

Citizens of Heaven

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Introduction

Paul had just stated that nothing in life, including religious zeal, was worth anything in comparison to knowing (intimate relationship with) Christ Jesus. It is the righteousness (covenant relationship) that comes from the faithfulness of Jesus that is to be desired. Pursuing covenant relationship based on anything else is comparable to a dung heap. A relationship with Jesus blesses disciples with knowing the power of resurrection in their own lives, blesses them by their identification with Jesus in his sufferings (assuming a life is lived that seeks to glorify God), and blesses them with the eschatological (end times) hope of resurrection from the dead. Paul was calling them to imitate a life shaped by the cross.

Since this is the life that is made available by God through Jesus and is the life that should be desired by disciples, it is only natural for Paul to now appeal to the Philippians to imitate Paul's life. This imitation is not about glorifying Paul but desiring intimate relationship with God through God's provision in Christ rather than through human effort.

Imitate Me and Observe Others: 3:17

The idea of imitation was hinted at in 1:30 (saw and heard of Paul's struggle because of the gospel). It was elaborately expressed in 2:4 ("let the same mind be in you") when Paul called them to have the mind of Christ. More examples of such a life were presented in the lives of Epaphroditus and Timothy. Then Paul used his only life in the previous verses to again define a life characterized by the cross.

The word "imitate" here is in the imperative meaning it is not an option for disciples of Christ. It was not just Paul, Epaphroditus, and Timothy, but the Philippians were to observe and imitate. They were to do so with anyone who followed the example of the crucified Christ. The Philippians were not to follow the example of the enemies of the cross.

In verse 17, the NIV and NRSV read, "who *live* according to the example." The word should be translated "walk." It is not that "live" does not give the same general

meaning; rather, it is because the word walk is an important word for Paul. When translations do not show that pattern of usage by Paul, readers miss the importance of this word in Paul's theology. It is used by Paul 32 times either of the Christian life or a life contrary to the will of God, as it does in 3:18. Understanding this word is important to this context. Disciples are to "walk" according to the path set by the crucified Christ in sharp contrast to the path set by the enemies. This word is important to Paul's Jewish heritage. Students were to "walk" along side the Rabbi to learn and follow his ways. Christians were first referred to as "belonged to the Way" (Acts 9:2). Even enemies of the cross understood there was a unique walk or life associated with disciples of Christ. This "walk" is a life characterized by the crucified Christ. The Philippians were not just being asked to watch people. The language here indicates, "look out for" or "take note of." There is to be a purposeful choice to do so.

Not knowing your church heritage let me say something about the word translated "example." This word *tupos* in the Greek has often been used in Churches of Christ as a proof text to find a pattern to Christianity. That pattern ends up being things like the five acts of worship, the five steps of salvation, or church organization. Such a notion was foreign to Paul and this text. The *pattern* we are called to follow is the pattern set up by Christ when he gave up his will for this Father's will and died for the sake of others. This is the *pattern*.

Enemies of the Cross: 3:18-19

Identifying the "enemies of the cross" is difficult. Information from this text is limited. Were they the dogs of chapter 3 or other opponents Paul previously mentioned in this letter? Were they believers or former believers? Were they inside Philippi or outsiders? One of the best clues is found in the phrases "many walk" and "often told you." It appears Paul is speaking of an unspecified group of professed Christians in the at-large Christian community about whom he had warned the Philippians previously. Another indication that they were people within the Christian community is that Paul spoke of them with tears. This is the way Paul often spoke of Christians for whom he had concern (1 Cor. 7:30; Rom. 12:15).

Their end was destruction. The word “end” comes from the same root word as “obtained” or “complete” in verse 12. The previous use of this word and its use in 3:19 speak of the eschatological (end times) destiny of two distinct groups. Those who choose to follow the model of Christ as described in chapter 2 have the resurrection as their destiny or goal. Those who choose to follow their own selfish passions have destruction as their destiny or goal. Disciples may live in humiliation in this world, but they are destined for glorious transformation and vindication. Enemies do not live in humiliation now but are destined for future destruction.

