

The Cross and the Coming

Philippians 3:15-4:1

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As we return to the third chapter of Philippians, we will pick up our study by looking first at verse 17. Paul begins with this word of command:

Brethren, join in following my example, and observe [or mark well] those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.

It is always surprising to me when I come across these New Testament statements in which Paul says, quite unashamedly, "Follow my example. Look at me and pattern your Life' after my life." That sort of remark is probably very difficult for us to understand. I, at least, would find it difficult to say to people, "Look at me. Observe the pattern of my life and emulate my character." Most of us would probably feel much more comfortable using ourselves as bad examples - "Look at me and don't do what I do." But Paul doesn't put it that way. He says, "Look at my life and pattern your life after mine."

I have counted at least six times in the New Testament where Paul refers to his own life as an example. For instance, he says to the church in Corinth, "Follow me, as I am a follower of Christ." He says later in this book of Philippians, "The things that you have heard and received and learned and seen in me, do; and the God of peace shall be with you." And in 2 Timothy Paul commends as admirable the fact that Timothy has followed his example, saying, "But you followed my teaching, and my conduct, etc."

Now what right does the apostle Paul have to make statements like that? Well, Paul realizes that God is in the business of changing lives. We are intended to be monuments of the Lord's ability to change even the most wretched life. Paul speaks of himself as the "chief of sinners." And yet the Lord is in the business of taking the world's worst sinners and turning them around and making their lives worthy of emulation. We are intended to be monuments of God's grace.

In the Black Hills of South Dakota at Mt. Rushmore is one of our national monuments. The figures of four of our greatest Presidents were carved into the granite face of that mountain by the sculptor Gutzon Borgium. They are intended to be a monument to those presidents. But as you contemplate these immense statues they really amount to a monument to Gutzon Borgium, to the skill, the patience, the ability of this man to carve, it you will pardon the expression, these "monumental" images in the granite. This is what God intends us to be - monuments to his capacity to change lives. Renewed men are

God's product. "Therefore," Paul says, "it is right for you to look at me and to pattern your life after me because I am a display of what God can do with the most wretched of sinners."

And this is something which not only apostles but all the rest of the body of believers can say, because Paul says, "Look not only at my example but at the pattern set by others who are around me." Apostles do have a unique office in the body of Christ, but their character is not unique. All of the body is intended to display the handiwork of God in this way.

It is important to understand that Paul is not saying that one is merely to emulate his behavior, because that in itself would amount to putting yourself under law. Whether you put yourself under an objective, codified, written standard such as the Ten Commandments, or whether you try to emulate the standard you see in someone else's life, if you are attempting to do that by self-effort it amounts to legalism. You are trying to be

righteous by self-effort. The Jews demonstrated by their 1400 years of attempting to keep the law that it is simply impossible to be righteous by patterning your life after a standard. We can't be righteous by emulating another. I am sure that we have all tried to do so from time to time as we have observed people whose character was commendable and righteous, and as we sensed that we wanted to be that kind of person. So we have tried to pattern our lives after theirs but have found that it won't work, So that is not what Paul is saying.

He is saying, "Pattern your life not only after my outward behavior but also after my inner life - the principles which make possible the outward behavior, the faith which makes possible the manifestation of the character of God." He is saying, "Pattern your life after the whole of lay life the inward as well as the outward."

And in chapter 3 we have a statement of the dynamics of Paul's life - the foundations which underlay his character, the principle he operated on which made possible the display of the character of Jesus Christ and therefore makes it possible for us to pattern our life after him. So to refresh our thinking let's look back through chapter 3. Paul begins with a warning against certain men whom he calls "dogs" - outcasts, the people who are on the outside. He refers to the Judaizers - those men who followed the apostle Paul about and who intruded a "works" system into the churches he established. They taught that salvation in Jesus Christ was not enough, and that you needed also to keep the law, to be circumcised, and to worship in a certain way. These men were attempting to undermine Paul's ministry of grace, of Christ alone. So Paul labels them clearly and underscores the basic principle they operate on, which is confidence in the flesh, in the ability of man to make himself worthy of the praise of God.

