

January 24, 2021

FOLLOWING THE EXAMPLE OF THE CITIZENS OF HEAVEN

Philippians 3:17-4:1

(10 of 12 in a series through Philippians)

Being discouraged or depressed is an odd thing. Compared to what many of you have known and how long you've battled with it, I don't even feel like I should acknowledge any kind of discouragement or feeling of being depressed. But I did feel for a season like there was a cloud over my head. And I'm not referring to some difficult days early on in ministry—though some of those days would no doubt qualify. Nor am I referring simply to the struggle of raising children, when you feel like you don't know what you're doing, wish you could help them more, and feel like you're reduced to a shell of a person. The time that stands out most clearly to me as a time when I battled being a cloud of sadness for the longest period of time actually happened in high school.

I've noted this before, but my middle school years were some of the most encouraging and shaping years of my life. I found good friends who seemed to want to pursue the things of the Lord, and I was solidified in my desire to walk with Christ in that time. Some refer to these moments as a time when their faith became their own. I call it the moment when you realize that you're going to follow Jesus even if your dad and mom turned away. That happened for me in middle school, and those were glorious days of growth and encouragement.

But then I got word from my parents that we were moving from the eastern part of Kentucky down to the western part of the state. I would start my eighth grade year separated from these dear friends who had encouraged me so much in obedience to the Lord. But I soon found myself feeling hopeful. After all, we had moved to eastern Kentucky from western Kentucky when I was entering third grade, and I hadn't wanted to make that move either. Yet it turned out to be some glorious times of blessing in my life. Perhaps this would be the same?

But this time the move wasn't as glorious. I did indeed make friends over the next five years before moving to Jackson. And the Lord did work in my life in those days in gracious ways. But my classmates were largely kids who'd grown up in church, professed faith in Christ, and lived in all manner of debauchery. Sexual immorality was openly bragged about as we prepared for each class to start. We'd all attend a Thursday morning prayer meeting led by our godly choir teacher only to dismiss from that, and then the planning of how this weekend would be filled with more pursuit of drunkenness, immorality, and rebellion. And I felt quite alone, lonely, and a bit depressed. I felt beaten down in my own battle against sin, on my worst days a bit envious of those who were pursuing sin and seemingly enjoying life, and sad that I felt I had no one to walk alongside me into the doors of our public school or onto the soccer field or onto the tennis court who just wanted to honor the Lord.

And I've often wondered what all I would tell myself if somehow I could transport my forty-two-year-old self back into the early to mid-nineties and have a talk with my teenage self in that

moment while I was battling discouragement, loneliness, and feelings of being depressed. But as I reflected on Paul's words in Philippians 3:17-4:1 this week it hit me that I think this paragraph sums up so much of what my teenage self needed to hear, something I need to hear now, and perhaps something you desperately need to hear as well.

Maybe you feel in many ways that you can identify with the place of struggle I just described. You're feeling like the fight of faith is a fight that is wearing you out. You're discouraged, see others going down different paths, and are wondering how you'll keep pressing on. If so, my hope is that you will find our look at this text this morning to be a shot in the arm, or better, a clear word from God to you to encourage you, show you a path forward, and help you persevere during this time. Even if you're facing no discouragement, what Paul shows us in these verses is a picture of how we can be strengthened to grow in the faith, why it's so important, how we need to think, and what we need to do. What then does Paul tell us in this text? First, he reminds us to imitate him and mature believers like him.

Imitate Paul and mature believers like him

I know we've made reference to this a few times leading up to this text because Paul has been hinting at this for a number of verses by holding up the examples of Timothy, Epaphroditus, and himself, but now he comes out and explicitly states it. He writes in verses 17, "Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us." Paul wants the Philippians to imitate him, and he wants them to imitate Timothy and Epaphroditus and all others who live as they live.

Now, I realize that we've noted this for a number of weeks and have covered a number of characteristics that describe Paul and that we should imitate. But let me highlight one more characteristic of Paul in this text that we could miss. In the next verse Paul is going to speak of some individuals who are condemned. We'll say more about them shortly, but Paul is going to say of them that "their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame" (v. 19). In other words, Paul isn't pulling punches. He's condemning them as "enemies of the cross of Christ" (v. 18). He's not pretending like they're okay with the Lord.

Here, though, is where I want us to pause and notice something. Maybe asking a question will help us see it clearly. What is the disposition of Paul's heart as he's saying this? In other words, how would you imagine his affections? Would you guess that he's full of rage at this point? After all, he's talking about "enemies of the cross," and individuals who are glorying in things that they should be ashamed of. Perhaps it reminds us of a lot of individuals we could bring to mind. But the reality is, Paul is not pictured here in terms of being about to blow a gasket. He says, "For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you *even with tears*" (v. 18).

