

ST MATTHEWS ANGLICAN CHURCH



9 Studies on the Epistle to the Philippians

TERM 3 2017

Introduction to Philippians

“Onward! Keep going! Don’t stop!” Paul shouts the battle cry, exhorting the Philippians to press on. He is both thankful for their progress as a community of people following Jesus, and desires that they keep moving forward. He challenges them in a number of areas of personal and communal life, that they might stand firm and fight for the faith in a hostile world.

In addition to challenging the Philippians, Paul writes to thank them for their ongoing relationship with him – for their love and for financially supporting his missionary work in other places around the Roman Empire. As such, it is often classified as a “friendship letter.” But more than being a friendship letter, Philippians is a letter about Jesus. Not in the way the gospels are about Jesus – we have very little description of what Christ has done. However, every instruction and every encouragement is grounded in the reality that we have salvation through the gospel.

While Philippians is a joyful letter, filled with thanksgiving, it is also full of challenge for both new and old Christians. For the Christian today, Philippians answers the question, “I’m a Christian – now what?” God, speaking through the apostle Paul, declares that having been saved, Christians are now citizens of a heavenly kingdom, and are to live as citizens of this kingdom “in a manner worthy of the gospel” of Christ, through which we have been saved.

I have personally found so much encouragement in this short letter, and it has shaped much of my understanding of what a healthy church looks like. I pray that you will also be encouraged as you study it, and that our church will grow in unity through and for the gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Chris Donald

Structure

Scholars continue to debate the exact structure of Philippians, but a strong argument can be made that Paul is following the Greek conventions of a letter written to persuade. The following is one possible breakdown of the structure that I have personally found helpful:

1. Epistolary prescript: 1:1-2.
2. *Exordium* [a preview of coming themes and topics of the letter]: 1:3-11.
3. *Narratio* [narration of facts which provide the occasion for the letter]: 1:12-26.
4. *Propositio* [the thesis of the letter]: 1:27-30.
5. *Probatio* [the arguments or proof of the thesis]: 2:1-4:3.
6. *Peroratio* [a reiteration of the main themes and appeal to the emotions of the audience]: 4:4-9.
7. Concluding arguments: 4:10-20.
8. Epistolary greetings and closing: 4:21-23.¹

This is quite technical, but essentially, we have:

1. An introduction that acquaints us with the writer and receivers and previews the themes of the letter (1:1-11)
2. Some background on how Paul is doing (1:12-26)
3. Paul's big idea for the letter (1:27-30)
4. Supporting arguments that build on Paul's idea (2:1-4:3)
5. An emotional appeal to motivate the Philippians towards action (4:4-9)
6. A Conclusion (4:10-23)

¹ B. Witherington, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 29-30.

Study 1 – Philippians 1:1-11

Warm Up Question (as people arrive): If you were to compete in the Amazing Race, who would you choose as your partner?

Discussion: What does the word “fellowship” make you think of?

Introduction: In the opening verses of Philippians, we encounter Paul and Timothy, and the church in Philippi. We get an insight into their relationship with one another, and we encounter some of the key themes that will be developed through Paul’s letter.

But before we dive into the passage, briefly peruse Acts 16:11-40. What do we learn about Philippi, the Philippian church and Paul’s relationship to them?

[OPTIONAL: read through the whole book as a group. Note any words/ideas/themes that seem prominent. Share as a group.]

READ 1:1-11

- How would you summarize this section - what’s Paul talking about?
- How many times does Paul refer to Jesus in these verses, and what do these references teach us about Jesus in verses 1-11?
- Assuming Paul is following the conventions of Greek rhetoric in this letter (see intro to series), this first section of the letter establishes themes that will be important for the rest of the letter. Based on these verses, what themes do you think will be prominent in Philippians?
- What emotions do you see in these verses? What do these emotions reveal about Paul’s relationship with the Philippian church? (compare with the opening verses of Galatians 1)
- Why do you think Paul is so exuberant because of their “partnership in the gospel”? Why does a gospel partnership mean so much to Paul?

