



Imitating Paul and Longing for Our Savior

Series: Philippians – To Live Is Christ

Philippians 3:17-21

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Pastor Nick Shaffer

Most of you probably know that I grew up in a small town in northern PA. Growing up in a small town had its distinct advantages. First, everyone knew everyone else. It was close-knit community. Second, growing up we pretty much had to entertain ourselves and that made for some very interesting amusements which I will not mention this morning. But my neighborhood was a lot like the movie Sandlot. All the kids in our neighborhood were constantly either playing football or baseball depending on what season it was. And we used to have this little game that we would play after we played a baseball or whiffle ball game. As we were sitting around drinking our Cokes or Nehi, each guy would take turns imitating our favorite players' batting stances and everyone would guess who we were. We imitated Johnny Bench, Mike Schmidt, Thurman Munson, Reggie Jackson, Pops Stargell, Rod Carew, Carlton Fisk... but in all the time that we played that game I never remember anyone imitating, say Tim Lincecum, or Larry Bowa, or some utility player. We only imitated the best because in our hearts, we wanted to be just as great as they were. They were, to our way of thinking, worthy of imitation.

In this text, Paul is calling us to imitate him and those like him, as we run this Christian race. He calls us to a distinctly gospel-shaped lifestyle, one that reflects a true understanding of the gospel and the cross, a life that reveals a true faith in Christ, a life that adorns the gospel of Christ – a life that is lived with a proper vision to the return of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Now, before we look at this text, I want to make sure that we all understand what we have before us.

Let's Make Sure We Understand The Gospel and What We Are Reading. Paul is not telling us the way of salvation in this text, at least not explicitly. You could read this text out of context from everything else that Paul is saying and mishear Paul's message as being, "Try harder, do better, be good, live a better life, and you will be saved." That is emphatically

NOT the gospel. That is not the gospel. It is not just try harder and be a better person and get into heaven. If that is the gospel, we're all going to hell.

The gospel is that, despite our sin and the very fact that we are not good, that we have not loved God and we have not obeyed His commandments, and that, by our sin, we are naturally enemies who deserve God's wrath and judgment in hell, God has shown us grace. Because we could do nothing to save ourselves, because by our sinfulness we have no power to do anything to make ourselves right with God, God has done the amazing. He has sent His Son Jesus Christ into this world to save sinners. Jesus willingly became a man and lived the life that we could never live, perfectly obeying and fulfilling the Law of God, which we have broken, and earning perfect righteousness for us before the throne of God. And then at the appointed time, He gave Himself over to wicked men to be crucified on the cross and to die the death that we all deserve, suffering the wrath and fury of God in our place, dying and rising from the dead so that we could be forgiven of our sins. He took our sin and all of its judgment and gave to us, in exchange, all of His righteousness before God. As Paul wrote in 2 Cor, 5: ***“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*** (2 Corinthians 5:21, ESV)

Jesus stood in our place, as our representative, as our substitute, and lived the life that we could not live, and died the death, enduring the curse that we all deserve, so that we could be forgiven, and counted by God the Father as perfectly righteous, and be made the children of God, adopted by Him forever. God the Father receives and accepts us not because we've stopped being bad and tried to be good, but because the Lord Jesus lived perfectly and died perfectly in our place, the benefits of which we receive by faith alone. It's good news – that what gospel means – because what we couldn't do, what we could never do, Jesus did for us. We simply receive this gift of salvation in Christ by faith alone. That's the gospel. This is what Paul so clearly taught in Romans 3, starting in verse 21: ***“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”*** (Romans 3:21–25a, ESV)

What Paul is saying to us here, he is saying to Christians, to those who have been saved by grace through faith, to those who know the law convicts and condemns them, but who have

been forgiven, set free from the penalty of their sin – eternal death, and been pardoned and accepted by God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Make sure that you understand that. Make sure that you are resting your hope for eternal life and salvation on this gospel, in Jesus Christ alone, and not in the filthy rags of your own pretend “goodness” or you will misunderstand what Paul is saying here. He is concerned with the way that those of us who have been saved by grace through faith live in light of the salvation that we have in Christ. And the first thing that Paul says to us is:

Imitate Me and Others Like Me (17) In verse 17, Paul writes: **“Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.” (Philippians 3:17, ESV)** “Imitate me – think as I think, walk as I walk, pursue what I pursue.” Those are surprising words coming from a man who just confessed that he is not perfect, right? But Paul is not exalting himself or making much of himself. He isn’t a cult leader, ok? He knows he isn’t perfect, but he knows that because he is an apostle of Christ, the way that he lives will set the standard for true Christian living – his delight in the Lord Jesus, his singular trust in Him alone for salvation, his determination to be like Jesus and to do His will, his striving for godliness and obedience, his single-minded pursuit of the prize. This isn’t the only place that Paul says this. In 1 Corinthians 11, he says, **“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 11:1, ESV)** In copying Paul, in other words, we are copying Christ. What Paul is saying is “Imitate me and others like me, because in doing so you will live a life that is in accord with the truth about the cross.” There must be a very real correlation between what you believe and how you live. What you truly believe will be illustrated by how you live. That’s the point.

