

XII. Lesson 12 Citizens of Heaven/Agreeing and Helping – Phil. 3:20-4:3

March 7/8, 2007

Aim: To understand that Christians live with a different perspective from the world on (i) the future and (ii) disagreements.

A. Citizens of Heaven (Phil. 3:20-4:1)

In Philippians 3:18-19, Paul points out four moral deviations of false teachers: 1) in character they were enemies of the cross of Christ; 2) their god was their own passions; 3) their glory was in the shame in which they indulged; 4) their future was destruction. In what follows, he shows us that at each of these points the lives of Christians stand in contrast to terms of their character, their Lord, their glory, and their destiny.

1. Christian Character (3:20a)

Unlike the enemies of the cross Paul has been describing ‘who set their mind on earthly things’ (3:19), the Christian knows that this world is not the end, for their ‘citizenship (*politeuma*) is in heaven (*ouranois*).’ Christians are aliens or strangers in this world (1 Pe. 1:1; 2:11). It is a traveling place to another world and not a stopping place. Their true home is in Christ, in the presence of God.

Philippi had become a Roman colony during the previous century. It was governed by Roman law; its inhabitants wore Roman dress; they used Latin in official documents; even the architecture of Philippi became Romanesque in character. Most significantly of all, the citizens of Philippi had the privilege of being citizens of Rome.

To live in Philippi, but to be a citizen of Rome, living the Roman life while absent from the Roman capital – what an ideal illustration of the Christian! Paul is saying, ‘Just as the Roman colonists never forget that they belong to Rome, you must never forget that you are citizens of heaven, and your conduct must match your citizenship.’ As Roman subjects they are citizens of the far distant, capital city of Rome, where the emperor has his residence. As servants of ‘another king, one called Jesus’ (Acts 17:7), we are citizens of that capital city where the King of kings has His domicile. We are in Christ; we have experienced a heavenly calling; we belong to another country and are citizens of a different city from this world. Here on earth, meanwhile, we are resident aliens who dwell temporarily in a foreign country, but we have our citizenship elsewhere (*cf.* Heb. 11:13; James 1:1; 1 Pe. 1:1; 2:11).

2. The Lord from Heaven (3:20b)

‘Their god is their belly;’ they worshiped downwards and inwards! But contrast the Christian believer who looks upward, outward, and forward to his Lord and God, ‘the Lord Jesus Christ (*cf.* Titus 2:13). Those whose minds are ‘set on earthly things’ live only for the present, to gratify their desires. They know neither satisfaction in this life nor the hope of true joy in the world to come. Christians, by contrast, have the blessings of grace now and eagerly look forward then to their Savior coming from heaven to take them where they belong.

Jesus Christ will come from heaven as our ‘Savior’ (*soter*). ‘Savior’ is a very infrequent term when used as a title of the Lord Jesus in the Pauline writings (*cf.* Eph. 5:23; 2 Tim. 1:10; Titus 1:4; 2:13; 3:6). The neglect of this term in early Christian literature was likely due to the popular

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use of the designation in Greek religion where the gods were hailed as ‘saviors,’ and in Caesar worship which gave this honorific title to the emperor. ‘Savior’ (*soter*) became a title of the Roman emperors in 48 BC when a decree of the people of Ephesus declared Julius Caesar to be the ‘universal savior of mankind’; thereafter it became a common title for the ruling Caesar. Christians would be reluctant to claim a term for their Lord which was so applied in current religious speech. The use of the term here may be justified on the ground that Paul has employed an imagery in which the contrast with the Roman emperor was unavoidable. Therefore, he opposed the true emperor, ‘the Lord Jesus Christ,’ against the head of imperial Rome.

3. The Christian’s Glory (3:20b-21)

The false teachers’ ‘glory is in their shame.’ By contrast, Christians look forward to all that is shameful giving way to glory. ‘We eagerly await’ (*apekdechometha*) for His reappearing, says Paul, using a verb which is usually employed of the hope which is set upon many things in the future (*cf.* Rom. 8:19, 23; 1 Cor. 1:7; Gal. 5:5; Heb. 9:28). The glorious return of our Lord should occupy much of our attention. The Second Coming of Jesus is mentioned over 300 times in the New Testament, so we should never forget that He is coming again. We should be living our lives in ways which please Him.

