

Lessons from Philippians: Your True Citizenship

by Bayless Conley

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Hello, my friend. I am glad that you have joined me. I want to do something a little bit different today. I want to begin talking to you about the history of a church. If right away you want to check out and go, “No, not interested in that. I don’t need a history lesson.” Listen, there will be some things in this that will help you. I’m going to give a bit of a backdrop as to how a particular church started historically. We’re going to be looking at the Scriptures. I’m going to share some practical things that will help you right where you are in your life right now. If you will be attentive and if you’ll be sensitive, I believe the Holy Spirit is going to give you something right now that you need. On the other hand, there are always people who love the background stories. They love the historical stuff that sets things up. They want to know the context. Paul wrote to this church, and said this about women and this about men. This needs to be done that way, and you need to avoid that. Well, what was the cultural context that those things were written in? Some people are fascinated by them, and they are important.

What I’m going to begin talking to you about is the book of Philippians and the church at Philippi, which was established by the Apostle Paul and his companions during his second missionary journey. His relationship with this church at Philippi was far different than almost any other church that he established or had relationships with. Many times when he wrote, say, to the Corinthians or the Galatians, he was dealing with doctrinal error or immorality that was happening in the church. There was great correction to be brought. Though certainly, the church at Philippi had its challenges, as all churches do, they would have had their share of persecution, as all churches do. But he wasn’t dealing with them about doctrinal error or sin in the church, and it’s different in that respect. In fact, it’s been referred to by some as the “Epistle of Joy”. He seemed to have this intimate relationship with them that he didn’t have with believers in any of the other churches.

And just a bit of history. The church at Philippi was actually in the town of Philippi, founded by Philip of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great. It was located on this fertile plain. At one time, it was very famous for its gold and silver mines. It was named after Alexander the Great’s father, Philip. The reason he founded the city there, the city of Philippi, was because it was the most strategic site in all of Europe. There is a range of hills that divides Europe from Asia, running from east to west. And just at Philippi, this chain of hills dips down into a pass so that the city literally commanded the road between Europe and Asia. You could say that Philippi was the gateway between Europe and Asia. Many famous battles were fought there, but it was also strategic for the gospel and bringing the gospel to Europe. Later on in history, Philippi became a Roman colony, and Roman colonies were sort of like little mini-Romes. The distinguishing characteristic of any Roman colony is their pride in their Roman citizenship. The Roman language was spoken, Roman dress was worn, and Roman customs were observed. The same ceremonies being carried out in Rome were carried out in these Roman colonies.

In fact, many retired veteran soldiers would have been relocated to the city of Philippi, and some of the retired Praetorian guards would have had their homes there. It was Roman in every single respect, and they never would have dreamed of being assimilated into the culture and the

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people among whom they had been set. They were Roman in every way. Knowing that, the apostle Paul writes to the church in this Roman colony at Philippi. He says to them in the third chapter, “You are a colony of heaven. Your citizenship is in heaven.” That is very, very interesting. Just like a Roman colonist never forgot in whatever environment he was in that he was Roman, a believer should never forget that first, always, and above all things, we are citizens of heaven. Friend, we belong to a different world. We are subject to a higher government, to a higher law, and to a higher King. We need to follow the customs and the laws of heaven first of all.

I happen to be Irish by descent. Irish and Scottish, mostly Irish, and the rest is almost all Scottish. It's sort of cool. I've been many, many, many times to Ireland to preach, and being immersed in the culture there kind of helped me understand some things about myself. I thought, “Man, these people are like I am. They're kind of cheeky and a little bit half crazy.” They just reminded me of me. It's like my wife is German Austrian, and her mother didn't speak English. Even as a child, she only spoke German. Her father is of German descent as well, and my wife is from the Midwest here. The first time I took her with me to Germany— and I've done meetings in Germany and the German-speaking nations for many years— Janet cried. She said, “Bayless, these people are like me. They think like I do. In fact, the place where my family grew up, the farm that I was raised on,”— and she was raised in a German community— “is just like the land here in Germany.” When the Germans migrated over, they found lands and properties that were like their homeland, and Janet was raised in that German culture.

Now, to my point. I'm Irish, but I'm not going to say, “Well, I'm an Irish Christian, or this is the Irish church, or this is the Caucasian church, or this is the Hispanic church.” It's the Church. We are Christians first and foremost. We are citizens of heaven, and we should never put our ethnicity before that. We should never put our culture before that. It's Jesus first. It's the Kingdom of God first. I think with some people, it's almost a bit of idolatry. “Well, yeah, I'm a Christian, but I'm this kind of Christian.” It's like the culture trumps everything else. “Well, this is the way we do this in, name the culture, name the skin color, and then put the church after it.” I think that's wrong. We are a colony of heaven first and foremost. My friend, if you name the name of Christ, we are brothers, you are my sister, and we follow a higher law. We have a higher King, and that is our first relational point. Everything else comes after that, not before that. I think sometimes, at least I know certainly here in the United States where I reside, I think when people put their ethnicity before church, or they put their culture before church, or they put their skin color before church. It actually works in a divisive way.

