

Citizens of Heaven

Philippians 3:17 - 4:1

Humility is such an illusive thing, for the moment you are sure that you have it, you can be quite sure that you have lost it. Because of that, we often find examples of false humility today, particularly when a Christian tries to hide his life from the view of others and says, “Don’t follow my example. Don’t look at me, I’m just an ordinary person. Don’t imitate me, I’m just a sinner.”

Now, there is, of course, a more than a grain of truth in that. None of us ever escapes the presence and the reality of sin, not in this life. But it is false to hide behind that sinful imperfection, as if excusing the sin altogether. Instead, we are often challenged to provide good examples for others to follow, and to imitate those who set a pattern of life worthy of such honor. And presenting yourself as a godly example to follow does not violate the spirit of humility, but really embodies it. At least, as Paul presented himself.

His clearest statement is found in,
1 Cor. 11:1 “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.”

He gets very specific in,
Phil. 4:9 The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.”

And in our text this afternoon, he says merely,
v.17

We’ll come back to Paul’s pattern of life in few moments, but first what is clear is the contrast with those who are not believers.
v.18

The sad reality, then and now, is that,

I. MANY PEOPLE LIVE AS ENEMIES OF JESUS CHRIST.

Specifically, as enemies of the cross. That’s an important phrase, because there are certainly people today who claim to know Jesus Christ, who claim to be Christians, but are still enemies of the cross, for a variety of reasons. There are those who say that to be saved, you must perform certain good works, thus denying the unique nature of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus upon the cross. There are those who teach that Jesus’ death was a good example of loving your neighbor, but not an actual satisfaction of the justice and wrath of God for sin. Some would say the cross was the end of Jesus’ life, and there was no necessity for the resurrection; others might say that Jesus’ death upon the cross falls into the category of myth or fable. A good story, but not historical reality. Some would say Jesus himself was a good man and even a worthy prophet, but not God in the flesh.

Ultimately, all those who believe such things are enemies of the cross.

Then there are always the legalists, those who insist upon obedience to the traditions of men as the ground of assurance of eternal life. There are the self-righteous Pharisee-like people who make the Christian faith an external religion of outward appearances but who cherish wickedness in their hearts. Social acceptability which covers up often gross moral impurity.

All of those are enemies of the cross as well! Every bit as much as ones who would physically or intellectually assault the very truths of our faith. Enemies of the cross, not believing that the cross of Jesus Christ was the triumphant climax of God’s eternal purpose to save his people from their sins by sending his

own son to satisfy his justice and take upon himself the curse of the covenant demanded by a holy God against covenant breakers. And their end is sure.

A. The enemies of Jesus shall be eternally condemned.

We are not talking about different denominations of Christians, different groups of godly people who believe the Bible but disagree on secondary matters. Rather, we're talking about people whose claim to the Christian faith is false! In many cases, they themselves are deceived. But Paul is plain.

v.19 "[Their] end is destruction."

End means their ultimate position, the end result of their lives. Eternal ruin. There is no hope, and this destruction does not mean annihilation. It does not mean that you simply cease to exist. Rather, it means that you will exist eternally in a horrible state of everlasting punishment. This is the truth that we must proclaim to our wicked world.

2 Thes.1:6 "...since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, 7 and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, 8 in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, 10 when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed."

Everlasting destruction. Eternal condemnation. The burning of fire that shall never be extinguished. We touched on that subject this morning. That is what lies ahead for those who are enemies of Jesus Christ. But how do we identify those enemies

more specifically? Paul gives us a very concise and penetrating description.

B. The enemies of Jesus serve the god of physical desires.

Paul says it this way, "their god is their belly." Their god is their stomach! That is to say, what they live for is the satisfaction of their own physical and sensual desires. The focus of their life is upon meeting their own needs. Fulfilling their own pleasures.

Lots of examples, and they really haven't changed since the time that Paul wrote the book of Philippians. The word for belly has obvious reference to food and drink. Gluttony and drunkenness. It's Miller time. It's happy hour!

