

# **First Principles of Faithful Living**

**Jeremiah Dennis**  
**Philippians 3:17-4:1**  
**April 27, 2025**

If you don't get the foundation right, nothing you build will stand. That's true in every serious discipline, whether it's science, philosophy, engineering, or theology. That's because everything rests on a principle or something called first principles. If you don't know that term, first principles are the most basic bedrock truths. They are the realities you can't break down any further. They're not guesses, they're not theories, they're solid facts that everything else depends on. Ignore first principles and things fall apart. Let me give you an example. In engineering, a first principle is structures must resist gravity. Build a bridge without accounting for gravity and it will fall down.

In mathematics, a first principle is numbers have fixed unchanging relationships. If two plus two sometimes equals five, every equation collapses. Take philosophy where a first principle is truth cannot contradict itself. Without that premise, reason and debate fall apart. So first principles may sound simple, but they're actually totally essential and when you're clear on your first principles, you can face even the most complex challenges with clarity and confidence. So what do you believe are the first principles of the Christian life? Paul answers that question a few verses earlier in chapter 3 of Philippians. In verses 8 and 10, he writes this, "Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in in order that I may gain Christ, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and may share His sufferings becoming like Him in His death."

That is the irreducible minimum of the Christian life, to know Jesus and become more like Jesus. It's not an optional pursuit for the especially holy. No, it's the cornerstone upon which the entire Bible rests. This first principle is everywhere throughout the New Testament. Romans 8:29, "For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son." Galatians 2:20, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." Galatians 4:19, "Until Christ is formed in you." Colossians 3:16, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." 2 Corinthians 3:18, "And we all are beholding the glory of the Lord are being transformed into the same image." 1 John 2:6, "Whoever says He abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which He walked."

Therein lies the why behind every command, every calling, every sacrifice in scripture. We were saved to be shaped into the image of the Savior. When you start to look like Christ and act like Christ, everything in the Christian life falls into place. You're thinking, you're speaking, you're serving, you're leading, you're loving. All of it pleases God and that brings us to our text, Philippians 3:17-4:1 and by way of reminder, Philippians is a letter written to the church at

Philippi. It's a joyful letter about joyful perseverance and it's a call to press on toward Christ with unity, humility and hope.

In our passage, the Apostle Paul shows us how to live that out. He gives us three call-to-actions to energize our pursuit of Christlikeness. Number one, follow the faithful because Christlikeness grows in gospel community. Number two, flee the fakers because not everyone is truly walking with Christ. And number three, focus on the future, because one day, Jesus will make us like Himself. So how do we progress down that journey of Christlikeness? Well, Paul's first call-to-action is follow the faithful. If you want to grow in Christlikeness, if you want to live out the first principle of the Christian life, you need to grasp this essential truth, you can't do it alone. You need faithful examples to imitate. Men and women further down the road of godliness that you can look at and pattern your life after.

Look at verse 17, "Brothers, join in imitating me and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us." With the beginning of that verse, Paul literally says, "Become fellow imitators of me." It's not a passive suggestion, it's an active, ongoing, urgent command. Becoming like Christ is the ultimate goal of the Christian life and one of the primary ways the Lord has designed to conform you into His image is through the example of faithful men and women. But there's more than merely that in Paul's command to join in imitating him. There's actually a communal flavor to that command. Paul isn't calling isolated Christians to imitate him. What he's doing is speaking to the whole church, calling the whole church to come together in their pursuit of Jesus through imitating Paul.

In other words, he's saying, "Act as brothers and sisters in Christ. Stimulate one another. Stir one another up so that you all together as a unit can pursue Christlikeness." That's a really helpful reminder for us as Americans because our culture prizes two virtues, self-reliance and independence and if we're not careful, we can import that into our faith and we can imagine that "As long as I have Jesus in the Bible, I don't really need a church." But Christianity was never intended to be a private journey. It's a shared life. It's a body life. God absolutely designed us to grow together through real relationships, real community and real encouragement from the body of Christ.

