

Philippians 3:12-4:4

1. Paul's reference to confidence in this passage calls us to ask whether we fall into religious observance as a way to make us feel spiritually "safe", as opposed to building our relationship with God. The church has a rich history of trusting in religious observance (e.g. never missing church, dressing up for church, Sunday observance, etc.) and piety (don't drink, don't smoke, don't curse, don't watch spicy HBO series, don't hang out with the wrong people, don't don't don't...). The Law isn't bad—Paul makes that quite clear. It's just powerless to make God's people holy.

Imagine now how hard it was for Paul to eat his first bite of pork, and ask yourself whether the things you do to be more pure, or your religious habits, are more about making you feel like you are on the straight and narrow rather than building up others and your relationship with Jesus. What aspects of spiritual observance or piety make you feel guilty or sick to your stomach to think of skipping or forsaking? What things do you avoid out of Christian culture, tradition or habit?

2. Paul writes, "Let those of us who are mature be of the same mind" (15). It's clear here and elsewhere that Paul expects maturity of *all* believers, not a select few (1 Cor 3:2-3; 14:18-20). Maturity in the NT means *changed, non-worldly* (Lk 8:14) *thinking*, leading to *discernment* of good and evil (Rom 12:1-2; Heb 5:13-14) and a deeper *understanding of Christ's love* (Eph 3:18-19). Maturity requires *single-mindedness* (James 1:2-8); and *love for one's enemies* (Mt 5:46-48, which uses the same word). Maturity is driven by the ministries of pastor-teachers, prophets, apostles and evangelists (Eph 4:11-13), immersion in Jesus' teaching (Jn 8:31) and prayer (Col 4:12).

In the amazing 3:7-12, Paul associates maturity with "knowing Christ" (cf. Jer 9:23-24, 31:33-34), adding a personal aspect reminiscent of David's relationship with the Father. It suggests a dimension which might be missed even by one who masters scripture and lives a life of service. Read the quotes from Yancey, below. Do you feel you really know Jesus? Do you feel you are growing in your knowledge of Jesus?

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...the gospels present a man who has such charisma that people will sit three days straight, without food, just to hear his riveting words. He seems excitable, compulsively "moved with compassion" or "filled with pity". The gospels reveal a range of Jesus' emotional responses: sudden sympathy for a person with leprosy, exuberance over his disciples' successes, a blast of anger at cold-hearted legalists, grief over an unreceptive city, and then those awful cries of anguish in Gethsemane and on the cross. He had nearly inexhaustible patience with individuals but no patience at all for institutions and injustice.

The gospels show that Jesus quickly established intimacy with the people he met. Whether talking with a woman at a well, a religious leader in a garden, or a fisherman by a lake, he cut instantly to the heart of the matter, and after a few brief lines of conversation these people revealed to Jesus their innermost secrets. People of his day tended to keep rabbis and "holy men" at a respectful distance, but Jesus drew out something else, a hunger so deep that people crowded around him just to touch his clothes.

He would accept almost anybody's invitation to dinner, and as a result no public figure had a more diverse list of friends, ranging from rich people, Roman centurions, and Pharisees to tax collectors, prostitutes, and leprosy victims. People *liked* being with Jesus; where he was, joy was.

—Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (88-89)

Fun fact: Paul directly addresses in 4:3 an anonymous “loyal companion.” Who is this? It can’t be Timothy or Epaphroditus, who are with Paul. A good case can be made that it was none other than Luke, who accompanied Paul on so many of his travels. This theory is supported by the narrative of Acts which has Luke remaining in Philippi in Acts 16 while Paul goes elsewhere. (Big Fee)

Further fun fact: Paul never asks churches that don’t know him personally, such as Rome or Colossae, to imitate him (Cohick 196).

Be still and know that I am God,
be still and know that I am God,
be still and know that I am God.

In thee, O Lord, I put my trust,
In thee, O Lord, I put my trust,
In thee, O Lord, I put my trust.

Leader's Intro:

For this week we continue our discussion of the important chapter 3. (This includes one repeat question which we didn't get to last time.) This passage is of interest not just for its message, which is that the Philippians show they are mature by imitating Paul and Jesus in putting others' ahead of themselves, but for the meta-message entailed in:

- Paul's assumption of forward movement; he doesn't envision a static Christian life. Do we?
- The implicit message of imitation—something which is largely lost from modern Christian practice, with its focus on individualism.
- That growth entails knowing Jesus better, not just being more righteous, not just knowing more Scripture. Christianity is fundamentally relational, by God's design.

