

Philippians

Part 17 – Citizens of a Better City

Philippians 3:17-21

In this passage Paul continues with a theme begun in chapter one verse 27: “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ...” The clause “manner of life” is translated from a word which means citizen. So more literally Paul was instructing the Philippian church to “live as citizens of the gospel.” In this week’s passage we are taught that our true citizenship is seen, in part, by the examples we choose to follow. Paul was not shy to call the Philippian believers to follow the example of the apostles as they followed Christ. This is a stark contrast to the example of those whose lives made them “enemies of the cross of Christ.”

Paul’s use of the term citizen in a verb form in 1:27 and now as a noun in 3:20 is a summons to Christians to live in a way that is consistent with their status as citizens of God’s kingdom. This citizenship is not an abstract notion. It is a literal citizenship in a real place to be fully revealed in the age to come. This is the believer’s eternal and therefore most significant citizenship.



Main Idea: Christians are called to live in light of their heavenly citizenship.

Vs. 17 – It isn’t boasting for Paul to call upon these Christians to imitate him because he has just said what he wants them to imitate in him is his repudiation of self-confidence and spiritual pride. [Moule, 101] He wants them to be as conscious of their failings as he is of his and as dependent upon God’s grace to keep going on as he knows he must be. “Us” is most likely a reference to the apostles.

Vv. 18-19 – Paul, of course, and no doubt his readers knew of whom the apostle was speaking, the people whose god was their stomach. But it is hard for us to know precisely whom he means. They seem to be licentious people, given to sensuality, immoral and worldly. In which case there may have been a separate group of antinomians, professing Christians given to moral laxity, troubling the Philippian church. They would be enemies of the cross because they imagined that Christ’s atonement and the forgiveness of sins that comes from it gave them liberty to live immoral lives and so they disgraced the cross before the eyes of the world. The judaizers were not morally lax in these ways – indeed, precisely the opposite – and they are the only “enemies” specifically referred to in the letter. So some commentators suggest that the description of these people in v. 19 could be applied to the judaizers with the terms to be taken not literally but figuratively: a fleshly mind, a concentration on the accomplishments of this world, and a betrayal of their privileges as the chosen people of God. The judaizers were, in Paul’s mind, certainly “enemies of the cross.”

Vs. 20 – Christians are to live on earth primarily as citizens of Heaven. “Heaven,” here, is shorthand for the age to come or the new creation. The age to come will be inaugurated with Jesus’ second advent. Christians live with an eager anticipation for return of Christ.

Vs. 21 – Paul has already mentioned the believer’s going to be *with the Lord* at death. But like the rest of the New Testament, the emphasis always falls primarily and ultimately on the resurrection of the body at the end of history and the consummation of our salvation that will occur only then. The New Testament consistently teaches the Christian’s lowly body will be renewed at the Second Coming. Our true self – as that self has lived and died in this world – will be made perfect in glory. There is a great mystery here to be sure. But it is the Christian as he truly is, body and soul, who will be raised and made perfect by Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

1. Two Ways to Live and Two Sorts of Examples

Vv. 17-19

- Paul continues to connect to the theme he established in 1:27 where he calls the Philippian believers to live as *citizens* (the verb form of the noun he uses in 3:20) of the gospel. The theme of citizenship provides a thematic backdrop for this section. Along the way he also continues to hold forth examples both positive and negative. Here, the clear implication is that the examples we follow in this life are indicators of our true citizenship.

a) The example to follow (the apostles)

“Brothers, join in imitating me...according to the example you have in us” (vs. 17).

- This is not arrogance on the part of Paul. This is an example of basic discipleship. Paul knows that he and the apostles have set a Christ-like example worthy of following. Part of that example is Paul’s humility seen in the previous passage where he freely admits that he has not yet arrived at the goal. The example he sets forth is one of a man who views all of life as a disciplined pursuit of knowledge of and conformity to Christ.

b) The example to reject (the enemies of the cross)

“Their end is destruction; their god is their belly; and they glory in their shame with minds set on earthly things” (vs. 19).

- These “enemies of the cross” are not clearly identified by Paul. Although it is likely that the Philippian believers knew who he was referring to. It less clear to modern readers. Paul may be referring to those who use the message of the cross as a license to sin as some were doing in places like Corinth. Verse 19 seems to suggest this. Their god was their belly in that they lived for their own appetites. However, it may well be that Paul was addressing the Judaizers who ultimately denied the cross through legalism. They made a god of their belly by resting their confidence in their own disciplined adherence to the Old Covenant dietary laws. Their “glory” (legalistic righteousness) was actually their shame.
- We need not press the issue too far. Indeed, Christians must reject the examples set by the licentious and the legalists. Both are enemies of the cross. Both have twisted the gospel. Paul weeps over such as these precisely because they claim to be Christians and yet they have missed Christ altogether.

2. Two Cities and Two Destinies

Vv. 20-21

“Their end is destruction...But our citizenship is in Heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

a) The City of Destruction

- Paul’s use of “destruction” is clearly a reference to hell. He weeps over the tragic consequences of living as an enemy of the cross.

b) The City of God

- Paul’s reference to “Heaven” is shorthand for all that is promised in the age to come. The Christian’s eternal destiny will be fully embodied in the new creation. All sin and sin’s effects will be fully and finally eradicated. The power of Christ’s resurrection will be realized in the glorified bodies of His people. Eternal life in new creation in the presence of God is the prize toward which we press. It is the reality which is to shape our living in this fallen world.