

Philippians 3

Heavenly Conversation

For our conversation is in heaven – v. 20

This chapter is very instructive to us both in terms of our justification and our sanctification – and the way they both work together. Paul’s hope and his faith was in the glorious truth that he would be found in Christ – *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* (v. 9).

As blameless and zealous as he may have been in his former days he placed no hope in his former zeal – or his present zeal for that matter. His hope was that he would be found in Christ with the righteousness of Christ imputed to him. As a result of this righteousness given freely by God and received by faith alone – Paul’s life was effected.

He speaks of this effect in v. 13 and describes it in a two-fold manner. *Forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before.* Forgetting and reaching – or if we want to use the term in v. 14 we could say forgetting and pressing – pressing toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

In the verses that follow Paul teaches us very plainly that his experience was not unique to himself. In exactly the same way as Paul experienced the gospel – or the truth of justification – which in turn leads to sanctification – in the same way as Paul had known it so every true believer should know it. *Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded* – he writes in v. 15. *Let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing* – he says in v. 16.

Realizing as he does that his own experience is common to true believers he doesn’t hesitate to set himself as a pattern. *Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample* (v. 17). Sadly – not everyone who professed to be a believer walked by the rule Paul is describing. There were others who were in fact enemies of the cross of Christ. They professed to be believers – but in fact were enemies and they could be recognized with a little discernment.

They could be known by the fact that their fleshly appetites had the preeminence in their lives. This is what Paul means when he says – *whose God is their belly*. They could be further recognized by their immorality. This is what Paul means when he says – *whose glory is in their shame*. And if their appetites or their shame was not readily apparent there was yet another way in which they could be recognized. The last part of verse 19 says that they *mind earthly things*.

You’ll notice that verses 18 & 19 are in parentheses. And so in order to understand the continuity of the thought we have to look at v. 17 and then jump down to v. 20. In v. 17 Paul is setting up himself and others who are like him as examples to be followed. And the reason that he can do this is because (as he says in v. 20) *our conversation is in heaven*.

This universal law, then, among Christians – or this same rule that is to be minded according to v. 16 can be referred to as *our conversation in heaven* in v. 20. And it's just another way of saying a *heavenly conversation*. You've perhaps heard the saying that a Christian may be so heavenly minded that he's no earthly good. I don't think that's a problem we suffer from in Christendom today.

The pendulum has swung the other direction and so we find that professing Christians are so worldly minded that you wonder whether or not they're even headed for heaven. Heaven seems to be foreign to their thinking – remote to their hopes – distant to their actions. The emphasis is entirely and exclusively on the here and now. And so what you find in large measure is worldliness with a religious tint cast upon it.

This is not the way of the gospel. And those that find themselves in this condition need to examine their lives as to whether they're really in the faith – or they need some serious adjustments to their way of thinking and acting. Listen to the way James Durham presses the issue:

A Christian's conversation should be heavenly because all that a Christian has is from and in heaven, and is in some way heavenly. This will manifestly appear if you look, first, to a Christian's nature. It is from heaven; he is partaker of the divine nature; he is born of God; he is of the new Jerusalem; his Father is heavenly. He is taught to pray Our Father, which art in heaven, or our heavenly Father... Where is our elder Brother? Is He not in the heavenly places?. The believer's treasure is in heaven; his hope is in heaven; heaven is the city, the mansion, the rest where he is travelling.

This is of course expounded upon eloquently by John Bunyan in his classic – *Pilgrim's Progress*. What is that story? It's the story of Christian's pilgrimage to the celestial city. Heaven is his home – heaven is his aim – heaven is his motivation. He certainly illustrates to us how a Christian is to have his conversation in heaven. And so I'd like to focus on the theme today of our heavenly conversation.

We Must Establish and Maintain Heavenly Conversation

And in order to do so I want to raise and answer the question as to how we can establish and maintain heavenly conversation. Consider with me first of all that we establish and maintain heavenly conversation -

I. By Understanding What It Is -

This word *conversation* is one of those words in our Authorized Version that conveys a different meaning than what is commonly understood today. We think of a *conversation* as a dialogue between two or more people. That's not the meaning of the word in our Authorized Version. There is a sense in which the word can include our verbal communications with each other – but the meaning is much broader than that.

We find the English word *conversation* used 18 times in the New Testament. And it usually denotes one's *manner of life*.

Gal. 1:13 *For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it.* The word here obviously speaks to us of much more than verbal debates between Paul and the Christians. His manner of life – his constant activity, or his conversation was to persecute the church.

In Eph. 4:21 we read: *If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus: That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind.* (Eph. 4:21-23). Here the term *conversation* refers to the Christian's former lifestyle. He's exhorted to put off that former lifestyle and be renewed to an altogether new and different lifestyle.

