

The Pursuit of Spiritual Maturity. St. Paul's Message of Discipleship in Philippians 3

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Abstract: This paper explores the Epistle to the Philippians, penned by St. Paul, focusing primarily on the theme of spiritual maturity and growth in the third chapter. This missive, written during St. Paul's imprisonment, communicates themes of joy, unity, and perseverance amidst adversity. It encourages early Christians to remain steadfast in faith and strive for spiritual growth. The document outlines St. Paul's intent behind writing the epistle, which extended beyond addressing the Philippians' concerns. St. Paul's motivations stemmed from his concern for the Philippi church and its needs amidst external threats. Consequently, St. Paul utilizes autobiographical content to instruct the Philippians, using his own spiritual journey as an exemplar for achieving spiritual maturity. The paper delves into St. Paul's transformation from a zealous Pharisee to a follower of Christ, emphasizing the value of Christ-centered faith over adherence to the Mosaic Law. It underscores the shift from personal accomplishments to a profound relationship with Christ as a hallmark of spiritual maturity. This study provides insights into St. Paul's teachings on discipleship and their applicability to contemporary Christian life.

Keywords: Philippians, Spiritual Growth, Paul's Teaching, Discipleship

I. Introduction

a. Brief Overview of St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians

The Epistle to the Philippians developed in four chapters is one of the thirteen letters written by the Apostle Paul to various Christian communities during the first century CE. This particular letter was addressed to the believers in the city of Philippi, a

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Roman colony located in nowadays Greece². It is believed that St. Paul founded the church in Philippi during his second missionary journey around 49-52 CE³. The letter was although written during a period of imprisonment of St. Paul, most probably in Efes or Rome⁴, but in contrast to this unfortunate event, the epistle is wellknown for its themes of joy, unity, and perseverance in the face of adversity. St. Paul's message to the Philippians serves as an encouragement for the early Christians to remain steadfast in their faith and to strive for spiritual growth⁵.

b. The Theme of Spiritual Maturity in Philippians 3

In the third chapter of his letter to the Philippians, St. Paul emphasizes the importance of spiritual maturity and growth in the life of a believer. He highlights the significance of developing a deep, personal relationship with Christ and the process of sanctification in the Christian life. By examining St. Paul's call to spiritual growth and maturity in Philippians 3, the main purpose of this paper aims to provide insights into the Apostle's teachings on discipleship and how they can be applied in contemporary Christian life.

² The town of Philippi was named after Philip II, king of Macedonia, who founded it in 356 b.c. There previous site of it was a Thracian village named Krenides, which was taken over in 361 b.c. by settlers from the island of Thasos led by the exiled athenian named Callistratus. The main attractiveness of the place are the proximity gold mines of Mount Pangaeus, which Philip made sure of controlling by means of his new foundation. „*It was also strategically important because it commanded the land route to the Hellespont (Dardanelles) and Bosporus, and so across into Asia*”, according to F. F. Bruce, *Philippians* (New International Biblical Commentary), Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, 1989, p. 1.

³ Stephen E. Fowl, *Philippians*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Cambridge, U.K., 2005, p. 11.

⁴ It is clear that the letter to the Philippians was written when Paul was in prison (1, 7, 13, 14). This imprisonment was serious (1, 20-24, 30; 2, 17), for his trial could result in either life or death for him. Paul links this imprisonment with his ministry, claiming that he had been put there „*for the defence of the gospel*” (1, 16). Contrary to what his friends at Philippi might have expected, both the imprisonment and the attendant circumstances had served to advance the gospel rather than to hinder it (v. 12). But where was this imprisonment? Paul does not say explicitly, for his Philippian friends already knew: they had sent Epaphroditus, one of them, to visit him (2, 25). The traditional answer to this question has been Rome (A.D. 60-62), with the earliest attestation going back to the second-century Marcionite prologue 1. In more recent times arguments have been presented in favour of Ephesus (ca. A.D. 54-55), Caesarea (A.D. 57-59), and less frequently Corinth as the place from which Paul wrote to the Philippians, according to Peter Thomas O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1991, p.20.

⁵ Hywel R. Jones, *Philippians*, Christian Focus Publications, Ross-shire, 1993, p. 11.

In order to understand better the content of the epistle's third chapter we must know first, why Paul wrote to the philippians, especially in those moments of imprisonment. Initially, Paul had reasons to write to the Philippians, including their thoughtful gift to him, their concern for his and Epaphroditus' health, and their desire to hear about the spread of the gospel despite Paul's imprisonment. However, if these were the only reasons, the resulting letter would have been of limited value to the church in general. Therefore, there must have been additional factors that led Paul to write⁶.