Paul says, "In contrast to them, we do not place confidence in the flesh. Although if anyone could I could," he notes. "There are many areas of my life that I could count upon." He then itemizes his assets - his religious upbringing, his national heritage, the fact that he was a Jew who had been circumcised on the eighth day and raised in a religious family from the right tribe. He wasn't a proselyte. He had all the prerequisites of a godly Jew - if he were going to count on the flesh. And then he enumerates some of the acquired characteristics he could count upon - his zeal in Judaism and in persecuting the church. And yet Paul says, beginning with verse 7'

But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish [dung] in order that I may gain Christ.

Paul discovered on the road to Damascus that everything he had been living for, everything he counted upon to make himself righteous, was dung in God's sight. And he turned his back on all that and began to pursue another principle that he might gain Christ and might be found in him. He is referring to his identification with Christ with his death, burial, and resurrection. Paul is no longer counting on the past, no longer looking back to the qualities which gave him status before. He is not reckoning upon his assets. He is counting upon the resurrection life of Jesus Christ. He says, "That is the principle which governs my life the principle of the cross, the fact that life comes out of death." Life doesn't come out of self-effort. It doesn't come out of the right kind of religious background. It is not the result of a powerful personality or intellect. Life comes out of death, out of laying in the dust all of life's glory, all the things that we once counted upon. Paul says, "I put all those aside and now my life is in Christ. And my goal," he says, "is to live the resurrection life in every situation." That is why he says in verse 11,

. . . in order that I may attain to the resurrection [literally, the "out-resurrection"] from among the dead.

That is, ". . . in order that I may stand up out of my old, dead self and live in every circumstance according to the power of a resurrected Lord." That is the principle which governed the apostle Paul's life. That was the basis of his righteousness - both of the righteousness that he had in God's eyes and of the righteousness that he lived out before men. He wasn't counting upon his strength and abilities but upon the life of Jesus Christ. Life comes out of death. That is the principle of the cross.

But Paul is quick to say, "I don't always act this way. There are many times when I don't reckon upon the life

of Jesus Christ." Verses 12 through 14:

Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect, but I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind [i.e., both my liabilities and my assets, my sins and the qualities I might have counted upon] and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul says, "I not only have the principle well understood, but I am seeking to apply it in every situation. I am pursuing the application of that principle." The word which is translated "press on" here is the same word he used earlier to refer to his persecution of the church. He pursues it with dogged determination. He wants to apply, in every conceivable circumstance, this principle that life comes out of death.

Now we want to go back and note what Paul says in verse 15;

Let us therefore, as many as are perfect [mature], have this attitude . . .

That is the mark of maturity - to have understood the principle of the cross and to be operating on that basis, to be pursuing the application of that principle in all of life. Paul says, "That is what constitutes maturity, and if you are a mature man you will have this attitude, you will be applying this truth." And then he says,

. . . and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you . . .

Do you see what he is saying? If in any area of life we are not applying the principle of the cross - if we are pandering to the flesh, cultivating it, letting it dominate us - if in any area we are not doing that, God will make us aware of that area of life. We don't need to worry about hidden areas of sin, of which we are unaware. God does not hold us accountable for sins that we don't know about, areas of the flesh which are not obvious to us yet. In God's own time and in his own way he will uncover those areas and then we can apply this principle there. "But until he does," Paul says, "we don't need to worry about them."

Occasionally people come into my office concerned about a sense of guilt they feel but which they can't pin down. They feel that it might be traced to some secret sin of which they are completely unaware, but for which God is judging them. Well, you see, this verse says that God doesn't operate that way. God holds us accountable only for what we know. If there is any area of our life where we are unknowingly sinning, In God's own time (and his timing is perfect) he will uncover that area for us. "But until then," Paul says, "don't worry about it. It is not a problem to God."