As Paul is writing about these enemies of the cross, he is weeping. This is one aspect of Paul's mind and heart and actions that we've not covered to this point as we've spent a few weeks noticing characteristics in him that we should imitate. But it's definitely one we need to take note of now. When you think of individuals who say they're followers of Christ but are showing

themselves to be otherwise, does it lead you to tears? I'm afraid that we may be more prone to complaining about them on social media than we are to get down on our knees and speak to the Lord about them—crying out for their repentance.

Now, I'm not saying that we shouldn't call out sin. It is dishonoring to the Lord for Christians to be unwilling to identify sin because they want to be loving. It's *not* loving. To refuse to tell the person pursuing same-sex attraction that he needs to repent because you say you want to be loving and feel bad for them in their struggle is simply helping usher them towards hell in the name of love. That's more like hate than love. No, I'm not saying that we become a people who weep without calling out sin, but nor should we be people who call out sin without weeping for those who do not know Christ. Let's imitate Paul here. And let's imitate all those who walk in maturity.

We've noted for a few weeks now that much of discipleship is caught. We mimic those around us. So, let's do the same with those whom the Lord has given us in our lives. I think one thing I would say to my teenage self is, "Find some person or a few individuals who are really pursuing the Lord, and fix your eyes on them. The Lord hasn't left you alone, no matter how isolated or lonely you feel. So fix your eyes on other believers and begin to imitate the ways they pursue the Lord." And it's what I'm saying to every teenager here today—and everyone else as well. If you're struggling to persevere in a difficult situation, find someone who is persevering well in difficulty and imitate them. Let's imitate godliness and live lives worthy of imitation.

Then, Paul gives us a reason why it's so important to fix our eyes on mature believers and imitate them. It is because there will always be those who provide misleading examples.

There will always be those who provide misleading examples

After the exhortation to imitate him and those mature believers who live like him, Paul tells the Philippians why it's so important that they imitate him and others. He writes, "For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ" (v. 18). The reason they need to identify godly believers and imitate them is because they're going to see many who profess Christ and yet do not know him, providing misleading examples.

Now, you may have noticed that I said that Paul is referencing professing believers, and the reason I think so is because this is a consistent "enemy of the cross" that Paul writes about. When he writes against the Judaizers—that is, those who say you are justified by faith in Christ *and* by doing the works of the law—he is writing against individuals who claim to belong to the Lord. When he writes to the Corinthians about the danger of sinful behavior spreading in the church (using the image of leaven working throughout a loaf of bread), he is writing about "anyone who bears the name of brother" (1 Cor 5:11) and practices unrepentant sin. When Paul meets with the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, he warns them, saying, "From among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:30). So it seems that when Paul speaks this way, he is almost always speaking about those in the church,

which would mean professing believers. So I think it's most reasonable to think the group he's talking about here are those who profess faith in Christ and yet are condemned.

He describes them as enemies of the cross in verse 18, but then he elaborates on how they live in verse 19. He writes, "Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things." In other words, their sinful appetites rule their lives. They chase after what their flesh desires—whether sexual immorality or riches or praise they covet. Their appetites rule them. And they glory in their shame in that things they should be ashamed of, they're bragging about. They boast of their sexual exploits, brag about abortion, or flaunt their pursuit of same-sex activities. Surely you've seen this. Their minds are completely about this world and this age only. They give no thought to eternity. And they're on their way to hell. That's what Paul means by "their end is destruction." They profess Christ, but this is their lifestyle.

What Paul is saying is that the experience I had in high school, being surrounded by professing believers who felt no conviction about sin wasn't some exception that was unique to the western Kentucky public school system in the mid-nineties. There are "many" Paul says who are like this. It's why he's weeping. And it's also why the exhortation in verse 17 is so crucial. The idea seems to be because so many are surrounding us and providing misleading examples of how we should live, we need to make extra sure that we're fixing our eyes on mature believers and imitating them in the midst of a tide of "many" running the wrong direction.

But that's not the only reason we're to imitate Paul as he presses on in pursuit of Christ more and more. We also see that our citizenship is in heaven.

Our citizenship is in heaven

After noting that these professing believers who are chasing after sin set their minds on earthly things, Paul contrasts that with us, saying, "But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 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" (v. 21). Now, that all sounds good, but what does Paul mean?

Well, our home characterizes us. Someone has no doubt said to you at some point when you're away from your home, "You're not from around here, are you?" They're saying this because they know how those around them speak, act, and think, and there's something about you that's different. Paul is saying that the realities of heaven have invaded our lives as believers. We have the Spirit, eternal life, new hearts, and we're heading to heaven. That's now our true home. Accordingly, we should bear the imprints of our home. People should be able to look at us and say, "You're not from around here" in some sense because our behavior—how we speak, think, and act—should be so different from them.

