

“Following Genuine Citizens of Heaven”

Philippians 3:17-21

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There are many people in our lives that we naturally imitate. For many of us, that starts in childhood. We mimic our parents in good ways, and sometimes not in the best ways. I remember as a youngster wanting to be like my dad. I wanted to go to work with him, do what he did, and follow his example. Without even realizing it, he instilled in me a strong work ethic simply by living it out in front of me. As we get a little older, those influences begin to change. If you played sports like I did, you probably had athletes you looked up to, people you copied and tried to become like, at least in whatever sport they played. Something you may not know about me is that I was into skateboarding growing up, even into high school. Like many who grew up in that culture, I looked up to a guy named Tony Hawk. I'm not proud to say that I even copied his haircut for a time.

Before Christ saved me, I followed some very poor examples. I had role models that led me toward some very poor decisions. Of course, our decisions to sin are fully our responsibility, but there is a reality that what we fix our attention on and imitate will take us somewhere.

But when God saved me, He began to change the direction of my life. And one of the ways He did that was by putting Christ-pursuing examples in my life, people I could see Christ in and follow.

One of those men was a retired pastor named John. For the first few years after my salvation, we met every Wednesday morning at 5:00 AM at Denny's. I would bring whatever was going on in my life; questions, struggles, decisions, and he would open up the Word of God. He helped me think biblically. He showed me how to respond in ways that honored Christ and glorified God. He encouraged me, challenged me, wept with me, and rejoiced with me. He imitated Christ right in front of me, and that made a huge impact on my journey with Christ.

So as we come to our passage today, I want us to consider two questions: Who are you following, and where are they from?

Our text begins in verse 17, where Paul says, “Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.”

At first, this can sound a bit arrogant. But we know from earlier in this chapter that Paul is speaking with humility, because he already acknowledged his need for continued spiritual growth in verse 12: “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”

So, Paul is saying something very similar to what he says in 1 Corinthians 11:1: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” In other words, we are not to mimic Paul in every single way, as though he were perfect. He is not. But we are to imitate the ways in which he imitates Christ.

Paul, in his singular pursuit of Christ, is calling us to do the same. Follow me as I follow Him. Keep your eyes on, or fix your attention on, those who walk in this manner.

Paul has already demonstrated some characteristics of those we should imitate. And soon, we will see some characteristics of those we should not follow. Just like the Philippians needed discernment, so do we.

And that need for discernment is just as relevant today as it was then. Paul wrote these words long before the internet, smartphones, the likes, follows, and subscribes, before everyone could have their own personal platform. And yet the same struggle remains. We are constantly being shaped by what and who we watch. That means we need wisdom. We need discernment.

A. What are the characteristics of a faithful example? We can see three that Paul has already displayed throughout this letter.

1. Faithful examples exhibit dependent prayer.

Paul models a genuine life of prayer all throughout his letters, and Philippians is no different. By the third verse of this letter, he is already breaking into prayer and thanksgiving to God.

Look for those whose lives are marked by dependent, God-centered prayer. I see this in the elders here at Trinity. Their first response when something hard comes up, when someone is struggling, when there is need, is, "Let's take this to the Lord in prayer."

Imitate that. Train yourself so that when you face struggle, hardship, triumph, or uncertainty, your first response is to go to the Creator and not to the things created.

2. Faithful examples have a love for the cross.

Paul viewed everything through the lens of the cross and God's complete sovereignty. He could have grumbled or complained about his circumstances. After all, he was imprisoned and chained to Roman guards 24 hours a day. That is not what we would call ideal circumstances! And yet Paul saw it as an opportunity for the gospel to advance, as he states in Philippians 1:12-14.

Paul is modeling someone who puts God back in His rightful place. Jesus gives us the supreme example of this when He says, "Not my will, but yours be done." (Lk. 22:42) Look for and fix your attention on those who do the same, those who see every circumstance as an opportunity to grow in Christlikeness and ultimately to glorify God. He is the giver of all good things.

3. Faithful examples walk in humility.

Paul encourages us to walk in a unified humility toward one another when he says, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves."

This is a community project. Paul says at the beginning of verse 17 to "join in imitating," which literally means to do this together. You see, the Christian life is not just taught; it is also caught. We can learn a great deal from sermons, books, and conferences, but until we cultivate this in community with one another, in relationships, it will remain only knowledge and not Christ formed in us.

