

Philippians 3:17-21

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/phil/phil-3/philippians-317-21/>

Paul tells the Philippians to imitate him, not other believers who are living contrary to Christ by serving their own immediate desires. They live lives of destroyed opportunity and shameful waste, prioritizing earthly gain. Believers should look beyond the present and beyond the earth, toward Heaven where we truly belong, our true country, where Jesus will one day take us as He remakes our bodies to be sinless and totally in step with Him.

In the previous chapter, Paul instructed the Philippian believers to make an intentional choice to adopt the same attitude that Jesus adopted. Now Paul tells his Philippian *Brethren* to *join in following my example and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us*. Paul has made it clear in this chapter that he had adopted the same attitude/perspective/mindset that Christ adopted (2:5-10), counting anything in this life that stands in the way of radical obedience to Christ as “rubbish.” Now he tells his Philippian *brethren* to *follow his example*. Paul is willing to say, “Follow me, my life displays what it looks like to adopt the attitude Christ chose.”

Of course, at the time of the writing of this letter, Paul is imprisoned for his testimony to the gospel. He has placed his life on the line and done so gladly. He has endured immense suffering, which he calls “momentary” and “light affliction” when compared to the “eternal weight of glory,” waiting for those who serve Christ faithfully, adopting the mindset that Jesus adopted (2 Corinthians 4:17). He is, therefore, practicing what he preaches, and providing an example to follow. We would expect most people in prison facing death to say “I am an example not to follow.” Paul does the opposite. He says “Follow me. I have the mindset that leads to the greatest possible outcome of life.” This corresponds to Jesus’ assertion that to be the first of all requires making a choice to become a servant to all (Mark 9:35).

Paul ends this chapter by contrasting his good example, and Jesus’ good example, with a poor example which the Philippian believers ought to avoid. Paul acknowledges that *many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ*. These *enemies of the cross of Christ* could be connected with the “dogs” and “evil workers” Paul warned of in Philippians 3:2. The evil workers could also be those who are licentious. Both legalism as well as licentiousness are forms of self-seeking. They are different ways to serve self.

Certainly it seems Paul primarily tussled with evil workers who claimed the necessity of following religious rules in order to be righteous. These would be like the evil workers who led Paul’s Galatian brethren astray. There could also be evil workers who prioritize indulging the things of the flesh. Whatever these *enemies of the cross* are doing, they make Paul very sad.

To think of these people causes him to weep. For them, perhaps the *cross of Christ* was not deemed sufficient, and they began to trust in themselves rather trusting in Christ. This of course cannot negate the power of the cross, but it can lead believers astray from following Christ through the obedience of faith. It is also possible that they never believed. Either makes them

enemies of the cross of Christ. Anyone who leads people away from the cross of Christ, or away from the mindset to follow in the obedience to Christ, is an *enemy of the cross*.

Our true path to maximum benefit in this life is in setting aside self and laying down our lives in service to Him. Instead, we can find ourselves trusting our own acts, and end up choosing the wrong mindset. Rather than taking up our cross daily and following Christ, we can find ourselves in opposition.

Trusting self leads to self-seeking. Perhaps rather than choosing to adopt the mindset of service, these evil workers chose to adopt a mindset of prioritizing earthly gain, as in Philippians 1:17. In either case, these false teachers have an *end* that is *destruction*. The word translated *end* is the Greek word “teleo,” which is the same root as the word translated earlier “perfect.” It is the idea of completion, maturity, or culmination of an era. In this context, the idea is “the final result of their lives.” The word translated *destruction* is also found in 1 Timothy:

“But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction.”
(1 Timothy 6:9)

Paul does not address the question of whether these false teachers are believers. But that does not seem to matter for his application—following their example will lead to destruction. Paul simply asserts that their lives will be wrecked because of their bad choices. He does indicate that these people are examples not to follow. Which indicates that believers can make bad choices, with adverse consequences.

Rather than adopt the mentality of Jesus and follow in radical obedience to Christ, they have placed their hope in the things of this world. Their *god is their appetite*. Paul desired the Philippian believers to follow his example, and avoid following this bad example. All believers should heed this warning. Believers can choose to follow their appetites, or lusts. And the result is *destruction*. Paul devotes Chapter 5 and 6 of his letter to the Galatians to this topic.

Paul exhorts believers to choose to walk in the Spirit rather than choosing to walk in the flesh. To walk in the flesh is to have our *appetite* as our *god*, because our *god* is that whom we serve. If we sow to the flesh, we reap corruption (Galatians 6:8). We can see our earthly deeds burn up in the judgment of Christ, like wood, hay, and straw (1 Corinthians 3:12-14).

One of the main reasons humans are prone to following religious rules, as the “dogs” who were the “false circumcision” were likely doing (v. 2), is for the purpose of self-justification. Humans do not have to be trained to self-justify—it comes naturally. As shown throughout scripture, it is a long and difficult journey to leave behind self-justification and replace it with trusting God fully in our daily lives. This is why Paul goes to such great lengths to describe how to adopt the right mindset. It is not easy.

