

“Citizenship & Imitation”
Philippians 3:17-4:1
June 14, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We return this morning to our series in the Book of Philippians.

Paul has been discussing the importance and the incredible value of knowing Jesus Christ, both in this life and in the next life. And in our text this morning he continues to discuss how we are to live in light of Christ’s surpassing value.

With that said, let’s turn to our text: Philippians 3:17 through 4:1.

Please do listen carefully. This is God’s Word for us this morning.

Paul writes:

¹⁷ Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸ For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ 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.

^{4:1} Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, our soul clings to the dust,
and we ask you to give us life according to your word!
Teach us your ways,
help us understand your precepts,
make us to meditate on your works.
Help us to cling to your testimonies,

and enlarge our hearts,
that we may run in your ways.
In Jesus's name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:25-32]

Introduction

In our text this morning, Paul is talking to the Christians in Phillipi about who they are, and how they should live.

More specifically, Paul says here that: Because of our cosmic citizenship, and the reality of our cosmic king, we must beware of those who are enemies of the king, and imitate those who are faithful to the king.

Let me say that again: Because of our cosmic citizenship, and the reality of our cosmic king, we must beware of those who are enemies of the king, and imitate those who are faithful to the king.

Let's break that down together.

Our Cosmic Citizenship

First, we need to recognize our cosmic citizenship.

And we see this in verse 20. Paul says: "But our citizenship is in heaven."

And there's more going on in this statement than we might catch at first.

Paul making an analogy here from the Philippians' civic life. Philippi, their city, was a colony of Rome, established largely by veterans from Rome's military. They were citizens of Rome, even though they lived in Philippi. And Paul is alluding to that dynamic here to help them better understand what it means to be a Christian.

He's saying to them: Just as you live your life in Philippi, but you're actually citizens of Rome, just as you live in Phillipi, but you live according to the customs and culture of Rome, just as you live in Phillippi, but your deepest allegiance and the guide for your life is Rome (and not, ultimately, Phillipi), so in the very same way, though you live in this fallen world, your actual citizenship is in heaven – as a member of the Kingdom of God, and you are called to live according to the customs of God's kingdom, and to give your ultimate allegiance to God's kingdom, even as you live out your life in this fallen world.

Just as the Philippians lived their lives in Philippi as citizens of Rome, so Paul is saying here that as Christians they are to live their lives in this world as citizens of God's heavenly kingdom. That's the point he's making here. [Wright, 124-128; Fee, 161-162, 378-380]

The Church is a colony of heaven – of the Kingdom of God. And as Christians, our deepest allegiance is supposed to be to heaven – the capital of God’s kingdom. We are citizens of heaven, citizens of God’s Kingdom before we are citizens of this world. That’s where our greatest allegiance is supposed to be.

And so it’s worth asking: Is that how you view yourself? Is that how you think of your life? Is that a conviction that’s reflected in your daily decisions: In how you spend your time, in how you spend your money, in how you treat other people, in how you prioritize your relationship to God or to the Church?

Because if you’re a Christian, what Paul is saying about you here is true, even if you’re not living it out very well. Paul starts this verse not with an exhortation, but with a statement of fact: “Our citizenship is in heaven.” Your citizenship is in heaven. If you are a baptized and believing Christian, then you are, first and foremost, a citizen of the Kingdom of God.

The first thing you need to do is believe that. All who trust in Jesus are citizens of God’s Kingdom. Such citizenship is a gift, given by his grace. And the first thing we need to do is to trust God’s Word and believe God’s promises, that in the gospel, these things are true about us.

If we have trusted in Jesus, then our cosmic citizenship is in the Kingdom of Heaven. That’s who we are.

Our Cosmic King

But once we’ve recognized our cosmic citizenship, the next thing we need to take seriously is the reality of our cosmic King.

As we said, in verse 20, Paul is alluding to the Roman citizenship of the Philippians to help them better understand their relationship to the Kingdom of God.