KEY IDEA: *Koinonia* (coy-no-nee-a) - Partnership

This is a rich theological term, and important theme in Philippians. We could translate it partnership, fellowship, communion, community. It implies sharing in something (common-unity). The Philippians and Paul have *koinonia* “in the gospel.” They are a community brought together by the gospel, but they also share in the common purpose of working together to see the gospel preached to make new believers. In this partnership, the Philippians provide financial and prayerful support to their “link-missionary,” Paul.

- How does Paul encourage the Philippians?
- The “you” in verse 6 is plural. Does that change the way you read this verse?
- What is Paul’s ambition or desire for the Philippians (expressed at the end of this section)? (Read carefully, as the phrasing and logic is a little complicated.)
 - Of all the things Paul could pray for the Philippians, why do you think he prays for this?

Application

- What in this passage do you find most encouraging?
- Would you describe any of your relationships as a “partnership in the gospel”? What criteria would you look for in such a relationship?
- Paul’s love for the Philippians is unmistakable. How might we better cultivate deep and enduring Christian relationships?
- Does anything about Paul’s prayer for the Philippians challenge who or what you pray for?

Prayer

- Use Paul’s prayer as a model to pray for one another.

Study 2 – Philippians 1:12-26

Warm Up Question (as people arrive): What everyday pleasure would you find it hardest to go without?

Discussion: Can you think of a time when the call to follow Christ brought you into uncomfortable or unexpected circumstances?

Introduction: In 1:12-26, Paul fills the Philippians in on his current circumstances. However, his goal is not merely to keep the Philippians informed, but to present his current circumstances in such a way that they reinforce his main argument for the letter, outlined in 1:27-30.

READ 1:12-26

- What is Paul's situation as he writes to the Philippians?
- How would you describe Paul's attitude as presented in 1:12-19? Given his circumstances, how can we make sense of this attitude?
- What do you think Paul means by the "advance of the gospel" in v12?
 - Why is Paul so wholeheartedly committed to seeing the gospel advance?
- In verses 19-26 we learn that death is a very real prospect for Paul, but he is surprisingly unconcerned.
 - What stands out to you about Paul's perspective on death?
 - What stands out regarding Paul's attitude towards his life?

Application

- Later in the letter, Paul tells the Philippians to follow his example (3:17). Do you think you would find it harder to emulate his willingness to die for Christ, or his willingness to make all of his life about Christ?
- What does the phrase, "to live is Christ" mean for us: 1) in our workplace, 2) our relationships and 3) how we plan for the future?

- Paul’s understanding of following Jesus obviously includes great sacrifice. What are everyday-type things we can do to teach and remind ourselves that such sacrifice is right and worth it?

READ 1:27-30

KEY IDEA: *Politeuomai* (poly-too-o-my) – to be a citizen

Hidden in our NIV translation of verse 27 is a crucial theme in Philippians. In verse 27, Paul tells the Philippians to conduct themselves *as citizens* in a manner worthy of the gospel. Citizenship was an important idea to the Philippians. Philippi was a Roman colony, giving it’s inhabitants the rare and precious status of Roman citizens. But Paul doesn’t want the Philippians to identify themselves primarily as Roman citizens, but as *gospel* citizens, citizens of *heaven* (3:20).

In these verses we come to Paul’s big idea in the letter.

- What does Paul command the Philippians to do? What do you think this means?
- In v27-28, Paul notes three qualities that he anticipates seeing in the church if they follow his command. What might be practical evidence that these qualities exist in the community?
- What insights do these verses give us into some of the challenges of being a Christian in First Century AD Philippi?
- In verse 29, Paul suggests it has been “granted” to the Philippians to not only believe in Jesus, but also to suffer for him. The word “granted” implies a gift. Why might Paul suggest suffering for Christ is a gift?
 - Do you think Paul is referring to any kind of suffering? How does that shape your concept of suffering?