But He will also return as the ‘Lord’ and engage in triumphant work, exercising His authority over the whole creation. He has that power (*energia*), which results in effective action; of which the resurrection of Christ is the supreme demonstration (Eph. 1:19-20). One day He will display it universally, thus demonstrating for all that the entire universe and everything in it is ‘under His control.’ The thought corresponds closely with that in 2:10-11 where every domain is brought into subjugation to Jesus Christ.

We have a future to which not all the immediate gratification in the world can compare! We will be like Christ, for He ‘will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body.’ The Greek translated as ‘lowly’ (*tapeinoseos*) is related to the noun *tapeinosis* which means ‘low estate’ or ‘humiliation;’ *cf.* 2:8, where the cognate verb is ‘He humbled Himself,’ (also Luke 1:48). Ours is a lowly body because it belongs to the state of humiliation caused through sin. Its characteristics are frailty (*cf.* Gen. 3:19; Ps. 103:14) and weakness as the agency which sin finds it so easy to command and use (Rom. 7:14ff.). But the body itself as God’s creation is good (1 Cor. 6:13ff.).

‘Our lowly body’ will one day give place to a new ‘spiritual’ body. 1 Corinthians 15:42ff. describes also the transformation of the departed believers. The ‘body of His glory’ (*somati tes doxes*) is the prototype of the believer’s spiritual body, and we shall be made like it, *symmorphon*, by his transforming power. The likeness will not be external resemblance only, but we may say, in view of the use of the root *symmorphos* in 3:10, translated ‘becoming like,’ that the point of connection will be a sharing in the nature of that exalted body (*soma*), which signifies ‘the whole person.’ The ‘end-product’ of God’s redeeming activity, which is continuous throughout our Christian experience (2 Cor. 3:18) will then have been achieved: Christ will have taken shape (*morphe*) in us (*cf.* Gal. 4:19).

Then our salvation will be complete. From beginning to end salvation is a process of transforming us into the likeness of Christ. In the finale, this ‘lowly body,’ made from the dust of the earth (Gen. 2:7), weakened by sin and disease, subject to the shame of death and

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disintegration, will be transformed by Christ when He raises it from the dust (*cf.* 1 Cor. 15:42-44).

- ‘*Salvation is a process of transforming us into the likeness of Christ*’ (p. 95). Trace the stages in this process. Is this the way we normally think about ourselves?

4. To Crown It All (4:1)

God’s people are faced with treacherous enemies, but the glories that await them are of such a nature that, as Paul points out with great affection, they should ‘stand fast in the Lord.’ If we are to be strong Christians in a strong church, then we must know the truths of God’s Word and stand firm in them. They were to remember that the Lord was their strength and help, and they were to trust Him come what may.

So, how can we find the strength to stand firm like that? First of all, *we are to see that we live according to the pattern Paul gave.* We are to live selfless lives (2:3). Secondly, *our attitude should be the same as that of Christ* (2:5). Thirdly, *we must remember that Christ is Lord.* If Euodia and Syntyche (see 4:2) had remembered and obeyed these things, then they would not have fallen out with each other, and Paul would not have had to cause them embarrassment by mentioning their names in this letter.

Paul demonstrates very clearly that he still loves the Christians at Philippi, despite the disagreement between the two women. Notice all the terms of endearment he uses. There are six of them in verse 1 alone. ‘Whom I long for’ (*epitheto*) recalls 1:8 and expresses his ardent desire to see them again.

As Paul looks to the future he thinks about the enduring significance of his relationship to the Philippians, calling them his ‘joy and crown’ (*cf.* 1 Th. 2:19-20). Paul does not use the Greek word *diadema*, which refers to the crown of a king. The word used here is *stephanos*, which is that for the festive garland or crown won by victorious athletes at the games (*cf.* 3:14; 2 Tim. 2:5; 1 Cor. 9:25). If the metaphor is to be applied here, it means that the Philippian Christians would be regarded as his ‘reward,’ the seal of his apostleship (1 Cor. 9:2), and the proof that his labor had not been in vain in the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58; Phil. 2:16). The Philippians were his brothers; he loved them and longed for them. Unlike the shameful things to which the false teachers devoted themselves, this relationship would last. It would also be transformed into something more glorious – into Paul’s ‘joy and crown.’

