

Lent 2

Philippians 3:17 – 4:1

March 16, 2025 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

Stand Firm in Spite of Challenges

The Milwaukee Bucks are not having their greatest season. They really need to step up their game over the next month in order to make it into the playoffs. It won't be easy and will take a lot of work. Some might suggest, "It's not worth that extra hard work. Just coast to the end of the season and go home." But there is the pride as well as the playoff bonus money. The Bucks face some challenges, but they are not going to give up. They are going to stand firm and do their best in spite of challenges.

Making the playoffs can be a big thing for the team and the city of Milwaukee, but it's not a matter of life or death. Walking away from Jesus, however, would be eternally tragic. You would end up spending all of eternity apart from God and his blessings. The Apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Philippi and lovingly urged them to stand firm in the faith in spite of challenges.

The believers in Philippi certainly had their challenges. There were very few Jews in the city who would have the concept of sin and salvation so it was a bit harder to do outreach. There were people involved with spiritism who took people's money to tell the future. Most of the population was made up of Romans who had all of their false gods they followed. Plus, there was the standard immorality that especially infected the Roman culture. They did not care about the 10 Commandments. Their thinking was, "If it feels good, do it." The Christians in Philippi faced a number of challenges which made it difficult for them to stand firm in the faith.

Two-thousand years later and Christians still face challenges. Three weeks ago in Congo in West Africa, 70 Christians were forced into their church where they were beheaded. The governor of Oregon declared March 10, last week, as Abortion Provider Appreciation Day. They are officially praising those who perform abortions. How heartbreaking. Nearly every TV episode uses our God's name in vain by saying, "Oh, my God," or "Jesus Christ," as if they were wiping their feet on his name. It seems to me that nearly every show has to make jokes about God's gift of marriage and sex. And every movie seems compelled to show an intimate love scene. Every morning, you look at the headlines and there are more crimes to replace yesterday's crimes. There are plenty

of religions in our culture which do not proclaim Jesus as our Savior – Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Muslims, and others. And there are a LOT of churches which talk about Jesus, but mislead people into telling them that they have to do something before they are really saved – Roman Catholic Church, Seventh Day Adventists, Baptists, and others. I could list others. Then there is the issue of family and friends who do not walk with the Lord. All of these issues, and more, make it difficult for us to stand firm in the Lord. It's easy to start thinking that we are the crazy ones. Jesus told us that following him would be like carrying a cross. It would not be easy. Paul wrote about such people who oppose Jesus (:18-19), **"as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach** (they follow whatever appetites or yearnings they get), **and their glory is in their shame** (they think it's a cool thing when they sin as they laugh at each other). **Their mind is set on earthly things** (they do not care about heaven)."

A lady went to college. She NEVER swore or used any foul language. Her roommate, however, could barely speak a sentence without adding something vulgar. After a few months, the first lady realized that some bad language was coming out of her mouth as well. You see, the immorality and mixed up priorities of our world WILL have an effect on us. We had some very windy weather yesterday afternoon. To walk with our Lord, to enjoy his blessings, to stand firm in the faith, we need to be prepared to walk into the wicked winds of our world. Be aware of the temptations in your life and fight against them. We must take this seriously.

If we are honest with ourselves, we'll admit that the sinful world around us has had an influence on us. We have not always been light and salt to the world, but the world has impacted us. God's commandments, given for our good, have not always been our guide. We commit a sin and no lightning came from the sky so we think our sin is not such a big deal. Would you be OK if your mother looked at your search history on your phone or computer? Have inappropriate words come out of your mouth? Have you made prayer a priority in your daily schedule? Have you spent your money wisely and given an offering to the Lord that honors him as special? I could go on, but I think you get the point that we have not stood firm in the Lord. Our challenges aren't that great, but we still slip into sin pretty easily. What Paul said about the unbelievers in Philippi, often describes us – deserving destruction, following our stomachs (our appetites and yearnings), finding delight in shameful things, setting our minds on earthly things.

Paul was aware that the Christians in Philippi were also far from perfect. Even though they were sinful, Paul did not group them together with the unbelievers in Philippi. Through faith, their sins were forgiven, just like yours. Paul told them and he tells you (:20), **“Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.”** Many of the people living in Philippi, which was in northern Greece, were Romans. When Roman soldiers retired, they received a piece of property. When Rome got too crowded, they started giving retirees pieces of property in Philippi. Those retired soldiers were living in Philippi in Greece, but were still considered citizens of Rome. They were living in one country, but said that their citizenship was in another place. Paul is making that same point for you. You are living on this earth, but this is not your real home. Your citizenship is in heaven. One day, at the end of time, Jesus will come from heaven to take us home to heaven. Paul describes Jesus as our Savior, not our example or good luck charm. Jesus is the one who lived a perfect life, standing firm no matter what challenges he faced, including being rejected by his own people, being arrested, falsely accused, and abused. Jesus stood firm. He never faltered, never lost his temper, never said a bad word. He was perfect in every way and through faith, he gives you the credit for his perfect life. Yes, there have been plenty of times that you and I have messed up, but in the record book God keeps on us, you are perfectly perfect, just as if you never sinned.

In exchange for giving you his perfect life, Jesus took all of your sin and guilt to the cross where God punished him for everything wrong we’ve ever done. Before he died, he told us (Jn 19:30), **“It is finished.”** All of your sins have been paid for. There is no reason to feel guilty or ashamed. God loves you. Your sins are forgiven. But it gets even better. When Jesus comes again to this world to take us home to heaven, Paul explains that he (:21) **“will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”** Doesn’t that just blow your mind and fill you with joy? Your body will still be your body, but it will be changed. It will be similar to Jesus’ body after he rose from the dead. Your body will not be touched by any of the affects of sin. You’ll be perfectly healthy and happy – no more hurting, no more health issues. Never tired again. How wonderful

Paul continues (4:1), **“Therefore ... stand firm in the Lord.”** It’s going to take effort to stand firm, to fight against the devil, to resist temptation, to suppress your sinful nature. It’s not going to be easy to stand firm, but

with the Lord’s help, you can do it. The Apostle Paul knew the struggle as well and he wanted to encourage the Philippians. That’s why he explained (3:17), **“Join together in following my example ... and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.”** Think of someone who lives a true Christian life, someone who is always sincere and encouraging, someone who would never sin, the model Christian. Then do your best to live like him or her. The big point here is that Paul wanted the Philippians and us to stand firm in spite of challenges and be saved. Amen.