

Polycarp to the Philippians

Modern English version · SermonIndex

Polycarp of Smyrna · c. AD 110–135

A short letter from Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna and a disciple of the apostle John, to the church at Philippi. It is full of echoes of the Gospels and of the letters of Paul, Peter and John.

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Greeting

Gr. Polycarp and the elders with him, to the church of God that lives as a stranger in Philippi. May mercy and peace be multiplied to you from almighty God and from Jesus Christ our Savior.

Translator's note. The greeting echoes [1 Peter 1:2](#) (“may grace and peace be multiplied to you”) and [Jude 2](#) (“may mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you”).

Chapter 1

1.1 I rejoiced greatly with you in our Lord Jesus Christ that you welcomed those who are living copies of true love. As was fitting for you, you helped them on their way, bound as they were in chains fit for saints. These chains are the crowns of those truly chosen by God and our Lord.

Translator's note. The prisoners were probably Ignatius of Antioch and his companions, who passed through Philippi on their way to Rome. Polycarp names Ignatius, Zosimus and Rufus in chapter 9.

1.2 I also rejoice that the firm root of your faith, which has been spoken of since early times, still lasts and bears fruit for our Lord Jesus Christ. For our sins he endured even to the point of death, and God raised him up, having loosed the pains of Hades.

Translator's note. Polycarp is echoing [Acts 2:24](#). The word for “pains” (ōdines) is also used of birth pangs. Most manuscripts of Acts read “the pains of death,” but Polycarp has “the pains of Hades,” a reading also found in some manuscripts of Acts.

Scripture: [Acts 2:24](#)

1.3 You have not seen him, yet you believe in him with a joy that cannot be put into words and is full of glory, a joy that many long to enter. For you know that you have been saved by grace, not by works, but by the will of God through Jesus Christ.

Translator's note. Polycarp echoes [1 Peter 1:8](#) ("though you have not seen him... you rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory") and [Ephesians 2:8-9](#) ("by grace you have been saved... not a result of works").

Scripture: [Ephesians 2:8-9](#)

Chapter 2

2.1 So then, prepare for action and serve God in fear and truth. Leave behind empty talk and the error of the crowd. Believe in the one who raised our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead and gave him glory and a throne at his right hand. All things in heaven and on earth are subject to him, and everything that breathes worships him. He is coming as judge of the living and the dead, and God will hold those who disobey him accountable for his blood.

Translator's note. "Prepare for action" is literally "gird up your loins," as in [1 Peter 1:13](#). Polycarp also echoes [1 Peter 1:21](#) (God "raised him from the dead and gave him glory"), [Philippians 2:10](#), [Psalm 150:6](#) ("everything that breathes"), and [Acts 10:42](#) and [2 Timothy 4:1](#) ("judge of the living and the dead").

Scripture: [1 Peter 1:13-14](#); [1 Peter 1:21](#); [Philippians 2:10](#); [2 Corinthians 4:14](#); [Romans 8:11](#)

2.2 The one who raised him from the dead will also raise us, if we do his will, walk in his commandments, and love what he loved. We must keep away from all injustice, greed, love of money, slander, and false witness, not paying back evil for evil, or insult for insult, or blow for blow, or curse for curse.

Translator's note. Compare [2 Corinthians 4:14](#) and [1 Peter 3:9](#) ("do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling").

2.3 Remember what the Lord taught when he said: "Do not judge, so that you will not be judged. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Show mercy, so that you will receive mercy. The measure you use will be measured back to you." And also: "Blessed are the poor and those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for the kingdom of God is theirs."

Translator's note. Polycarp seems to quote from memory. His wording is close to [Matthew 7:1-2](#), [Matthew 5:7](#), [Luke 6:36-38](#), and [Matthew 5:3](#), 10. A similar cluster of sayings appears in 1 Clement 13:2. "Blessed are the poor" without "in spirit," and "kingdom of God" rather than Matthew's "kingdom of heaven," are closer to [Luke 6:20](#), though Luke has "yours is the kingdom."

Scripture: [Matthew 7:1-2](#); [Luke 6:36-38](#); [Luke 6:20](#); [Matthew 5:3](#);

Chapter 3

3.1 Brothers, I am writing this to you about righteousness, not because I took it on myself, but because you first invited me.

