

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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STAND FIRM!

Philippians 3:17-4:1

We Americans love freedom, don't we? But do we know what freedom means? Gene Edward Veith, in an insightful essay, writes this:

America is mad for liberty. Ours is a free country. We enjoy freedom of speech and of religion, the freedom of the press, and the freedom to bear arms. And rightly so. But though Americans love freedom, many of them have forgotten what it means. Today, many assume that freedom means getting to do whatever we want. Any restrictions on our behavior – whether from the state, or the church, or some other person – violate our freedom. And for many of us, freedom above all means the liberty to sin. But according to the Bible, this is the opposite of freedom. Sin has nothing to do with liberty. Sin destroys freedom. Sin enslaves.

By this definition, the apostle Paul, though in prison, was a free man. Even though he sat chained 24/7 to a Roman guard, he was free. Even though he called himself a servant of Christ, he was free. He had true liberty because Christ had set him free from the bonds of sin and death and had given him the liberty to pursue His savior.

Through our study of Philippians, we have gotten a clear picture of the life of Paul. He was a man who had the right resume, one that should inspire confidence, at least as far as spiritual things go – an Israelite, a Hebrew of Hebrews and a Pharisee who could be counted faultless for his devotion to the Jewish religion. Yet he counted his background and experience as loss in view of knowing Jesus Christ. He encountered the Lord on the road to Damascus, where He confronted Paul with his sin and brought him salvation. Paul gave his life to telling others about this Savior and suffered for doing so. He was beaten several times, was cold and hungry, experienced shipwreck and other dangers, and now at the writing of this letter, was awaiting a trial that could bring the sentence of death.

Yet Paul was free. His goal was to know Jesus Christ, to really experience the power of His resurrection and the fellowship in His sufferings. Paul's goal was to become like Jesus and he calls us to do the same. He calls us to a life of running after Jesus.

We often get distracted from pursuing our relationship with Christ, when the comforts and pleasures of this present world entice us. We are especially tempted when we are in the midst of some difficulty or suffering. Paul reminds us in this passage not to focus on the benefits of this world, but as citizens of heaven, to focus on the benefits of belonging to Christ. Let's spend a few moments examining what Paul has to say.

A CALL TO IMITATE PAUL

In verse 17, Paul says. *Join with others in following my example.* Imitate him! Do what he does! That's quite an order, isn't it? Does it seem presumptuous or egocentric?

It shouldn't if you remember what Paul says about himself. He discounts his resume. He says he has not arrived! Paul makes it clear that he has not obtained his goal. Though his deepest desire was to know Christ and completely shed all reliance on himself, he isn't there yet. In fact, the longer Paul is a Christian, the more aware he is of his sin. He will write to Timothy shortly before his death that he is the "worst of sinners."

The more Paul gets to know Jesus, in all His perfection and holiness, the more he knows how far short he comes. The more Paul understands the majesty and glory of the Lord, the more amazed he is at God's grace in his life. That's the way it works in the Christian life – God gets bigger and we get smaller. As we get to know Jesus, we see the gap between us and our great God as wider and wider and come to realize that without the cross bridging that gap, we would be doomed.

Paul doesn't ask us to imitate him because his life is so squared away, because he is such a faithful and obedient Christian. He wants us to follow his example in knowing ourselves as great sinners and Christ as a great Savior. That is not presumption, that is humility.

Furthermore, Paul calls us to follow not just his own life, but the lives of others. For the Philippians, that meant imitating men like Timothy and Epaphroditus. We saw their stories in chapter 2. They were men who followed the example of Christ, who though He was God, did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. Like the perfect example of Jesus and like the imperfect example of Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus put the needs of others above their own and pursued Christ and His interests,

Paul calls on us to imitate those who pursued Christ. We all learn by watching other people. Johann Sebastian Bach watched the organist and composer Dietrich Buxtehude to learn music. Bach made repeated trips to his church to hear the master, he listened intently to every note and copied his scores to learn his technique. He learned carefully from a genius by imitating Buxtehude and became more accomplished than his teacher. The same is true in every endeavor – sports, professions, business life. We learn from the masters.