Live for the things that will last! That is the underlying lesson. Paul has shown us what this means: living for the long-term, and not with an eye on the quick and easy methods of spiritual advance which are so characteristic of false teachers. That means keeping our eye fixed on eternal realities, on the long-term harvest of our lives, not on short term satisfaction. It means lifting our eyes to the sure promise that Christ will appear again in glory, rather than lowering our eyes to ourselves and our appetites. The only enduring appetite is an appetite of love for Christ and His people. All else will become dust.

B. Agreeing and Helping (Phil 4:2-3)

The various themes briefly treated throughout chapter 4 can be summarized under the general topic of Christian attitudes. As we have seen, Paul was convinced that what we think, and the

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way we think, profoundly influences the way we live. Here in verses 2 and 3, he concentrates on the way Christians should think in the context of their Christian fellowship.

To live above
With the saints we love;
Oh, that will be glory!
But to live below
With the saints we know;
Now that's a different story!

Bentley tells of a church where there had almost been a split in the membership over the color that the kitchen had been painted. The complaint was that the deacons did it without consulting the membership of the church. Does this kind of thing sound familiar? ... The sad thing is that most of these altercations arise out of selfishness. They happen because the people concerned do not have the same attitude that Christ Jesus did (2:5; *cf.* James 4:1-2).

Three hundred years ago John Owen said that division over minor matters had caused Christianity to lose much of its authority in the world. This is even more true today than it was when he wrote it. It is, therefore, not surprising that many people fail to take notice of what the church says. Owen concludes, 'Christians ought to be a blessing to everybody, but they are not.'

1. Agreeing Together (4:2a)

Two ladies from the church at Philippi have gone down in history, and the thing they are remembered for is that they had fallen out with each other. The details of the disagreement between Euodia and Syntyche are, tactfully, not discussed by Paul. But the situation was obviously serious enough for him to address these women by name, and the division sufficiently long-standing for news of it to have reached Paul's ears in faraway Rome. Paul was so concerned about it that he found it necessary to mention it in his letter, and actually name the two ladies. However, Paul refuses to take sides in their disagreement. He pleads with both of them equally.

The situation here is very different from Paul's concern over the threat of false teachers. They were 'enemies of the cross' but these women had been (and Paul still regarded them as) 'fellow workers' who had labored with the apostle 'in the gospel.' He praises them for their past work. Possibly they assisted him with material help as Lydia had done some years before. He was sure that they were genuine believers. Nevertheless, there was a division between them. They had been very bold in speaking to non-Christians about the salvation that there was in Christ, but now it seems that they would not even speak to each other.

This division was, no doubt, affecting the entire church. If Euodia and Syntyche were among the original little group of praying women who worshiped with Lydia (*cf.* Acts 16:13), a disagreement between them had potentially far-reaching repercussions.

2. Christian Harmony (4:2b-3)

Nothing so hinders the cause of Christ as Christians who have unresolved disagreements with each other. Unbelievers are ever eager to pounce on dissension in the church as proof that there is nothing to Christianity. While the church has to work very diligently to publicize the gospel, a church quarrel always publicizes itself!

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The apostolic appeal to agree needs to be heeded. But how? Paul mentions two things which provide direction.

1. Firstly, Christians are to learn ‘to agree’ (*to auto phronein*) (literally, ‘to think the same things’ or ‘to have the same mind’) ‘in the Lord.’ This is a phrase which uses Paul’s favorite verb, *phronein*, which means to think or be minded in a certain way. The common ‘mind’ they are to share, in reconciliation and mutual love, is one which sets the good of the church above personal interest, and finds its inspiration in the lowliness of the incarnate Lord and the standard He expects of His people (2:3, 5).