One of them was his concern for the church in Philippi and its needs. As a substitute for his preaching ministry, Paul wrote to edify the Philippians and provide them with authoritative guidance. This is evident in the serious tone of the letter, despite its conversational style. Paul had learned that the church in Philippi was facing some danger from its environment, as mentioned in 1, 28-29: „*And in nothing terrified by your adversaries: which is to them an evident token of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that of God. For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake*” also in 3, 2: „*Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the concision*” and then in 3, 18-19: „*For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: Whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things*”.

This threat is the reason for the autobiographical content in the letter, as Paul uses his own experiences to reinforce his instruction to the Philippians⁷. That is the reason why, in the process of teaching them the deep meanings of a fulfilled christian life, St. Paul starts with the experience of his own life and all the process he it's been through in order to become a *perfect man* in Christ, which he is not already as he says (Philippians 3, 12), but he seeks further for it by taking hold of Jesus Christ, Who took him hold first⁸: „*Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus*” (Philippians 3, 12).

Through this sentence and some others that St. Paul stated in chapter 2, he explains to the christians of Philippi that God is the One who brings the man to perfection and not

⁶ Hywel R. Jones, *Philippians*, p. 16.

⁷ F.F. Bruce, *Philippians*, p. 10.

⁸ In relation to Jesus Christ (verse 12) Paul sees it as something which he wants to *take hold* of either because Jesus took hold of him (the same verb is used) or because he wants to possess what Jesus took hold of him for on the road to Damascus. „*The NIV favours the latter interpretation and in view of the fact that the Greek words in question do not mean because in 4:10, where they are also used and translated indeed, we agree with the NIV rendering. This means that Paul will only be content when he possesses all that Jesus Christ has for him. He will not allow himself to be satisfied with, or diverted by, the ground he has already gained when there is more land to be possessed*”, according to Hywel R. Jones, *Philippians*, p. 121.

the man itself by what he does with his own body or will: „ *For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure*” (Philippians 2, 13). The philippians were already on a good path⁹, as Paul expresses many times, they showed careness for their neighbours, they sustained Paul¹⁰ and showed worries for him and for the health of Epaphroditus¹¹, all of these facts making them look as good christians. But what Paul wants through this letter is to help them evaluate to the next step and become deeper christians and to live a more profound life in Christ.

1. St. Paul's Personal Testimony: The Value of Knowing Christ (Philippians 3, 1-11)

The theme of discipleship in chapter 3 is deep connected with Paul's wish to teach philippians about having a more profound life in Christ. First of all, the apostle shows them that in order to grow spiritually, the measure of discipleship is needed to be applied. The apprentice has to learn from an initiate, from a disciple who has already been on this path and has the experience and the notions of what is to be learned.

In the opening verses of Philippians 3, St. Paul shares his personal testimony, recounting his background as a zealous Pharisee and his memorable and dramatic conversion to Christianity. He highlights the importance of knowing Christ and the transformational impact it has had on his life¹².

⁹ „*For your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now; 6 Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ*” (Philippians 1, 5-6).

¹⁰ „*But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at the last your care of me hath flourished again; wherein ye were also careful, but ye lacked opportunity*” (Philippians 4, 10).

¹¹ „*Yet I supposed it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, and companion in labour, and fellowsoldier, but your messenger, and he that ministered to my wants. 26 For he longed after you all, and was full of heaviness, because that ye had heard that he had been sick. 27 For indeed he was sick nigh unto death: but God had mercy on him; and not on him only, but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. 28 I sent him therefore the more carefully, that, when ye see him again, ye may rejoice, and that I may be the less sorrowful*” (Philippians 2, 25-28).

¹² Markus Boehmuel, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (Black's New Testament Commentary), Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, 1997, p. 222.

a. St. Paul's Background as a Pharisee (Philippians 3, 1-6¹³)

St. Paul begins this section by describing his former life as a Pharisee, a member of the Jewish sect wellknown for their strict adherence to the Mosaic Law¹⁴. He lists his credentials, such as being circumcised on the eighth day, coming from the tribe of Benjamin, and having zeal in persecuting the church (Philippians 3, 4-6). These accomplishments would have made him a respected figure within the Jewish community. However, St. Paul goes on to explain how his encounter with Christ changed his perspective on the value of these accomplishments.