We need real people, not just books or podcasts or powerful tweets. We need flesh and blood saints around us who walk beside us, pray with us, challenge us and carry our burdens. Just like Hebrews 10:24 reminds us, "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good works." See, it's a sad thing that I've seen as a pastor, but really as just a Christian, that there are believers who live isolated, disconnected lives. They come on Sunday, but they never truly engage. They don't serve, they don't commit, they don't step into the beautiful messiness of real gospel community. When they do that, they forget the fact that sanctification doesn't happen in isolation. Stagnation happens in isolation.

Believers need faithful companions, courageous companions who will inspire us to chase Christ harder. That's why the apostle Paul in this verse is willing to hold himself up as an example, not because he somehow believes himself to be perfect, but because he knows he's passionately,

persistently pursuing Jesus, and he says, "You too do that just like me." In case you think, "I don't know, that still sounds a little boastful. Hey, why don't you imitate me?" No, if you go back to verse 12 just a little bit prior, Paul writes this, "Not that I have already obtained it or I'm already perfect, but I press on."

Paul wasn't a perfect example, but he was a faithful one. So when he called the Philippians to imitate himself, he was actually calling them to imitate Jesus. That's literally what he says in 1 Corinthians 11:1, "Be imitators of me as I am of Christ." Paul understood the critical importance that every believer needs models, but not just models. We need actually imperfect models. Because yes, we have Jesus, who in all of His perfection, He is the standard, but we need people like us who are flawed and yet are still actively pursuing Christ. John MacArthur wisely notes, "We need to follow someone who is not perfect, so we can see how to overcome our imperfections."

But Paul is humble enough to know his example isn't the only one worth following. That's why he adds in verse 17, "Keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us." In other words, keep a sharp lookout for any man or woman who's walking in a godly way and follow them. But you have to choose carefully, right? Because not everybody who names and claims Christ is imitating Christ. Not everyone is worth following. Well, we should then ask the question, "So how do I know who's worth following?" Well, Paul doesn't leave us guessing. See in verse 17, he says, "Yes, follow me, but also there are others who are walking in the right way."

Even though he doesn't specify who that is precisely, it's probable, he's thinking about Timothy and Epaphroditus. He talked about them in chapter 2. They're ordinary men but faithful men. They weren't apostles, they didn't write any books of the Bible, but their lives did overflow with love for Jesus and concern for His people. So while we might feel that Paul's example is towering and unattainable, when he says, "Join in following the example of those who are walking in the right way like Timothy or Epaphroditus," we hear that and say, "Maybe I can do that."

It's interesting, because if we study the example of Timothy and Epaphroditus in chapter 2, we can discover at least seven essential traits of someone we should follow, which is helpful to you, because if you say, "I want to grow in Christ. I want to be more like Jesus, but who am I looking for?" Let me tell you who you're looking for. Number one, someone who loves the church and cares for God's people. Philippians 2:20 of Timothy, "I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare." Second, you're looking for someone whose faithfulness has been tested and proved. Paul writes of Timothy 2:22, "You know Timothy's proven worth."

Number three, you're looking for someone whose priorities are Christ-centered, not self-centered. He writes in 2:21, "For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ." Number four, you're looking for someone who serves humbly not seeking status. 2:22, speaking of Timothy, "How as a son with a father, he served with me." Number five, you're looking to follow someone who is deeply committed to advancing the gospel. 2:22 of Timothy, "He served with me in the

gospel," for the furtherance of the gospel. Number six, you want to follow someone who's willing to suffer and sacrifice for Jesus. Of Epaphroditus in 2:30, Paul writes, "He nearly died for the work of Christ." Number seven, you want to follow someone who has been affirmed and approved by godly leadership. Verse 25, chapter 2, Paul says, "I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus.

In other words, he bears my stamp of approval." So if you're saying, "Who are those faithful models I ought to follow?" Well, in summary, you're looking for someone who loves Christ more than comfort, the church more than self and the mission of God more than their own safety. That's a person worth following. Follow people like that, stick close to Christians like that, chase harder after Jesus because of people like that, because that's what faithful examples do. They make Jesus Christ more precious to us and then more visible through us.