Again, look for those who exhibit this humility in their relationships. Fix your attention on them. Imitate them. And imitate that Christlike character in your own relationships.

Now Paul moves us to a warning, a contrasting example, in verses 18 and 19: "For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things." Paul reminds the Philippians that there are some who are setting the wrong example. From the context, we can reasonably assume that these "many" are those who made some kind of profession but lived in complete opposition to that profession. It is what we might call checkbox Christianity. You fill out a form at the doctor's office and it asks for your religious preference, so you check Christian because you go to church, or even read your Bible, but then you live your life in a way that shows something else is really ruling you. Functionally, they have a different god. They are deceived.

Paul's warning is very clear: do not follow these false guides. Do not fix your attention on them. Do not imitate them. He speaks of them with tears because he knows their end is destruction.

B. There are three distinct markers of these pretenders, or those walking in deception as enemies of the cross.

1. They are opposed to the cross.

Notice that Paul says they are enemies of the cross of Christ. That does not necessarily mean they are enemies of Christ in name, but they are enemies of everything the cross requires. They do not want to participate in sharing Christ's sufferings, because that would mean they would have to deny themselves, pick up their cross, and follow Him.

Suffering and dying to self, do not fit their expectations. They do not want to be put to death in the flesh. But the only way into union with Christ is through the cross. He bids us to come and die, to deny ourselves. Since their profession is false, their end is destruction. Do not be drawn to people who are opposed to the cross, who resist dying to self, and who live with a self-preservation mindset when suffering comes.

2. They seek to please themselves and even revel in it.

Paul says, "Their god is their belly," meaning they serve their desires and appetites instead of serving God. This is not limited to physical appetite and food, though that is certainly included. It reaches much further than that. It vividly portrays the belly as the center of a person's life, and what they feed on to please self becomes functionally their god.

That might show up in gluttony, sexual sin, greed, power, or any number of other things. Not only do these people live in pursuit of pleasing themselves, but they celebrate the very things that offend God and should bring shame. If you notice this in someone's words or in the way they live, do not fix your attention on them or imitate them. Pray for them.

2. They have earthbound minds.

This is the overall disposition of these enemies of the cross. They are not captivated by Christ, the cross, and the resurrection. They are captivated by worldly things.

They would rather scroll social media, play Xbox, watch TV, or pursue any number of worldly distractions than study God's Word, pray, cultivate humility in relationships, embrace the cross-shaped opportunities in front of them, serve others, or be generous with their time and money for Christ.

This life is so short, but eternity with the Creator will go on forever. May this stir all of us not to set our minds on earthly things, but on Christ. In Colossians 3:2, Paul says, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth."

Do not fix your attention on those whose minds are locked on created things, on the shiny things. Fix your attention on the radiance and excellence of Jesus Christ, the ultimate glory, because that is where true contentment and unshakable joy are found.

C. Focusing on Future Hope Affects Our Present Reality

Then in verses 20 and 21, Paul shifts our eyes toward future hope, and that future hope shapes our present reality. He says, "But our citizenship is in heaven."

That would have carried special meaning for the church in Philippi, because Philippi was a Roman colony, and Roman citizenship was highly prized. It was a coveted status. But Paul points them to something greater: our citizenship in heaven.

That should affect the way we speak, act, and respond. It should affect everything we do. It should supersede any earthly citizenship we have, because this is not our true home. We are foreigners and exiles here, as Peter says. We are ambassadors of our true home, heaven.

Tony Merida says, "People of this world should look at the words and actions of believers and say, 'You're not from around here, are you?'"

That is what genuine citizens of heaven should look like. They live with their future hope in view, and that shapes their present reality.

C. S. Lewis said in *Mere Christianity*: "If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. Because Christians have largely ceased to think of the next world, heaven, they have become less effective in this one." But when we rightly fix our hope on heaven, we are enabled to face trials with a joy that cannot be taken away.

And here's why that matters, heaven is not amazing because of what's there, but because of who is there! Jesus Christ, He will transform our lowly bodies to be like His glorious body. Think of that! Imagine that reality! No more sin, no more death, no more struggle. We will be in the presence of Christ, and in His presence is fullness of joy. Invincible Joy, That is what awaits every believer.