In his way of sharing his own experience, Paul gives to philippians the advice to keep themselves away from the circumcision. He states that seriously, more like a command, which is pretty doubtly coming it from a jew who also received the circumcision and originally respected the law of it. But he does that in order to underline the need of the christian man of keeping himself away from *formalism*, a totally unproductive quality which charaterized especially the pharisees who were supposed to fulfill the law but on the contrary, they misinterpreted it. The apostle doesn't want to say that circumcision is bad, but he wants to show that there is something greater than that, and that is because: „ *we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh*” (Philippians 3, 3).

b. The Value of Knowing Christ (Philippians 3, 7-9)

St. Paul describes his radical transformation after encountering Christ, stating that he now considers all his former achievements as „rubbish” in comparison to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ (Philippians 3, 8¹⁵). He explains that true righteousness comes not from following the Mosaic Law, but through the faith in Christ (Philippians 3, 9). This shift in focus from personal accomplishments to a relationship with Christ is a key aspect of spiritual maturity.

¹³ „Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe. 2 Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the concision. 3 For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh. Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless” (Philippians 3, 1-6).

¹⁴ Hywel R. Jones, *Philippians*, Christian Focus Publications, Ross-shire, Scotland, 1993 p. 109.

¹⁵ „Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ” (Philippians 3, 8).

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St. Augustine asks himself what does Paul mean, by saying „*not having my own righteousness*”¹⁶ when that law was not his but God's? „He can only have called it his own righteousness because, although it was from the law, he used to think that he could fulfill it without the aid of the grace that is through Christ”¹⁷. After converting and all the way he is been through until being a man in continuous searching of God, he now puts the righteousness of God through faith more than anything. This is the way he teaches also the philippians to do so, in order to reach a spiritual maturity.

c. The Goal of Spiritual Maturity: Knowing Christ and Sharing in His Sufferings (Philippians 3, 10-11)

In the next verses, St. Paul expresses his desire to know Christ more deeply, to experience the power of His resurrection, and to share in His sufferings (Philippians 3, 10¹⁸). This pursuit of knowing Christ and being conformed to His image is the ultimate goal of spiritual maturity. St. Paul acknowledges that this path involves both the joy of experiencing Christ's power and the challenge of sharing in His sufferings, reflecting the complex nature of spiritual growth. Not in the proper meaning of crucifying, but in the meaning that the „old man” should die with all the sins and the new spiritual man should rise with Christ, in faith.

Knowledge therefore comes through *faith*, and without faith there is no knowledge, explains St. John Chrysostomus, saying that it is only through faith that we know the power of Jesus's resurrection¹⁹. It is by faith in Christ that anyone and everyone comes into the relationship of being *in Christ*- a great emphasis of Paul's. Consequently, Paul's desire exceeds being accepted by God *through* Christ. It extends to being *conformed* to Christ (*becoming like him* in verse 10) and that increasingly this side of death and ultimately beyond it²⁰ (verse 11²¹).

¹⁶ „*And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith*” (Philippians 3,9).

¹⁷ M.J. Edwards, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, in „Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT 8”, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1999, p. 270.

¹⁸ „*That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death*” (Philippians 3, 10).

¹⁹ St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, *Homilies on the Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Philippians*, in „John Chrysostom: The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers”, Vol. XIII, The Christian Literature Company, New York, 1889, p. 238.

²⁰ „It is because Paul is still persevering in the fellowship of suffering, which is very similar to death itself, that he says „*that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead*”. There can be no doubt of his attaining to the resurrection. But what is this attaining to the resurrection of the dead? It is the perfect and full life of every individual which is elicited from the fellowship of Christ's sufferings by every means, which will appear clearly at that end time when the

In verse 10, there are three clauses that explain what it means *to know* or *to become like Christ* in this life. The first two clauses, which are the power of Jesus's resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, are connected and should be seen as parts of a single whole. While they can be distinguished, they should not be separated chronologically or as two different stages in the Christian experience. The third clause describes *the ongoing process of becoming like Christ*, which is indicated by the present participle. This process involves *participating* in both the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings.²²

Paul's desire to know Christ is based in the reality of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Paul's devotion is directed towards a historical figure who had a physical existence in space and time. However, it is not merely a recognition of these events or a remembrance of them. Instead, it is a dynamic relationship with the living Christ who suffered, died, and rose again. This relationship is grounded in the physical world but transcends it because it is focused on one who is beyond time and space, the Creator of all things. This is the spiritual reality of „*Christ in you, the hope of glory*” (Colossians 1, 27), a blessed reality that is available to all except those who believe that the physical world is the only reality that exists²³.