It separates and it doesn't unify. We are Christians first and foremost. Though I may have certain cultural things I understand as being Irish, and my wife may have certain cultural things as being from a Germanic background, all of those things are below the fact that we are Christians. We have been born again, we have been washed in the blood, and our homeland is in heaven. Our citizenship is in heaven, and that needs to come first and foremost. And the truth—and I didn't plan on saying this right now, but I just feel like it's an important thing to get across. Paul first came to the city of Philippi in about 52 A.D. during his second missionary journey. Silas, Timothy, and Luke were with him. As I said, he seemed to have grown this really close bond with the converts that he had won to Christ in Philippi, more than anywhere else. They even sent him offerings when no one else was involved with his ministry financially. In Thessalonica, they supported him. In Corinth, they supported him. In Rome, where Paul was a prisoner, writing this letter in about 63 or 64 A.D., they supported him as well, and no other church did that.

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In fact, the offering that was sent to him in Rome was brought by Epaphroditus, sent from the Philippian church. He stayed to help Paul and actually overworked himself, not regarding his own body, and became very sick and almost died. After he recovers, Paul sends Epaphroditus back to the church at Philippi with this letter. It has been called the “Epistle of Joy” because that is one of the central themes. In fact, in this short letter, Paul mentions joy or rejoicing no less than 17 times. Now, think about it. He is sitting in a Roman prison. He is a prisoner of Rome, and he talks again and again, “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice.” Friend, joy is not dependent upon our circumstances. I know that somebody watching me right now is going through a rough patch. Your heart has been broken. You may have been betrayed. You may have received some terrible news, and your feet are where your head was a few minutes ago. You've just been knocked flat, and your whole world has sort of gone upside down. Well, my friend, you can rejoice because God sees you. He knows you. He will not leave you. He will not forsake you. The Scripture says, “Do not be afraid of what man can do to you. The Lord is your helper.” So, you can rejoice. I want to begin to look at where the history of the Church is written. Actually, in Acts 16, we have the story of where Paul came to Philippi and how that occurred. I want to read it to you. We're going to read in Acts 16:6–10 NKJV. It says,

⁶ Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. ⁷ After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. ⁸ So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. ⁹ And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” ¹⁰ Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them.

It's very interesting. They tried to go into one region in Asia Minor, and the Holy Spirit didn't permit them to go. They tried to go to another place, and they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit. Now, if you think about it, Jesus has commanded us as believers to go into all the world and to preach the gospel to every creature. Yet, these particular parts of the world they tried to go into, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit. Isn't that interesting? The truth is, no one can do it all, and no one person can be it all. You need to find your lane, and you need to run in your lane. You need to find your part in what God wants you to do. I need to find my part as a minister of the gospel, and I need to run in my lane. There are some regions that I will never go to. There are some people groups that I will never reach, but there are some people that I will reach. There are some people that God has created me and wired me in such a way that I can relate to them, and I can reach them. But I can't go everywhere. I can't do everything.

I remember a guy who came to me one time, and I hadn't met him before, but he showed up at the church with his family, his wife, and his kids. I met with him afterwards. He asked if he could please talk to me, and he explained that he was a missionary going through a really rough patch, and he asked me for some help. So, I actually sat down, talked to him, and I did a little research on my own. I said, “Look, I'll get back to you.” He did indeed lead some mission teams back to his native country, where he was from. He was not American by birth. He was from another region of the world, and he would take, usually twice a year, people from the general church and some other churches as well that he had somehow become affiliated with. He would take maybe 20 people on a missions trip for eight or ten days, twice a year. I think that's great, but the rest of the year he didn't work. He didn't do anything. He wasn't pastoring a church. He wasn't leading a home Bible study. He wasn't working. He was just sitting at home in his apartment. Some of these other churches, he had talked them into supporting him, and then they realized that this guy is not doing anything. He is taking two trips a year, for ten days, and they are supporting him every month. So, they withdrew their support.