But then, in the second half of verse 20 Paul extends that analogy in a way that would both build on and confront their understanding of their relationship to Rome.

Paul says that because they are citizens of God’s heavenly kingdom, it is from God’s heavenly kingdom that we, as Christians, “await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

And to understand how the Philippian Christians would have heard this, you need to know that as Roman citizens, they were used to hearing someone else referred to as their Lord and their Savior. Because those were official titles of Caesar. In the imperial cult of Rome, Caesar was worshipped as a god – specifically as a son of god, and he was worshipped under the titles of “Lord” and “Savior.” [Wright, 126; Fee, 380-381; Green, 133-135; Evans, lxxxii-lxxxiii]

Earlier in this verse Paul made an analogy to how they, as Philippians, relate to Rome and its king, to help them better understand their identity as Christians. But now Paul turns on that analogy and subverts it, calling their relationship to Rome and Caesar into question. Because, Paul reminds

them, despite their Roman citizenship, Caesar is not their ultimate Lord. He is not their truest Savior. Because you can't have two ultimate kings. You can't have two cosmic lords. You can't have two true saviors. In the end, one must trump the other. And by identifying Jesus as the true Savior of the Philippian Christians, by saying that Jesus is the true Lord of the Philippian Christians, by saying that the true citizenship of the Philippian Christians is in the Kingdom of Heaven, Paul is also saying that Rome is not where their truest citizenship lies, and Caesar is not their ultimate Lord or Savior.

And as Paul confronted them, so he would confront us.

If Jesus is our Lord, if Jesus is our Savior, if Jesus is our King – then our loyalty to him must far outrank every other loyalty.

While we are called to obey those in authority over us ... even so, our loyalty to Jesus as our King must outrank our loyalty to Bob Ferguson, as our governor. Our loyalty to Jesus as our King must outrank our loyalty to Donald Trump, as our president. Our loyalty to Jesus's Kingdom must outrank our loyalty to the United States of America. Because our truest citizenship isn't in America or any other country on this earth – our truest citizenship is in Jesus's Kingdom, which he rules over from heaven.

Jesus is the true King of the cosmos. And he reigns both with gracious generosity, and with firm justice.

Paul makes this point in verses 19 and 21.

In verse 21 Paul reminds us of how God's power will be shown in his gracious generosity towards all those who are faithful subjects of his Kingdom.

There Paul reminds us that Jesus "will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself."

Jesus is the cosmic King of the universe. But he is not a selfish King. He is not a King who uses his power to grasp at things for himself. Rather, he is a generous King, who gives, and blesses his people.

And so, Paul says here, if we are faithful to him, then he will not just give us blessings in this life, as Caesar might promise to do. Jesus will bless us with eternal life. He will transform our lives and our bodies, so that we will be like him. When he returns in glory, Jesus will raise us from the grave, and he will give us new bodies, free from sickness, pain, and death. Like him, we will experience eternal joy in God's kingdom, forever.

Jesus is so powerful as our cosmic King that he can do that. And Jesus is so generous and loving as our cosmic King that he desires to do that. He doesn't withhold what he has, but he will share it with us. That is the generosity of Jesus, our King, towards all who are faithful subjects in his kingdom.

Jesus is a King marked by gracious generosity.

And he's also marked by firm justice.

We see this in verses 18 and 19.

In verse 18 Paul speaks of those who are enemies of Jesus, the King. And in verse 19 he says that their end will be destruction. Jesus will appeal to his enemies. He will offer them forgiveness. He will offer them clemency. He will even offer them full citizenship in his Kingdom, if they would just repent and lay down their arms, and bend the knee to him. But if his enemies persist in their rebellion, then in the end, Jesus will bring his powerful justice down upon them. And their end will be destruction.

A King cannot tolerate rebels within his borders forever. Even the most patient and gracious King must eventually put such rebels to an end if they will not repent. And we need to take that as a warning. We need to be sure that we are not living as enemies and rebels of Jesus, the King.

