life wanting the next thing, and we miss the promise of eternity and the point of everything else along the way. But these enemies of the cross don't stop with appetite.

They also glory in their shame. So, once appetite becomes your Lord, once it becomes ultimate, we find ways to justify and promote that. And there's this amazing inversion that happens in sin when a thing that we ought to be ashamed of becomes a source of pride for us.

It becomes actually a badge of self-definition and a mark of our authenticity. And Paul uses this same language in Romans 1 when he's talking about sexual immorality. But we know that it can happen to us in many other ways as well.

The final and most telling description that we have is that their minds are set on earthly things. So, in chapter 2, we were invited to share the mind of Christ and the mind of God.

[15 : 02] And early in this chapter, we saw an example of a mind transformed in Christ where we see how Paul is thinking. In Paul's own life, the light of heaven in Christ literally shone on him into this world, and it makes him purposeful, and it makes everything beautiful and hopeful.

But if our view is set below the horizon, always, as it were, we don't catch any of that view. We're in what Charles Taylor would call an eminent frame where there's nothing more than what we see.

There's nothing true beyond my experience. There's no purpose beyond pleasure and fulfillment. No life after death, no meaning in suffering. Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.

Or maybe more realistically, go to work, pay your rent, die alone. It's a Vancouver mantra these days, isn't it? The enemies of the cross have grabbed fully onto the now of this world, and it's all they see.

They've lost sight completely of the not yet, of what is to come. Paul began by saying there are many that walk this way. And it's many, if not most, isn't it?

[16 : 13] The majority of our friends and our families, our colleagues and our neighbors, think this way, live this way, order their lives this way. We've seen it in our own hearts as well, I'm sure, as we've talked about it. Paul says, if you want to stand firm in this work of maturity and transformation, they can't be your example.

Our vision and our mind has to be captivated by something else, by someone else. And that brings us to the third point, which is belonging. Paul says, our citizenship is in heaven.

And from it, we await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. And this cuts right to the heart of it. The Philippian Christians would have instantly connected with this image.

They were a Roman colony, so they were granted a rare standing in the empire as citizens. Christians, and they belonged to Rome. And they were proud of it because it meant that they had protection.

The Roman legions were going to defend them. They had privilege. They had access to wealth building and legal rights. And from the Roman point of view, it meant salvation. Caesar regularly used the titles of Savior and Lord for himself, just as the word gospel originally spoke of Caesar's victories.

[17 : 33] Caesar alone could be trusted to bring peace and prosperity and victory. If you are earthly minded, it didn't get better than this, what the Philippians had in the first century.

This was the place to be, to be a Roman citizen. So what could be better? Well, Paul's making a very strong statement here, isn't he?

To his Philippian friends, his beloved. He says, you don't belong to Caesar. That earthly frame, that point of view, it's not yours. Your salvation is much bigger than this Pax Romana situation that you find yourselves in.

You await a Savior from heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ. You aren't looking inward and downward, you're looking outward and upward, where Christ is who is coming. And the New Testament uses a lot of different ways to play with this idea of citizenship, doesn't it?

Jesus says, we're not of this world. Peter calls us exiles, resident aliens. In Hebrews, we long for the heavenly country. And all of it is the language of expatriates or the language of belonging versus not belonging.

[18 : 46] Our hearts are set on our true home where we really belong. Now often in church land, we use this language to talk about responsibility.

If your true home is heaven, then you ought to live like it. And this is true. The New Testament teaches that way as well. We ought to think and live differently. We're called to walk faithfully.

We're called to think maturely, following Paul's good example. It's true, but it's not first. It's not enough to help you stand firm. Because citizenship, as we know, is a right before it's a responsibility.

It starts with belonging, not behavior. Paul isn't saying here to the Philippians, as we might read it, you're citizens of heaven, so shape up.

No. He's saying, heaven has claimed you. Heaven will always claim you. Heaven is coming for you. Christ has made you his own.

[19 : 49] He has gripped you. You belong to him. You aren't accomplishing your salvation. Christ is bringing it. He is working it out in you by his powerful spirit. In this slow and painful road to maturity, he will bring it to completion.

He will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body. By the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

Our cross-shaped life of suffering that we share with Christ now. The humility, the lowliness that we embrace now, is a prelude to the eternal weight of glory that will be revealed in his coming.

Now, we began by talking about this struggle that we face of Christian maturity, the frustration of the now and the not yet, of our desire for sanctification, and the bad examples that might lure us away from hope in him.

But here, we're talking about the end of all of that, the end of that process. that struggle that we're in now is not forever. Our glorification is coming.

[20 : 58] When Christ returns, when he reveals his power over all things, our transformation will be complete. Our lowly bodies will be like his heavenly body, perfected and deathless.

We will no longer at some point need to forget what's behind and press towards what's ahead. We'll have arrived at home. We'll be where we belong in Christ. The eternal, unshakable, unbreakable reality of heaven has broken into the world in Christ and now it has laid hold of you and me.

It's claimed us as its own and for now we grab onto it by faith until it becomes sight. Day by day forgetting what lies behind, pressing on towards the upward call of Christ.

He has claimed us and he's coming to bring us home. Amen.