

Philippians #7 - Living what we learn

Bible Reading

Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Philippians 3:17-21

In the previous study of Philippians we saw Paul describing the Christian way of life as being one of dying to our old selfish selves, and learning to live a new way of life, a life lived in relationship with Jesus, a life that relies on Christ's grace, power and righteousness.

We saw how Paul is aware that this is not a 'one-time' decision, but a life long, minute by minute journey, learning to let go of being in control of our lives and handing them over to Jesus.

And this is not something that we will fully achieve in this life. Paul is aware that he falls short of what he is urging the Philippians to do. We are all in this together, imperfect but forgiven people, learning to live the Jesus way.

Paul talks about this new way of life as pushing towards a goal. Being a follower of Jesus requires effort.

But Jesus works with us. He even provides the initial push.

It is Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, who initiates and sustains our new way of living, so we are never working alone.

Jesus takes hold of us, and we hold on to Jesus, doing the things we know he wants us to do, constantly relying on his wisdom and strength.

And the ultimate goal is knowing, loving and trusting Jesus more fully, something that we can move towards in this life, but which we will only know in a perfect way in our resurrected bodies.

Paul concludes this section with the following words...

All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

Philippians 3:15-16

Here we see that Paul knows that not everyone is going to find this teaching easy to accept. He knows that the Philippian church was made up of imperfect people, as we will see in a few verses time.

What Paul wants his hearers to do is examine what he is saying, discuss it among themselves and pray about it. He is confident that if they do this, they will see that it squares with God's will for them.

Note that Paul does not say 'if on some point you think differently, stop thinking'. Paul is not a dictator, he is a teacher. More than anything he wants his hearers to understand why they believe what they believe.

He doesn't want them to be dependent on him, he wants them to be dependent on Jesus.

This is the essence of all good Christian teaching, not indoctrination, but education, presenting God's truths in the hope that what is relevant and helpful will be thought about and acted upon by the hearers.

And like all the best teachers, Paul and his colleagues Epaphroditus and Timothy walk what they talk, as he states in the following verse...

Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.

Philippians 3:17

Far too often, Christians equate spiritual growth with learning stuff.

Now learning stuff is good. But we don't learn stuff for the sake of learning stuff, we learn stuff so that we understand why and how we can live stuff.

I could spend my life reading books about how to ride a bicycle, but just reading about it is not enough. I need to get on a bicycle and learn how to pedal, balance, steer and brake.

Jesus' disciples learned from him, but they also imitated him. In Jesus' day, disciples left everything they had to live their life around their chosen teacher, to observe and emulate the way they lived their lives.

Jewish writings show that this devotion to knowing everything their teacher did sometimes went as far as disciples following their rabbi into the toilet to find out whether he says a special prayer before or after doing his business.

The Gospels don't mention this happening, but there are plenty of examples of Jesus' disciples asking him to show them how to do things, including how to pray, and how many times they had to forgive.

And more than this, Jesus taught his disciples that it wasn't just doing good things that was important, it was the the reasons why you do them, and the attitude with which you perform them.

In my life there have been many people who have inspired me to live a better Christian life. None of them are perfect, but they live lives that demonstrate that they love Jesus. Their love for Jesus motivates their attitude and actions.

It's one of the reasons I enjoy reading Christian biographies, seeing the way God enables imperfect, sinful people to become better people, to handle challenges and even failures by relying on God's grace and power.

I was listening to a podcast a while ago where a man called Martin Shaw (no, not the actor) was being interviewed. Martin is a respected expert in

world mythologies, who became a Christian following an unexpected supernatural experience.

As he talked about his childhood, I realised that he had been brought up in a church where one of my friends used to work, Upton Vale Baptist Church in Torquay. I contacted my friend to tell him about the podcast. He remembered Martin and the rest of the Shaw family well. In fact my friend was still in contact with Martin's father, who is still an active member at Upton Vale Church.

There were two things that I took away from the podcast and my chat with my friend that are relevant to today's talk.

Firstly, when my friend contacted Martin Shaw's father, the father confessed his amazement at his son's conversion. He has two other grown-up children, both committed Christians, and he has faithfully prayed for Martin to come to know Jesus for decades.

But he told my friend that he was completely amazed when his son told him about his conversion. Although he had faithfully prayed for it to happen, there was something unimaginable about his son ever becoming a Christian

And yet, it happened. His prayers, as doubting as they were, were answered. Hallelujah!

Secondly, during the interview Martin Shaw talked about how strange it was to be an older man who became interested in the Christian faith, and how much he had been helped by talking with people who had been Christians for decades.

He said that he often found these older people to be nervous about sharing their Christian experience with him, not wanting to be patronising, or to come across as 'super spiritual'.

He encouraged older Christians to be more open to being 'examples' of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, not because older Christians are

perfect, but because they have living experience of how, often because of their failings and imperfections, they have experienced God's reality, experienced his supernatural, loving grace.