This section ends with artfully obscure instructions for two leaders who are clearly at odds, Euodia and Syntyche. Fee believes, and it is quite plausible, that they must be disagreeing about responding to the danger of persecution by joining the circumcision group. Rather than calling one right and the other wrong, Paul tells them to have the right mindset and then figure it out (with Luke's help—see Fun Fact). The questions don't get into it at all, but it's fascinating that Paul is as hands off as he is. In this, perhaps the most familiar of his letters, he feels the least need to adopt the patron-client hierarchy, pull rank or smack them down. Maybe this can tell us something about our style of leadership as well.

If, after discussion, the group has a greater appreciation for developing a personal relationship with Jesus (and not merely an emotional or fanciful one reflecting our own desires and biases); if the group feels the tremendous spiritual pressure gradient drawing Paul forward; and if they can appreciate that this change of mindset is central, it will have been a successful discussion!

Note after the fact: We ended up having a very fruitful discussion on just the two questions above, pushing two questions off until the next week. Two questions doesn't seem like many, but they pack a punch. If they don't feel like enough for you and your group, consider drawing from the extra questions and observations below.

Extra questions and observations:

1. Regarding imitation and discipleship, you might consider exploring the following:
 - a. What about Paul's (and Christ's) actions is he asking them to imitate?
 - b. I imitate my brother in praying spontaneously; my parents in their faithfulness; my thesis adviser in his integrity; etc. Who in your life has been influential enough for you to *consciously* imitate?
 - c. Anything resembling the discipleship Paul and Jesus practiced has largely vanished from the modern church, replaced by Sunday school, preaching and Bible study meetings.¹ While practices like discipleship do occur in our culture (e.g. apprenticeships and academic advising for a Ph. D.), they are rare. Why? Is discipleship fundamentally un-Western?
2. Paul's antithesis of maturity is the mind of the flesh, which is self-centered; focused on its own appetites; tries to justify itself by pious actions rather than trust in Jesus. As in Romans 8:6, "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit^[g] is life and peace"; "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mt 6:21). If we don't embrace this we risk the fate of the seed in the thorns (Mt 13:29). Where we put our thoughts is of great importance. Which makes it worth asking: where *are* our thoughts? How well are we doing at turning our eyes toward Jesus on a daily basis?

¹ Some groups *do* keep discipleship or something similar alive, such as the Navigators college ministry, or cell groups as practiced by some churches.

3. Why the “body of humiliation” in 21? Is Paul body-shaming? In fact, Paul is *assuming* that in imitating Christ’s suffering we will suffer shame. We may not be crucified, but we won’t be driving a Lexus or wearing the best clothes or sporting the latest iPhone. Coming from an honor-shame culture, Paul, writing from prison, knew well the shame which Christian life entails.
4. This section ends with artfully obscure instructions for two leaders who are clearly at odds, Euodia and Syntyche. Fee believes, and it is quite plausible, that they must be disagreeing about responding to the danger of persecution by joining the circumcision group. Rather than calling one right and the other wrong, Paul tells them to have the right mindset and then figure it out (with Luke’s help—see *Fun Fact*). It’s fascinating that Paul is as hands off as he is. In this, perhaps the most familiar of his letters, he feels the least need to adopt the patron-client hierarchy, pull rank or smack them down (contrast 1 Corinthians). What might this tell us about a healthy style of leadership?

Christian maturity:

Passages on Christian maturity:

1 Corinthians 2:4-7 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁴ My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom,^[a] but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power,⁵ so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

The True Wisdom of God

⁶ Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish.⁷ But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.

1 Corinthians 3:2-3 New International Version (NIV)

² I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready.³ You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans?

Philippians 3:15 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹⁵ 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.

1 Corinthians 14:18-20 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹⁸ I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you;¹⁹ nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

²⁰ Brothers and sisters,^[a] do not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults.

Colossians 1:28 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

²⁸ It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

Romans 12:1-2 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

12 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters,^[a] by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual^[b] worship.² Do not be conformed to this world,^[c] but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.^[d]

Colossians 4:12 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹² Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant^[a] of Christ Jesus, greets you. He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills.

Ephesians 3:18-19 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹⁸ I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth,¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be **filled with all the fullness of God**.

Ephesians 4:11-13 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹¹ The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, **for building up the body of Christ**, ¹³ until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, **to maturity**, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

James 1:2-8 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Faith and Wisdom

² My brothers and sisters, ^[a] whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; ⁴ and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be **mature and complete**, lacking in nothing.

⁵ If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. ⁶ But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind;

Of course the model in Philippians for maturity is the mindset of Christ as exemplified in 2:4-11.

The contrast in Philippians is with the Roman pagans, who are the very opposite of mature (3:18-19, as much as those who rely upon the Law for their righteousness, 3:2-3).

Hebrews 5:13-14 New International Version (NIV)

¹³ Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

Matthew 5:46-48 New International Version (NIV)

⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Luke 8:14 New International Version (NIV)

¹⁴ The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.

John 8:31 New International Version (NIV)

³¹ To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.