

Series: To Live is Christ

Title: Onward in Christ, Part 2

Text: Philippians 3:17-21

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Verse 17

In Philippians 3:17, Paul continued his encouragement concerning spiritual progress by saying, “Join in imitating me, brothers and sisters, and pay careful attention to those who live according to the example you have in us.” The apostle knew that a pattern of example is important in Christian growth. Didn’t Jesus’ disciples learn from Him by actually living with Him? Yes, He instructed them and taught them through sermons (Matthew 5:3-7:27; Matthew 23:2-25:46), but He also provided an example for them to follow. In Christian discipleship, disciples learn from others via both lessons and lifestyle.

Paul knew there were detractors to his teaching in Philippi. Judaizers attempted to gain a following from the faithful in the church. Paul wanted the true believers to look to the right types of spiritual roles models. Thus, he boldly said, “Join in imitating me...” (Philippians 3:12). Paul’s words appeared as a command in the original language of the text. By twenty-first century standards, it may seem that Paul was a bit brazen in commanding others to follow his leadership. Modern minds often argue that “leadership is earned, not given.”

It is worth noting that Paul’s church-planting experiences in Philippi (Acts 16:6-40) had “earned” him the right to lead, in a sense. However, Paul’s command for followership wasn’t based on such things. The apostle knew two important realities concerning Christian discipleship. First, he understood that he was an apostle. By God’s grace (1 Corinthians 15:10), he had been appointed as a mouthpiece for New Covenant truth. Second, Paul knew that discipleship involves followership. When Jesus called the first disciples to Himself, He said, “Follow me...and I will make you fish for, people” (Mark 1:17). True Christian discipleship involves the transmission of information (truth) via the pathway of a relationship. It is for this reason that Paul said, “Join in imitating me.”

Paul did not make himself the only standard to follow. Though he was an apostle, he realized the Philippians would benefit from other godly role models as well; thus, he said, “...and pay careful attention to those who live according to the example you have in us.” The Greek word translated “pay careful attention” is one that meant “to mark.”¹ It was used of the act of one taking careful note of a person, place, or thing for the sake of careful observation. It was used in the ancient world to describe the activity of a spy.² Figuratively, it portrayed the act of keeping a watchful eye on a person.³

¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 456.

² Zodhiates, 1296.

³ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 351.

Paul's words emphasize the need for godly role models in the process of Christian sanctification. Believers need examples to learn how to pray, how to study the Bible, how to relate to others, how to deal with temptation, how to share the gospel, how to serve in the church, and more. Young men need more mature Christian men to model the faith, and younger women need older women to do likewise. Throughout his writings, Paul encouraged such modeling amongst the body of Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:7; 2 Thessalonians 3:9; Titus 2:4). In his first letter to Timothy, Paul encouraged the young pastor to be such a model, saying, "Don't let anyone despise your youth, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12).

The apostle's admonition to Timothy revealed that age isn't necessarily a determining factor for who can serve as an example for others in the church. Timothy was apparently younger than the majority of his church members. If age isn't a qualifier, we are left to consider what actually qualifies one to be a role model for other believers. Paul's words in Philippians 3:17 provide an answer. The apostle said, "... pay careful attention to *those who live according to the example you have in us.*" The people worth following are those who faithfully live according to the teaching and example of the apostles.

Before the time of Christ, a popular Roman playwright said, "Not by age but by capacity is wisdom acquired." The axiom supported the idea that age doesn't always guarantee that a person possesses wisdom. Paul's point in Philippians 3:17 was similar. Neither age, religious pedigree, or adherence to the Ceremonial Law qualified church members at Philippi to serve as examples for other believers. Instead, faithfulness to the doctrines of Christ and His apostles is what made one worth following.

In all generations, believers should look for godly examples to follow. It is true that more is often "caught than taught" in the Christian life. There is a perennial need for mature mentors. Oftentimes, we best learn how to live the Christian life by seeing it in the lives of others. We should study our Bibles, but we should also study the lives of more mature believers. Coupled together, these two types of studying will help us grow in our experience of grace.

Verse 18

On top of following the right type of examples, the Philippians needed to be leery of toxic spiritual influences. Paul said, "For I have often told you, and now say again with tears, that many live as enemies of the cross of Christ" (Philippians 3:18). The apostle surely had the Judaizer's in mind (Philippians 3:1-11). By his own admission, Paul had warned the Philippians "often" about the influence of such false teachers. Maybe his previous letter (Philippians 3:1) was primarily dedicated to correcting the error of such religious professors. Whatever the case, Paul shed "tears" when he wrote the epistle we now have. The language of the text referred to not just "the shedding of tears, but also every eternal expression of grief."⁴ Paul's emotional agony conveyed his strong concern for doctrinal fidelity in the body of Christ.

⁴ Zodhiates, 863.

Through their legalistic doctrines concerning circumcision, the Judaizer's positioned themselves "as enemies of the cross of Christ." The phrase "cross of Christ" was likely a technical religious phrase from the first-century church. It was used as a reference to the entire scope of Christ's work on behalf of sin. The cross was seen as central to the work of Christ, since it was on the cross that the Lord paid for the sins of God's people (Philippians 2:8).