The reference to the "belly" can also refer to other sensual desires, sexual satisfaction and pleasure being high on the list, clearly a god for many people. The thing, above all others, for which they live, that which consumes their time and attention.

And you can broaden the scope even more, with our love affair with our own comfort and luxury. Pampering our own lives with things that might not be so bad in themselves, but the pursuit of luxury can become the god whom we serve.

You no doubt know people whom you would describe in this way. Their god is their belly. And it is a terrible temptation for us, for we are bombarded by messages, especially in the public media and television, that appeal to this very god! It is insidious, creeping up unawares upon us sometimes, developing little by little as we get acclimated to particular comforts and pleasures that we come to take for granted.

And the influence of this false god of personal pleasure upon the enemies of Christ is particularly obvious. In the words of Paul,

v.19 “Whose glory is in their shame.”

In other words,

C. The enemies of Christ boast in things for which they ought to be ashamed.

We have gross and horrible examples today. The sad reality of life in our country, in this day, is that people not only fail to condemn that which is evil, and not only fail to be grieved or offended by it, they glory in it! We boast about the great freedom of the press in our country, the freedom that allows and encourages the publication of pornography. We boast about civil liberties, and we live in a time when the freedom of choice is permitted to end the lives of unborn children. We boast about our material successes and financial prosperity, all the while families are falling apart and marriages are breaking up more often than they are staying together. We boast about educational advances and opportunities while few and few people know much of anything anymore about God or his word.

Our glory is in our shame. That is, our society, in which so many live as an enemies of the cross. Finally, Paul says that,

D. The enemies of Jesus live only for the things of this world.

Paul’s description is this,

v.19 “Who set their mind on earthly things.”

That description is certainly related to the others, but is an important one to mention separately because it doesn’t necessarily refer to things quite as offensive as the worst examples we could imagine. There are many true believers who fall into this same trap, simply failing to raise their minds above

the normal and ordinary affairs of this life. Work. Family. Raising children. Cars and houses. Money and retirement accounts. Health insurance and cholesterol levels. Now, those are all good things to give some thought to. But there are more important things to give some thought to also. Issues of the soul. Spiritual concerns. Spiritual health. Relationships with God.

Giving this same warning in the positive, Paul writes to the Colossians,

Col. 3:1 “If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. 2 Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.”

It is the same instruction Jesus gives in,

Mat. 6:19 “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

The enemies of the cross, the enemies of Christ, fail to understand what Paul teaches so plainly and clearly in,

1 Tim.6:6 “Now godliness with contentment is great gain. 7 For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. 8 And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. 9 But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. 11 But you, O man of God, flee these things

and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness.”

The things of this world are food and clothing. Things above are godliness, patience and gentleness, the fruit of the spirit. And the probing question remains, which do you pursue the most?

Many people live as enemies of Jesus Christ. But we must not! Instead,

II. WE MUST LIVE ACCORDING TO THE PATTERNS OF GODLINESS.

That bad example isn't all that we find in our text. There are also good examples. With the urging to follow those good examples. Paul offers his own life as one such pattern.

v.17

Paul's motives are clear, and clearly stated.

4:1

Stand fast in the Lord. Stand firm. That should be our greatest wish for ourselves, and for others. For our children. For our church. Our great wish for this church should not be that we would grow. Our great wish shouldn't be that we might become successful and prominent. But rather it should be that each of you have the confidence to know that you will stand firm in the Lord no matter what the outward circumstances might be.

That's what Paul so dearly wishes for this church at Philippi. He is so personal, so pastoral in his relationship with people and churches. His concerns are so touching. He writes in a similar way in,

1 Thes. 3:5 “For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain. 6 But now that

Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you— 7 therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith. 8 For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord.”

That's a pastor's heart. He couldn't endure not knowing how the people were doing. He couldn't endure not knowing how strong and firm their faith was. And he said, “We live, we really live, if you stand fast in the Lord.”