2. The Process of Spiritual Growth: Pressing Onward (Philippians 3, 12-16)

In this section of his letter, St. Paul elaborates on the process of spiritual growth, emphasizing the ongoing nature of this journey and the importance of perseverance in pursuing a deeper relationship with Christ.

The Ongoing Nature of Spiritual Growth (Philippians 3, 12)

St. Paul acknowledges that he has not yet achieved the ultimate goal of spiritual maturity, stating that he has not „*already obtained this or am already perfect*”²⁴ (Philippians 3, 12). By admitting his own imperfection, St. Paul demonstrates humility and self-awareness, which are essential qualities for believers seeking to grow in their

resurrection from the dead occurs, that is, when the dead come back to life”, according to M. J. Edwards, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, p. 271.

²¹ „*If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead*” (Philippians 3, 11).

²² Hywel R. Jones, *Philippians*, p.118.

²³ Jac. J. Muller, *The Epistles of Paul to the Philippians and to Philemon*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Grand Rapids, 1955, p. 115.

²⁴ He doesn't say „I run” but „I press on”, as a consideration how the pursuer strains in his pursuit. „He sees nothing, he thrusts away all who impede him with great force, he cherishes his mind, his eye, his strength, his soul and his body, looking at nothing other than the crown”, according to John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Philippians*, p. 239.

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faith. This acknowledgement also highlights the ongoing nature of spiritual growth, reminding believers that the pursuit of maturity is a lifelong endeavor.

Paul's modesty is a lesson in humility for the Philippians, for he discounts even his labors as an evangelist, teaching us that *all perfection* lies in a gradual advance toward the future with God. His entreaty combines both humility and aspiration, hinting at prizes yet unseen, as explains the Bishop Theodoret of Cyr. He claims maturity only in his aspirations and in the knowledge of his imperfection, says St. Augustine²⁵.

Forgetting What Lies Behind and Straining Forward (Philippians 3, 13-14)

To illustrate the mindset needed for spiritual growth, St. Paul uses the metaphor of a race, „ *I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus*” (Philippians 3, 14). He urges believers to forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead, pressing on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3, 13-14). This imagery emphasizes the importance of focus, determination, and perseverance in the journey toward spiritual maturity. Believers are encouraged to let go of past failures or accomplishments and to continually seek a deeper relationship with Christ, striving for the heavenly reward that awaits them.

By this gradual advance, never being static but always in progress, St. Paul is able to teach us that what we supposed in our human way to be perfect still remains in some ways imperfect. The only perfection is the true righteousness of God²⁶.

Putting the past out of mind doesn't mean to forget or to ignore what was done wrong, but to forgive yourself and ask God for forgiveness and go further with Christ in becoming a better man. It is a productive mentality that keeps the mind far from the diabolical despair and helps us grow no matter how low the starting point was, because „ *I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me*” (Philippians 4, 13).

In verse 14, Paul draws a parallel between forgetting and „straining forward”, which indicates that he is determined not to be weighed down by his past as he pursues what lies ahead. Nevertheless, it is also clear from 3, 2-11 that Paul has not „forgotten” his past. He has reconceived it from the perspective of one who is now in Christ, but it is not forgotten. In fact, it is quite clear that it is only now, from the perspective of being in Christ, that Paul can offer a truthful account of his past. His ability to „press on toward the goal” can be sustained only by the truthful account of his past he is now able to narrate²⁷.

Paul does not promote a spiritual life in which one constantly reinvents oneself. Instead, he uses his past experiences, viewed from the perspective of being in Christ, as a

²⁵ M. J., Edwards, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, p. 272.

²⁶ Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians: An Introduction and Commentary*, (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 11) Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham, 1987, p. 159.

²⁷ F.F. Bruce, *Philippians*, p. 122.

launching point to propel himself forward toward the goal that Christ has set for him. The apostle does not forget or erase his past, but rather he has gained a truthful understanding of it. It is only from this truthful perspective that Paul can hope to direct his present and future towards achieving the goal for which Christ has called him.²⁸

There is another issue that needs to be considered, which is the nature of the „prize” that Paul is striving for. The prize is described as the „heavenly” or „upward” call of God in Christ Jesus. The primary question for many modern commentators is how this clause modifies our understanding of the prize. Some wonder if the call itself is the prize, or if it refers to being called to be with Christ in heaven (cf. Col 3, 3- 4, Eph 2,6).