Paul's accusation may have seemed strong to some, but it was perfectly justified. Was it really necessary to call the Judaizers "enemies of the cross?" Indeed it was. By stressing the Ceremonial Law as necessary for salvation, the Judaizers actually denied the power of the cross for salvation. They diverted people's attention away from Jesus and toward legalistic observance of the Law.

It is precisely at this point that most false teachings, and the majority of our spiritual maladies, err and transgress. Michael Reeves has rightly said, "Most of our Christian problems and errors of thought come about precisely through forgetting or marginalizing Christ."⁵ It is no wonder that Paul had such strong words concerning the Judaizers. He knew his readers would only be built up and blessed by Christian doctrine rooted in the cross; consequently, he did not mince words when warning them to avoid legalistic doctrines. He unequivocally elevated Christ and the cross over circumcision. He used similar logic when writing to the Galatians:

Those who want to make a good impression in the flesh are the ones who would compel you to be circumcised—but only to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even the circumcised don't keep the law themselves, and yet they want you to be circumcised in order to boast about your flesh. But as for me, I will never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. The world has been crucified to me through the cross, and I to the world. For both circumcision and uncircumcision mean nothing; what matters instead is a new creation (Galatians 6:12-14).

Verse 19

To further discourage his readers from listening to the teaching of the detractors in Philippi, Paul described the end result of following legalistic doctrine. He said, "Their end is destruction; their god is their stomach; their glory is in their shame; and they are focused on earthly things" (Philippians 3:19). Deviations in doctrine may seem insignificant to some. Modern believers are often tempted to dismiss all differences in Christian teaching as mere matters of personal perspective or preference. According to Paul, however, departure from central truths concerning Christ can have serious consequences.

Concerning the Judaizers, Paul said their "end" was "destruction." The language was used elsewhere in the New Testament to speak of the destruction of our current Earth and its evil world system (2 Peter 3:7). At the Lord's end-of-the-world, judgment, the false teachers in Philippi would encounter the second death of Revelation 20:13-14. Because of their minimization of gospel truth, Paul's doctrinal adversaries

⁵ Reeves, Michael. *Rejoicing in Christ*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 10.

were destined for hell. Earlier in his epistle, Paul had used the same language of Philippians 3:19 to say, “This is a sign of destruction for them” (Philippians 1:28).

On top of being marked for judgment, the Judaizers lived for a false god. Paul said, “their god is their stomach.” Note that English translations speak of a “god” with a lowercase “g.” In the original Greek, Paul used the popular Greek term *theós*. In some contexts, the word was used of idols in the ancient world.⁶ Paul implemented the term in such a way in our current verse. Through their teachings concerning the Law, the Judaizers erected a graven image (Exodus 20:4-6), a false idol for whom they demanded obedience and obeisance.

What was the meaning of Paul’s reference to the “stomach?” It seems his intent was to make an allusion to the Judaizers’ adherence to the Ceremonial Law. They enforced circumcision as a requirement for salvation (Philippians 3:2-3), so it stands to reason they also mandated adherence to certain dietary restrictions of the Law as well. Perhaps the Philippians needed to hear the same admonition Paul gave the Colossians — “Therefore, don’t let anyone judge you in regard to food and drink or in the matter of a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day” (Colossians 2:16). Through their dogmatism concerning dietary customs, the Judaizers at Philippi championed a form of idolatry. They beckoned others to follow a false “god.”

Because of such things, Paul said, “their glory is in their shame.” Throughout his letter to the Philippians, Paul used the Greek word rendered “glory” a lot. He used it to speak of the act of “boasting” or “glorying” in a matter. The heretics in Philippi gloried in baseless things — the flesh (Philippians 3:4). Paul wanted the church to glory in the things of the Lord (Philippians 1:11; 2:11; 4:19-20).

In Paul’s estimation, the Judaizers’ “glory” was in fact a form of “shame.” The more they boasted, the more they invoked judgment for the day of wrath. Interestingly the word rendered “shame” is one that often referred to nakedness (Revelation 3:18). Perhaps Paul invoked the word in a tongue-in-cheek fashion. Maybe his language was meant as an innuendo to the nakedness required for Jewish circumcision rituals.

Paul gave a final description of the doctrinal deviators in Philippi by saying, “They are focused on earthly things...”. The word translated “focused” referred to the act of thinking. It depicted one placing his or her thoughts on a person, place, or thing in such a way that the person, place, or thing in view became the governing factor in one’s life. Throughout his epistle, the apostle addressed the importance of proper thinking (Philippians 2:2; 2:5; 3:15; 4:2; 4:8-9). Undoubtedly, the doctrinal error of certain influences kept some in the church from thinking straight.

All in all, the false teachers of Philippi were toxic to the fellowship of the church. Paul wanted the real believers to be vigilant. Those who taught a different gospel weren’t just peddling a slightly different form of Christianity. Much more was at stake than mere opinions and personal preferences. The message of the cross was being compromised, and the church needed to be on guard!