Prayer

- Pray for each other that we would have “*sufficient courage* so that now as always Christ will be exalted in [our bodies], whether by life or by death” (1:20).

Study 3 – Philippians 2:1-2:11

Warm Up Question (as people arrive): You can invite 5 people, dead or alive to a dinner party. Who do you invite?

Discussion: Have you ever been part of a collective (team, organisation, group, etc) where the relationships flourished and the group’s objectives were successfully achieved? What elements do you think made that group so great?

Introduction: Over the coming chapters, Paul will help the Philippians see what it would look like to together “live in a manner worthy of the gospel” (1:27). He starts in chapter 2 by encouraging a particular attitude or mindset.

READ 2:1-4

- In verses 1-2 Paul is using a conditional (“if... then...”) argument. Unpack the argument –
 - what are the “ifs” (and what do they mean)?
 - and what is the “then” – the result Paul desires (and what do these results mean)?
- Why do you think Paul has such a preoccupation with unity? What would be gained by greater unity in the Philippian church (or alternatively, what would be lost by greater disunity)? (If helpful, look back at 1:27-28.)

KEY IDEA: *Phroneo* (phro-ne-o) – to have an understanding, a mindset, an attitude

Though this word is not especially common in the New Testament, Paul uses it ten times in Philippians. Again and again, Paul exhorts the Philippians to have right thinking, either sharing a common mind with each other, himself or with Christ.

- In verses 3-4, Paul gives a series of instructions for the Philippians to follow in order that they might share in the same mind/attitude.

Based on his examples, how would you describe the mindset Paul wants the Philippians to have?

READ 2:5-11

- What do you especially appreciate in these verses?
- *How* does Paul's (magnificent) description of Jesus in verses 6-11 relate to his exhortation in verses 1-4?
- From verses 6-11, in what specific ways does Jesus demonstrate the mindset Paul wants the Philippians to share in?
 - Can you think of examples in the gospels where Jesus also demonstrates this mindset?

Application:

- Of the different instructions for behaviour Paul gives in verses 3-4, which do you think is hardest to do? Why?
- (Take your time on this one) How might we improve our unity and be of the same mind:
 - In our families?
 - In our Bible Studies?
 - In our congregations?
 - At St Matt's as a whole?
- Paul is calling us to a mindset that is very much contrary to our sinful nature. What hope do we have that we could possibly grow in this mindset? (For ideas, see Phil 1:6; Phil 2:13; Eph 2:8-10); Gal 5:16-26.)
- How does the end of this passage encourage us as we (at times painfully) seek to transform our mindset?

Prayer:

- Pray for our church, that we would be a people united in and around Jesus Christ and his gospel. Pray that we would humbly confess our sins and love one another sacrificially.

Study 4 – Philippians 2:12-18

Warm Up Question (as people arrive): Share one of your pet peeves.

Discussion: Based on our discussions from Philippians in previous weeks or from your own knowledge, what does it mean to “live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ”?

Introduction: Paul continues to encourage the Philippians to “live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27), and he gives instructions that they might remain faithful to Christ until the end.

READ 2:12-13

- What desire does Paul have for the Philippians in verse 12?
- Verse 12 is an often-misunderstood verse - “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” might be understood to say, “do works in order to be saved.”
 - Why is this understanding problematic for a Christian?
 - Can you think of Bible verses elsewhere that would contradict such an understanding?
 - How does the immediate context (v13) contradict such an understanding?

KEY IDEA: *Soteria* (so-tear-ia)– Salvation

In Paul’s letters, his understanding of salvation is a little richer than our understanding may sometimes be. For Paul (and thus, for us), salvation is a past present and future act. If we follow Christ:

- Past: we have been saved from the *punishment* for sin (Eph 2:8).
- Present: we are being saved from the *power* of sin (Rom 6:18; 7:21-25).
- Future: we will be saved from the *presence* of sin (Rom 8:11).