Let me tell you the story about a man who helped me follow Christ more closely. His name is Pastor Harry Walls. I met him about 10 years ago, my first year of seminary, and the very first interaction I ever had with him, I was blown away by how godly he was, kind, gracious, patient, humble, gentle and I thought, "This guy is everything I want to be but am not. So I knew if I'm going to grow, I got to be around somebody like that. Actually, I just need to be around him." So that night, I decided I'm going to be in his Bible study. So I served with him for six years every week in his Bible study, but that wasn't sufficient. I said, "No, no, no, I need more proximity. I need to be closer to this man if his godliness and virtue is going to rub off on me."

So I said, "Hey, Pastor Harry, how can I get more time with you? What needs do you have?" He says, "Well, I'm a car guy. I wash my car, but I don't just wash it, I really wash it. I detail it." So I said, "I'm there whenever you need me." So once or twice a month for six years on Saturday, show up at his house about 9:00 AM and there's his car, and for two or three hours, we detail that car. The whole time I'm observing him and I'm watching him and I'm listening closely, "How does he talk about his wife? How does he talk about the church? What is he learning in the Bible? How does he treat me a nobody?" All this time, I'm watching and observing, and six years of conversation and observation, you can't imagine how much his life marked me, probably more than any man on the planet. He changed me and helped me be like Jesus.

Even today, 10 years after meeting him, even today when I face challenging situations, one of the first questions I ask is, "What would Harry Walls do in this situation?" and then I do the opposite. No, of course not, right? That's the potent power of faithful example. It's not simply that they teach you, it's that they shape you. So my question for you is, who's your Harry Walls? Who are you following? Whose steps are you following? Whose life are you imitating? Whose life are you watching? Many of you I know are being disciplined by godly people and that is so wonderful, press on. But if not, if you don't have that godly faithful example to follow, then my encouragement to you is seek it, pray for it, find it.

Even today, ask the Lord God, "Bring that worthy example into my life, so that I may grow." Our church has mechanisms by which you can find that, the mentor program, discipleship groups, but you don't necessarily need a formal program. Informally works well. Who's in your growth

group? Who's that godly lady that you'd like to be like? Who's that godly man that you would want to be like? Approach them, get time with them. Try to imitate them. See, growing in Christ's likeness doesn't happen in isolation. God designed it that it happens most powerfully and potently when we walk together side by side, step by step, pursuing Jesus together.

But you also have to be careful because not every example is worth following. Paul knew that. He wanted the Philippians to know that and he wants by extension you to know that. So where we go in verse 18, actually the tone gets darker and he introduces now a sober warning. The **Second Call-To-Action** here is **Flee The Fakers**. Yes, follow the faithful, but not everyone is faithful, so you must be discerning enough to flee the fakers. Look at verse 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." Verse 18 explains the urgency of verse 17, "We need to follow the right examples because there are so many bad examples."

See, some people claim Jesus, but they are headed for destruction and they want you to go with them. That was the threat facing the church at Philippi and it must have been real and it must have been pressing because Paul says, "For many," which is to say, "There's not one. There's a whole host of these dangerous influences." As the good shepherd, Paul has repeatedly warned them, "Watch out for them, watch out for them, watch out for them." But today, something is different when he writes Philippians now, he does it with tears in his eyes. He says, "And now tell you even with tears."

That's the only time in the entire New Testament where Paul says, "As I'm writing this right now, I'm weeping." You can envision it, right? With one hand, he's gripping the pen with the other. He's wiping the tears off so they don't splotch the parchment. The question is, why this grief? Why this emotion here? Some say, "Well, it's probably because Paul is heartbroken over the eternal destiny, the perilous condition of these who are called enemies of Christ." Maybe, but I think more probably it's because Paul's heart aches over the danger these men pose to the Philippians, people he loves dearly and he knows what's at stake if they become deceived. They will be led away from obedience.