How can two people who think differently be brought to think in the same way? By remembering that they are both ‘in the Lord.’ The apostle did not ask that these ladies agree for Paul’s own sake, or even for the good of the church (although both of these would have been valid reasons for doing so). No, he urges them to ‘agree with each other in the Lord.’ They are His, not their own; they are both His. It would be inconsistent, therefore, for either of them to insist on her own way, when they both belonged to a Savior who had not insisted on His way nor sought to please Himself (*cf.* 2:1-11; Rom. 15:2-3). We can never shake hands with a fellow-Christian after a disagreement and say, ‘I told you so.’ Instead, we must always say, ‘The Lord has told both of us so.’

Christians have been given insight into the mind of the Lord. Paul’s life had set before them an ‘example’ (3:17); his teaching had given them the pattern (3:17) for living. The contemporary application of this is obvious. When two Christians disagree, they must both seek to submit their thinking to the teaching of Scripture. That is the litmus test of our real attitude.

2. Secondly, Paul makes clear that division between two individuals in a Christian fellowship can never remain a private matter between them. It inevitably affects others. Because disagreements do not remain private, Paul appeals not only to the individuals involved but to at least one other person to help them. ‘True companion’ (*gnesie syzyge*) is a translation of the more literal ‘loyal’ [or perhaps, ‘aptly named’] ‘Syzygus’ or ‘yoke-fellow.’ It is possible that Paul has an individual, named Syzygus, in mind, although this does not seem to occur elsewhere as a first century name. Other suggestions for an individual include Timothy, Epaphroditus, Luke, and Lydia.

The meaning of the name ‘Syzygus’ is significant, because a yoke is what was used to bind two oxen together when they were plowing a field or working a grinding-machine. The animals were fixed to each other with a piece of wood called a yoke, and this ensured that they moved together at the same speed and the same direction. If this is the name of a real person, Paul is playfully reminding him to be true to his name, and to be a real ‘yoke-fellow,’ in assisting in the coming together of the estranged women.

The identity of the person is not important. He or she, a person who had labored faithfully with Paul and others, obviously had the respect of all the church members and could, therefore, truly assist Euodia and Syntyche in resolving their quarrel.

Clement is the name of a Philippian Christian otherwise unknown. The name was a common one in the first century and would be familiar in a Roman colony like Philippi; so there is no clue to exact identification.

Paul had already reminded the Philippians that their citizenship is in heaven (3:20). So if they were citizens of heaven, why were they quarrelling among themselves? The question for each of us is: ‘How can we live as citizens of heaven if we are at odds with a fellow believer?’ After all,

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their names were written in ‘the book of life.’ This book is the register of the people of God (Ex. 32:32-33). In it are recorded the names of the righteous (Ps. 69:28). The Lord Jesus told His disciples to rejoice above all else that their names were written in heaven (Lk. 10:20). Come what may, every person whose name has been written in God’s book will go at last to heaven (Is. 4:3; Rev. 3:5; 13:8; 17:8).

Christian fellowships are often at their worst when dealing with differences of opinion. In some ways biblically-based churches find it easier to deal with false teaching. But personal differences can be almost as deadly, dividing the fellowship, sowing seeds of bitterness, diverting attention from central issues to sometimes petty, peripheral concerns, sucking energy that should be employed in building up believers and in reaching out to the community. How effectively we handle these differences may say more about the biblical character of our church life than how we handle heresy.

- *What do you think are the most common reasons for divisions within the church?*
- *What are some of the potential dangers for a Christian fellowship when two of its prominent members seriously disagree? How can we minimize these dangers?*

C. Application & Discussion Questions

- *In what ways does the Christian inevitably ‘stand out’ as a citizen of heaven?*
- *How would a frequent asking of the question, ‘What future is there in the object of your devotion?’ (p. 94) help us live the Christian life more faithfully?*
- *In what ways do we fail to ‘Live for the things that will last!’ (p. 96)? Why?*
- *‘How can two people who think differently be brought to think in the same way’ (p. 99)?*
- *How can we recognize and deal with pride as a cause of disagreement among Christians?*

For next time: Read Philippians 4:4-13 and Ferguson chapters 24-25