



Philippians: Week 4

Week 4, Day 1 - Philippians 3:1

Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard.

Understanding the Passage:

For Paul, it all goes back to rejoicing. In the first two chapters we hear a lot of specific pieces of advice and encouraging words, but Paul says, “finally” the work is to rejoice in the Lord. The Greek word for “finally” is the word *loipos*. It literally means, “here’s what’s left” or “here’s what remains.” Paul says, “after everything I’ve said to you in this letter, the that thing I can center on is rejoicing in God. That’s the foundation.”

Paul preempts a complaint: “isn’t reminding us of the same things over and over tiring?” No. Paul says it’s not burdensome to him to repeat himself or to write the same things over and over. Rather, it protects the Philippians from future temptation or abuse. The word for “safeguard” is *asphales*. You might even see the etymological connection between that word and our word “asphalt.” Paul says to repeat himself and remind the Philippians of the call to rejoice is sturdy and firm – for us, as sturdy as asphalt. And to go over it again and again fills the potholes we might encounter on the journey.

Questions for Reflection:

1. How is rejoicing the “remainder” or the main thing for Paul’s letter? Why do you think that’s where Paul wants to land? How does rejoicing apply to the other guidance and advice that Paul has given?
2. What advice have you heard repeated in your own life? Was it a burden to hear it again? What advice have you had to repeat? Why did you feel the need to repeat it and did it stick?
3. Is rejoicing a firm safeguard in your own life? How can you shore up rejoicing in your own life?

Week 4, Day 2 - Philippians 3:2-6

Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! ³ For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh— ⁴ even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Understanding the Passage:

Paul uses several evocative images in his warnings in this passage. First, he warns of dogs. Remember, dogs were not necessarily the domesticated best friends we enjoy today, but often a metaphor in the Bible for the wily and unpredictable wilderness. Dogs hung around dumps and ate trash. They carried diseases. They would attack passersby. Paul warns of people like this – people that are out to get you and harm you. Out there, Paul warns, the wildness of the world will butt up against the firm foundation of imitating Christ. Watch out.

At the same time, Paul warns generally of evil works. Paul's advice is general enough that it's hard to pin to a specific work of evil, but broad enough to attach to other works Paul warns about. Here he specifically points out the mutilation of the flesh. He's mentioning the outside encouragement to be circumcised as a means of salvation. At this point in the letter it's pretty clear that one person completed the works of the flesh (Jesus) and there's no reason to hitch your wagon to them. Paul does make one interesting note, that even though he discourages attention to the works of the flesh, he has reason to be confident in the flesh. He's adding credence to his discouragement: "I know what it's like to strive after works. I was actually pretty good at it. It will not satisfy you." He goes on to give his credentials. He did it all by the book. He followed the guidelines. He fulfilled the timing of the works. He went so far as to persecute the group he's now leading. He had a great track record with the law. That gives him even more credibility for some – "been there, done that."

Something worth addressing here is how Paul has been used historically to justify antisemitism. One would have to unread all of Paul's celebrations of what God has done in Israel in order to arrive at such an abusive reading. Rejoicing in Christ and his work does not require (nor does it ask for) the hatred and exclusion of God's people in Israel.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What does the image of a dog bring to mind for you? What do you think Paul is warning against?
2. Are there "dogs" in our lives today? While avoiding dehumanizing people, what external circumstances may be out there "in the wild" that can lead us astray in our pursuit of Jesus?
3. Why does Paul have confidence in the flesh? Does this add credibility for his work to you? Why or why not?

Week 4, Day 3 - Philippians 3:7-11

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Understanding the Passage:

Paul confronts his past religious life in a truly vulnerable way. He was raised religiously. He checked the boxes. He lived a righteous life. Given all that, he's ready to count it as loss. Imagine counting your whole life previous to now as "loss." In the same way that Paul imitates Christ in his moral and ethical life, he imitates him with a penchant for hyperbole. In comparison to what Christ has done – infinitely sharing God's love with all of humanity – anything would necessarily be counted as nothing. Or in Paul's words, "rubbish." The word *skybalon* is more precise than that – it's excrement.