Verse 20

While the Judaizers were on the road to perdition, the destiny of Paul and the true believers at Philippi was different. Paul said, “Our citizenship is in heaven, and we

⁶ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller,

eagerly wait for a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20). Paul had referenced the concept of citizenship earlier in his letter (Philippians 1:27). Philippi was a significant Roman colony, operating as a center for trade and commerce. It also provided a strategic base of operation for the Roman Army. Paul’s readers were well-versed in what was involved in functioning as residents of a far-off political kingdom. Roman citizenship was a big deal in the first-century world (Acts 22:25-26), and it carried certain obligations with it.

Citizens of Philippi undoubtedly experienced great benefit because of their standing in the Roman Empire. Aware of the pride concerning such citizenship, Paul used the concept to encourage the church at Philippi toward gospel fidelity. Though the believers in that church had a great standing in the eyes of Rome, they had a far more important standing in Christ. They were legal citizens of the Roman Emperor’s kingdom, but they were also spiritual citizen’s of Christ’s kingdom (Matthew 6:10).

Paul referred to a citizenship “in heaven.” The word “heaven” referred to the place of God’s abode — “Paradise” (Luke 23:43) or “the Third Heaven” (2 Corinthians 12:2). Paul’s vision was of the place in which God’s manifest presence dwells. He had personally visited that place (2 Corinthians 12:1-5). Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-13) and John (Revelation 4:1-5:14) had as well. In mentioning Paradise in the context of our current verse, Paul indicated that the faithful in Philippi had a secure standing in Christ. Because their names were inscribed within the Lamb’s Book of Life in heaven (Revelation 13:8; 21:27), they had no need to be intimidated by the legalistic doctrines of the Judaizers.

To further highlight the security of the true believers in Philippi, Paul reminded them of the Second Coming of Christ. He said, “...we eagerly wait for a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20). The title “Savior” is one that was used in the Graeco-Roman world of the Caesars and Roman emperors. The Philippians knew what it was like to live by the dictates of the Roman Emperor in Rome, but they needed to develop a stronger regard for the King of Heaven. Instead of being detoured and distracted by the Judaizers, they need to stand firm in their heavenly citizenship.

Paul’s words highlight a secret to strong Christian living. The Lord’s children are to regard themselves as pilgrims and resident aliens of this Earth. They are to always be looking forward to the day in which Christ will return to make all things new (Romans 8:19-25; Hebrews 9:28). Spiritual progress is ignited when God’s children meditate on their standing in Christ. The act of remembering one’s citizenship in an otherworldly kingdom does something to detach hearts from worldly allurements.

Verse 21

Paul elaborated further on the blessings of Christian citizenship by saying, “He will transform the body of our humble condition into the likeness of his glorious body, by the power that enables him to subject everything to himself” (Philippians 3:21). Take note of Paul’s focus on transformation. His words refer to a future event known as “glorification.” Such is the climactic stage of Christian salvation. While salvation begins with regeneration and justification (John 3:3; Romans 5:1), and while it continues with the process of sanctification (Philippians 1:6; 1 Thessalonians 4:3), it concludes with glorification. John gave details of the event in 1 John 3:1-2. Paul spoke of it in his letter to the Romans, saying, “And those he predestined, he also

called; and those he called, he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified” (Romans 8:30).

Interestingly, Paul’s language in Philippians 3:21 provided a level of specificity concerning the nature of glorification. In Koine Greek, there was a term to speak of a transformation that involved a change into something completely different. There was also a term to speak of a change into something different, yet relatively similar. Paul used the later type of terminology in Philippians 3:21. His language indicated that believers will still have bodies in the New Heaven and the New Earth; however, they will have bodies that have been changed. Glorification will not render believers into spirit beings or angelic beings; instead, it will make them into glorified humans. They will have bodies similar to the one our Lord had after His resurrection (Luke 24:40-42).

According to Paul, our present bodies presently have a “humble condition.” Though they have been magnificently fashioned by our Creator (Psalm 139:14), they have been negatively impacted by original sin. Thus, they are subject to decay and death. They are second-rate, when compared to God’s original plan for creation. However, the hope of glorification gives promise that they will one day be transformed. Scripture says, “...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 will be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:52).

On other occasions in the New Testament, Paul used the hope of glorification as a grounds of encouragement for his readers (1 Corinthians 15:50-58; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). His intent in writing about the subject in Philippians 3:21 was the same. The true believers at Philippi did not need to be unnerved by perfectionist doctrines of the Judaizers. The faithful would one day experience full perfection at the final work of salvation — glorification. The truth of Christ was greater than the supposed truths of the circumcisers.

The message of Philippians 3:16-21 is important for modern believers. Spurious Christian doctrines and worldly self-help philosophies are the source of truth for some professing Christians. It is more beneficial to stick to the plain paths of gospel truth. If believers stay mindful of simple realities related to salvation, sanctification, and glorification, they won’t need to look elsewhere for spiritual insight and assistance. In addition, they will have a more firm footing for persisting through temptations, trials, and testings. The gospel of Jesus Christ provides all that is necessary for spiritual encouragement and progress.