

Philippians 3:1-4:1

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Date: 30 June 2024

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[0 : 00] Over these last few Sunday evenings we've been talking about what it means to keep our heads while others are losing theirs and in some cases blaming it on us.

! The foundations of our society and our culture are being dismantled and so the question is how then should we live?

Augustine was a bishop, an African bishop in the fourth and fifth centuries and he describes the world in terms of two cities. Not physical places existing in different locations, not temporal places existing in different times, but bodies of people, cities marked by different kinds of desires.

There is the earthly city that is marked by disordered desires while the city of God is marked by a desire to embody the values of the kingdom of God.

There is the earthly city marked by distorted desires and there is the city of God marked by a desire to live in a way that is governed by God's word and according to the values of his kingdom.

[1 : 26] Now we get a glimpse of that difference here in Philippians chapter 3 and do turn it up if you've closed your Bibles, page 981. As with the other sermons in this series, it won't be a super tight exposition of Philippians 3 but this evening we're going to spend quite a bit of time in this text.

But Paul talks about those who, on the one hand, if you look at verses 18 and 19, that's actually page 982, they live according to their desires and those desires make them enemies of the cross of Christ.

I tell you, even now with tears, there are those who walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. That is, they are citizens of the earthly city.

And to be a citizen of the earthly city is to have your mind and your heart set on earthly things. Now that could take a number of forms, couldn't it? It could take all kinds of different expressions. This group, the way they express their earthly desires is explicitly religious.

They're a group called the Judaizers who demand a certain religious ritual. But when Paul says that, quote, their God is their belly, that is a phrase that he's using to describe the earthly, this worldly nature of their interests.

[2 : 41] Although they are expressed in religious terms, they are actually very earthly and of this world. And Paul contrasts those who are enemies of the cross of Christ, who have their belly as their God.

He contrasts them with those whose citizenship is in heaven. The city of God. And those who live accordingly, pursuing their happiness in God, pressing on in the hope of the resurrected Jesus and ordering their lives around him.

And these two cities are rival visions of how to live in the here and now. These two cities, you could say, are present in the here and now.

And they are visions that are being lived out alongside each other in boardrooms and staff rooms up and down the country. In cities and towns and villages across the world. So the question we must ask is, what does it look like to be that society who are called to embody the life of heaven that God has called us to live in this world?

A world that has been cursed by sin. A world that is marked by pain and hardship. Where even ordinary things like working a job have been spoiled by struggle and strife. There are thorns and thistles, it seems, at every turn.

[3 : 55] And it's also a place where, as I said at the beginning, there is a growing cultural opposition that we face that simply adds to the strain. There is something about living in a fallen world that is difficult just in and of itself because the world has been cursed by God because of our rebellion.

But add to that the extra opposition that we face in the strain just grows. How does the church live as the city of God? How do we keep our heads when the earthly city seems to be in charge? When the earthly city seems to be gaining momentum? When the earthly city feels like it is an impossible force that we can't possibly stand against? How do we live? Well, I want to suggest that we live by establishing our lives around four convictions.

Establishing our lives around four convictions. Here's the first. Christ at the center. Christ at the center. Everyone, whatever they say they believe, has something at the center of their lives. Something around which every decision they make, from the most mundane to the most significant, every decision is governed by this thing at the center of their life. It is the beast in the middle of everything around which everything else orbits.

[5 : 12] And Paul describes how for him it had been religious and social credibility. Paul talks about how he had been a Hebrew of Hebrews.

He was a Pharisee. He was committed to the law. He was a persecutor of the church. He was a zealot. Paul was absolutely, he wasn't just born with great pedigree, but he was also committed to living that out in a way that was flawless.

He was the best of the best when it came to that world. And it all had to do with religious and social credibility. And then he met Christ. Look at verse 7. Everything changed.

Everything that was valuable before is now loss.

Everything that was at the center before has now been shattered and pushed out of the way and replaced by Christ. Loss for the sake of Christ, greater worth of knowing Christ.

[6 : 27] Everything else he says is rubbish if he can only gain Christ. And again, verse 14. He says he strains and presses on toward the goal of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Whatever the past and whatever the present opposition, Paul is captivated by Christ. Christ is at the center of everything. And his reasons for this are twofold. On the one hand, Christ affords a righteousness that no one can earn.

You see that? Verse 8. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I've given up all these other things and I want to be found in him not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law.

But that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

Christ affords a righteousness that no one can ever earn.

Through his death and resurrection, the Lord Jesus grants to those who put their faith in him a righteousness from God. And there's a sense in which that's the key moment.

[7 : 33] It is as we receive that righteousness by faith, not in our own effort, but by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that we are moved from the earthly city to the heavenly city. That's the citizenship that Paul describes down in verse 20.

Paul is captivated by Christ because of the grace and the mercy that he has been shown in receiving right standing with God. Not on the basis of his performance, but as a free gift.