So Paul sounds the alarm because enemies are never neutral and they're never tame. Yes, these people may dress like sheep, but they have teeth like wolves and Paul knows if the Philippians follow them, it will be to their eternal peril. So that raises an important question. Who are the enemies of the cross? Paul doesn't name them, he doesn't specify precisely who, but the context gives us clues. You notice in verse 18, he says, "For many walk." That verb walk that is the same word he used in verse 17. It's Paul's normal word to use to describe lifestyle and habitual pattern, behavior.

So he's saying these are men who affirm Christ, who agree with the gospel. They profess to be believers. Maybe they were traveling missionaries and maybe they were folks who formerly were in the Philippian church but are no longer there and it seems probable that they're not presently in the Philippian church, but whoever they were, what's very clear is they claimed Jesus, but they certainly weren't Christians. That's why he identifies them as enemies of the cross

of Christ. See, their theology might have been orthodox, but their practice was anything but their immoral lifestyle betrayed the corruption within.

A true friend of the cross, you see, a true friend of the cross will embrace the sin-crushing, self-denying demands of the gospel. A true friend of the cross will eagerly walk out. Luke 9:23, "If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me." But these enemies of the cross wanted Jesus without his cross. They didn't want to deny self; they wanted to indulge self. Even in his day, Charles Spurgeon saw these dangerous men and he warned, "No man who is the friend of the cross of Christ will give license to his passions or indulgence to his appetites. If he does so, he proves that he is the enemy of the cross of Christ."

So what's happening here is there are dangerous men promoting a doctrine that says, "You can name Christ and live however you want. You can be saved but not shackled by the rigors of obedience. You can receive grace and then walk however you want," but you know that's not the message of the Bible. You know that you cannot possibly pursue greater Christlikeness while at the same time indulging in unrepentant sin. They are mutually exclusive. Beginning in verse 19, Paul gives more information. He sketches out four frightening descriptions of these faith fakers. First, "Their end is destruction." That word destruction is the very same word used to describe the eternal fate of the antichrist, Judas and everyone who's walking on the broad road. It's a word that speaks of eternal torment and everlasting judgment. It's hell. Paul is saying, "These men are headed to hell."

Second, he says, "Their God is their belly." In other words, they are ruled and dominated by fleshly desires. Maybe it's food, right? Maybe it was gluttony. More probably, it was sexual immorality and carnal appetites control them. Their motto was, "If it feels good, do it." Third Paul says, "They glory in their shame." In other words, they turn morality on its head. They boast about the sins over which they should really blush. They are Isaiah 5:20 come to life, "Those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter." A lot of those in our culture today, right?

Lastly, these faith fakers set their minds on earthly things. Their focus isn't heavenward, it's earthward, selfward, inward, pleasure ward. No wonder Paul says, "You have to flee these fakers." His warning still rings true today. The danger is no less alive. It wasn't ancient history. No, no, no, these enemies of the cross, they're alive today in our age and the tricky part is they often wear the garb of religion. They know the vocabulary. But see, not every preacher, teacher, author, influencer or podcaster who names Jesus is actually going to lead you closer to Jesus. Some are slowly pulling you away from Jesus one post, one picture, one sermon at a time.

If we're not discerning, we can begin to admire the wrong people because we're listening to the wrong people. We can begin to follow those on social media who are successful and flashy and influential, but not Christlike and then when we listen and observe them, we too start to drift. We start valuing the wrong things, comfort, wealth, reputation, acceptance. We start craving the wrong things, ease, pleasure, applause. Before long, we're no longer marching forward in

godliness, we're marching in worldliness and calling it godliness and saying, "This is real Christianity."

I think that's why Paul weeps, not just because of what these enemies were doing to themselves, but principally because of what they would do to the church. You need to get this principle, who you admire shapes who you become. Who you follow determines where you end up. So the pressing question for you is, who are the influences in your life that are slowly pulling you away from Christlikeness? Who do you need to unfollow on Instagram? Whose podcasts do you need to stop listening to? Whose YouTube videos do you need to stop clicking on?

