

Sermon 20: Philippians 3:17-21: How we Walk

OUTLINE

Imitating our examples
Recognizing our enemies
Awaiting our Saviour

INTRODUCTION

Paul has been challenging us to be mature, modelling in himself what that looks like. Philippians 3:17-21. In this section Paul gives us some practical pointers on how to walk in order survive the difficulties we are facing and grow in grace. In this section Paul talks about two opposite types of walks; two types of guides; two types of citizenships; and two types of destinations. Paul gives us three things to do as we walk and grow in maturity. We are to imitate godly example; recognize ungodly enemies; and await our God and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Imitating our examples

V17, 'Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.' Paul begins by calling upon the Philippians to join in imitating him. at first this may come across as completely egotistical but it is not. Paul recognizes that there are many examples out there to follow but⁶ the Philippians ought to follow Paul as an apostle. He does this more than once, especially when there is a pattern of bad behaviour that is present or false teachers seeking to draw these young Christians away, 1 Cor. 11:1, 'Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.' Imitation is one of the most basic ways in which we learn. Every single one of us are wired to imitate, this is a key way God gives us a leg up to grow. This strength is a double edged sword and can cut both ways. We can learn good things from good examples, 'Young Johann Sebastian Bach was a studied observer of the great organist and composer Dietrich Buxtehude. Bach made repeated long trips on foot to Buxtehude's church to observe and hear the master, even copying the composer's scores by hand—all of which had a marked effect on Bach's style and vitality and the shaping of his brilliance. Bach, surpassing genius that he was, rode on the lesser genius and example of his mentor.'¹ And we can learn bad things from bad examples, Prov. 22:24-25, 'Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare.' And every single one of us has been shaped by other people. The African proverb is true, we become ourselves through other people. We are not islands. You don't believe me that you have been influenced by others? Do you have an accent? If you speak with an accent, and we all do, we have learnt our patterns for speech from someone else. You don't remember being influenced, you don't even realize you are being influenced, but you are. We learn by imitation, it is one of the easiest ways to pick things up. Because it is so easy it can also be very dangerous. Think of speech patterns. Think about how young people use the word 'like' as a comma, full stop, paragraph break, etc. Think about how our generation has normalized taking the Lord's name in vain because of the programs we watch.

¹ R. Kent Hughes, [*Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 156.

This raises the issue of what sort of influence are we? As friends are we those good or bad friends? Do we help people grow towards godliness or worldliness? As parents how are we influencing our children? Do we model godly priorities in making sure that church is not neglected, family comes before friends, that the Bible is read every day in the home, that prayer is a pattern of reliance on God for all things, that all decisions are made in accordance with the revealed will of God in His word and for His glory? Do we model forgiveness, loyalty, responsible spending, generosity, losing well, controlling our temper, self-control, responsible consumption of films and programs? Can we say to those around us, imitate me as I imitate Christ?

But let's think of Paul as an example for a moment. In what way should we imitate him? there are several things that appear in this letter alone. We should imitate him in the gospel that he believes. He does not depend on anything in himself but only on what God has done for him in Christ. He believes that a sinner is made right with God not by being good, but by receiving the free gift of righteousness through faith in Christ. We should imitate him in his desire to serve the church and be willing to suffer and sacrifice for her progress. He has a high view of the life and is committed to her health. He has a high view of the sovereignty of God and is content whether he has a lot or a little. He has a high view of human responsibility and zealously and strenuously pursues holiness. He is a man who has a heavenly mindset who allows the wonderful view of his inheritance to enthuse and inspire him. He is someone who bears with the scruples of those who are weak in conscience and will even give up the eating of meat offered to idols if it causes a Christian to stumble.

Paul however is not our only example, he says in v17, 'keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.' Here Paul is not only talking about himself but also about people like Timothy and Epaphroditus who he has already commended to them, 2:19-30. Once again we have example of those who are selfless, who risk themselves in service of others, who have the Lord's priorities at heart. What examples can you look to? If you have the blessing of Christian parents, don't despise them as the world teaches you to do, appreciate them and learn what you can from them. Take note of the older and mature saints in our own congregation. Get to know them speak to them about what has enabled them to endure; about testimonies to answers to prayer. Another thing I want to encourage us all to do, is read Christian biographies.

