The Makings of a Great Teacher (Philippians 3:2-4:1) Memory Verse: Philippians 3:10-11

September 14th, 2025 Scripture Reading: 2 Kings 5:9-15

**[SLIDE 1]**

Have you ever had a teacher who you realize, after a few class sessions, just did not know much about what they were teaching? They don’t seem familiar with the material and they can’t really engage in questions that are asked. In college, I had to take a class called “Logic”. Our professor was not much older than we were. She was a first year teacher and was trying to get her feet under her. Logic on it’s own seemed easy enough. I thought it would be an enjoyable time in which we picked apart different ideas and analyzed the way in which people think and arguments are presented. There was a little of that, but it did not take long for me to end up completely lost! It turns out logic was just another name for math! Somehow we ended up trying to balance out equations all day long. Math does not belong in a Bible college! And it wasn’t just me. It seemed that all of my fellow students were in the same boat. And our teacher, our captain, our guide to steer the ship through this storm, well, she seemed out of her depth as well. She was not able to bring clarity to confusion. But, again, it was her first time at the helm. She was probably learning just as much as we were. But, as students, her on the job training was not for our benefit.

I managed to pass the class, but it was not a pretty semester. And I’ll admit, there were times when I blamed the professor for my struggles. I just couldn’t help but think that a seasoned professor; someone with thick glasses and elbow patches on his suitcoat, someone who knew and loved the material, someone who had internalized logic, that kind of teacher could have helped me out. That kind of professor would have been a benefit to the whole class.

Well, I have since had my own experiances of firsts. And I have come a long way in understanding how our fresh, young teacher must have felt going through that class with us. It’s not easy to have to learn on your feet in front of a class full of people. But think now about those teachers you did have that stand out to you. **[SLIDE 2]** Teachers who not only knew well the material you were supposed to learn, but they also expressed a concern, an interest in you and in your well-being. My best teachers taught me, but more than that, they affirmed me, they encouraged me. They provided a needed boost in my educational journey. A good teacher possesses two qualities: they know their stuff and they care about their students.

Well, Paul is one of those teachers. **[SLIDE 3]** He’s not up at the chalkboard giving lectures in a classroom, but he is delivering information, he is forming minds and hearts, he is teaching. As we have seen, his office at the moment, includes a Roman guard and his classes must be taken remotely; by mail in this case. But his knowledge of the subject is vast. He lives what he teaches. And his concern for his students runs deep.

As we enter into Philippians 3, we remember that Paul has just shared some plans regarding his partners in ministry, Timothy, his son in the faith, and Epaphroditus, his brother. He sends these men in his stead, and he expresses all the confidence in the world in their knowledge and ability. In 3:1 we talked about the importance of repetition in our own learning process. And we were reminded that Paul himself was a Pharisee. He had received the highest education available in the world of Judaism and had very likely committed the entire Old Testament to memory. This feat of course could not have been accomplished without constant and deliberate repetition. Now this teacher of the highest order turns his crosshairs on those he considers to be his enemies: Judaizers. **[SLIDE 4]** (READ 3:2-3) Paul is calling out teachers who say they are Christians. They say that they have put their hope in Christ but yet they also insist that those who come to Christ must also embrace the old traditions of Judaism, specifically in this case, circumscion. They are more concerned about an external sign, when Paul is clear, “we don’t put our confidence in rituals performed on the body.” If Christ is our savior, if Christ is our righteousness, then there is no need for any extra rituals, there are no other hoops that need to be jumped through. Paul does not take this slight on the work of Christ lightly. For him it is a false gospel, for him, these teachers are “dogs”.

Now, of course, we do not have many voices in our life trying to persuade us to live out traditional Jewish rites. But, certainly, there are still ways in which false teachers pervert the gospel. **[SLIDE 5]** We can think about this in many ways, but usually when we think about something that is pure or unadulterated, we think of a substance that is not mixed with anything else. Pure water is free from debris or iron or chemical additives. Pure gold has no other substances rolled into it. We might even speak of the purity of competition. We want a fair fight so to speak. If one althlete is adding chemicals to his preparations, steroids for example, then we consider the results of such a competition to be impure. Something has been added from the outside. This is a problem that has run rampant in our culture when it comes to the gospel. The pure gospel is hard to find. Many teachers or preachers add outside elements to the gospel and so corrupt its purity.