Bockmuehl explains that: „while this understanding of the ‘upward call’ could be compatible with Paul’s thought elsewhere, it seems at this stage to disrupt the metaphor in which the goal is a prize not a calling. What is more, it is worth underlining that for Paul the word ‘calling’ (*klēsis*) normally denotes the divine act of calling itself rather than that to which one is called”²⁹.

The Role of Attitude and Mindset in Spiritual Growth (Philippians 3, 15)

St. Paul encourages the Philippians to adopt a mature mindset in their pursuit of spiritual growth, stating that „*all of us who are mature should take such a view of things*” (Philippians 3, 15). This exhortation highlights the significance of attitude and perspective in the process of spiritual growth. A mature mindset involves as we already saw in Paul’s gradually description: humility, self-awareness and a willingness to learn from both successes and failures, as well as a commitment to continually seeking a deeper relationship with Christ³⁰.

The *Christ-centered* ambition expressed by Paul should characterize every mature believer. No doubt Paul’s ambition, from the moment of his conversion, was to serve Christ and „*be found in him*”; but it took time for him to appreciate by experience what was involved in the pursuit of this ambition. Having attained spiritual maturity, however, he „no longer frets about weaknesses, failures and frustrations”, whether in himself or in others³¹.

Maintaining a Consistent Walk with Christ (Philippians 3, 16)

Lastly, St. Paul emphasizes the importance of consistency in the Christian walk. He encourages the Philippians to „*live up to what we have already attained*” (Philippians

²⁸ Stephen E., Fowl, *Philippians*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 2005, p. 161.

²⁹ Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 222.

³⁰ Jac. J. Muller, *The Epistles of Paul to the Philippians...*, p. 125.

³¹ Robert E. Picirilli, *Paul the Apostle*. Chicago, Moody Publishers, 1986, p. 220.

3, 16) which underscores the need for believers to be diligent in applying the spiritual lessons they have already learned and to maintain a steadfast commitment to their faith, even as they continue to grow and mature in their relationship with Christ.

In verse 16 Paul shifts from the second person plural back to the first person plural with which he began verse 15. Having conceded that the Philippians may have yet to adopt his perspective fully, he redirects their attention to what he and they have already attained, urging them to “keep in step” with this pattern of thinking, acting, and feeling. This notion of “keeping in step” draws on the military image of keeping in line or in step³².

If „*what we have already attained*” are the guidelines for Christian living which Paul habitually recommended to his converts- if they are, as he puts it elsewhere, „*my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church*” (1 Cor. 4, 17)- then let them continue to follow Paul’s „way” as their rule of life, and the desired spiritual growth will manifest itself. To those who walk in the light they already have, more light will be given³³.

As we could see, St. Paul's teachings on the process of spiritual growth in Philippians 3, 12-16 offer valuable insights into the ongoing nature of the Christian journey, the importance of perseverance, and the role of attitude and mindset in pursuing spiritual maturity. By examining these principles, believers can be encouraged and equipped to grow in their faith and develop a deeper, more intimate relationship with Christ.

3. The Role of Christian Community in Spiritual Maturity (Philippians 3, 17-21)

After he made a step by step description of the levels of becoming a true christian, in the final section of Philippians 3, St. Paul highlights the importance of the Christian community in the pursuit of spiritual maturity. He discusses the role of mentorship, the dangers of false teachings, and the ultimate hope that unites all believers³⁴.

³² Stephen E. Fowl, *Philippians*, p. 165.

³³ F.F. Bruce, *New International Biblical Commentary: Philippians*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1989, p. 125.

³⁴ „Spiritual discipline does involve denying oneself, and it does require endurance, but its rewards are both earthly and heavenly. The transformation spiritual discipline makes in life on earth is preparation for the transformation the Lord Jesus Christ will make to prepare His followers for life with Him in eternity. In Philippians 3, 17, Paul added himself to those whom the Philippians were to imitate” according to Jack W. Hayford, Joseph Snider, *Prisoner of Joy: Living in Christ's Fullness and Freedom: A Study of the Prison Epistles*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 1997, p. 25.

Mentorship and Imitation of Christ (Philippians 3, 17)

St. Paul encourages the Philippians to imitate him and other mature believers as they walk in the footsteps of Christ. He writes, „Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do” (Philippians 3, 17). This exhortation highlights the value of mentorship and discipleship in the Christian community³⁵. By following the example of mature believers, younger Christians can receive guidance and encouragement in their journey toward spiritual maturity.

