

Straining Forward, Press On and Hold Fast 2022
 Philippians 3:13-4:1 2 Corinthians 5:1-7

Philippians 3:13-4:1 (New Revised Standard Version)

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, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. 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. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained. Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

2 Corinthians 5:1-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling— if indeed, when we have taken it off we will not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord— for we walk by faith, not by sight.

Dr. Smiley was one of my favorite professors during seminary.

I loved his passion and enthusiasm in the classroom,
 and the way he'd lean forward and bounce up on his toes
 when he'd get excited about something during a lecture.

Paul's message to the Philippians reminds me of Dr. Smiley, vs. 13-14

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, I press on** toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul, Silas and Timothy spent about a year and a half at Philippi, proclaiming the gospel and establishing a Christian community. We also know the city of Philippi, located along a major trade route, was considered very cosmopolitan, corrupt, immoral & wildly pagan.

As fairly recent converts to Christianity,
 they had much to learn about living as faithful Christians
 in such an unrestrained, pagan and depraved environment.

So while Paul and the other evangelists were living there,

they tried to teach by modeling how to live out their faith, vs. 1, 17

My brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. Brothers and sisters, **join in imitating me**, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.

Or as he explained in 1 Cor. 11:1, Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

Just as Paul was trying to live and be more like Christ, he's urging the Philippians to follow his example of imitating Christ.

Several year ago at one of the big game preserves in East Africa, because there were more elephants than the land could support, the authorities decided to reduce their herd of elephants. So they shot and killed a number of the older male elephants.

And almost immediately some unexpected trouble erupted. The elephants that were left, suddenly became a big problem, fighting, attacking and killing other animals, and even going after busloads of tourists.

It seems that the young bull elephants, were now all about impressing the female elephants, and got very territorial with their aggressive behavior.

So they brought in an elephant-ethologist who advised them to introduce some older elephants back into the herd, so that they would influence the young bulls back into line.

It seems the young elephants didn't know how or were willing to behave without some older and more experienced elephants to guide them.

So too, we need more knowledgeable and experienced Christians to guide us toward more faithful & effective Christian living.

But then, after Paul had moved on to spread the Good News elsewhere, some of the Christians of Philippi, still young in their faith, started to slip back and return to their former pagan ways, setting their minds on earthly things – **not Christ.** vs. 18-19

For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. **Their end is destruction; their god is the belly;** and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.

Now the ancients believed that all desires emerge from the belly, and so when Paul writes that **their god is the belly,** he's talking about more than just an appetite for food.

These recent converts to Christianity were living their lives mis-focused on pleasure and feeding their every desire. vs. 19 belly; and their minds are set on earthly things.

... their god is the

In sharp contrast, Paul writes, vs. 20

But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Citizenship had a special meaning & significance in the Roman empire.
Philippi was specifically designated as a Roman colony
which meant that though they were far away from the city of Rome,
citizens still lived as Romans & received all the privileges.

Drawing on that perspective and understanding of citizenship,
Paul writes of our loyalty & perspective as followers of Christ.

Paul's point is that we are living as resident aliens in this world,
for this isn't our home, BUT we are waiting for salvation, – vs. 20b
... it is from heaven, we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

When he wrote this, Paul was confined in a prison-cell dungeon,
but he sees beyond his immediate suffering and circumstance
toward God's kingdom – toward the God to whom he belongs...
... as in 2 Cor. 5:1 For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from
God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

Yes, his physical body was in this world, locked in that prison cell.
But his true citizenship and loyalty were not of this world,
and we too need to understand that truth.

Though imprisoned,
Paul stays focused on his true home and to whom he belongs,
and he uses that understanding and the image of citizenship,
**to teach & explain that our relationship with God changes everything
about our lives, our behavior, our attitudes, goals and loyalties.**

When James Baker was the Secretary of State, it was his practice,
that when a new ambassador was appointed to serve a foreign posting,
Baker would call that new ambassador into his office,
and ask them to point out their country on the globe.

And typically they pointed to the country to which they were going.
And then the Secretary of State would say, "No – that's wrong.
Your country is the United States of America.
Never forget your true home and to whom your loyalty is due."

In his cell Paul knows that his true citizenship is God's kingdom,
therefore he can stand firm and strong in Jesus Christ,
for he knows with certainty to whom his loyalty is due...

... **which gave him courage and strength, power and assurance over
any challenge, trouble, storm or claim of this world. 2 Cor. 5:6-7**

So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we
are away from the Lord— for we walk by faith, not by sight.

And as Paul continues, it gets even better, vs. 21

He will **transform** the body of our humiliation that it may be **conformed** to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

Paul uses two very specific Greek words, that together help explain this process of our lives being changed, preparing us for the eternal Kingdom that awaits us.