And this is the blessing for all who put Christ at the center of their lives. When you put your faith in Christ, you put him at the center of your life and you receive a righteousness that means that you're accepted and loved by the creator of the universe.

Think about the way that we live our lives. Think about the way life is set up when you have anything else at the center. Think about the way that we live our lives. All of the striving that characterizes our world is at root an attempt to be accepted.

An attempt to be in the right with our chosen master, whatever that master might be. One of the most explicit ways that we see it in our culture today is the way that people's followers on social media control the way they live.

[8 : 46] If you've put your followers at the center of everything, you live your life for their approval. If it's your boss, if it's money, well it could be anything. If it's at the center, you live to serve it.

Your life orbits around it. You're looking for acceptance from that thing or those people or whatever it might be. What you want there is to be in the right with that master.

The reality is that when we put Christ in there, when Christ is at the center of everything, we are accepted by the living God. We are accepted and loved and cherished by the God of the universe. Paul puts Christ at the center of everything because Christ has been so gracious to him. That's on the one hand. On the other hand, he puts Christ there because it is the right thing to do.

Christ deserves to be there because of who he is. It is striking in this chapter. You could say in the letter of Philippians in general how Paul repeatedly describes Jesus. Have a look at verse 3, Christ Jesus.

[9:52] Verse 7, Christ. Verse 8, Christ Jesus my Lord. He very rarely refers to him as Jesus on his own. He is always Christ Jesus or the Lord Jesus Christ.

By referring to Jesus in this way, Paul is repeatedly using his kingly title. He is emphasizing the power and authority that Christ possesses. So even if there was nothing in it for him, even if there is nothing in it for us, it is entirely right that Christ is at the center of our lives.

It is entirely right that Christ is at the center of our society because he is at the center of the universe. He is Lord. The risen and ascended Christ is Lord of all.

Every king, every government, every business and cultural leader, he is Lord over all of them. He is Lord over the earthly city, whether the earthly city recognizes it or not.

He is Lord over everything that will happen this Thursday and the outcome. And whoever gets promoted into positions of power and authority, he is Lord over them all. And all of those people are obligated to bow their knee to him because of who he is.

[11:07] What that means is he is Lord over every aspect of your life and my life as well. He is Lord over your body, your relationships, your career, your family, your home.

He is Lord over your fridge, your words, your actions, your laptop. He is Lord over the whole nine yards. Citizenship of the city of God requires us to hold Christ at the center.

Now because we do this, it leads to a second conviction. It is this. Second conviction is God's word over all. Number one, Christ at the center. Number two, God's word over all.

Because the risen Christ is Lord, the word of God must rule every aspect of our lives. As an apostle, Paul knows that he is providing the foundational documents for the church. That's why in verse one, he says he is glad to write these things to the Philippians.

As it was for them, so it is for us. This book, the Bible, is the one place we go in order to know what it looks like in order to live in a way that pleases God.

[12:12] The Bible is to become the world that we inhabit. It is to become the lens through which we view absolutely everything in our lives. Our first question for anything from ethics to the environment to our career to how we spend our money to the politics that we have to our relationship to the state should always be, What does the Bible say?

What has God said on this matter? That means we should make it our business to understand what it says. Understand what it means. We should have a view on the difficult bits of the Bible.

And we should live our lives that are consistent with that view. Not finding excuses for why the difficult bit doesn't apply to us. Why that bit that is culturally unpopular, all of a sudden in the last few years we've discovered that the meaning is different.

And it doesn't mean what for X number of hundred years we thought it meant. We submit ourselves to God's word over all. Now the pressure of the earthly city dents our confidence on this.

Makes us want to step back. Makes us want to find, oh look, the culturally appropriate interpretation of that otherwise difficult text. We lose our nerve.

[13:30] But this is the book that God has given us. This is the book that lays out our rules of engagement. And so we must take it as such. It must be allowed to take us wherever it may.

Christ at the center, God's word over all, and I submit myself to it wherever it takes me. However uncomfortable that might be, however difficult it might be. And we do this because of the authority that it has.

The God who breathed it out is sovereign and has the right to call us how to live. We do it because it has the authority to call us to do it.

A bit like the Lordship of Christ. We submit to Him because of who He is. We submit to Scripture because God has the authority to call us to submit to it. But we also do it because, well as I said when we looked a few weeks ago at the oneness of God, this word sets us free.

Think about the billions of voices that tell you how to live in this cultural moment. How to raise your children. How to use your money. How to order your relationships.

[14:37] How to find happiness. You can get, with a click, you can get a thousand different opinions on each one of those tonight if you wanted to.

And there's a good chance that they all contradict each other. When God's word orders our lives, there is not only truth, but there is coherence and consistency. And that is liberating.

