

## **Philippians 3:17-4:1**

“Brothers and sisters, pattern your lives after mine.”

Now, call me crazy, but I thought we were supposed to pattern our lives after Jesus, not Paul? Yes, but. Paul is addressing a time and place where there were really no Gospels available. You couldn't go and read about Jesus. If you wanted to learn what Jesus was like, you could look at the example of a Jesus follower. And we are all supposed to imitate Christ. So if someone is imitating us, then by extension, they are also imitating Christ. Are we setting a good example?

Paul didn't claim to be perfect in his Christ-following. Just go back a few verses in chapter 3 and he says, “I don't mean to say I've already achieved these things or reached perfection. But I press on toward the goal.” That's something that we can all imitate. We're not there yet, but we are striving toward the goal of maturity in faith and Christ-likeness.

Could you say that? Imitate me? Could I say it? I'll be perfectly honest and say that I wouldn't want to say that. I know my faults and failures. I know my immaturity. But so did Paul. And he said it anyway. It's something we should all be able to say. If we can't say it, then we need to re-examine our own life of Christ-following.

Especially because, as someone once pointed out, “You are the only gospel some people will ever read.” They won't read the Bible. They won't go to church and hear about Jesus. But they'll look at you. If you show them Christ, they might be curious. But if they know you follow Jesus and they see you falling short in obvious ways, then that might be it for them. I think if there is a fault in the American church, it's probably this: Too many of us look too much like the world and not enough like Jesus. It is a humbling and intimidating thought to know that we represent Christ to the world.

Paul goes on, “I say it again with tears in my eyes.” Paul takes no joy in the thought of the eternal fate of these opponents he is addressing.

“There are many whose conduct shows they are enemies of the cross.” What does it mean to be an enemy of the cross? I think it means we scoff at the suffering of Christ for the sins of the world. We continue in sin and thus make light of what Jesus did to free us from sin.

“Their god is their stomach.” In Hebrew thought, the stomach was the center of emotion and passion. Those who live by the stomach don't live by reason or thoughtfulness. They are ruled by their passions. The expression is used for those who are ruled by the passions and desires of the flesh. It was especially used for those prone

to gluttony or sexual indulgence, both of which were well known in Roman society, especially among the wealthy aristocracy. More on that later.

“They brag of shameful things.” Instead of being ashamed of their sins, they are proud of them. And “they are fixated on the things of this world.” There is no thought for eternity, only satisfying one’s lusts here and now.

Who are these enemies of the cross? Bible scholars agree there are two most likely options.

One is that they are Gnostic Christians. Gnosticism was a philosophy that found its way into many different religions, including first century Christianity. The central idea of Gnosticism is that all material are inherently evil. Only spiritual things are good and only spiritual things will endure. Since the body is physical, it is doomed to destruction. Only the soul will endure. Because of this, most Gnostics believed that it really didn’t matter what you did with your body. So there were no such things as sins of the flesh. Things like gluttony and sexual indulgence were not a problem.

The second possibility is that they are those who misused the idea of Christian liberty. Christ has set us free. But we should understand that as freedom from sin. Some took it to mean freedom for sin. If you know Christ, you are free to do whatever you want, they said.

Instead of living as enemies of the cross, we must bear the cross. “Take up your cross, deny yourself, and follow me,” Jesus said. We should obey Christ. We should deny ourselves. We should love as Jesus loved. We should imitate his behavior. We should be willing to suffer for Christ. If we do these things, then we will share in his resurrection into glory.

Paul summarizes this by saying that we should “Live as citizens of heaven.” Paul uses this imagery here because it would mean something to the Christians in Philippi.

Philippi was a Roman colony. Rome established colonies all throughout its Empire, in large part to try to bring some unity to the vast and culturally diverse Empire. Every citizen of a Roman colony was also a citizen of the city of Rome. Most people in the Empire were not citizens, and being one was a distinct advantage and an enviable title. In the case of Philippi, most citizens were retired soldiers. One of the ways to become a citizen was to serve 21 years in the Roman army.

Citizens of a Roman colony were expected to live like Romans. They had Roman courts and laws. They were expected to dress like Romans, speak Latin, and practice Roman customs. They might be in Macedonia, like Philippi was, or modern Turkey, or

North Africa, but they were expected to live like Romans. In many cases, these citizens of a Roman colony had never actually been to Rome. You could volunteer for the army and spend your whole career far away from Rome. So these people would know what it meant to live like the people of a place they had never been.

Paul says, "Live like people of heaven." You haven't been there yet, but live like you are already there. Live according to your true citizenship. Don't follow the patterns of the world in terms of behavior, attitudes, words, and values. Live like people of heaven.

"When he returns, he will transform our weak bodies into glorious ones by his mighty power." If we live like Christ in this life, then we will share in his glory for all eternity. But only if we keep our faith.

Paul goes on, "I long to see you. You are my crown." The Greek word for crown there is STEPHANOS, which referred to a "victor's crown." There was another word that meant, "royal crown." The victor's crown was given to athletes or soldiers when they triumphed. Paul is saying to them, "You are the reward for my labor in Christ."

But only if they "stand firm" in the Lord. That phrase was used of soldiers who had to "stand firm," hold their ground, in the heat of battle to be victorious. Again, there were many veterans in Philippi who would understand and appreciate that imagery.

We only share in the glory of Christ if we stand firm in him. The world will oppose us if we belong to Christ. But we will share in his glory for all eternity, if we stand firm.