But how do you do that? How do you stand fast in the Lord, and what does that involve? There are some good answers for us here. First,

A. We must live as citizens of heaven.

This probably covers all the rest, which is why I used it for my sermon title. We are citizens of heaven. Cities of earthly nations, certainly. Citizens of the United States. Citizens of North Carolina, or Virginia. Citizens of Mount Airy or Surry County. But more than that! Citizens of another kingdom, a heavenly kingdom. And that kingdom already exists, for the king already sits upon his throne.

This heavenly citizenship means that we are really aliens on this earth. We are sojourners, strangers, visitors. It is essential that we view life that way. We are the children of Abraham, whom we read about in,

Heb. 11:9 “By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; 10 for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.”

And with broader reference to the saints, we read,

Heb. 11:13 “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. 14 For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. 15 And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.”

Now, citizenship actually refers to your behavior as a citizen of a nation. It refers to your actions and words that benefit the nation. It refers to your duties as citizens. It could be translated statesmanship. It refers to your duties obligations as good citizens. And so, we must live as citizens of heaven.

That doesn't mean that you should be guilty of the charge, “He's so heavenly minded that he is of no earthly good.” Rather, it should mean that your life and character are conformed not to the patterns of this world, but to the patterns of heaven. It means that the characteristics of your life, the dominant and prevailing characteristics of your life, reflect the truth that you will live for eternity in the presence of God in heaven.

But do they? Those are always good questions to ask. Sadly, that sociologists can study the behavior and life patterns of people and not be able to see an immediate or obvious difference between Christians and non-Christians. That should not be. The difference should be plain to see. Because as citizens of heaven, our perspective is different. This age isn't all that there is. This age will end, and so,

B. We must live with an expectation of Jesus' return.

v.20

That perspective changes everything, doesn't it? It's not that I'm going to go build a bomb shelter and hide out in isolated security so that I can survive a nuclear attack. Rather, I am going to be a little bit careless about the affairs of this world. My own earthly security isn't going to be most important. Because I will live with great expectations of Jesus' return.

That is why I can handle injustice and unfairness, as painful as it often is. I can handle sorrow and disappointment, as grievous as that is. And it means that I need to battle with the temptations that come to me as well. Because we must live with an expectation of Jesus' return.

No one expresses this idea more forcefully than Peter.

2 Peter 3:10 “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. 11 Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, 12 looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? 13 Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. 14 Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless.”

And with that diligent pursuit of godliness,

C. We must live with the hope of immortality.

The hope and confidence that this mortal body shall be made incorruptible.

v.21a

We must live with that hope, otherwise our religion is useless! We must live with that hope, otherwise there will be nothing to say to those who face the reality of death. We must live that hope, otherwise any single tragedy would be capable of thrusting us into utter despair, to say nothing of the aggravating frustration of this past year of COVID-19. We must live with the hope of immortality.

And so I proclaim to you,

1 Cor. 15:51 “Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed— 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. 53 For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. 54 So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.””

And God will bring that to pass. Therefore,

D. We must live with the awareness of God’s power.
v.21b

Let me explain that this way. God the Father raised Jesus from the dead. That’s power. God “seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come.”

That’s God’s power, according to Ephesians 1. And in that same power, we read that “He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church.”

That’s the fullness of God’s power. And that power is at work in us. The power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in us! In Ephesians 1, Paul is praying for the people to come to know and experience that power in their own lives. Paul writes,

Eph. 1:16 “[I] do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: 17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, 18 the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power.”

What difference does all this make? It makes a great difference in your own struggle with sin. That you know the exceeding greatness of his power toward us who believe. It makes a great difference when you confront death or sorrow. It makes a great difference when you deal with difficulty or trouble of any kind. “That you know the exceeding greatness of his power.”

v.1. “Therefore, my beloved and longed-for brethren, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, beloved.”