Paul here reminds us of our cosmic citizenship: if we have put our faith in Jesus, then we are citizens of his heavenly kingdom, even as we live in this rebellious world. And then Paul reminds us to consider our relationship to Jesus our truest King – the blessings of being his faithful subjects, and the perils of being his enemies.

Paul puts these important truths before us to consider.

But Paul doesn't want us to stop at considering. Paul wants us to take action. Paul wants us to do something with this knowledge and these categories. More specifically, Paul wants us to consider who we will imitate. And he puts before us two options, set in deep contrast with each other.

We Must Beware of Those Who Are Enemies of the King

First, Paul warns us to beware of those who are enemies of the king.

And we get this in verses 18 and 19.

Paul writes: "For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things."

Paul gives a warning. But it's a very specific warning.

It's not a warning about what these enemies might do to the Philippian Christians. Rather, it's a warning about what the Philippian Christians might do when they observe these enemies. Paul is worried that the Philippian Christians will be tempted to imitate these enemies of Jesus, their King.

We're not sure who exactly these enemies were. There's some reason to believe they may have been "public" figures in some way – but it's hard to say. They may have been pagans who spurned Christianity. Or they may have claimed to be Christians while living in contradiction to that claim. [Fee, 367-370] Paul's description here could cover a range of possibilities, and maybe that's instructive for us. These enemies of Jesus that we are tempted to imitate can take many forms.

Additionally, we need to note that Paul's primary attitude towards these enemies is grief. He speaks of them with tears, he says in verse 18. Not hatred. Not anger. Not with an arrogant sneer, or with dismissive contempt. But Paul speaks of them with tears. With grief. And he calls us to imitate him. [<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/questions-and-answers> 26:30-29:40]

But we are not just to imitate Paul in his grief. We are also to imitate him as he resists the temptation to imitate these enemies of Jesus.

Now ... one of the hurdles for us as modern western people, is that when Paul warns us against imitating certain people, many of us think "Okay ... well ... maybe others would be tempted to do that. But not me. I'm not an imitator. I'm my own person. I do my own thing. I have my own mind. Don't worry about me."

We are a culture that likes to believe that we do not live by imitation, we do not conform, we all think for ourselves, and we all act independently – none of us are conformist imitators. Or rather ... we think a lot of other people are conformist imitators ... but none of us ourselves are.

The irony, of course, is that the way we all learned to think of ourselves this way is by imitating other people who claim to be non-conformist and non-imitators. Starting with just about every children's movie that's come out in the last 30 years ... and then in the songs we listened to as teenagers, the TV shows, and books, and films we look to as adults – we all consumed story after story in which the hero learns the lesson that to live right they had to be their own person, they had to follow their own heart, they had to be true to themselves and not imitate others. We all repeatedly absorbed these kinds of stories ... and then we all imitated the main character.

Even independent expressive individualism that decries imitation and conformity is only really learned through imitation. We need to imitate the people we see do this, and conform to stories that promote that value system.

We all learn what kind of person we should be, and also how to be that kind of person through imitation. Some people might imitate straight-laced suburbanite stereotypes ... and some people might imitate rebellious, chaotic, anarchist, punk rockers ... but we all are imitating someone.

Don't flatter yourself. You live by imitation too.

You imitate people around you. But you also imitate certain public people – whether they're locally public people like a leader in your community that you look up to, or they're more broadly public people, like a celebrity, or a politician, or a sports star, or someone else.

We all imitate other people.

And Paul’s first concern here is that we are imitating the wrong people.

He’s worried that there are people whose spiritual state we should be weeping over ... and instead, we’re trying to be like them – we’re trying to imitate them.

And Paul goes on to tell us what these people are like: He says in verse 19 that that their god is their belly, they glory in their shame, and their minds are fixed on earthly things.