In Philippians, we also see salvation understood not just as a singular past action, but as an ongoing (1:6) and future action (1:28; 3:20).

- Two things might help us better understand the meaning of verse 12:
 - Try substituting “work out” with “demonstrate” or “live out”.
 - We need to understand what Paul means by salvation, not just as a completed act, but also an *ongoing* act (see “Key Idea” above).
 - In light of the above, how might you express verses 12-13 in your own words?
- What is God’s good purpose that Paul refers to in verse 13?

READ 2:14-18

- What instruction for behaviour does Paul give?
- What reasons does he provide for this instruction: for the Philippians themselves, for the non-Christians around them and for himself?
- What do we learn about Paul’s heart and passions based on this section? Why should the Philippians share in his joy?

Application:

- Why do we complain? How can complaining impact our community?
- What steps could we each take to be a people that stand out not for our complaining, but for our lack of complaining?
- Paul tells us to work out our salvation with “fear and trembling” because salvation is such a significant, weighty thing. Can you think of someone you know who stands out to you for taking seriously the charge to live out their salvation? What stands out about them?
- What encouragement do you see in this passage? Why does it encourage you?

Prayer:

- Pray for each other, that we would not be complainers, or critical, and that we would take seriously the gift of salvation and the need to live as a saved people shining Christ into our broken world.

Study 5 – Philippians 2:19-30

Warm Up Question (as people arrive): When you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up? Why?

Discussion: Who were your role models as a child? What do you especially remember learning from them?

Introduction: In 2:19-30, Paul brings the Philippians up to speed on his partner Timothy, and Epaphroditus, a member of the Philippian church who had been sent to Paul on behalf of the church. But Paul also skillfully presents the two as role models who live in a manner worthy of the gospel.

READ 2:19-30

- From elsewhere in Scripture, what do we know about Timothy; his character, and his relationship with Paul? (You could consult Acts 16:1-3; Acts 19:22; 1 Cor 4:17; 1 Thess 3:2; also 1 and 2 Timothy!)
- Based on these Scriptures, but especially on Phil 2:19-22, why does Paul want to send Timothy to Philippi?
- How does Timothy embody the mindset the Philippians were encouraged towards in 2:1-5?
- In Scripture, Epaphroditus only appears here and in Phil 4:18. What do we know about him?
- Why does Paul hold up Epaphroditus as an example? How does he embody the mindset of Phil 2:1-5?

Application:

- What do you find most admirable about Timothy or Epaphroditus?
- Do you have positive Christian role models in your life now? What about them do you wish to emulate? How do they affect you?

- What might it look like for us to “honour” people in our faith community who embody the mindset of Christ like Timothy and Epaphroditus?
- What steps could you take to have more positive influencers in your life, or to be more influenced by them?
- Take some quiet time to personally reflect on this question: what sort of influence do you have on others? How might you improve:
 - the nature of that influence, and
 - the strength of your positive influence?
- When we encounter a positive example, it’s tempting to strive in our own strength to be like that example. What would it look like instead, to depend on God’s help to become more like that example?

Prayer:

- Pray that each of us might increasingly share in the mindset of Christ, and be a community that influences each other to live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Study 6 – Philippians 3:1-14

Warm Up Question (as people arrive): If you had three magic wishes, what would you ask for?

Discussion: If it were necessary, what would you find hardest to give up as you follow Christ?

Introduction: In verses 3:1-14, Paul get's increasingly personal. We see what makes him angry, and what he desires above all else.

READ 3:1-14

- Why might Paul have been placing such an emphasis on joy in this letter?
- There is a distinct change in tone when Paul begins speaking of a third party in verse 2.
 - Who are the dogs Paul is referring to? (See Acts 15:1-2.)
 - Why is he so harsh towards them? (Gal 5:1-6.)
 - What would be lost if we followed the teaching of the “circumcision group” instead of the teachings of Paul?