When James talks about the law of God, he calls it the law of liberty. Because the one God has spoken and He sets us free. A life with Christ at the center that is submitted to God's word then leads us to a third conviction.

Here is a third conviction around which we need to order our lives as people, as citizens of the city of God in the earthly city. Worship at the top.

Christ at the center, God's word over all, worship at the top. Paul describes the conflict between the two cities as an issue of worship. Did you notice that? Look at verse 3. The true people of God worship by the Spirit of God and the glory of Jesus Christ.

[15:47] Whereas the enemies of the cross are described, verse 19, as having a different God altogether. The God of their earthly desires. Now worship.

The giving of yourself to something or someone. Worship in the broad sense is unavoidable. We talk about that all the time. We quote Bob Dylan all the time. You've got to serve somebody.

Because we are created for worship, worship is unavoidable. That we worship as part of being human. It's as simple as that. As a human being, you are a worshiper.

However, we can only choose who or what it is that worship is directed toward. The object of that worship. And the choice is between worship that is true, that is focused on the Lord Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit.

And then anything else. It's a choice between one, the Lord Jesus, true worship, and then anything else. So only two options.

[16:51] There are a bazillion options in category two. There's only two categories. And for the Christian, while we acknowledge that all of life is worship and that everything we do is devoted to God in some way.

Christ at the center, God's word over all. The most important way that we worship is when we gather in his presence in the city of the living God each Lord's day. What we're doing now.

Here's how Hebrews describes what we're doing now. Here's how Hebrews. Hebrews is a sermon. And it is a sermon that is being delivered to a congregation.

And the writer says, But you have come to Mount Zion. Chapter 12, verse 22. In this gathering, that's what you have done. You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.

He's saying, You have come into the presence of God in heaven. To the innumerable angels in festal gathering. And to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven. And to God, the judge of all.

[17:55] And to the spirits of the righteous made perfect. And to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant. And to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. That's what you've come to when you gather here each Lord's day.

Verse 28, Hebrews 12. Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. And thus let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe. For our God is a consuming fire.

Now the author of Hebrews, his reference here to city is important. It refers to the coming together of people. You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God.

We are not called to individual communion with him somewhere of our choice. We are called together to worship. We gather on his terms, not our terms.

We don't make up what we do when we gather in this way. And we are called together with the people that he has chosen for us to meet with at that time. And we gather to have our lives reoriented around the values of the city of God.

[19:02] And this is absolutely vital for the Christian life. That is why in the same letter, a couple of chapters earlier, the author says, Do not forsake the meeting together as some are in the habit of doing.

Don't forsake coming together into the presence of God in this way. Because you will miss out on all of this. You will miss out on the reordering of your life according to the values of the city of God.

The Lord does not come first in a person's life in abstract ways. Like in your heart. Jesus comes first in practical and obvious ways. Like worshipping him on the first day of the week.

Worship at the top. This is one of the big shifts that happened between the old and new covenants. Under the old covenant, it was six days of work and then a day of rest for worship. Leviticus 23 says that the weekly Sabbath was a day of gathering to worship God.

In the new covenant, we gather on the first day of the week as a way of giving our whole week to God. We gather in this way as the first fruits. We are giving the first fruits of our week to God to say the whole week is yours.

[20 : 11] This time together on a Sunday is the foundation of everything else that will follow in the week. And that is not the case outside the assembled church.

No matter how good the online sermon might be. No matter how good the Christian book may be. No matter how good your other source of receiving some kind of data input, however Christian it might be.

It is not the same. You're not gathering in the presence of God. And when you get into a healthy rhythm of Lord's Day worship, you start to see this.

You start to see how this works. Sunday becomes relevant for a meeting on Tuesday. A situation on Thursday is different because of what you experienced on Sunday. When worship is placed at the top of the week, our whole week is affected in good ways.

A word to the weary and to those who are battling. Maybe battling because the earthly city has roughed you up and you feel, for whatever reason, you feel like you can't face gathering.

[21 : 16] You feel guilty, perhaps, because you've fallen into sin in some way. This is the best place you can be. It might feel completely otherwise, but I'm telling you this is the best place you can be.

As you assemble before the Lord, as you confess your sins, as you hear His assurance of your cleansing and renewal, as you sing or listen to other people sing. Perhaps you can't sing because you're so low.

But as you listen to other people sing of His goodness and grace, as you hear His word preached and bring your prayers to Him. And then when we do, as you smell and taste His promise of your sonship around the Lord's table.

And if you lift your head in that gathering and look around and see these other people who will bear your burdens with you in that struggle. Here is where the weak and the broken are restored.

Here is the best place you can be. Worship is vital. Make worship on the Lord's day a priority. Christ at the center.

[22 : 18] God's word over all. Worship at the top. Then we go back into the world. We leave worship on the Lord's day. We think, oh, that did me good.