Occasionally people talk to me about habits they cannot get rid of. And they are rightly concerned. But they feel that somehow God has not supplied the power to rid themselves of these habits. They have tried and tried, but nothing seems to work. Well, there are a number of factors which might cause that problem, but very often it is simply because God is not working in that particular area. It may be a habit which annoys us but, at the moment, it is not a problem to God. There may be other areas where the flesh is running rampant, which are much more destructive, and therefore God is putting his finger on those issues in our life. Perhaps it has something to do with our relationship with our husband or wife or children or employer - something which we are not willing to face. But God is saying, "I want you to apply the principle there." And we say, "No, I want to apply it over here because this is more bothersome to me." And God says, "No. I want you to apply it there." Whatever areas of life God is concerned about, he will put his finger squarely upon. And we are held accountable only for those areas which are clearly revealed. Where God is not speaking to us he does not hold us accountable. So Paul says, "Don't worry about those things."

What we are to be concerned about, according to verse 16, is:

. . . however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.

That is, we are to live according to the truth that we have, to apply the principle where we know it needs to be

applied.

So, here in chapter 3 we have the pattern of the apostle Paul's life. He says, "First of all there is a principle which is the basis of everything I do. That principle is the principle of the cross, of the fact that life comes out of death. And I am pursuing the application of that principle in every area where God is revealing to me the presence of the flesh. And," Paul says, "that is the pattern you ought to follow - not just the outward behavior but the inner life." That inner attitude, which Paul describes here as a mature attitude, is what he seeks for all believers.

Now notice what Paul does in verses 1 and 2 following. He not only describes and defines for us the pattern which we are to emulate but he gives us the reason for the command of verse 17. There are actually two reasons, One is found in verse 18 and the other in verse 20. You will note that both verses begin with the preposition "For". In almost every case where that word occurs in the New Testament it could be translated "Because". It introduces an explanation of what precedes it. Or, you could insert the question "Why?" before the verse in which it occurs: "Follow my example." "Why?" "Well, for two reasons . . ."

In verse 18 you have a negative statement and in verse 20 a positive statement, In verse 18 the reason given as to why we are to follow Paul's pattern, i.e., the principle of the cross, is that certain very, very seriously destructive things happen if we don't. And in verse 20 he explains that if we do operate according to the principle of the cross something very, very important will happen to us, something of great significance. The reasons center around these two ideas - the cross and the cooling of Jesus Christ. Let's look at verse 18:

For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ . . .

This must have been a recurring theme in Paul's teaching - to mark well those who walk this way, in contrast to those who walk according to the principle of the cross, They are described here as "enemies of the cross". When we hear this term we are inclined to think of the more infamous skeptics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries - the German rationalists and other well-known philosophers who have been obvious enemies of the cross in that they have been militant in their opposition to the gospel. We think of men like Bertrand Russell and women like Madeline Murray O'Hare, who are enemies of the cross in a blatant, militant way. Of course this passage does take such people into consideration,

But Paul is really talking not so much about those who are obviously enemies of the cross, but about all those who live out quiet, unbelieving lives, those who are counting upon their own resources, who feel that they are adequate to face life and who encourage us to go out and do the best we can, to get in there and mix it up with the crowd and to give it everything we've got.

These are the enemies of the cross, you see, because they stand against the very principle of the cross, which is that life comes out of death, strength comes out of weakness, adequacy out of inadequacy, and that confidence comes not out of inner self-confidence but from confidence in Jesus Christ. And as long as they live according to their principle, they constitute themselves enemies of the cross. They are inveighing against the one principle, the only principle, which can give life.

But Paul doesn't say this in a self-righteous, gleeful way. He says it with tears. He weeps over them because of the pattern of their life, And the reason he weeps is because of the terrible destruction, the inevitable downward progress which occurs in a life like this. This he describes for us in verse 19:

**. . . whose end is destruction, whose God is their appetite [the Greek word really means "belly."
"Their god is their belly."], whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.**

Paul says that with tears! He thinks of these people and of the terrible results which have come into their lives because of their opposition to the principle of the cross. He speaks first of their destiny - "Their destiny is destruction." The word translated "destruction" does not in any way imply annihilation. Rather, it means "waste", This is the term which Matthew uses in chapter 26 of his gospel when he refers to the incident when

the woman broke the alabaster jar of perfume and poured it on Jesus' head. The disciples responded by saying, "What a waste! This jar of perfume could have been sold for a great deal and the money given to the poor. What a waste." Paul is saying that a life lived on the basis of what he describes here - opposition to the cross principle - is a wasted life. It may be a life given to the pursuit of good things, good, righteous social causes. But, if it is lived out of a sense of personal adequacy, it is a wasted life.