3.2 Neither I nor anyone like me can match the wisdom of the blessed and glorious Paul. When he was among you, in the presence of the people of that time, he taught the word of truth accurately and firmly. When he was away, he wrote you letters, and if you study them closely you will be able to build yourselves up in the faith that was given to you.

Translator's note. Polycarp speaks of Paul's "letters" (plural) to the Philippians, though the New Testament has only one. Scholars debate whether he means more than one letter, or uses the plural loosely.

3.3 That faith is the mother of us all, with hope following after and love leading the way, love for God, for Christ, and for our neighbor. If anyone lives within these, he has fulfilled the commandment of righteousness, for the one who has love is far from all sin.

Translator's note. "Mother of us all" echoes [Galatians 4:26](#). Note that the Greek has hope following and love leading.

Chapter 4

4.1 The beginning of all troubles is the love of money. Since we know that we brought nothing into the world and can take nothing out of it, let us arm ourselves with the weapons of righteousness, and let us first teach ourselves to walk in the commandment of the Lord.

Translator's note. Polycarp echoes [1 Timothy 6:10](#) and 6:7, though where Paul calls the love of money the "root" of all evils, Polycarp says "beginning." "Weapons of righteousness" recalls [2 Corinthians 6:7](#).

Scripture: [1 Timothy 6:6-7](#)

4.2 Then let us teach our wives to live in the faith, love, and purity given to them, to love their own husbands with complete faithfulness, and to love everyone else equally with complete self-control, and to bring up their children in the instruction of the fear of God.

4.3 Let us teach the widows to be sensible in the faith of the Lord, to pray constantly for everyone, and to stay far from all slander, gossip, false witness, love of money, and every kind of evil. They should know that they are God's altar, and that every offering is examined for blemishes. Nothing escapes him, no reasoning, no thought, no secret of the heart.

Translator's note. Widows were supported by the church's gifts. Polycarp

probably calls them “God’s altar” because those gifts, and the widows’ prayers, were seen as offerings to God.

Chapter 5

5.1 Since we know that God is not mocked, we ought to live in a way that is worthy of his commandment and his glory.

Translator’s note. “God is not mocked” quotes [Galatians 6:7](#).

5.2 In the same way, deacons must be blameless before his righteousness, as servants of God and of Christ and not of men. They must not be slanderers or double-tongued, not lovers of money, but self-controlled in everything, compassionate, diligent, and walking in the truth of the Lord, who became the servant of all. If we please him in this present age, we will receive the age to come, just as he promised to raise us from the dead. And if we live as citizens worthy of him, we will also reign with him, provided that we believe.

Translator’s note. “Deacon” (diakonos) means “servant.” Polycarp plays on this when he calls Christ “the servant (diakonos) of all” (compare [Mark 9:35](#); [10:45](#)). The list echoes [1 Timothy 3:8](#). “Live as citizens worthy” recalls [Philippians 1:27](#), and “reign with him” recalls [2 Timothy 2:12](#).

5.3 In the same way, the younger men must be blameless in everything, giving first thought to purity and keeping a tight rein on themselves against every evil. It is good to be cut off from the desires that are in the world, because every desire wages war against the Spirit. Neither the sexually immoral, nor men who submit to or perform homosexual acts, will inherit the kingdom of God, nor will those who do what is wicked. So it is necessary to keep away from all these things and to be subject to the elders and deacons as to God and Christ. The young unmarried women should live with a blameless and pure conscience.

Translator’s note. “Younger men” translates *neōteroi*, and “young unmarried women” is literally “virgins” (*parthenous*). The letter mentions elders and deacons at Philippi but never a bishop.

Scripture: [Galatians 5:17](#)

Chapter 6

6.1 The elders also must be compassionate and merciful to all. They must bring back those who have wandered, visit all who are sick, and never neglect a widow, an orphan, or a poor person. They must always give thought to what is good in the sight of God and of people. They must keep away from all anger, favoritism, and unjust judgment, and stay far from all love of money. They must not be quick to believe a charge against anyone, and not be harsh in judging, knowing that we all owe a debt because of sin.

Translator’s note. “Give thought to what is good in the sight of God and of

people” echoes [Proverbs 3:4](#) (Greek version), which Paul also uses in [Romans 12:17](#) and [2 Corinthians 8:21](#).

6.2 So if we ask the Lord to forgive us, we ought to forgive as well. For we live before the eyes of the Lord and God, and all of us must stand before the judgment seat of Christ, and each one must give an account of himself.