There are many itinerant teachers whose example it would be unsafe to follow. Paul recommends his own example and that of others who, like him, adhere to the way of Christ. The “imitation of Paul” is a remarkable and recurring theme in his letters. He taught his converts by precept, spoken and written, how they ought to live; but a living example could be more telling than many words. If they desire to see Christian life in action, Paul directs their attention to his own conduct, as he does here: “join in imitating me”³⁶.

The Dangers of False Teachings (Philippians 3, 18-19)

St. Paul also warns the Philippians about the dangers of false teachings that can lead believers astray from the true path of discipleship. He describes such individuals as „enemies of the cross of Christ”, whose focus on earthly desires and self-indulgence ultimately leads to destruction (Philippians 3, 18-19). By warning the Philippians about these dangers, St. Paul emphasizes the importance of discernment and accountability within the Christian community. Believers must be vigilant in guarding their faith against false teachings and must support one another in upholding the truth of the gospel³⁷.

The Ultimate Hope: A Heavenly Citizenship (Philippians 3, 20-21)

Finally, St. Paul reminds the Philippians of their ultimate hope and identity as citizens of heaven (Philippians 3, 20). This heavenly citizenship unites all believers, regardless of their earthly backgrounds or circumstances, and offers them a shared hope for the future. St. Paul assures the Philippians that Christ will one day return to transform their lowly bodies into glorious, resurrected forms, conforming them to His own

³⁵ Charles J. Ellicott, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Philippians, Colossians, and to Philemon: With a Critical and Grammatical Commentary, and a Revised Translation*, Smith, English, And Co., Philadelphia, 1876, p. 93.

³⁶ F.F. Bruce, *Philippians*, p. 127.

³⁷ Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, p. 164.

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glorious image (Philippians 3, 21³⁸). This promise serves as a source of encouragement and motivation for believers, inspiring them to persevere in their pursuit of spiritual maturity, knowing that their efforts are not in vain³⁹.

In conclusion, St. Paul's teachings on the role of the Christian community in spiritual maturity in Philippians 3, 17-21 emphasize the importance of mentorship, discernment, and a shared hope in Christ. By understanding these principles, believers can better navigate their journey toward spiritual maturity, drawing strength and encouragement from their fellow Christians as they grow together in their faith.

Conclusions

St. Paul's message of discipleship in Philippians 3 provides a comprehensive roadmap for the pursuit of spiritual maturity in the Christian life. By examining the key themes and teachings presented in this chapter, believers can gain valuable insights into the transformative power of knowing Christ, the process of spiritual growth, and the vital role of Christian community in their journey toward spiritual maturity.

Firstly, St. Paul's personal testimony in Philippians 3, 1-11 demonstrates the transformative impact of knowing Christ and placing one's faith in Him. By sharing his own experiences and the radical shift in his priorities after encountering Christ, St. Paul emphasizes the importance of developing a deep, personal relationship with Jesus as the foundation for spiritual growth.

Secondly, the process of spiritual growth is elaborated in Philippians 3, 12-16. St. Paul highlights the ongoing nature of spiritual maturity and the need for perseverance, focus, and a mature mindset in the Christian walk. By adopting these attitudes and practices, believers can continue to grow in their faith, even in the face of challenges and setbacks.

Lastly, the role of the Christian community in spiritual maturity is emphasized in Philippians 3, 17-21. The importance of mentorship, discernment, and the shared hope of a heavenly citizenship unite believers in their pursuit of spiritual growth. By recognizing the value of these communal aspects of the Christian life, believers can better support and encourage one another in their journey toward spiritual maturity.

In conclusion, St. Paul's message of discipleship in Philippians 3 offers a rich and inspiring guide for believers seeking to grow in their faith and develop a deeper, more

³⁸ „Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself” (Philippians 3, 21).

³⁹ „The certainty of that which Paul anticipated is underscored by the reference to power. Though „power” (ἐνέργεια, *energeia*) could be described with several illustrations, this is the ultimate one, comprehending all others. The word “power” comes from a Greek root which stands behind the English „energy.”, according to Anthony Lee ASH, *Philippians, Colossians & Philemon*, College Press Joplin, 1994, p. 120.

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intimate relationship with Christ. By embracing the pursuit of spiritual maturity and applying the principles outlined in this chapter, Christians can experience lasting transformation, find joy and contentment in their walk with Christ, and ultimately reflect the image of their Savior more fully in their lives.