In short, Paul says that they live only for the present, they live only for this life, and they live only for the things of this earth. Their immediate desires are what they serve above all else. And as a result, the things they glory in, the things they delight in, maybe even the things they take pride in, are the very things that Jesus thinks they should be ashamed of. Their minds are set on earthly things, Paul says. It’s not just that they think about earthly things, but their minds are set on earthly things, because it’s to earthly things that they look to for their ultimate joy and purpose. [Fee, 372-375]

And that could actually describe a wide range of people. It can describe both the drug addict scorned by society, and also the self-centered successful achiever whom our society so often holds up as a positive example for others. Paul’s words can describe both the wild hedonist who looks to sex for ultimate fulfillment and the restrained conservative who looks to the value of their stock portfolio for fulfillment. The brash person who grasps at and worships power and the sheepish person who hungers for and worships the approval of others. This is such a range of people, but what they all have in common is that they are driven by their desires for earthly things, and they all look to those earthly things to ultimately fulfill them, rather than looking to Jesus.

This is the kind of person Paul here warns us against imitating.

And we each have people like that who we are tempted to admire ... and look up to ... and emulate ... and then ultimately imitate.

They are ultimately enemies of the cross of Christ. But we are tempted to imitate them.

So ... who is that for you?

What public person in the culture – a leader in business, a politician, a podcaster, an influencer, an author, celebrity, a public intellectual, a musician, an actor – what public person in our culture are you tempted to imitate, even though they are an enemy of Christ?

Or what individual in your personal life who fits this description, are you tempted to try to follow, even though they are an enemy of Jesus?

Paul calls you here to identify them, and to beware of their influence on you.

Now, let’s be clear: Paul is not saying that you shouldn’t love such people as your neighbors. He’s not saying you can’t work with such people, or cooperate with them towards certain shared goals.

He's not saying that such people have nothing to offer. He's not even talking about who you should vote for, or hire, or befriend. Those are all complicated questions, but they're not what Paul is focused on here.

Paul is clear in verse 17 that the topic at hand is imitation. And Paul is worried that we might imitate such people. And so, the question for you to ask yourself is: Are there people like this who you admire more than you should ... who you look up to more than you should ... who – even if you don't think about it or mean to – you sometimes find yourself imitating them?

Maybe you find yourself picking up some of the ways they talk to or about other people. Maybe you find yourself thinking in their words, as you mentally draw on things they've said to shape your own thoughts. In subtle ways, you are being conformed to their image ... you are imitating their actions, their words, even their thoughts.

And that's a problem. Because you are a citizen of heaven ... and that person is an enemy of your King. And you are becoming like them. And the things they glory in – the things you are starting to imitate – those things are, in Jesus's eyes shameful. And their persistence in refusing obedience to Jesus's commands will, ultimately result in their destruction if they don't repent. Jesus is your King, and if you begin imitating enemies of the King, ... then slowly, subtly, before you even notice, you yourself may also become an enemy of the King.

We should seek to love these enemies of Jesus. We should seek to bring them into a right relationship with Jesus, so that they too can become faithful citizens of his Kingdom. We can interact with them, and care for them – and as Paul models for us, we should shed tears over them.

But we absolutely should not imitate them in their foundational patterns of life.

Where is this a danger for you? Whose influence in your life runs this risk? What public figures, that you tend to admire, do you maybe need to take a step back from, and be more intentional about how they influence you?

How do you need to heed Paul's warning here to beware of imitating those who are enemies of Jesus, our King?

We Must Imitate Those Who Are Faithful to the King

Paul gives us this negative warning. But with it, Paul also gives us a positive exhortation. Paul exhorts us to imitate those who are faithful to the King.

And we see this in verse 17.

Paul says: “Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.”

Paul's point here is simple. But whether we take it seriously can determine the shape of our lives, and even our eternity. Paul is telling us who we should look to, who we should admire, and who we should imitate: whose pattern of life we should internalize and seek to replicate in our own lives.