It's this new and different lifestyle that is described in the words of our text – *a conversation in heaven* or *a heavenly conversation*. Now interestingly enough this word *conversation* in our text is a different Greek word from the Greek word that is most often translated by the word *conversation* in the New Testament. Most modern English translations use the word *citizenship* here instead of the word *conversation*.

I find it interesting when I read sermons from the Puritan era to see what kind of treatment they give to the translation of a word. James Durham, for example, devotes a paragraph to the meaning of this word. And he points out what our modern versions reflect that the meaning of this word can be translated *citizenship*. But he goes into a more detailed explanation as to why the word is translated *conversation*.

He points out that the Greek word contains a broader meaning than any single English word can express. And the literal meaning does imply a title to the privileges that would have belonged to Roman citizens. In its spiritual meaning it would apply to the privileges that belong to the believer as a citizen of heaven. As Paul says in Eph. 2:19 *Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God.*

But the Greek word refers not only to this title or privilege of citizenship but it also refers to the conduct or the manner of living that should be manifested as a result of that privilege. And since Paul is setting himself forth as an example to be followed (v. 17) it makes sense that he intends to emphasize this aspect of the Greek term – and hence the word is translated *conversation* – stressing the simple truth that our manner of living should reflect the privileges of our citizenship in heaven.

Simply put – we should live in this world – with a greater consciousness that we are not of this world. We should live in a manner that is consistent with our true citizenship which is in heaven. Or in other words our manner of living should be a reflection of heaven – it should be governed by heaven – it should be aiming toward heaven – it should be demonstrating to others that we are more heavenly minded than we are earthly minded.

Paul adds a statement in the text that explains a little more fully what heavenly conversation is – look again in v. 20 *For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.* There's the explanation of a heavenly

conversation. We're looking for Christ. We've looked to His atoning death for the salvation of our souls. We look to Him now for all we need to live in this world below and we anxiously look forward to the day that He'll come and redeem this world from the curse under which it now groans.

A heavenly conversation, then, is a manner of living that is governed by the interest we have in Christ. We're to live our lives in the light of what He has done – what He is doing – and what He will do in the future. We see something, then, of what it is. Would you consider next that if we would establish and maintain a conversation in heaven:

II. We Must Appreciate Why It's Important –

The importance of a heavenly conversation is seen by the fact that it's a distinguishing mark of true believers. This heavenly conversation is what distinguishes them from unbelievers or from hypocrites. The early church, you see, was no more free from hypocrites than the modern church of our day.

Christ said that this would be the case. *Let the tares grow up with the wheat* He says in the parable. And the lesson is that there would be within the church those that are truly saved and those who may have an appearance of religion but are not saved. From those who have merely an appearance, you would see leaders – even preachers would arise.

Paul makes reference to them in 1:18. There were those who preached Christ in truth and there were those who preached Christ in pretence. They were in it for themselves. They were seeking to use the church to advance their own agendas. Christ was a means to an end for them. And while they might have an outward show of piety they were in fact – as Paul calls them in v. 18 *enemies of the cross of Christ*.

How can you distinguish them from true Christians? Paul describes them. They serve their own appetites. They glory in their shame. And their minds are on earthly things rather than heavenly things. In other words – you tell them by their conversation – which is their manner of living.

The Christian is marked by a heavenly conversation. The hypocrite is marked by an earthly conversation. Would you note how Paul puts it in the words of the text – *For our conversation is in heaven*. He doesn't say merely that it should be. He doesn't say that at high times it might be – He doesn't say that for some spiritually minded Christians it will be, but for less spiritually minded Christians it may not be – no, he sets it forth as a simple fact – for the Christian, his conversation is in heaven.

This is not to say that the Christian is exempt from sin or that the Christian never has lapses into worldliness. It's not to say that the flesh never gets the best of him. Who could ever profess to be a Christian if such were the case? Neither is it to say that there are not legitimate things in the world that the Christian can use and enjoy. But it is to say that his manner of life is governed by Christ. His outlook in this world is governed by Christ. He sees his chief purpose to glorify Christ and enjoy Him forever. He sees his mission in life to advance the kingdom of Christ. His conversation is in heaven because his hope is for heaven. And he lives in the light of that hope.

Now let me press the importance of this distinguishing mark by just noting the strength of Paul's words. To those that follow their appetites, who in effect make their God their belly – who think lightly of sin, to the point of glorying in their shame – to those who mind earthly things – Paul does not call them carnal Christians. He does not call them worldly Christians. He does not refer to them in any way, shape, or form as any kind of Christian – He calls them, rather, *enemies of the cross of Christ*. And he adds to the strength of his case against such by saying in v. 19 that *their end is destruction*.

The solemnity of Paul's words is magnified even more when you read in v. 18 that there are many who fit into this category – *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*. To the extent, then, that true Christians cave in to fleshly lusts and worldly wanderings – to the same extent they find themselves in the enemy camp – so to speak.