KEY IDEA: Dikaiosune (dik-eye-os-oo-nay) Righteousness

Righteousness in Scripture can refer to being morally upright, but especially to being in right relationship with God. Through faith in Jesus, sinners are brought into right relationship with God, and are thus morally right in God's eyes.

- Why does Paul list his credentials in 3:4-6?
- Given the significant Jewish credibility Paul had amassed, why is he so ready to give them up now?

- In verses 7-14, we get another deep insight into Paul's heart. Why does Paul want Jesus more than anything else? What, in relation to Jesus, does Paul want exactly?
- Why is a righteousness that is based on faith in Christ better than a righteousness that comes from obedience to the law?
- In verse 10, what value does Paul appear to suggest that suffering has?
- What words would you use to describe Paul's desire for and pursuit of Christ?

Application:

- In what ways do you find yourself tempted to seek righteousness by doing the right thing, rather than through faith in Christ?
- Have you found anything especially helpful in reminding you to find your righteousness through faith in Christ?
- What might it look like practically to pursue Christ, the way Paul describes it?
- How can we convince and re-convince ourselves that Christ is worth more than anything else?

Prayer:

- Pray to share in Paul's heart for Jesus. Pray that we will find our righteousness in Christ alone, and not in what we have done.

Study 7 – Philippians 3:12-4:1

Warm Up Question (as people arrive): If you could have dual citizenship to Australia and one other country, which country would you choose?

Discussion: Have you ever been overseas? How has being a foreigner changed the way you understand yourself or the world?

Introduction:

- What big ideas have we encountered so far in Philippians?
- What have you found most challenging?

In verses 3:12-21, Paul explicitly holds himself up as an example for the Philippian Christians to follow.

READ 3:12-21

- To remind ourselves of our last study, look over verses 7-14 again. What does Paul want, and why, in verses 7-11?
- In verses 12-14, Paul refers to “all this”, “my goal” and “it”. What do you think he is referring to?
- According to verse 15, what marks someone as a mature Christian?
- In verse 17, Paul tells the Philippians to follow his example. Based on other parts of Philippians we have seen, and what you know of Paul from elsewhere in Scripture, list ways in which he “lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.”
 - What should we especially be emulating about Paul, from Chapter 3?
- In verses 18-21, Paul divides people up into two groups. Give a name to each of these two groups, and identify the qualities of each group of people.

- What might it mean to:
 - make one's stomach their god,
 - glory in one's shame, and
 - have one's mind set on earthly things?

Application:

- How does Paul's description of his pursuit of Christ make you feel?
 - How do you feel at the prospect of trying to emulate Paul?
- At what times in your life have you been most eagerly pursuing Christ? What has spurred you on during those times?
- Paul is both joyful in the present, yet constantly striving for greater maturity, and constantly looking to heaven with Christ. How can we be both content and discontent like him?
- What implications does it have for how you live on earth, if your citizenship is in heaven?
- What can we do to cultivate in ourselves a future perspective, so that we will actually look forward to heaven and not be satisfied with this life?

Prayer:

- Pray for an increasing desire for Christ and for heaven with him.

Study 8 – Philippians 4:1-9

Warm Up Question (as people arrive): Share one of your happiest memories.

Discussion: Who is the most joyful person you know? What do you think makes them so joyful?

Introduction: In these verses, Paul gives some final instructions for the Philippians, in keeping with his desire that they would live in a manner worthy of the gospel.

READ 4:1-9

- What appears to be the issue in verses 2-3? How might Paul's teaching earlier in the letter relate to this situation?
- Paul moves quickly from idea to idea in this section. Summarize the traits he would like to see in the Philippians as they live in a manner worthy of the gospel.
- Paul is not telling the Philippians to rejoice *for* all situations, but *in* all situations. What is the difference between rejoicing *in* the Lord Jesus at all times and situations, and rejoicing *for* all situations?
- What does Paul mean by "gentle" in verse 5, and why should Christians be gentle?
- In verse 6, how does Paul advise we deal with worry and anxiety?