Their god was their belly. The enemies lived for the present. Their mindset was upon earthly things. Fee (pg. 372) quotes from some ancient sources to show this similar thought among society in general. Euripedes (Cyclops, 334, 335), “I offer sacrifice to no god but to myself, and to this bellie of mine.” Lucian (Part. Laud. 10) uses stomach in the context of people measuring happiness by their appetites. Seneca (Ben. 7.6) refers to people who are “slaves of their bellies.” Glory is what they were searching for, but their behaviors should have been seen as shameful. Ironically, not only would they not obtain glory, their distorted sense of glory was the very thing that was shameful about them.

The issue here was not the teaching of the “enemies.” It was their way of life, their “walk.” This is the way the enemies were identified. The issue in Philippians is the pattern or model set by Christ as described in chapter 2. The reason they were called enemies is because their lives betrayed the nature of Christ by living in a way that denied the glory of the crucified Christ. “They are enemies of the cross and their minds are set on present, earthly things; that is, they have abandoned a lifestyle marked by the cross and have given up all together on the sure future that belongs to those who are thus marked” (Fee pg. 363). Sometimes people in today’s world think the problem is all doctrinal positions. There is nothing more basic and important than living a crucified life.

Heavenly Citizenship: 3:20-4:1

This section begins with “for,” not “but” as seen in both the NIV and NRSV. The importance of beginning with the word “for” shows the following comments are not a

new thought. What is said here is the reason to imitate Paul's walk. It is the reason not to follow those whose god is satisfying the passions of this life.

Citizenship is here again in contrast to their Roman citizenship (see 1:27 notes). It should again be understood as commonwealth. Philippi was in a sense an outpost of the Roman Empire. Another important word here is "savior." This was a common title for the Roman emperor. Paul's point was that the Roman emperor was not their savior. The Christians' savior is Jesus. The Philippians were an outpost, an outpost of the Heavenly kingdom. Being so meant they, like their Roman counterparts, were to bring honor and glory to their savior. The Philippians were to understand the value of suffering and death for the sake of Christ and the gospel.

Even though they may suffer for the gospel, the Philippians should have been motivated by the anticipation of Jesus' return. Christians live in an already/not yet existence. We live in this world under, in some areas of our lives, the authority of worldly authorities. As long as we are in this world, Christians continue to live in a broken world, which means we may suffer at the hands of those who oppose the gospel. But Christians are not bound to this world. We are even now, and primarily so, citizens of heaven. This is where our primary allegiance lies. It is where our savior sits at the right hand of the throne of God. However, there is a tension. Although Christians in this world are citizens of heaven, the complete fulfillment of what God has done in Christ will not be fully realized until Jesus returns. This is our anticipation, the goal of our lives.

Christ's glory came by way of humiliation (Phil 2:5-7). Just as his humiliation was transformed to glory, the Philippians needed to understand their present humiliation would be transformed into Jesus' glorious likeness. Christians may now know weakness and humiliation. When Jesus returns, Christians will be vindicated and know glory.

This glory will be accomplished through the same divine power that gave life to Jesus' dead body. It is the same power that subjected everything under the feet of Jesus (Phil. 2:9-11). That which was subjected to the authority of Jesus Christ included the Roman emperor and the disciple's enemies.

Conclusion

All that is involved in the cross, as described in chapter 2, characterizes the Christian life. Enemies of the cross are those whose lives are the opposite. Their focus is on self and this world. Christians live with the dual blessing of citizenship in the kingdom of God now and with the anticipation of Jesus' return. At that time, the Christians' humiliation that came from worldly opposition will be turned into the same glory that was given to Jesus after his humiliation and resurrection.

This passage reminds us that, despite appearances often to the contrary, God is in control, and that our salvation is not just for today, but forever, that Christ is coming again, and that at his coming we inherit the final glory that belongs to Christ alone - and to those who are his. (Fee pg. 384)

Points to Be Made

1. At times, the world will attempt to humiliate disciples of Christ just as they did to Jesus.
2. Jesus will return, and disciples will be vindicated. Just as experienced by Jesus, the humiliation that disciples suffer in this world will be turned into glory by the power of God.
3. Therefore, stand firm and live as citizens of heaven.