He said that many non-believers are tired of the 'flatness' and hopelessness of their lives, and that talking with older believers had made him realise how much their faith made their lives so much more hopeful and joyful.

And while this doesn't mean that non-Christians are going around thinking 'I really need Jesus in my life', when they come across people who share their experience of a loving God who helps them with their daily lives, they are often intrigued enough to want to know more.

And now Paul moves from the importance of thinking clearly, and of learning from the godly lives of other Christians, to people in the Philippian church who were doing neither.

For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things

Philippians 3:18-19

As I've emphasised previously, Paul was deeply fond of the Philippian church, and that is why the thought of believers living lives that were at odds with the gospel brings him to tears.

Sadly, for some Christians, God's grace becomes an excuse to live badly. Why not? No matter what I do, God will forgive me. That's his job!

When Paul calls these people 'enemies of the cross of Christ', he is calling to mind what he discussed earlier, about 'forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead'.

These Christians have decided not to take that step. They're Christians by name, they believe their sins have been forgiven, but in practice they are not much different from their non-Christian friends and neighbours, motivated primarily by their physical and emotional appetites.

Paul refers to them as 'enemies of the cross of Christ',

probably referring to what we looked at in the last talk, about wanting to know Christ...

they are people who want salvation from their sins, the power of Christ's resurrection, but are not so keen on sharing in his suffering.

It is verses like these that make me very uncomfortable. And Paul wants me to be uncomfortable, because he knows that I cannot fully experience Jesus' love and peace without living the kind of life he wants me to live.

And the life he calls me to lead isn't always a life of comfort and convenience. It will regularly involve me doing things that I will not be thanked or rewarded for.

And so I regularly compromise. I want the power of Jesus' resurrection, but not the participation in his suffering.

But it's like wanting a perfect beach body, without being willing to do the exercise and refraining from stuffing your face.

As Paul explains...

Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.

Philippians 3:19

The people he is addressing think they are getting the best of both worlds.

They think they are able to eat their cake and have it, or as Paul says, 'their god is their stomach'... rather than the God who gave them their stomach, and the food that they put in it.

In fact, as Christians we will sometimes be called to make and bake the cake, then give it to others to eat.

These people are living double lives... being Christians when they are around Christians, non-Christians when they are not.

And they are proud that they are clever enough to be able to carry this off, as Paul says, 'their glory is in their shame'.

'Their mind is set on earthly things', for these people the world revolves around them, their comfort, their happiness, their security.

But when they're with their Christian friends they know how to use the right words, the right language, so that they fit in there as well.

However, it takes a lot of effort to live a lie. History and modern psychology agree that most humans are not good at living double lives.

And the result of living two lives is that we end up not being able to fully enjoy either of them.

Trying to balance the unbalanceable is too much for our brains to bear... the 'destiny of a double life is destruction', as our lives fall apart under the strain of the contradictions.

Now, of course, none of us manage to fully live the ideal Christian life. The important thing is that we acknowledge our shortcomings and hypocrisies, and ask Jesus to help us to correct them.

At the moment we live in a fallen world, but we are being prepared to live in a renewed, perfected world, as Paul continues...

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!

Philippians 3:20-4:1

What glorious, encouraging words... once again we see that Paul isn't the intellectual bully that so many people think he was. He 'loves and longs' for all the Philippian believers.

Like a good parent with their children, he loves the good and the bad ones. When he sees them doing things that will hurt them, he gets angry, not primarily at the child, but at the things that are going to prevent them from living their best lives.

These closing words are not just for the 'good' Philippian Christians, they are just as much for the ones who are living as 'enemies of the cross of Christ'.

And, they are words for everyone in between, which, let's face it, is most of us. Life on earth is messy. Good, but imperfect. Sometimes amazing, sometimes disappointing.

Jesus knows this, he lived a fully human life, and he didn't even have coffee, or internet access.

Jesus knows that life is not simple, he knows when you're hurting and confused. And he loves you. And he wants to help you. And we need to constantly remind ourselves of this, and turn to him and ask for help.

- Ask him to help you be honest, when it would be easier to lie.
- Ask him to help you forgive the person you really, really don't want to forgive.
- Ask him to help you take the first step towards breaking that bad habit that clings to you like a second skin.
- Ask him to show you what it is that he wants you to do for him today, and ask for the power to want to do it when he shows you.
- Ask him to fill your life with his joy, his delight, his love.

Few of these things will happen overnight, they are a process. As Paul says, we press on towards the goal.

But we live our messy lives with the hope that one day things will be better.

A sure hope that Jesus bought for us by suffering for us on the cross.

And by rising from the dead.

And by ascending back to heaven to 'bring everything under his control', and who will one day 'transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body'.

Now isn't that something to look forward to?

And so Paul finishes this section with one of his great 'therefores'...

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!

Philippians 4:1

Amen, and Amen!