Paul counts everything he's done and everything he's been as "rubbish" to the end of gaining *all* that Christ has done for him. That is, Christ's righteousness has now become Paul's (and our) righteousness by sheer grace. What is anything else compared to *that*?

And, if Paul couldn't be any more extreme, he says he's prepared to suffer and die like Jesus if it means getting to partake in the resurrection as Christ did. What faith! When Paul talks about imitation, he *really* means imitate to the extreme.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What do you count as loss in your life? Do you, like Paul, look back on your life differently post-Christ? How do you see your life's story in the light of the story of Jesus?
2. Are there things in your life you'd consider *skybalon* (rubbish)? What do you think Paul is referring to in his own life?
3. Paul's faith is amazing – he's prepared (while in prison) to endure the pain and suffering that Christ endured. Is that posture the goal of the Christian today? Do you share the same attitude as Paul?

Week 4, Day 4 - Philippians 3:12-14

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Understanding the Passage:

Recalling from yesterday's reading, Paul's "goal" is the resurrection from the dead. He directly says he's not there yet. He hasn't suffered exactly as Jesus. He hasn't died. He is not Jesus; but, he pushes forward toward that end to possess it for himself. Why? Because Jesus holds Paul in his hands. In response to the grace and transformation that Jesus offers, Paul can't help but want more of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done.

He stresses that he's not there yet, but that he's ready to leave his past behind and see what God has prepared for the future. I imagine this would be incredibly encouraging to the Philippians. Think of the individuals who might have heard this letter for the first time. Just some 20-25 years ago a man named Jesus of Nazareth changed the history of the world and changed the individual lives of so many. Paul's ready to put everything pre-Jesus behind him and asks his readers to do the same. Look forward. God has more to do in Christ.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Knowing the good news that Jesus has "made you his own," what does that encourage you to do? How might it transform how you act in the world?
2. Does following Jesus give you hope for the future? Why or why not?
3. What does God still have left to do in you? In your community? In your church? In your city? In the world?

Week 4, Day 5 - Philippians 3:15-16

Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. ¹⁶ Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.

Understanding the Passage:

Paul wraps up this section with another plea for unity. Being of the same mind is a mark of maturity. Mature followers of Jesus have collectively adopted what they have "attained" or received from Jesus, not a bespoke version of Jesus that fits who they already are.

One might say that herd like-mindedness is actually a sign of weakness. Recall earlier passages in which Paul calls for unity of spirit and thought. It's not about adopting Paul's vision for humanity – it's about adopting God's in Christ. Now imagine that God really is who Paul says God is and who Jesus demonstrated God to be. Would it really be such a bad idea to have your mind shaped by this God? The God who created and knows all things? The one who raised Jesus from the dead? Paul

resists the idea that God is just some spiritual advice-giver. Rather, the God of the universe desires to be *with* you and in that intimacy to also form every aspect of your life, including your mind.

Paul leaves open the possibility that the Philippians won't all get to like-mindedness all at once. "If you think differently about anything" your mind will be changed if you stick with Jesus. There's a communal aspect to this. There is no solitary follower of Jesus. Rather, followers of Jesus become like-minded *together*. Transformation happens in a community. And, if you "hold fast" to this great gift of what God has done in Christ, you and your whole community *will be changed*. That's the promise Paul points to. Following Jesus is not simply a project of opinion formation. Being in a beloved community with other believers shapes your whole person. The end goal isn't checking ideological boxes. The end goal is Christian community, of which changing your mind is a precious fruit.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How do we become of the same mind? Is this truly a mark of maturity? How so?
2. Does Paul's view of God change how you think about being "of the same mind?" Why or why not?
3. How does your spiritual life shape your mind? Would you say you and others in your Scripture+Shared group are of one mind?
4. What things are okay to be of a different mind about?

Video Questions:

1. What does it mean to rejoice?
2. How do you answer Paul's call to, "rejoice yourself?" Is it something you can do on your own? What do you *need* in order to practice rejoicing?
3. How do you, in your own life, distinguish between "the flesh" and "the spirit?"
4. What are some simple ways you can begin practicing imitating Christ?
5. What is the difference between effort and earning? Do you see your spiritual life as one or the other?

Prayer requests and other notes.