**[SLIDE 6]** ((For some pastors, the gospel brings along with it material blessing or health benefits. We call this the prosperity gospel. If you trust in Jesus, then he will bring in the money for you. It is false, because it has added something else to the pure message of salvation found in Christ alone. Some pastors want the gospel to come with a political agenda. **[SLIDE 7]** It’s the idea that all who are in Christ must vote a certain way. Some pastors want the gospel to come with a social agenda. **[SLIDE 8]** Certainly, we ought to treat people that way Jesus would, but these false teachers want to dictate how that treatment plays out. They have a specific prescription in mind for how you should act in society. Sometimes the gospel is presented with a spiritual agenda. **[SLIDE 9]** Sometimes it seems like salvation must also come with certain supernatural powers or instantaneous transformations. No. **[SLIDE 10]** The gospel is good news. Christ came into this world to take on our sin. To die on the cross for our sake and to rise again so that we can freely be reunited with God for all eternity. That’s it. We come to Christ, we put our trust in him. There is nothing else that we can do.))

I think we are prone to falsifying the gospel message because the gospel on it’s own is too simple. It seems too easy. Trust in Christ, put your faith in him…it seems like there should be more to it. I’m reminded of Naaman **[SLIDE 11]**, a Syrian soldier we meet in 2 Kings chapter 5. Naaman suffers from a terrible skin disease, and he hears about Elisha, a prophet of Yahweh, who might have the power to heal him. Naaman follows up on the lead, meets with Elisha who tells him to go and dip himself in the Jordan River seven times. Naaman was not happy. He wanted some procedure here. Some ritual, some extended prayer, some hand waving and incantation from the prophet. Besides, what was so great about the Jordan river? He could jump into better rivers back home. In verse 13, Naaman’s servants say to him, “Sir, if the prophet had told you to do something difficult, you would have done it. Now why can’t you just wash yourself, as he said, and be cured?” Somehow, we want to add **[SLIDE 12]** difficulty. We want to feel like we are engaged in the process, like we are somehow earning our way. False gospels are attractive to us because they speak to our fallen human nature. They highlight our resistance to free grace. We want to know what we can do to earn it, to deserve it, to work for it. But there is nothing we can do. Just jump into the river. The offer is there, why can’t we just believe and be cured?

And as Paul attacks these false teachers, he can anticipate what opponents might say, so he decides to lay out his credentials. **[SLIDE 13]** (READ 3:4-9) Basically Paul is saying here that not many people can compare to him when it comes to what the law requires. If anyone could stand before God on the basis of external standard, he would be the one. He has the pedigree, the education, the zeal, he seems to have it all, all that God would want…yet, if he does not have Christ, none of it is worth a thing. All of it is garbage. All the hours and hours and days and years he toiled away committing scripture to memory, all the students he taught, all of the honor he had gained…he counts it all as loss for the sake of Christ. What good is any of it if Christ is not present? Everything is a loss because knowledge of Jesus is superior. He is the only source of our righteousness. We are not made right by ourselves or by our adherence to the law…is is only by faith in Christ. Pure faith with no additives.

Verses 10-11 serve as a wonderful summary of Paul’s main point. I wonder if we could read it together:**[SLIDE 14]** *“The righteousness that I have comes from knowing Christ, the power of his resurrection and the participation in his sufferings. It includes being conformed to his death so that I may perhaps reach the goal of the resurrection of the dead.”* This verse is maybe an entire sermon series in and of itself. There is no question here about where our righteousness comes from. We have to know Christ, we have to get acquainted with the power of his resurrection and we do this by being conformed to his death. What do we make of that? What does it mean to be conformed to the death of Jesus?

The word Paul uses here is **[SLIDE 15]** *symmorphizo,* meaning “to render like”. It is written in the passive present tense which means Paul is speaking here of an ongoing process. We conform ourselves to the death of Christ by daily putting to death the desires of our bodies. Paul speaks of this in **[SLIDE 16]** Romans 8:13. We must die to ourselves. We live in a crucified way by taking Christ’s death as a mold for our life.

Paul is not claiming perfection. Here is how he characterizes his journey of faith: **[SLIDE 17]** (READ 3:12-16) What is following Jesus like for Paul? It is a race! **[SLIDE 18]** For anyone who has run a race before it requires total involvement of both mind and body. Of course, your body needs to be in shape but your state of mind is what will guide your body. **[SLIDE 19]** Forget what is behind Paul says. In fact, he highlights this as the one thing he does. Forgetting is function of the will. Notice here, I say the will and not the memory. Certainly, there are experiences, both good and terrible, in our life that we cannot forget. Our brains will not allow us to dismiss these things. We cannot control memory in that way. But Paul is speaking here of the will. He is talking about focus. Look at what is ahead of you, focus on taking the next step. Do not allow the past to dictate the future. Do not allow the past to hinder progress. Forget about that. Forge ahead! Move forward in Christ! He is the goal. He is our prize.