Now, yes, we right now still live in this world and still know the effects of sin and the looming presence of death. But one day we will fully become the kind of person fit for our heavenly

home. Even our bodies will be transformed to become fit for heaven. Jesus will do that for us when he returns by his might and power. But, until then, we need to live in light of what will one day be fully true of us. If we're headed for heaven, we might say, then let us bear the imprint of heaven in how we walk now.

We are not like those about whom Paul speaks in verses 18-19. We do not live our lives simply chasing fleshly desires. We do indeed fight sin, but if we sin, we do not glory in it, but see it as shameful, turn from it, and get back to pressing on after Jesus. And we set our mind on heavenly things. We budget our money in light of eternal reward. Fight for purity in light that we will one day be perfectly pure. We turn away from the fleeting pleasures of sin, knowing that we will one day know the pleasure of having hearts that only love our God and neighbor perfectly.

And so, what then do we do? Paul ends with one last exhortation: stand firm until that day.

Stand firm until that day

Paul begins 4:1 with, "Therefore." In other words, he's saying, "In light of what I've just said you need to do what I'm about to tell you." In this case, he is saying, "In light of the fact that heaven is our home, Jesus is coming to save us, our bodies will be glorified, and all will be well on that day, do this." What then does he want his hearers to do in light of this news? He wants us to stand firm. He writes, "Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in thus in the Lord, my beloved."

I know there's a lot of language in that verse, and we'll address it all, but don't miss the one command he notes here—stand firm. He's telling us that as we seek to imitate him in obeying Jesus and pressing forward to know him more, understanding that our home is in heaven and striving toward what we one day will be, stand firm. He's telling us that as many people around you professing Christ are chasing after the things of this world and seemingly getting out of life its sweetest rewards that are actually just the fleeting pleasures of sin, stand firm.

Now, I know this can be hard when it feels like those around you seem to be chasing sin without obvious consequences, but this is why Paul mentions that their minds are set on earthly things, while our citizenship is in heaven. In other words, keep eternity in mind. This life is but a blip, but eternity will be forever. Also, they may seem to be glorying in things that should be shameful, but remember "their end is destruction."

Moreover, Paul isn't writing this in some callous manner, as if he's saying, "Listen, look at eternity, suck it up, and do the hard and sacrificial thing." No, listen to how he says this. He refers to them as "my brothers." He tells them he loves them and longs for them. He calls them his beloved. And he refers to them as his joy and crown, which is a reference to the reward he will have in being able to present them to the Lord on the day of judgment, in saying, "These, Lord, are my joy and crown of boasting, these whom you have allowed me to labor over and pour into." No, this isn't some dispassionate or callous appeal. This is the appeal of one who loves these Philippians so deeply.

And in that vein I want to say to you who may well feel the pull of sin and the pull of following those professing believers who aren't obeying Christ as you grow weary in your fight for faith, don't chase after that path. I know you might feel alone. I know it can be discouraging. But fix your eyes on some mature believers and imitate them. Remember the end of those who are chasing after their sinful appetites is destruction. Remember you're headed to heaven, so stand firm until that day comes. You can do it. And we'll walk with you. As a church, let's strengthen one another by standing firm together.

On February 26, 1852, a British ship called the Birkenhead with a number of soldiers and a few women and children struck a rock that ripped through the ship. Some of the soldiers in the lower decks instantly drowned. The rest gathered on the upper deck of the ship together. There were only a few life boats, and even some of them weren't able to be lowered because of mechanical issues, but they took the few women and children and put them on the boats to be rowed away to safety. The men then began readying themselves to jump overboard, but the soldiers' commanding officer realized that if these men jump overboard and began swimming, they would be able to easily reach the rowboats of women and children, and if enough of them did so then the rowboats themselves would capsize and women and children would likely drown. So he drew his sword and told the men to stand firm until the boats would be a good enough distance away that it would be unlikely for many to reach them and risk the lives of the women and children. The men did so, standing side by side—standing firm, together—not moving, even while the ship ripped in two and began to sink. A few of the men did eventually reach the boats, but all the women and children survived.¹

This event began being taught in school as “The Birkenhead Drill,” and it's where the cry of women and children first comes from. Sixty years later, as the Titanic was sinking, the men on the ship sent the women and children away first on the limited number of lifeboats. It is rumored that as they stood, letting them get farther away, they whispered to one another, “Remember the Birkenhead.”²

I know it's hard to stand firm, but fix your eyes on those who have modeled how we walk—even in difficult circumstances—and imitate them. Stand firm, remembering this life is not all there is because the one who lived, died, and was raised for us, will return, turning our lowly bodies into glorious ones, fitting us to be with him forever. And let us thank him and demonstrate our obedience to his call now as we come to the table. Amen.

¹ <https://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/Women-Children-First/>.

² https://watv.org/faith_life/remember-birkenhead/.