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So, I met with the guy, and I said, "Listen, I appreciate the fact that you're taking these mission trips, but listen, you need to get a job." He said, "But I'm a missionary." I said, "Yeah, okay, you do some mission trips, and that's good. May God's hand be on you and bless it. But you need to get a job and you need to support yourself." I actually earnestly prayed before I met with the guy, and I was pretty straightforward with him. I said, "Now, I'm going to help you right now." I gave him a check. I said, "Now, this is going to take care of your rent for this month, but you need to get a job. Do you understand?" He just looked at me. I said, "Now listen, this is God's mercy helping you. This gift I'm giving you is not a confirmation that you are a missionary and you're on the right track. This is not God's hand of blessing upon you to go forward the way you've been going. What this is, this is mercy because you need to work. If a man doesn't provide for his own household, the Scripture says he is worse than an infidel. You need to get a job. Do you understand? If I'm going to give this to you, you need to understand what I'm saying." He says, "I understand, Pastor." I said, "Okay." So, I gave it to him. Anyway, I didn't hear anything from him for about six months. Then, six months later, he calls me. He says, "Pastor, I'm in a jam. I need help again financially, like you did before." I said, "Have you gotten a job?" He says, "Well, not really." I said, "I'm sorry. I'm not going to help you. I told you that you needed to get a job. It's been six months and you haven't gotten a job." He calls me again. I said, "Look, stop calling. I'm not going to help you again."

Then, he showed up at the church, and I sat down with the guy. Our church was fairly young and small at the time. I sat down with the guy, and he quotes a Scripture to me from 1 John. "If you see your brother has a need and you close up your heart from him and don't help him, how does the love of God dwell in you?" I said, "Well, that's a good verse. Did you ever read where Jesus said, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature?'" He says, "Yes." Then, I took him here to Acts 16. I said, "Look at this. The Holy Spirit forbade them to preach the Word in Asia. The Holy Spirit didn't permit them to go to Bithynia. Isn't that interesting? Jesus said, 'Go into all the world.' But here the Holy Spirit forbade them from going into this part of the world. Do you see that?" He says, "Well, I guess I do." I said, "The same Holy Spirit who forbade Paul to go preach the Word in Asia Minor is forbidding me to help you financially again. You need to get a job."

I think it's important that we become sensitive to the Holy Spirit. I think love needs to be our motivating factor. But the love of God that flows out of us like a river needs to stay within the boundaries of wisdom and discernment. It needs to stay within the boundaries of scriptural teaching and wisdom. If I would have continued to help that guy, it wouldn't have helped him. It would have hindered him. It would have hindered his family. He needed to work. He was young. He was able-bodied. He could work. There was no reason other than the fact that he was lazy. Anyway, we come back to this story. They want to go into Asia Minor. They try to go to Bithynia. The Holy Spirit doesn't permit them. By the way, that's not the only time that happened. I believe it's in Acts 13. Paul said, "Hey, I planned to come to you many times, but up to this point, I was hindered." It's the same Greek word translated as forbidden, where he was forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the Word in Asia. So Paul, writing to the Romans, said, "I made plans. I endeavored to come, but I was forbidden by the Holy Spirit." He was sensitive to God's timing and God's way. There are some people who just say, "Well, bless God, I'm just going to go anyway. I'm going to trust God to take care of me." Friend, timing does matter.

Moses, when he saw the Egyptians abusing his Israelite kinsmen, rose up and killed the Egyptian. He thought they would have understood that he was called to deliver them and to lead them. But they didn't. The Bible says they didn't understand that. And then when he came back among them, they said, "Oh, are you going to do to us what you did to the Egyptian the other

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day?" Moses realizes he's in trouble. So, he has to flee from Egypt. Now, the Bible says that it came into his heart to visit his brethren, the children of Israel. Literally, something came into his heart from God. A dream, a calling of what he was supposed to do and who he was supposed to do it for. He didn't wait on God concerning the timing. He was 40 years off when it came to timing. So, he's out there in the wilderness. Forty years later, he has the burning bush experience. God says, "Now I'm sending you into Egypt." You see, the people were not ready to be delivered. God is working things from all angles. We need to be sensitive to God's timing and to God's way.

We can have good ideas, but a good idea is not necessarily a God idea. I think there are some people who make big, life-changing decisions on a sudden impulse. They move, get married, sign on the dotted line, and commit themselves to huge debt without taking time to wait on God. My friend, waiting on God is not wasted time. Open your Bible, get on your knees, read prayerfully, and get quiet before God. Jesus said, "When the Holy Spirit comes, He will speak. He will guide you into all truth. He will speak through the Word. He will speak to your heart." David was going to build a temple for God. And off the bat, the prophet said to him, "It's good that it was in your heart to do this." But then the prophet came back to him later and reiterated. He said, "Okay, I told you to do it. It's good that it was in your heart to do it, David. However, you're not the one who is going to do it. Your son, Solomon, is the one who is going to build the temple for My name." David picked up on something in his heart. The prophet said, "It is good that it was in your heart to do this. However, you're not the one to do it." So, every good thing that we pick up on and that we sense, may not be the right time to do it, or we may not be the one who God has called to do it. The truth is, God does set boundaries for us. I want to read to you from 2 Corinthians 10:13–14 NKJV, if I might. He said,

¹³ We, however, will not boast beyond measure, but within the limits of the sphere which God appointed us—a sphere which especially includes you. ¹⁴ For we are not overextending ourselves (as though our authority did not extend to you), for it was to you that we came with the gospel of Christ.