Let me ask you, "Who do you imitate?" Who is your mentor? Do you have a Paul in your life, someone you see up close, so you can watch how they apply biblical truth in their lives? Someone who knows you well and the issues you face and teaches you by word and example how to walk with Christ? Perhaps one of the best times in my Christian life was when I was a relatively young Army officer and a couple of guys took me under their wings, opened up their lives to me, met with me week after week for several years to talk about the questions and problems and joys of pursuing the Lord. Those who pursue Christ will produce those who pursue Christ. And it is only those who continue to run after Christ who will stand firm.

WARNING ABOUT CHRIST'S ENEMIES

Paul has a sense of urgency in his command to imitate his life. He is not complacent. He says, *For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.* He gives a warning to us about the enemies of Christ who are influencing the church, who have somehow infiltrated our ranks and could lead us astray.

What does it mean to be an enemy of the cross? Simply put, an enemy of the cross is someone who denies the work of Christ, that is to deny or change some aspect of the gospel. Some deny the divinity of Christ and claim that He is not God, or they deny His virgin birth or resurrection. Others maintain that there are many ways to heaven – Jesus is just one of many paths to God.

I think in our passage, Paul is talking about putting too much emphasis on the physical world and less on the problem of human evil. That is, failing in some way to see that we are fallen creatures in need of a Savior. Jesus' death on the cross as payment for our sins is either not necessary or insufficient. These folks are enemies of the cross because they don't really believe it.

How can we recognize these enemies of Christ? Paul gives us four statements leading to one conclusion: Their focus is on the benefits of this world and not of the next. Look at what he says:

Their destiny is destruction. They claim to have made it, to have arrived at heaven on earth. In the ancient world, folks believed that human existence could be manipulated or escaped, often by magic or astrology to control the forces thought to govern the world. In places like Philippi, Christians might combine elements of these pagan religions with the gospel message and believe that they had already been removed from the realm of evil and suffering. They focused on the here and now.

Today, we see those who believe much the same. New Age thinking is all over the TV and we see their philosophy often creep into our thinking. One writer claims that evil is an illusion and salvation comes from within. "No mistakes. No wrong paths. No winners. No losers. Accept that and then take responsibility for making your life what you want it to be."

In the church, the so-called Prosperity Gospel has taken hold. They teach in error that Christians should not experience any sort of sickness and should have all their material desires met. Physical wealth and health are for everyone who follows the laws of prosperity. One popular TV preacher, Kenneth Copeland says, "The world's shortages have no effect on someone who has gone to heaven. Therefore, they should have no effect on us here who have made Jesus Lord of our lives." Do you see the error in that statement? Their focus is on the benefits of this world and not of the next.

Paul says their god is their stomach, that is their appetite. Their personal and physical wants come before pursuing the Lord and sharing in His suffering. They glory in their shame, that is they boast of their liberty and freedom with little or no reference to being set free from the penalty of sin. They have their mind on earthly things – Paul is not talking about the practical affairs of life, but a worldly life in which we go after our own interests and desires instead of God's. We become enemies of God. Listen to Romans 8:7: *the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so.*

Even in our own circles, when we place too much value on the present physical world, we can get into trouble.

We may believe that spiritual maturity comes when we've learned how to be successful in our vocations or other areas of life. We think we are spiritually mature because we've done well in this life. When we are socially adept and have become skilled at negotiating the challenges of business and

military life, when we have promotions in our jobs, or good financial situations, or we go to a good school, we may be tempted to think we've reached spiritual adulthood.

Sometimes, we think that obeying the rules and having good behaviors, being active in the programs of the church are indicators of real heart change. While they ARE part of Christian life, showing up and looking good on the outside is not what Paul is getting at. The goal is knowing Christ – we can get caught up into thinking we've arrived because our outward behavior looks good. These things may or may not be indicators of a degree of personal maturity. It is not what Paul means by living a life in pursuit of Christ.

If our lives are not marked by recognizing ourselves as sinners and knowing Jesus Christ and the power of His death and resurrection, we have our mind on earthly things and are not pursuing Him. And it is only those who continue to run after Christ who will stand firm.