Here's a simple truth. Every voice you listen to is shaping you, either into the image of Jesus or the world. Paul's warning is timeless. It resonates just as strongly today as it did in Philippi. Don't follow the fakers. Run from everyone who claims Jesus but lives totally contrary to the gospel. Follow the faithful, flee the rest. Verse 18 makes it abundantly plain, "The enemies of the cross are real. The danger they represent is real, but that doesn't mean Christians should lose heart." See, Paul doesn't leave us staring at the danger. He actually lifts our eyes to the hope that is in Jesus.

Beginning in verse 20, Paul is going to emerge out of the shadows, back into the sunlight and he's going to say in this ***Third Call-To-Action***, Follow the Faithful, Flee the Flakers and finally ***Focus On The Future. Focus on the future***," which is admittedly hard to do because it's very easy to be enmeshed in the present to live for this world and this life and our hobbies and pursuits and interests, because we don't know what the next life is. We've never been there, but we're here and this life is real. So heaven's an ethereal hard-to-imagine place. So living for my career or my hobbies, that's very easy and very natural.

That's what was happening with these enemies of the cross, right? They set their minds on earthly things. The enemies of the cross today, they set their minds on earthly things, but Paul is saying, "Not you believers, not you. You're radically different. When the whole world chases the temporary, you chase the eternal." He says, "You belong somewhere else. Yeah, you live on earth temporarily, but you're really citizens of heaven." Look at verse 20, "But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it, we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." Look at that word citizenship. That Greek word is where we get our English word politics. It doesn't describe where you live. It describes how you live, your behavior, your loyalty, your identity as a citizen.

So when the Philippians read these words, "Our citizenship is in heaven," they immediately knew what Paul was talking about. Here's why. Because Philippi, according to Acts 16:12, Philippi was a Roman colony. So which means even though Philippi is geographically far from Rome, it was nevertheless governed by Rome's laws, shaped by Rome's cultures and proud of Rome's power. So everything about life in Philippi, the way they spoke, the way they dressed, the way they worked, the way they lived, all of it was shaped by a kingdom they weren't living in, but they were allegiant to. They didn't live in Rome, but they lived like Rome. They represented Rome in their remote outpost.

That's Paul's point. Believer, your citizenship is not in earth. It is in heaven. Just as the Roman colonists in Philippi never forgot that they actually belonged to Rome, so must you never forget that you belong to heaven. Your citizenship is there. It's not just where you're going one day, it's where you belong now. It's where your identity is anchored. See, every choice you make, every word you speak, every step you take should declare, "I belong to Jesus and I belong to heaven." Paul underlines that in verse 20. Let me show you that. Go back again to the beginning of the verse, "But our citizenship is in heaven."

There's something so powerful here. I love how every word of the Bible matters, even the little ones. He says, "Our citizenship is in heaven." Small word that communicates massively massive truth. That's not the normal word for being. This is the word that Paul used in Philippians 2:6 to speak of Christ's pre-existence as deity. So that word is it emphasizes actual existence, not theoretical, not hypothetical, actual and it's a present tense. So what Paul is saying is, "Believers, you right now, Philippians, even though you actually are citizens of Rome, your greater reality is you are a today citizen of heaven. Your identity is fixed in your future destination. So in some ways, you could say your future has invaded your present. You will go to heaven, and right now, you already belong there," which makes verses 17 and 18 all the more reasonable.

Why follow Godly examples? Because I'm a citizen of heaven. Why flee the contaminating influence of false professors? Because I'm a citizen of heaven. Why focus on the future? Because I'm a citizen of heaven. I'm going there. Our king reigns there. Our inheritance waits there. Our home is prepared there. Our names are written there. Our fellow saints rejoice there. How could my life be shaped by anything less?