And the world realizes this. You don't have to tell a non-Christian, after a period of time, that his life is wasting away. Eric Clampton some years back wrote a song entitled, *I Am Wasted*. They know. No matter how hard they may try, their life becomes less and less productive - a wasted life. Both Jesus and James used the term Gehenna to refer to Hell. Gehenna was the garbage dump in Jerusalem. It is a picture of Hell, a picture of wasted lives, lives on the garbage heap. Satan is given the name Beelzebub, the Lord of the Flies, the one who presides over the garbage dump, over wasted lives. This is the picture the Bible portrays of lives lived in opposition to the cross. They are wasted lives. Despite all the enormous human potential there, these are lives which are put to no eternal use. They are fruitless, futile, frustrating lives.

Then Paul says a word about their deity. Their destiny is destruction and, "Their God is their belly, their appetite." Here he is not referring primarily to the sin of gluttony. The Greeks used the word synonymously with sensuality. So Paul means that they live according to their five senses, they seek primarily to gratify the five senses. A man whose God is his belly is a man who exalts the senses, sees them as the highest good and seeks to gratify them at all costs. He lives for his senses.

There are numerous applications of this statement. Perhaps one would be to the scientist who believes that the scientific method has universal adequacy and that what we receive through our five senses is the sum total of all truth, and who therefore denies revelation, the fact that God can speak apart from the senses.

But essentially it can be applied in any tired of life where the gratification of a sense is of first priority, of first importance, where life consists of filling our lives with beautiful things - beautiful homes, beautiful furniture, beautiful clothes. There is nothing wrong with things in themselves, But they can become gods, the pursuit of which is seen as the highest good. Or perhaps it consists of filling our ears with beautiful sounds, with having the latest and the most highly developed stereo system. There is nothing wrong with stereo systems. But when this becomes a God, when it is seen as the highest good, then our God is our belly. So this statement can be applied in any number of places where the pursuit of sensuality and the gratification of our senses is the most important thing in life.

Thirdly Paul says, "They glory in their shame." They glory in what they ought to be ashamed of - this strange inversion of values in which good becomes evil and evil becomes good, and everything is relative.

And finally, "They set their minds on earthly things." They are thing-minded. They love things instead of God, and people, as God has ordained.

Now these, Paul says, are the terrible results of living in opposition to the principle of the cross. If we do so then invariably these things will come to describe our lives - our destiny is waste, our God is our belly, we glory in our shame, and we seek after things instead of after God himself. What a description of our godless country with its corruption, inversion of values, and preoccupation with having more and better things in every way! This is a description of what we see all around us in society.

But, you know, this is also true in (those areas of our own lives as Christians where we fail to deal with the flesh according to the principle of the cross. Of course the waste is not in the ultimate sense. But in that area where we refuse to apply the principle of the cross the result is waste, and our God is certainly our belly in that area. That is why Paul says that it is so important that we take seriously the principle of the cross and that we apply it in the areas where God reveals to us that the flesh is running rampant. The result of not doing so, Paul says with weeping, is terrible disorder and destruction and wastes in our lives.

So that is the first reason why Paul says that we ought to mark carefully those who walk according to the principles of the cross, and ought to pattern our lives after them - because of the terrible results in our lives of rejecting the cross. Then in verse 20 he gives the second reason:

For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.

He alludes to something which would have had a great deal of meaning to the church in Philippi. As we have seen in earlier messages in this series, the city of Philippi was a Roman colony, one of the outposts scattered throughout the empire to maintain the peace of Rome. And it granted status as a Roman city. The people who lived there were considered Roman citizens and had all the rights and privileges of those who lived in Rome. In fact, Rome was considered their home, That was where they belonged. They were merely transients in Philippi.