And he calls us to imitate those whose lives more truly reflect the ways of Jesus. He calls us to look to those who are trying to be like Jesus, and then to imitate them as they imitate Christ. He calls us to look to those who clearly love the Lord, who are trying to be faithful to Jesus, who have acquired some level of spiritual maturity – Paul calls us to look to those people, and to observe their pattern of life, to reflect on it, and to seek to make it our own: to imitate their ways in our own lives.

That might sound phony or inauthentic, but it's not. We learn by imitation – that's who we are. And so true authenticity is often found in intentionally choosing who we will imitate ... in rejecting the dominant currents of the unbelieving world, rather than thoughtlessly following them, and then in making real and sincere decisions about who we will look to instead – who we will seek to imitate.

Paul urges us to that kind of authentic decision. And he urges us to choose to imitate those who walk in Jesus's pattern of life: lives of faithfulness to God, lives of sacrificial love for others, lives that reflect the grace, the gentleness, the faithfulness of Jesus.

So, who is it in your life, who reflects those things?

Of course no one does that perfectly in this life. But some do it better than others. And Paul urges us to look to those who are farther along in some aspect of their Christian life than we are. And it shouldn't be hard for most of us to find someone who fits that description.

If we do this, we can learn from the hearts and the lives of more faithful and mature Christians around us, coming alongside them to observe them, maybe asking for their wisdom and guidance in our own lives, living life beside them, and imitating them as they imitate Jesus.

We can also learn from Christians who we may not know personally, but who we know from the public square. We can observe them, even if from a distance, and we can glean those aspects of their lives that reflect Jesus's character, and seek to imitate them ourselves, as a help to our spiritual growth, and our faithfulness to Jesus our King.

But also, we can do this by looking to exemplary Christians throughout the history of the Church. By reading, or hearing, or learning from biographies of Christians who have gone before us, and whose lives have shown the grace and the character of Jesus – by learning about them, and admiring them, and then seeking to imitate aspects of their lives, we ourselves can strengthen our faith in Jesus our King, and we can learn how to walk more faithfully in his ways.

This is the kind of thing Paul is calling us to. How do you need to look to, and admire, and emulate, and imitate those whom the Lord has placed before you – those who themselves have sought to imitate Jesus?

This is the help Paul offers us, to be more faithful citizens of God’s heavenly kingdom. This is the help Paul offers us to be more faithful subjects of Jesus our King. This is the help Paul gives us to resist the temptation to assimilate instead to the foolish and destructive ways of this world.

Conclusion

Brothers and sister, our cosmic citizenship is in God’s heavenly kingdom, and Jesus is our true and highest King. And so, let us beware of the temptation to imitate those who are enemies of our King. And instead, let us be intentional about imitating those who are faithful to our King.

This is Paul’s exhortation to us here.

We have been given a gift. By God’s grace, we have been made citizens of heaven. By God’s grace, we have been given Jesus as our King – a King who loves his people, who longs to bless us, and to share what he has with us – who was even willing to die for us. This is what we have been given.

Let us not squander it, or throw it away, by admiring and imitating those who have rejected such incredible blessings. But let us remain faithful to Jesus, by imitating those who have remained faithful to him.

And Jesus, our King, will reward us. Jesus our King will watch over us. He will transform us. He will glorify us. He will shower his eternal blessings on us.

Because Jesus really is that good. He really is our loving Lord, and our sovereign Savior.

And we can entrust ourselves to him.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Evans, Craig A. *Mark 8:27-16:20*. World Biblical Commentary. Vol. 34B. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001.
 Fee, Gordon D. *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*. NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.
 Green, Joel B. *The Gospel of Luke*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997.
 Ferguson, Sinclair. *Let’s Study Philippians*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997.
 Wright, N.T. *Paul for Everyone: The Prison letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church’s core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul’s example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.