ASSURANCE FOR CHRIST'S FRIENDS

In light of our tendency to value the present world Paul reminds us we are citizens of heaven. Look at verse 20: *But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Citizenship in heaven. Here, the apostle Paul draws an analogy that would speak to the Philippians, who were, you may remember, citizens of Rome. Back in 42 BC, Octavian gave Philippi the status of a Roman colony as a reward for their support in an important battle. Philippi became, in effect, a Rome away from Rome. Through its government and culture, the city of Philippi and its citizens were to reflect the life and culture, values and attitude of Rome in a faraway land.

In the same way, we Christians are to reflect the life of Christ as citizens of another world, another culture and thus glorify God. 1 Peter 2:11-12 tells us, *as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God.*

Do you see this? As Christians, we are aliens, strangers in this present age and citizens of heaven. I don't mean that we act all weird and strange and anti-social. But I do mean that we have a different attitude about things. *We eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body*

We have an eager expectation of the return of Christ and that changes how we live and approach life. Understanding and expecting the return of Christ reminds us of where our focus should be. We are reminded that we are in fallen bodies but someday, we will be in glorified bodies, like Jesus. This is a radical transformation, not just of our physical bodies but of our whole being. It is necessary because our weak mortal and sinful bodies are not ready to receive and participate in the glorious state. We will be changed so dramatically that our bodies will be in the same order as Christ's resurrected body.

As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:49, *And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.* The reality that each of us who trust Christ will be changed should help shift our focus away from the present world.

When we know that our lives have been and are being transformed by Christ., the return of Christ takes on a new importance. It should influence the way we live. James Montgomery Boice wrote:

If you are contemplating some sin, perhaps a dishonest act in business, perhaps trifling with sex outside of marriage, perhaps cheating on your income tax return, then the return of Jesus Christ has not made its proper impression upon you.

If your life is marked by a contentious divisive spirit in which you seek to tear down the work of another person instead of building up, then the return of Christ has not made the proper impression on you.

If you first protect your own interests and neglect to give food, water, or clothing to the needy, as we are instructed to do in Christ's name, then the return of Christ has not made its proper impression on you.

I pray that the return of Christ has made the proper impression on us. We live differently when we remember that we are citizens of heaven.

Understanding the return of Christ also changes our perspective on difficulty and suffering. Romans 5:3-4: *Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.* Suffering strengthens our hope and makes our present fellowship with Jesus even more precious

The word suffering means tribulation, persecution, hardship. All of us suffer tribulation in some way – sometimes it is pretty horrible, sometimes it's annoying. In his commentary, Boice tells the word Paul used for suffering was translated into a word that comes from the Latin word *tribulum*. It refers to the threshing sled – a large block of wood several feet wide and several feet long, with sharp spikes on the bottom. It was pulled over grain on a threshing floor. Ancient Christians often saw themselves as wheat while the *tribulums* of the world were pulled over them. They knew the pain of the spikes, but learned that this was how God separated the wheat in their lives from the chaff and made them more useful and obedient servants.

Suffering puts us in a position to trust God. It has the power to shift our mindset from earthly to heavenward. It is in the midst of difficulty and pain where we get to know Jesus and His power in our lives. It is through the tough times where we get to know Him and hope for the power of His resurrection. It is in our suffering where others see the hope that we have in Christ and the gospel is advanced. Suffering can be painful, it is not something sought after. But suffering will come. When it does, we can be assured that it comes with purpose, to help us know our Lord.

We suffer differently when we remember that we are citizens of heaven. And that is what we see in the life of Paul. He lives differently and rejoices in his suffering because his heart is captured not by earthly things but by the interest and concerns of his Lord.

So, in light of the warning against the enemies of the Cross and the assurance that we, as Christ's friends, have as we anticipate His return, Paul calls us to imitate him and stand firm.

When the stuff of this present world distracts you, remember not to focus on the benefits of this world. They lead to destruction. As citizens of heaven, focus on the benefits of belonging to Christ.

Stand firm! Look heavenward and get to know and enjoy your Saviour.