Friends we need to be challenged, we need to be reminded by those who lived without modern medicine, and modern technologies, and whose lives were not ordered around their creature comforts showing us what a life for Christ can look like. We can get too acclimatized to our own situation and we need to be challenged. There are so many to choose from let me share one who inspires me: Charles Spurgeon. He had preached 600 sermons before the age of 21; he has written more than any other person in the English language; he read 6 books a week; he produced 140 books of his own; he ran 66 organizations at one time; wrote about 500 letters a week; 'He often worked eighteen hours in a day. The missionary David Livingstone, asked him once, "How do you manage to do two men's work in a single day? Spurgeon replied, "You have forgotten there are two of us."² He oversaw a church of 4000 members; a bible college; did funerals and weddings every week; would sometimes change his whole sermon even a few minutes before entering the pulpit; all while suffering from gout and depression

² <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/charles-spurgeon-preaching-through-adversity>

and opposition. I want to challenge you to read at least one Christian biography soon. Read about someone who suffered and endured; someone who served at great cost to themselves; someone who pursued holiness, was earnest in prayer, who faithful shared their faith with others, to shake you loose from the way we are continually institutionalized by our sins.

Recognizing our enemies

V18, 'For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.' There are two types of influences, those who are good and those who are bad. We have spoken about the good influences, Paul now turns our attention to the bad. Now there is a lot of debate about what sort of enemies Paul is talking about in these next few verses. V18-19 list a number of characteristics of these bad examples. They are enemies of the cross; they are headed for destruction; they have made a god of their appetites; they glory in what they should be ashamed of; and their minds are taken up with earthly things. There are two types of people that this list could be describing. At first you might think that this list is describing an immoral group of people who are pursuing pleasure and shameful behavior. This would be a very natural reading of the list. However, some have suggested that the list is describing the self-righteous false teachers Paul has just been exposing. It is hard to know which one is best so we will discuss both as we go through this list of things which help us recognize those who must not imitate.

Firstly, we must notice Paul's attitude towards these false teachers. Paul is very strong against error. He is ready to anathematize anyone who tampers with the gospel Gal 1:8-9; is ready to engage in publicly rebuking even other apostle's if necessary Gal. 2:11; and can resort to very strong language Gal. 5:12; Phil. 3:2. However, like Christ who prayed for the forgiveness of those who crucified Him; and who wept over Jerusalem that was going to be judged, Paul weeps for these false teachers. It is very easy to get angry when we see people tampering with the truth; but are we quick to weep for those who are deceived? There is a welcome balance in Paul's attitude here. Paul does not gloat; he takes no joy in exposing false teachers; refuting error is not an addictive blood sport carried out with spite; but a difficult necessity carried out with compassion. We can forget that those who are against our cause are eternal souls who need the truth to set them free. It is too easy to depersonalize our opposition putting our cause and our opinion before the value of their eternal souls.

Secondly, he describes these people as enemies of the cross of Christ. If these are legalistic enemies of the cross, this means that they reject the cross as a necessity as a payment for sin; they do not see themselves in need of a sinbearer because they see themselves as an able lawkeeper. The cross is a stumbling block because they don't need it; and how could God become a man and die as a cursed one? If these false teachers are not legalists but the opposite, antinomians, those who indulge their sins, then they are enemies of the crucified life, of holiness, of the power of Christ's resurrection which frees us from the power of sin and consecrates us for God's will. There are many ways in which we can be enemies of the cross. Those who deny that Jesus suffered the wrath of God in payment for our sins, as a propitiatory sacrifice, reject the cross as a satisfaction for sin. Those who call the cross a form of cosmic child abuse because a Just God requires sin's payment at the cost of the life of His Son is a misunderstanding of the united will of the Trinity at the cross and a rejection of the cross. Those who deny that Jesus died on the cross like the Muslims are

enemies of the cross. Those who think that Jesus was not the God man but just a political upstart who was martyred for His cause are enemies of the cross. We are those who glory in the cross. We have overcome the revulsion at the cruelty, the barbarism and see it as a manifestation of the love and holiness of God. The provision of God for helpless sinners.

V19, 'Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.' Paul goes on to give us four more distinctives about them. Firstly, 'their end is destruction.' Whether you are legalistic and living a really moral life; or have a verbal faith in Jesus and are living a life of an enemy of the cross, the end of those roads is hell. Sin will be judged. If we have not embraced Christ who died on the cross taking our judgement for us; if we are enemies of the cross either by denying it in what it teaches; or denying it by a life of sin, then we will have to absorb that judgement ourselves, and that means eternal hell.

Next we are told that their god is their belly. They have made an idol of their appetites. This may be literal food and the desire for or denial of it, or a metaphor for sinful desires. Now there are two ways appetites could be an idol. There is the way of license where you are willing to serve your sinful desires rather than the will of God. It is your god, it commands you obey, 'Obey your thirst' is its cry. You are enslaved by it willingly being dictated to by what it demands. But there is another way to have an idol of your appetites; legalists make an idol of their appetites by a rigorous service orienting their whole lives around their appetites by what they do not do. They are consumed by their appetites and dictated to by their appetites and define themselves by their appetites, but just in a legalistic and not a licentious way, a negative not a positive way. They too are enslaved.