And Paul says, "Our citizenship is in heaven. This world is not our home. We are just passing through. Our home is in heaven." Heaven is not some far-off place. Heaven is all around us. It is the dimension of the spirit, the realm where Christ lives and reigns, And it is just as real as the physical world around us, although unseen. Paul says, "That is where we live. That is where our resources are. That is where our strength comes from. That is where everything that we need in order to live in this world can be found."

C. S. Lewis, in one of his novels, *Till We Have Faces*, depicts a heroine who has a lover whom no one can see. In fact, she can't even see him herself. She lives in a castle which can't be observed. She drinks of springs which no one else can see. She has hidden resources of supply wherever she turns, and yet no one can see them. And this is what Paul says is true of us, because our citizenship is in heaven. That is where our life comes from.

Abraham¹ although he lived in the land and possessed it, dwelt in a tent. He was a transient, he was just passing through. It wasn't his real existence. He didn't put roots down. He didn't live for things here on earth. His citizenship was in heaven. "This," Paul says, "is true also of us."

"And," Paul says, "the time is coming when Jesus Christ, our Lord, will break out of that other dimension. Then we will see him in all of his glory and majesty, and we will be just like him." He says that coming is certain. This is what we long for. We long to be like him in every way, and we long to have a body which is equal to the demands of our spirits. Our spirits want to serve. We have great ambition in our spirit to be what God wants us to be. But we have all the limiting factors of a fallen body, a body which is not capable of responding adequately to the desires of the spirit. But Paul says, "When Jesus Christ comes back he will give us a body which will be an instrument for the display of the power and the beauty of Jesus Christ wherever we go."

So this is the second reason why Paul says that we ought to apply the principle of the cross. It is because those who know and walk according to that principle have the certainty of the coming of Jesus Christ for them. And that is when he is going to set everything right, and is going to give us the kind of body which will be adequate to meet the demands of eternal life upon us. These are the reasons why we ought to pattern our life after the principle of the cross.

A number of years ago a little boy was visiting his grand father's farm. There was a stock tank on the back part of the farm. If you have ever lived In Texas you know that a stock tank is just a hole scooped out of the ground by a bulldozer and allowed to fill with rainwater for the stock to drink. He was told to stay away from that place because the mud was very deep and so it wasn't safe. One day he disobeyed and went down to the tank to play. He stepped off into a mud hole and dropped in up to his waist. He began to sink further and so he cried out in alarm. His older brother was standing nearby and he ran for the house and called to his mother in the backyard. She grabbed a rake and ran back to the tank and held it out to her little boy and dragged him out of the mud.

By this time he had sunk to the level of his chest. Of course she was very frightened, and yet relieved. You know how mothers are when they are frightened and relieved! She said, "Son, what in the world were you doing?" And he said "Mom, I knew you were coming, so i was just standing there!"

Now look at verse 1 of chapter 4. Paul says,

Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, so stand firm in the Lord, my beloved.

This is another of those unfortunate situations where the chapter division is in the wrong place. This is really the conclusion of what Paul has said earlier; "Given the power of the principle of the cross in our life, and the certainty of the coming again of our Lord Jesus Christ, therefore, therefore, stand fast." Our Lord is coming again. And until he comes he has given us everything that we need in order to stand firm in the face of whatever pressure we are experiencing. It doesn't really matter what it is - whether it is some oppressive situation in your home or on your job or in your school or whatever it might be - given the adequacy of the cross, life which springs out of death, and the certainty of the coming again of Jesus Christ, therefore, my beloved brethren, stand firm in the Lord.

Our Father we thank you for this great principle which is laid out for us here, and for the certain power which is ours in the application of this principle. We thank you that we have discovered it to be true that life does spring out of death that when we reckon ourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, there is life which comes from God, there is power and everything else that we need. We thank you also for the certainty of your coming, and the hope which is ours that we shall be like you, and so we will be free from all the impediments and inhibitions which keep us from serving as we know we should. And we thank you for this good word that we can stand firm. We ask that this might be our experience, Lord, that we might stand firm together and therefore be before the world a monument to your grace and your ability to exceed our expectations and to remake men according to your own image. We thank you for all this in Jesus' name, Amen.

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