KEY IDEA: *Merimnao* (mer-im-na-o) – to worry

It's helpful to recognize that in 4:6, Paul is not referring to an anxiety disorder, but to worries in the more general sense of the word. Paul positively notes Timothy's concern (*merimnao*) for the Philippians in 2:20. While prayer is powerful and God does offer his peace to us, it is important to still seek out help if you are struggling with anxiety in a severe or ongoing manner.

- What do you understand Paul's encouragement to mean in verse 7? Do you think this is a guarantee that applies whenever we pray about anything? What is the place of thanksgiving?
- What is Paul's command in verse 8? What types of things do you think would qualify?

Application:

- What is the cost of two Christians failing to reconcile with one another?
 - For personal reflection: Is there another believer you need to reconcile with?
- Paul's command to "rejoice in the Lord always" suggests that rejoicing is more of a discipline than an involuntary expression of happiness. How can we practice this discipline so that we can have joy even during hard times?
- Have you had much experience of anxiety? How does it affect you, or how have you seen it affect others? How do God's promises in Scripture that address worrying make you feel?
- What keeps us from praying when we encounter difficulty or worry?
- Can you think of a time when you experienced the peace that transcends all understanding, to which Paul refers?
- When you look at the standards Paul has for what we devote our attention to, how does it challenge:
 - Our relationships,
 - The type of work we engage in,
 - What we do in our free time?

Prayer:

- Take some time as a group to share your worries and anxieties and to give your requests to God, along with thanksgiving. Pray that you will continue to petition him with these requests.

Study 9 – Philippians 4:10-23

Warm Up Question (as people arrive): Complete this sentence: I would be happy if I could have just one more _____.

Discussion: Given how wealthy we are, why do you think we struggle so much with contentment in our culture?

Introduction:

To conclude the letter, Paul returns to the occasion that prompted the writing of the letter – thanking the Philippians for a financial gift Epaphroditus brought Paul on behalf of the Philippian church. Rather than simply thank the Philippians however, he uses this occasion as a teaching opportunity on giving and contentment.

READ 4:10-13

- Paul declares that he has learnt the secret of contentment in all circumstances. He doesn't appear to tell us what this secret is immediately, but based on what we've seen in Philippians, what do you think is the secret?
- How do you think Paul came to learn this secret of contentment?
- Verse 13 has often been translated as "I can do all things through him who gives me strength." Do you think this verse is teaching that a Christian can do anything they want, or is it saying something else?

READ 4:14-23

- Describe the nature of the Philippian church's partnership with Paul.
- In verse 17, what do you think Paul means when he says, "I desire that more be credited to your account"?
 - Does Paul's statement affect your perspective on financially giving to the work of the gospel?
- What do you think the promise of verse 19 would mean in practical terms for the Philippians?

Application:

- What discourages us from being generous with our money?
- How does Paul challenge the notion that in giving our money away we make ourselves less secure?
- Do you partner with anyone for the furthering of the gospel? If so, how? How can you strengthen this partnership in order to make it more effective?
- Imagine you have a friend feeling discontent with their life. How might you use Paul's letter to the Philippians to encourage them? To what passages would you turn?
- For personal reflection: In what areas of your life do you struggle with discontentment?

Concluding Questions for the Series:

- What have you personally found most encouraging during our study of Philippians?
- What have you personally found most challenging?
- What would you most like our church to collectively take away from this letter?

Prayer:

- Pray for each other, that through Christ, you would find contentment in a discontent world.
- Pray for St Matt's, that we would be a church united by the gospel, committed to growing ourselves through it, and committed to sharing it with others in order to make new believers.



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