Translator’s note. Compare [Matthew 6:12-14](#), [Romans 14:10-12](#), and [2 Corinthians 5:10](#).

Scripture: [Romans 14:10](#); [Romans 14:12](#); [2 Corinthians 5:10](#)

6.3 So let us serve him with fear and complete reverence, as he himself commanded, and as did the apostles who preached the gospel to us and the prophets who announced beforehand the coming of our Lord. Let us be zealous for what is good, and keep away from causes of stumbling, from false brothers, and from those who hypocritically carry the name of the Lord and lead empty people astray.

Chapter 7

7.1 For everyone who does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is an antichrist. Whoever does not confess the testimony of the cross is of the devil. Whoever twists the sayings of the Lord to suit his own desires and says there is no resurrection and no judgment is the firstborn of Satan.

Translator’s note. Irenaeus (Against Heresies 3.3.4) reports that Polycarp, on meeting the heretic Marcion, called him “the firstborn of Satan.”

Scripture: [1 John 4:2](#)

7.2 So let us leave behind the emptiness of the crowd and their false teachings, and turn back to the word that was handed down to us from the beginning. Let us stay alert in prayer and persevere in fasting, asking the all-seeing God in our prayers not to lead us into temptation, as the Lord said: “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

Translator’s note. Compare [1 Peter 4:7](#) (“be sober for prayer”), [Matthew 6:13](#), and [Matthew 26:41](#) / [Mark 14:38](#).

Scripture: [Matthew 26:41](#)

Chapter 8

8.1 Let us then hold on without ceasing to our hope and to the pledge of our righteousness, who is Christ Jesus. He carried our sins in his own body on the tree. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. Yet for our sake, so that we might live in him, he endured everything.

Translator’s note. Quoting [1 Peter 2:24](#) and 2:22 (which itself draws on

| [Isaiah 53:9](#)).

| Scripture: [1 Peter 2:24](#); [1 Peter 2:22](#)

8.2 So let us become imitators of his endurance, and if we suffer for his name, let us glorify him. For this is the example he set for us in himself, and this is what we have believed.

| *Translator's note.* Compare [1 Peter 2:21](#) and 4:16. "Example" translates the same Greek word used in [1 Peter 2:21](#).

Chapter 9

9.1 I urge all of you, then, to obey the word of righteousness and to practice every kind of endurance. You saw this endurance with your own eyes, not only in the blessed Ignatius, Zosimus, and Rufus, but also in others from among you, and in Paul himself and the other apostles.

| *Translator's note.* Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, was taken through Philippi as a prisoner on his way to martyrdom in Rome. Zosimus and Rufus are otherwise unknown. They were probably fellow prisoners who passed through Philippi with him.

9.2 Be convinced that all of these did not run in vain, but in faith and righteousness, and that they are now in the place due to them, with the Lord, with whom they also suffered. For they did not love this present age, but the one who died for us and was raised by God for our sake.

| *Translator's note.* "Did not run in vain" echoes [Philippians 2:16](#) and [Galatians 2:2](#). "Love this present age" echoes [2 Timothy 4:10](#).

Chapter 10

10.1 So stand firm in these things and follow the example of the Lord: firm and unchanging in faith, lovers of the brotherhood, caring for one another, united in the truth, going ahead of one another in the gentleness of the Lord, and despising no one.

| *Translator's note.* The Greek manuscripts break off at the end of chapter 9, and chapter 13 survives in Greek only because Eusebius quotes it. Chapters 10 to 12 and 14 survive only in an ancient Latin translation, and this rendering follows the Latin.

| Scripture: [John 15:17](#); [Romans 13:8](#)

10.2 When you are able to do good, do not put it off, because giving to the poor frees from death. All of you, be subject to one another, keeping your conduct beyond reproach among the Gentiles, so that you may receive praise for your good works and the Lord may not be spoken against because of you.

| *Translator's note.* Compare [1 Peter 5:5](#) and 2:12.

| Scripture: [1 Peter 2:12](#)

10.3 But woe to the one through whom the name of the Lord is spoken against. So teach everyone to live soberly, as you do yourselves.

Translator's note. Compare [Isaiah 52:5](#) and [Romans 2:24](#).

Chapter 11

11.1 I am very sorry for Valens, who was once made an elder among you, that he so little understands the position that was given to him. So I urge you to keep away from greed and to be pure and truthful. Keep away from every evil.