He will transform the body of our humiliation

“transform” is translated from the GRK word, (μετασχηματίζω).

μετα meaning change and σχηματίζω as in a schematic drawing, which is an engineer’s drawing that is intended to show how something works or operates.

Paul is describing the process of our transformation away from sin, as Jesus redraws the schematics by which we operate in the world.

The second phrase, that it may be conformed to the body of his glory

“conformed” is translated from the GRK word, (συμμορφω),

συμ meaning “same” and μορφω as in morphology, the scientific study of form and structure.

Paul is describing **the process of our transformation,**

as the form and structure of our lives, our being and living,

is changed **to conform more closely to Jesus Christ,** by the Holy Spirit present and at work within us.

This means, the way that we function and operate in the world is gradually becoming more Christ-like as we grow deeper, as we increasingly live into God’s grace and Spirit. vs. 14

... press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

We know that when we connect and interact with certain people somehow they seem to bring out the very best & most noble in us.

When we’re around them, our ideas, conversations are more elevated and we are more gracious, more optimistic, more gentle and hopeful.

They help us have a more faithful and joyful perspective.

And there are others,

who don’t have that same up-lifting or building-up effect on us...

... and around them,

we may hear ourselves using somewhat more colorful language, perhaps laughing at jokes & humor that we know are offensive, and generally more selfish, antagonistic and demanding.

No doubt, for better or worse, we are influenced by others.

In fact it is remarkable how very much some people

and some environments can make a such huge difference

in our attitude, in what we say, and in what we do.

There've always been people, Christian mentors present in my life,
whose life-example has demonstrated God's grace and truth,
faithful Christians whose prayers showed me how to pray,

who shared the power and blessing of Christian faith & service,
and who encouraged me to dig deeper into the Bible on my own,
whose own faith journey with God was visible, authentic & inviting.

And so often it's been just the right needed-influencer,
at just the right time with just the right message ---
--- **and no doubt, it's been a God-thing all along.**

I am so grateful for the mentors of my life,
for those who, in love, integrity, truth, courage and honesty
have challenged me on my faith practices and failings,
**have dared to point out the space and chasm
that exists between my words and my deeds.**

Thank God for the true & godly Christian teachers - mentors in life
who will stand fast, will risk offending or hurting our feelings
and who push & prod us to seek God and God's ways above all else,
and to submit ourselves to the word, will & purpose of God.

So, in your life, who has influenced your faith and walk with God?
Who took an active interest in you, and who helped shape
your character and the person you eventually became?

Maybe a special teacher, a relative, neighbor, coach, scout leader?,
someone significant whose example you admired & wanted to emulate,
and whose guidance, nurture, teaching or influence
made a real and lasting difference in your life,
and who helped shape your values and character?

To those who are open and attentive, willing and humble,
God will place people in our lives to serve as worthy role models,
who by their example, show how us to live out our faith well.

So as we are passing through and deeper into the season of Lent,
the Philippians & 2 Cor. texts suggests 3 considerations
for our growth and useful service through honest reflection.

1st We want to live as a gracious people of faith, hope and integrity.

So who have been your spiritual mentors and influencers,
and through whose examples has the Holy Spirit of God
worked toward your spiritual growth & transformation?

If they are still alive, as a Lenten practice of gratitude & grace,
perhaps a note or phone call of appreciation **for their gift to you.**

And as you remember who your spiritual mentors and influencers were,
also try to recall **what they did & said** that made a difference,
**which leads to another important part, a task entrusted to us,
for us to be a blessing & worthy gift of influence to others.**

2nd Our call is to help form godly character & values in other people,
by living out our faith, our character and values in ways
that consistently provide an example worthy to follow.

And more powerful than anything we can ever say, it's by our deeds,
it's by what others see in us that gives credence to our words.

Our task is to demonstrate the truth, hope and depth of our faith
by word and deed, by our integrity and the choices we make in life,
as by our living, the ethics we demonstrate out in the world,
that makes concrete what our words of faith really mean...

... and as Paul wrote, what it means to walk by faith and not by sight.

Our word & deeds can show what is so special about God's love & grace,
and how God's truth matters and informs how we live out our lives.

3rd As we journey further into Lent preparing for Easter this year,
let us also consider what sources of influence we are choosing,
considerable power and choice in deciding
who and what we will allow in and permit to influence us.

for we do have

We're not just leaves subject to every passing breeze,
but we can choose to hold fast and stand firm in the Lord,
& to walk in ways that are honorable & pleasing to God.

As the Apostle Paul explains it in Romans 12:1-2 (*The Message*)

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and **place it before God as an offering**. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, **fix your attention on God**. You'll be changed from the inside out, **for God brings the best out of you**.