Now, think about what Paul is writing here to the Corinthians. He said, "We're not going to boast beyond measure, but we're going to stay within the limits of the sphere which God has appointed us." It talks about specific boundaries. It's interesting, that same verse from Barclay's translation says, "We will stay within the limit of the sphere which God has allotted us." Weymouth's translation says, "We will keep within the limit of the field which God has assigned to us as a limit." Again, another translation says, "We are not exceeding our determined boundary." So, God does set limits. Paul could have violated what the Holy Spirit was forbidding him to do. He could have gone into Asia Minor and preached. They could have gone to Bithynia. Some people have called it bold faith, but it's actually arrogance. I believe in having bold faith and trusting God with your life and putting your life on the line because His Word can be trusted. The Scripture says, "Wisdom is the principal thing." So, yes, I want to have bold faith, but I want it to be coupled with the wisdom of God, because I cannot step out from under the canopy of God's wisdom and have my faith in God operate. My faith in God operates when I stay within the boundaries of God's wisdom. In fact, I think when we step out from under what God has told us to do, that many times we step out from under God's protection and out from under His provision.

Now, I had a friend. He was a minister of the gospel. In fact, interestingly enough, he was just on my heart. I hadn't seen him in many, many years. He was quite a bit older than me. I just looked him up yesterday. After many years, we sort of lost touch. That happens with some people, even sometimes people who you admire and love. I found out that he just passed away

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recently. I was very happy to find out that one of his sons is in ministry and pastoring a church now as well, which delighted me. Back when I was in Bible college, he was living in the same town for a while. He contacted me one day and said, “Bayless, I have a meeting in Kansas.” It was a nearby state. He said, “I’d like you to come with me, lead worship, do some songs, maybe share your testimony, and then I’ll preach.” I said, “Okay, I’ll go.” I didn’t pray about it. I just said, “Yeah, I’m in. I’ll go.” I had the day free. I looked at my calendar. After he left, I just felt just a bit of a check inside. Something wasn’t sitting right. So, I got on my knees, and I earnestly prayed.

I can’t exactly tell you how. We’re not told how Paul and his companions were forbidden by the Holy Spirit. We’re not told how the Spirit didn’t permit them to do those certain things. It may have been a word that the Spirit spoke to them. It may have been through a dream or a vision. It may have just been an inward witness. I had this strong, strong inward witness, and I recognized the Holy Spirit was telling me not to go with this guy to Kansas. I didn’t know why, but I just felt like I should not go. So I called him up and I said, “Look, I gave you my word that I would go, and I will go. I will keep my word. But I just have a sense that I’m not supposed to go. I’m just telling you, I feel like the Holy Spirit—I don’t know why. I’m not saying anything bad is going to happen. I just don’t feel like I’m supposed to go. I’d like you to let me off the hook, but I gave you my word. So, if you want me to go, I will not break my word. I’ll go with you.” He says, “Bayless, absolutely stay. I’m going to pray a little bit more about it myself.” He did and went. He ended up having a great meeting. To this day, I don’t know why I wasn’t supposed to go, but I’m still convinced absolutely that God was the one leading me. You see, in my life, every time that I have violated that, it’s always led to trouble.

I remember one time I was coming home. Driving back, I felt like the Holy Spirit told me I needed to take a roundabout route home. It would have taken me several miles out of my way. I wouldn’t use the word forbidden, but I just had this inward, “I shouldn’t go home on the normal roads.” I remember thinking to myself, “I feel like the Holy Spirit’s telling me to drive home a different way, but I’m just going to pray. Lord, I just pray for Your protection. I don’t want to go several miles out of the way.” Anyway, I come to this intersection, and it’s a green light. I’m going through it. A woman runs the red light and smashes into my car. I remember thinking, “Yeah, I should have gone home the other way.” I could sit here and tell you story after story after story. God sees everything. He knows everything. Maybe you’ve gotten out from under God’s protection and blessing because you violated what the Holy Spirit has been leading you to do. Well, all you can do is repent and do your best to get back and do the last thing you know God told you to do. Well, we have so much more to talk about this church that is being formed that I kind of got stuck on some of these things. I hope that it was beneficial to you. I hope that you continue to join us because we’re going to stay on this. We’re going to get into some very, very rich things in the coming messages that I’m going to share with you. Until then, I pray that God’s richest and best be yours always.

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