**[SLIDE 20]** (READ 17-21) Paul calls the church to imitate him as he runs toward the goal of pursuing a relationship with Jesus Christ. And then Paul turns to tears. He has a heavy heart because he knows that not everyone will run after Christ. He knows that there are some, many in fact, who live as enemies of the cross. These people will not be conformed to the death of Christ. They will not know salvation, they will be destroyed. Paul is strighforward here about it, but he is heartbroken. Not everyone will come to Christ, we know this, we experience this. Some people are just opposed to faith. Some people are offended by the cross. Paul points out the heart of the problem in verse 19, **[SLIDE 21]** “Their thoughts focus on earthly things.” Again, we see that our minds are the field upon which this battle is fought. Do we forget what is behind us, and focus on Christ, our goal? Or do we think about and pursue earthly things? It seems like Paul is indicating here that our minds decide where are hearts will be. For Paul, verse 20, his citizenship is in heaven, and as he has told the Philippians all along, he looks forward to the day when Christ will come again, when he will return from heaven. That’s the focus. That’s the mindset of faith…living for that last day. And when it comes, we will enjoy the transformation of our bodies, from humility to glory. We will enjoy the outcome of living a crucified life.

I have been characterizing this letter to the Philippians as **[SLIDE 22]** Paul’s context for joy. And once again, we see that Christ’s second coming is everything for Paul. It is his focus, his goal, it is his joy. But even in that joy, there are some other emotions. Paul expresses anger toward the “dogs”, those teachers of false gospels, those charlatans that want to add to the glorious purity of the good news of Jesus Christ. Paul has no patience for a false teacher. They will meet with harsh judgement. And, even in this letter of joy, Paul sheds some tears. Not over false teachers who should know better, but over those who have taken their stand as enemies of Christ, enemies of his cross. These people are lost and they do not necessarily know better. They are focused on the wrong things, earthly things, they do not have eternity in mind. As I mentioned, we all know someone who has taken this position. We all know someone who stands as an enemy of the cross. Let us be like Paul and let that reality bring us to tears. It is sad. It is tragic to think that people will deny Christ because their minds are focused on the wrong things. Notice the way Paul presents this. These are not bad people. They are not criminals and adulterers and thieves necessarily, but because they focus on earthly things, they live for their appetites, and they take pride in disgrace, and they become enemies of the cross.

**[SLIDE 23]** I want to invite us, as those saved by a pure gospel, as those trying to pursue Jesus, trying to live conformed to the cross, trying to love others who have a different focus. Would you write down the names of one or two or three people who you know that do not know Jesus? Would you commit to praying for these names? **[SLIDE 24]** Pray over them every day. It need not be any sort of ritual. Simply pray over them, even allow yourself to weep over them as Paul does. Ask God to reveal himself to them, to put people in their lives that will point them to Christ. Write down those names and we will take time here this morning to pray. But as we pray, think about how you might engage with the people you have written. If Paul is right, if these folks are focused on earthly things, if their minds are in the wrong place, what could we do to help affect their mindset? What could we do to help them change their way of thinking? Maybe the answer is nothing. Maybe they do not want to listen to what we might have to say. Maybe we really have no voice in their life. In that case, we pray for them and pray hard.

But if we have contact with the people we wrote down, if we have some influence, can I just encourage you to become a teacher to them. Help them learn the gospel. You know the subject material. You have a history of living it out. You can help field questions. You are a professor who can have a profound effect on the lives of your students. Now we know these people will not formally sign up for any class you are offering, but in your conversations and interactions with them, can you see yourself as a teacher? Can you pass along some information? Remember the two qualities that we said makes for a great teacher: they know their stuff and they care. Share your knowledge of the gospel. Help others see where your focus lies. And pray, pray for them with tears because you care for their eternal lives.

I will close with Philippians 4:1 **[SLIDE 25]** “Therefore my brothers and sisters whom I love and miss, who are my joy and crown, in this way, stand firm in the Lord.” Paul has filled them in, he has instructed them on how they might stand firm in the Lord. By following the pure gospel, by maintaining a mindful focus on Christ, and by lifting up those who are currently lost. In this way, we have the makings of a great teacher and we stand firm in the Lord. Amen.