The real test for the validity of their professions would be how comfortable they find themselves in that camp. The Christian may stray into that camp but eventually he'll come to his senses, realize how out of character he's been and he'll repent and mend his ways. The man that is earthly minded won't give it a thought.

And so we see the importance of this heavenly conversation. It distinguishes the Christian from the unbeliever. It distinguishes the Christian from the hypocrite. The importance of his heavenly conversation also plays into his testimony. The world sees in a true Christian someone who is of an altogether different mindset than everyone else. He thinks differently – he speaks differently – he acts differently. His outlook on life is different. His motivation is different. His demeanor is different.

Like Moses coming down from the mountain – the believer who practices a heavenly conversation has a countenance that shines with the glory of Christ. You may not see it physically – the way the Israelites beheld Moses – but it will be perceived nevertheless. And this is what enables the Christian to function as the light of the world. He possesses a joy that is unlike anything the world knows. He possesses a stability about him even during adverse circumstances that causes the world to marvel. He is able through the simplicity of his faith and his heavenly conversation to make Christianity desirable to those who know no such joy, or stability, of faith.

So we must establish and maintain a heavenly conversation. Our own assurance depends on it – and the extension of Christ's kingdom depends on it. If we would stand out as true and real and avoid the prevalent appearance of hypocrisy – then we must have our conversation in heaven.

It only remains for us to consider what we must do to establish and maintain this heavenly conversation. And so consider with me, finally – that if we would establish and maintain a heavenly conversation:

III. We Must Utilize All the Means that Heaven Provides –

I've been referring to a sermon by James Durham on this text. I love what he has to say about maintaining a heavenly conversation when he says:

We may be said to have our conversation in heaven when we have a holy commerce, trading (as it were) with heaven. It is to have faith and hope exercised in and about heaven, to send many prayers and desires to heaven as so many empty vessels, and to be in the lively and longing expectation of their return full and richly laden. It is to make many visits to heaven, and to be in all those neither seldom nor transiently, and at starts only, but to be frequent and more continuing in them. And though they should sometimes return either with seeming loss, or with very little gain, yet to keep up the trade and traffic, seeking to make up our loss by a new voyage there; for the trade is not always equally quick.

Do you see what he's saying? We establish and maintain a heavenly conversation by visiting heaven often on our knees in prayer. This is what it means to lay up treasure in heaven. We go there with our desires and ambitions. We go there to sit at the feet of Christ. We bring others there in the place of prayer and look to the Lord to bring them there in salvation.

Durham again says that to abide in heaven *is to have our love in heaven, folding our two arms about the Lamb and Him that sits on the throne, and holily loathing having them loosed from those sweet, soul-solacing and satisfying embraces.*

A heavenly conversation, you see, represents an inward holy frame of heart. And this frame of heart is cultivated by contemplating and worshipping Christ. *To have the heart fixed in meditating on God and His law, on spiritual and heavenly things; to have a sublime and divine strain of mind, not debasing itself to pursue vanities, but kept in a close and constant pursuit after communion with God, and conformity to Him. It is to be able to say with David in Psalm 139:18 "When I awake, I am still with Thee." It is laboring to leave the heart and mind in heaven when you lie down, and seeking to find it there when you arise.*

To have your affections, love, desire, and delights in heaven, or heavenly – To have your words savoring of heaven, ministering grace to the hearers, endeavoring to have your words weighty and grave in the commendation of God and His grace – To have your hearing of the Word, and your praying, carrying much of a heavenly stamp and impression on them: hearing as if God were speaking to you immediately from heaven, and praying as if you were even before His throne.

We must, in other words, utilize the place of prayer – utilize the place of meditation – utilize the word of God in such a way that our view of Christ grows and our anticipation of heaven increases and the things of this world grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.

This heavenly conversation can be practiced at all times throughout the course of the day. We can practice it in family worship. We can practice it in private devotions. We certainly can and should practice it when we meet together to worship as a church. We can also practice it during the routines of the day – while we're at work no matter what we're doing we keep our hearts in tune with heaven.

We have every reason then to establish and maintain a heavenly conversation. It's not a far fetched ideal but is something within our reach. All we need do is utilize the means of grace often throughout the course of the day.

If your hope is for heaven – and you've been born from above – If you bear the heavenly stamp on your heart of love for Him who is now seated in heaven – then surely your desire will be to establish and maintain a conversation in heaven. The flesh will not aid you in the fulfillment of that desire – and that's why the flesh must be constantly mortified. But your awareness of Christ – who left heaven in order to make the way for you to be with Him in heaven – your awareness of Him and your faith in Him will kindle the desire in your heart for this heavenly conversation.

And so I pray that you'll walk in the light of your sure hope for heaven – and in the process you'll anticipate and live for heaven with great earnestness. And as you do so the light of heaven will shine even more brightly in a dark world that is in desperate need for that light.