As Jesus pointed out regarding the Pharisees, these false teachers would serve *their appetite* for the approval of men. They used their religious observance to justify exploiting their influence. The book of Hebrews notes the example of Esau, who was ruled by his appetite. He gave no

value to his “birthright” which was his right as the eldest son to rule the family later in life. He traded this future benefit to his brother for a mere pot of stew. He did not have the mindset, or “attitude” (“phroneo”) Paul advocates, of considering every action now an investment in a future reward. The Hebrews passage that uses Esau as an example follows:

“...that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears” (Hebrews 12:16-17)

The idea in this Hebrews passage of requiring the obedience of “sanctification” in order to “see the Lord” is the same idea in Philippians of requiring the obedience of faith in order to “know Him and the power of His resurrection.” We cannot know by faith unless we walk by faith. And this life will be our one and only opportunity to know by faith. It seems that to “know” and to “see” the Lord by faith provides a reward that will not come any other way. This is so monumental that the angels struggle to understand it, and gawk in amazement (Ephesians 3:10; 1 Peter 1:12).

Paul admonishes us to follow our much deeper desire to become all God made us to be, rather than obeying mere appetites. He wants us to seek the glory of Christ, and trust God to exalt us in due time. He wants us to live an investment lifestyle, and sow to the Spirit, rather than following the bad example of those following their *appetites*, and seeking the *glory* of the world. He wants us to invest wisely now, laying up treasure in heaven, in order to gain benefit of great rewards in the future.

Paul states of these whose *god is their appetite*, that their *glory is in their shame*, who *set their minds on earthly things*. The Greek word “doxa” translated *glory* applies to something or someone’s essence being clearly observed. The heavens declare the glory of God because they display the essence of God as the omnipotent creator and sustainer of all that is (Psalm 19). In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul contrasts the glory (“doxa”) of the earth with that of the moon. Their glory differs from one another because each has a different essence.

In the case of the false teachers, they are displaying an essence, a *glory*, of bad character. This bad character is *their shame*. It demonstrates that they have *set their minds on earthly things*. They are not adopting the attitude which Christ adopted (Philippians 2:5-10), laying aside all comforts and privileges in order to fully obey the Father. They are, rather, pursuing the comforts made available in *earthly things*. To follow their example would be to follow the example of Esau; they would be selling their future inheritance for a proverbial bowl of stew.

The phrase *set their minds on earthly things* contains the Greek word “phroneo” which means “to adopt a mindset.” The word “phroneo” appears ten times in Philippians. In this case, some believers have chosen to adopt a mindset advocated by the world. The world’s mindset is to believe that pursuing our appetites is in our best interest. This includes their *appetite* for earthly pleasure. This is the opposite of the mindset Paul urges believers to adopt, which is the mindset/attitude that Jesus chose, to leave the comfort of heaven in order to do the will of His Father, and come to earth as a human to die for the human race (Philippians 2:5-10).

The Bible says that God gives us richly all things to enjoy (1 Timothy 6:17). God wants us to enjoy life. But God does not desire us to be ruled by our appetites, as has occurred with these folks who have adopted a worldly mindset (“phreneo”) that is untrue. They have adopted a false mentality of self-interest promoted by the world. If we have the mindset of Christ (Philippians 2:5-10) then we can rejoice in all things, at all times (Philippians 3:1).

It is clear that we have a binary choice before us, whether to choose the mindset that Christ chose, which leads to radical obedience, or to choose the mindset promoted by the world. The result is stark. Choosing the world’s ways leads to a *glory* that is *shame*. It leads to serving a *god* that is our *appetite*. Alternatively, choosing the ways of God leads to the prize of the upward call in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:14).

These *enemies of the cross* whom Paul holds up as a bad example, an example not to follow, have rooted their pursuit of glory in the things of earth rather than the things of heaven. This is counter-productive. Paul notes that the proper attitude is to consider that *our citizenship is in heaven*. We should pursue glory that lasts; everything of this earth will burn up (2 Peter 3:12). We should focus on the things we can take with us into eternity.

Further, we should live with the reality that Jesus is now in heaven, *from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ*. This earth will not remain. *Jesus Christ* is a *Savior*. When we see “save” we know something or someone is being delivered from something or someone. What is being delivered from what is determined from the context. In this context, Paul and the Philippians have already been saved from sin and made just in the sight of God (Philippians 1:1). But we still live in a fallen world, and believers are waiting for Jesus to return to earth once again in order to save us from the presence of sin and evil. He will remake the earth anew, and raise up a kingdom in which righteousness dwells, and evil no longer has a place (2 Peter 3:13). He will deliver us from a fallen world and mortal bodies.

When Jesus returns, He *will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory*. Each believer will receive a resurrected body, which will be placed into *conformity with the body of His glory* (1 Thessalonians 4:15-18; 1 Corinthians 15:42-44). We will have a glorious state, rather than a *humble state*. This will not be in *conformity* to this world. It will be *into conformity with the body of His glory*. This is our blessed hope, that all things will be renewed, and we will receive a new body, that does not have a sinful flesh.

When Jesus comes to restore all things, it will be done *by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself*. All authority is already granted unto Jesus (Matthew 28:18). However, Jesus has not yet fully possessed His authority over the earth, and taken His rightful place as its king. Peter tells us that He has not yet done so as a matter of His mercy (2 Peter 3:3-9).

“The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.”
(2 Peter 3:9)

The perspective Paul offers in Philippians is that this life is a once-in-an-existence opportunity for believers in Christ to suffer the sufferings of Christ, adopting His attitude of radical obedience to the Father, and gain immense rewards of knowing Christ by faith, and pleasing God with lives of faith.

Biblical Text

¹⁷ Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. 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, ¹⁹ whose end is destruction, whose god is *their* appetite, and *whose* glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. ²⁰ For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; ²¹ 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.