We belong to heaven today. That's where our allegiance lies and we're called to live under the rule of its King and by the law of the King. So the question is, are you living today as a citizen of heaven? Is your thinking shaped by heaven or by earth? Are your priorities aligned with Christ or with the world? Are your longings stirred by eternity or distracted by today? Are you living like this world is ultimate or like it's temporary? When we forget that heaven is our home, it's not simply a matter of belief. It reshapes the way we live, the way we think. It reshapes what we chase. When we forget that our true citizenship is in heaven, we trade earthly reward or eternal reward for earthly comfort. We lose urgency and waste today. We fear death instead of longing for Christ. We drift into spiritual laziness and apathy. We grumble in discontent when life doesn't go our way.

But Paul says, "That's not for you, Christian. You don't have to fall into that trap. Lift up your eyes. Don't set your mind on earthly things. Set them on heavenly things." Go back to verse 20, "But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it, we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." That word await, it describes an earnest, eager, patient waiting and expectation, but not mere expectation, focused expectation. It's being so excited about what's coming that you lose sight of everything around you. It's like a bride on her wedding day, standing there in the church at the back of the aisle. She's not distracted by the flowers, the crowds, the cameras, her eyes are locked on one man, the groom.

That's a picture of the believer. Gaze, lifted heart, hopeful soul, yearning, waiting for the return of our great Savior and King, Jesus Christ. Paul says that that's not enough to stir your affections and stimulate you forward. Look at verse 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," which is amazing because he's saying, "When Jesus returns, He won't simply remake your broken body. No, He will reform it in glory. No more weakness, no more pain, no more decay, no more death, no more sin."

Let me ask you, which one of you doesn't want that? Who's not eager for that? When he comes back with his infinite power, Jesus will remake you and you'll have a body like that of our Lord, powerful, beautiful, eternal, perfectly suited to obey and honor Jesus forever. You want to know what that body will look like? Read 1 Corinthians 15 this week. You'll see why verse 21 is such good news, but it's not good news for everybody because not everyone is God's child. If that's you and you know you're not one of his citizens, then this hope can be yours. The King invites you today to repent, to place your trust in Him, to submit to His authority and he extends to you forgiveness, new life and eternal joy. But you must come under His terms.

But when you repent, when you place your faith in Jesus, when you submit your allegiance to Him, then you look forward to His return, not with dread, but with joy. Paul says, "Because that day is certain. Because heaven is your home, because your future is secure." 4:1, one last charge, "Stand firm thus in the Lord." Like a Roman soldier who held his ground and never fled on the battlefield, you Christians stand firm. Clinging to the cross. Fix your eyes on the Savior. Press hard after His likeness. One day, soon when the race is over and the battle is won, you'll see Him face to face. The heartbeat of the Christian life is to know Jesus and be like Jesus. Everything else flows from that. That is the first principle. Everything is built on that foundation.

But nobody ever drifted into Christlikeness. Nobody ever stumbled into faithfulness. It takes purpose. It takes resolve. It takes focus. How do we stay anchored? Well, we follow the faithful. Walk with those who love Jesus. We flee the fakers. We run from everyone whose lifestyle denies the gospel and we focus on the future. We live today for the world to come. This world is not your home. Your names are written in heaven. Your Savior is coming back and when He does, when you see Him, you will know every sacrifice was worth it. So plant your feet, lift your eyes and fix your gaze on the returning King. Let's pray.

Father, You are so wise. You know that we need hope, a transcendent hope that's bigger than today. In this text, You gave it to us. Our King is coming back. He'll make all things right. His infinite power will subject all things to Himself and part of that glorious subjection will be our new spiritual, eternal, unimaginable bodies with which we will serve you and love you forever. But you haven't left us alone, Lord. You've given us godly men and women around us who motivate us to walk as worthy citizens. Lord, I pray that we would eagerly search them out and attach ourselves to those godly examples that we might pattern our lives after them as they pattern their lives after Jesus. Help us not live for earthly things, as do the enemies of the cross. Help us to lift our eyes above, to think of heavenly things and to live in heavenly ways and all

that's possible because of what Jesus has accomplished on the cross. So we ask this in His name,  
Amen.