11.2 If someone cannot manage himself in these things, how can he teach others? Anyone who does not keep away from greed will be defiled by idolatry and will be judged as if he were among the Gentiles, who do not know the judgment of the Lord. Or do we not know that the saints will judge the world, as Paul teaches?

Translator's note. Linking greed with idolatry follows [Colossians 3:5](#) and [Ephesians 5:5](#). "The saints will judge the world" quotes [1 Corinthians 6:2](#).

Scripture: [1 Corinthians 6:2](#)

11.3 I have noticed nothing of this kind among you, and have heard nothing, among you in whose midst the blessed Paul worked, you who are praised at the beginning of his letter. He boasts about you in all the churches, which at that time were the only ones that knew the Lord, for we had not yet come to know him.

Translator's note. The Latin of "you who are praised at the beginning of his letter" is obscure, and "praised" is supplied. It may refer to Paul's thanksgiving in [Philippians 1:3-11](#). For Paul boasting of a church among the churches, compare [2 Thessalonians 1:4](#).

11.4 So, brothers, I am very sorry for him and for his wife. May the Lord grant them true repentance. Be sober-minded about this yourselves, and do not treat such people as enemies, but call them back as weak members who have gone astray, so that you may save the whole body of you all. By doing this you build yourselves up.

Translator's note. Compare [2 Thessalonians 3:15](#): "Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother."

Chapter 12

12.1 I am confident that you are well trained in the holy Scriptures and that nothing is hidden from you, though this has not been granted to me. Only, as it is said in these Scriptures: "Be angry and do not sin," and "Do not let the sun go down on your anger." Blessed is the one who remembers this, and I believe that this is true of you.

Translator's note. Both sayings appear together in [Ephesians 4:26](#). The

first is also [Psalm 4:4](#). Polycarp introduces them as “these Scriptures,” so if the Latin reflects his wording, he is calling Paul’s letter Scripture. That makes this one of the earliest such references outside the New Testament itself (compare [2 Peter 3:16](#)).

Scripture: [Ephesians 4:26](#)

12.2 May God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the eternal high priest himself, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, build you up in faith and truth, in all gentleness, without anger, in patience, in long-suffering, in endurance, and in purity. May he give you a share and a portion among his saints, and give the same to us with you, and to everyone under heaven who will believe in our Lord and God Jesus Christ and in his Father, who raised him from the dead.

Translator’s note. Calling Jesus the eternal “high priest” (Latin pontifex) echoes the Letter to the Hebrews ([Hebrews 6:20](#); 7:24–25). “Who raised him from the dead” echoes [Galatians 1:1](#).

Scripture: [Galatians 1:1](#)

12.3 Pray for all the saints. Pray also for kings, authorities, and rulers, and for those who persecute you and hate you, and for the enemies of the cross, so that your fruit may be plain to all and that you may be made complete in him.

Translator’s note. This combines several New Testament commands: prayer for kings and all in authority ([1 Timothy 2:1–2](#)), prayer for persecutors ([Matthew 5:44](#)), and the phrase “enemies of the cross,” which Paul used in his own letter to the Philippians ([Philippians 3:18](#)).

Scripture: [Luke 6:27](#)

Chapter 13

13.1 You and Ignatius both wrote to me that if anyone is going to Syria, he should also carry your letter. I will do that if I find a suitable opportunity, either myself or someone I send as a representative, on your behalf as well.

Translator’s note. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch in Syria, had asked the churches to send messengers or letters to Antioch to share in its joy once peace had been restored there (Ignatius, To the Smyrnaeans 11; To Polycarp 7–8).

13.2 As you asked, we are sending you the letters of Ignatius that he sent to us, and the others we had with us. They are attached to this letter, and you will be able to benefit greatly from them. They contain faith, endurance, and all the building up that belongs to our Lord. Let us know whatever reliable news you have learned about Ignatius himself and those who are with him.

Translator’s note. Many scholars think Polycarp’s collection of Ignatius’s letters helped preserve them for later generations, but this cannot be proved.

Chapter 14

14.1 I have written this to you through Crescens, whom I recently recommended to you and now recommend again. He has lived blamelessly among us, and I believe he will do the same among you. His sister will be recommended to you when she comes to you. Farewell in the Lord Jesus Christ, in grace, with all who are yours. Amen.

Translator's note. The Latin phrase in praesenti is unclear; it is usually taken to mean “recently” or “up to now.”

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