But we walk straight back into the many challenges that meet us in our culture. We seek to do our work to God's glory. We seek to share the gospel with colleagues and friends. We seek to raise our children without other people interfering.

We seek to serve the local community. It's hard. It's opposition. It's difficult. The thorns and thistles are still there as well. But we find ourselves at odds with the earthly city. So we need to hold a final conviction.

And it's this. Courage all the way down. Courage all the way down. Jesus told us that if anyone would come after him, they must take up their cross and follow him.

You probably heard sermons, dozens of sermons on Jesus when he calls a man, calls him to come and die. Die to yourself. We know that that's true. That's another way of describing taking whatever it is that is at the center of your world out of the way and putting Christ there.

[23 : 29] Getting yourself out of the center and getting Christ there. Take up your cross. And Paul's way of saying the same thing is here in verse 10. Can you see? We share in his sufferings and become like him in his death.

If anyone would come after me, he must take up his cross and follow me. That is, if anyone would come after me, he must follow the same path that I walked. Paul says that is share in his sufferings and become like him in his death.

But let's be honest. The temptation to pull back from that. The temptation to shrink from that and to choose a life less difficult is significant. So Paul says, look, chapter 4, verse 1.

Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. Stand firm keeping Christ at the center.

Stand firm living by God's word and gathering to worship him in the presence of his enemies.

Standing firm will mean that we resist the promises of the alternative visions of the good life that our world implores us to embrace.

[24 : 33] Standing firm will mean faithfulness to Christ when the pronoun police make their demands. Or when your resistance to some policy or other will cost you a promotion or maybe even your job.

Or when your inability, because you're Christian, to cheer when you're told that you should be cheering gets you canceled. More and more doors in our society are closing to faithful Christians. It's not a mistake. It is by design. And we need to realize this. We need to realize that this is the way it is. The world has changed. Living the Christian life is much harder now than it was in previous decades.

The institutional opposition to Christians is way further forward than it was in previous generations. Faithful discipleship is going to look different.

If we will have Christ at the center of our lives, it's going to cost us much more than it cost our parents' generation. So we need courage all the way down. But the good news is this.

[25 : 42] When he calls us to stand firm, when we recognize that actually we need to be more courageous than perhaps we had originally thought, it's not just that he says, grit your teeth, go and be courageous, just because it's the right thing to do, even though it is.

Paul calls us to stand firm, having just given us a very good reason to do so. Look up at chapter 3, verse 20. 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. Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. Think to yourself, I get it that we need courage, but I can't do it. It's beyond me. It's just too much. Well, Paul motivates our courage with this vision of the future.

The Christian life is necessarily future-focused. The Lamb wins. Christ has triumphed and he's coming back to transform you and to transform me and all that is broken about our world.

[26 : 57] Here is why standing firm is worth it and why the city of God is always, always, always marked by hope. However difficult it gets to live as a citizen of the city of God in the context of the earthly city, we always have hope.

Christians don't expect perfection before this future day. So we expect it will always be tough. Now, lots of the current visions of the good life that are out there are utopian.

If we fix the environment, we can live in paradise. If we get exactly the right leaders this Thursday, they'll fix our world. We've bought into an idea that we can make this life perfect.

Because it isn't happening, we despair. But that's not how God works. That's not the way a Christian should think.

Jesus tells us that the kingdom, the city of God, grows throughout the world like yeast works through a loaf. It starts really, really small. But in hidden ways, it grows and grows and grows.

[28 : 02] Until one day, the earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. The Lamb wins. Christ triumphs. But it is slow.

And until that day, we need courage. We need courage in the face of our own sin, not the despair. And we need courage in the face of any opposition that comes our way to stand firm thus in the Lord.

But we do that by allowing that future day that Paul has talked about in 3 verse 20 to shape the here and now. Because we know that glory awaits. Because we know that we are going to be transformed from what we are now to what we will be then.

Well, we're freed from any need to have glory in the present. Our culture is telling us that this is all we have and therefore we need everything now.

We need glory in the present. And a failure of courage is always motivated by personal comfort. Always. We choose the easy path because we don't want to suffer.

[29 : 08] Now, whether that's in terms of our reputation or material gain or whatever it might be. But if we know that future glory is guaranteed. And that any cost now for the sake of faithfulness will be rewarded on that day.

Courage comes much more easily. When we've got that to look forward to, courage begins to stir in us. Our spine begins to stiffen.

Our resolve begins to grow. When we lift our eyes to the future, we can lay down our lives in the present. Knowing that glory will repay the cost that was born.

Whatever it might be. That's what we have in the city of God. So there we go. When all about us are losing their heads.

Some of them are blaming it on us. How do we keep our heads? Christ. Bible. Worship. And courageous hope. Those are four convictions to establish our lives around as we seek to serve God in the midst of the earthly city.

[30 : 16] Let's pray.