'They glory in their shame.' On the legalist side this means that they glory in their self-righteousness, their rule keeping, their legalism and in how they are better than others. They are full of pride for their religiosity. Or on the side of license this could mean that they have seared their consciences; they have even flaunted societal norms and they glorify what is shameful. A good example of this is 'Pride'. Pride month is a month of celebrating unnatural sinful sexual desires; of a total disregard for the biological sex a person is given; a rejection of the natural function of marriage; a defiant celebration of that which is contrary to God's will. Today many wear their sins as a sign of superiority, a rebellious attitude against God given authority is advertised; sexual conquest; the ability to down a whole bottle; bragging about how many people you have beat up; how reckless you have been while driving; how much money you have. When we wear as a badge of honour those sins for which Christ had to die because our society puts some value on them reveals that we are not believers who have repented, but those still in the grip of our sins.

'With minds set on earthly things.' The orientation of their minds is for the here and now, for the things of this life, their treasure, their heaven is in this life not the next. The religious sinner fixates on their ceremonies, and their rules, and their group; the immoral sinner fixates on their pleasures and possessions and experiences.

As we look at this group the question we have to challenge ourselves with is, who are we following, who do we give our appreciation to, who do we inwardly want to be like, who do we outwardly conform our behavior to, whose values do

we share, whose opinions do we side with? Are we following godly examples, or ungodly? We are always imitating, but are we deliberately imitating the right people? Are we undiscerningly imbibing ideas about what is good, acceptable, beautiful, brave, just, etc.?

Awaiting our Saviour

V20-21, 'But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ 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.' The third point that Paul has for us that helps us walk and grow towards maturity is once again a reminder of Christ's return and the kingdom that is ours in Him.

You will remember that the Philippians had the rare honour of being Roman Citizens, a little Rome. They were very proud of this fact, and it was part of the cultural psyche of the city. Paul now reminds them that they have a greater and more defining citizenship, 'But our citizenship is in heaven.' This is the second time Paul has spoken in this vein, you will remember that in 1:27 Paul called them walk as worthy citizens, 'Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.' The footnote there indicates that the Greek is literally, 'Only behave as citizens worthy.' Proud Roman citizens would commit themselves to Roman dress, hairstyles, art, culture, food, politics, manners, speech. It would be worn as a badge of honour. As sinners we often commit ourselves to the things of this world in the same way. Paul reminds us that we have a different citizenship which defines how we live and act in this age. We are those who walk in a way fitting of the state of holiness we will one day enjoy. As a proud Roman town would prepare itself to receive a visit from the Emperor and lean into all things Roman; we are those who await the return of the Lord of Lords and King of Kings and we lean into all things heavenly, all things that belong to that new age.

We forget this this is not our home, that this world does not define our primary identity. We need this message more than ever in the day in which we live in. We live in an age of a new religion some have called 'Identitarianism'. Not to be confused with far-right pan-european ideology the Collins dictionary describes it as 'concerned with promoting the interests of one's own cultural group.' People who make an idol of their identity and impose on everything around them. We live in an age where minority groups are reversing power structures and forcing their so called rights on everyone else. We are seeing people define themselves primarily as black; as transgender; as an oppressed minority group, and this is feeding into the madness of the now-it-is-my-turn-to-be-in-power struggles going on around us. As Christians we do not identify ourselves first and foremost as white or black; as rich or poor; as entitled or oppressed, we are first and foremost sinners saved by grace. The rule that governs our life is not the political struggle to free our group but the will of God to spread the gospel, live holy lives, raise godly families, serve in biblical churches, be good citizens and workers, and love our neighbor. We do not get swept up in this world's causes because we are part of God's people who have a very particular mission and a very particular future.

We live our lives in this age governed by that one reality defining fact, Jesus is coming again. 'And from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.' This

changes everything about our goals, our direction, and how we live our lives, John puts it simply, 1 John 3:2-3, 'Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.' Notice that He is a Saviour, He has been our Saviour by dying on the cross, but that is not the end of His saving work. It is He who will come and put all our enemies away, this means that as the church we do not have to put preaching the gospel aside to take up a political mentality, the Second Adam will return and remake the world not us by our political efforts. As citizens of two kingdoms you can be responsible and be part of His restraining grace in this world, but He is the One who will apply renovating grace in the end.

Paul zooms in on what that day will mean for our bodies, '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.' It is from our bodies of death that temptation comes, it is the god of our bellies and appetites that we were once enslaved to and will one day be completely freed from. And it is with this destiny in mind that we view all that we do in our bodies now. Those who do not know Christ live for the appetites of their sinful desires here and now, but we who know that this body with its sinful desires is temporary live with that future in mind not dictated to and distracted by the things and priorities and values of this world.

So Paul ends a very practical portion urging us to imitate godly example, to recognize and avoid ungodly examples, all the while fixed on the future Christ has for us being defined by it not by the things of this world.