But I want you to see that the exhortation that Paul is giving in this verse is not simply, “Imitate me,” but “Join together in imitating me.” In other words, the way that Paul is phrasing this, we are to understand that imitating Paul in his pursuit of Christ is not an individual quest but a family pursuit. The emphasis is on doing this together. Do you see that? Proverbs 18:1 says: **“Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment.” (Proverbs 18:1, ESV)** Going it on your own, apart from a rooted involvement with people of God is a fast track to failure and falling away. Paul’s intent is that the Philippians and we would be imitating him and his pursuit of Jesus Christ together. That point is reinforced by the way that he calls the Philippians to fix their gaze, not only on Paul,

but on those who are like minded with him. So the first thing Paul says to us is “Imitate me.” And then the opposite, of course, follows.

Don't Imitate the Enemies of the Cross (18-19) Paul says, imitate me and others like me: ***“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.”*** (Philippians 3:18–19, ESV) Paul knows the truth about the church, that there are wheat and tares in the same field, the true and the false, the real and the hypocrite – all together in the visible church. And he has warned them before about this. Just like he warned the Ephesian elders, for instance, before he left them: ***“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.”*** (Acts 20:28–30, ESV)

Paul has in view people who profess to be Christians, who profess to be followers of Christ, but whose pattern of behavior – their walk, the way they live – contradicts their confession of Christ and the cross in practical ways. They may talk a good talk, deceive the unsuspecting and the undiscerning, parade themselves as faithful, but the thing that is missing is a right view of the cross, a view like Paul's. In fact, they are enemies of the cross who have never been born again, who do not manifest the life of Christ in them.

And he is deeply moved, moved to weeping as he tells them these things again. He's moved to tears for the fate of those who profess Christ with their lips but whose hearts are far from Him. He's moved to tears as he thinks about the evil influence that such people – these enemies of the cross – have upon the people of God and the reproach they bring upon the gospel.

Who are these enemies of the cross? They are those inside the church who are the legalists, that we talked about before who say that you must add to the work of Christ on the cross some human works, some rituals or rules that will earn you merit with God, that you must in some way do something to earn your salvation because Jesus and what He did in his life and

death are not enough. Second, he's talking about the evildoers, those who use the gospel as an excuse for sin, those who live lives of sinful indulgence and the pursuit of sinful pleasures in the name of "liberty in Christ", or who excuse their clear and obvious sin.

Both of these groups make a mockery of the cross and the gospel and are enemies of the cross of Christ. The first are enemies of Christ because they believe that men have the power to save themselves and so the cross is unnecessary. They minimize the worth of the cross. And the second, because they reject the power of the cross, the power of the gospel to kill the old man, and raise up a new creature in Christ. They continue on in the very sins for which Christ died, and from the power of which Christ has delivered His people and so disgrace the cross before the eyes of the world, trampling the blood of Christ.

How different is our view of the cross. We believe that Christ became the Lamb of God and lovingly and freely chose to make atonement for the law that sinners had broken. We believe that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures;" that **"the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."** (1 Corinthians 1:18, ESV) It is the cross of Christ that makes us able to say, "I have sinned; I have broken all God's commands, and I cannot pay the terrible debt that I owe. But, my Savior Jesus Christ, saw my lost condition and took pity upon me. In love he came and paid the debt of my sin. I cannot atone for my sin; I cannot pay the debt. But Jesus Christ has paid the debt; he has shed his blood for me." It is an entirely different view than that of the enemies of the cross.

Take note of the way that Paul describes these enemies of the cross – ***Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.***

First, look at the way that he describes their character. Here at the core is what is wrong with these enemies of the cross. He says, ***their god is their belly.*** That is a descriptive way of saying that they worship themselves. They recognize no authority, no truth outside of their desires, outside of what they want to believe is true. They are governed by a desire to please themselves, governed by a desire to satisfy their appetites.

I want you to see what Paul does here. He doesn't list specific sins. His focus is not on specific sins, but of the underlying sin of serving their own desires. It may be the desire to magnify and exalt self, like the religious legalists who believed they had it in their power to save themselves through moral reformation or good deeds apart from humble and self-righteousness killing faith in Christ alone. Or to those professing Christians who never restrain their appetites, or their desires, or their passions—who are sensual while they boast of being spiritual and who use grace as a license for fulfilling their desire for sexual sin, drunkenness, gossip, rebellion to authority, hatred, lying, greed, or a host of other sins. The justification for both of these groups is that “it seems right” or “it feels right” to them. But in each of these cases, the standard is not the objective truth of Scripture, but the subjective truth of their feelings or human wisdom. Do you see that?

Second, Paul says, **they glory in their shame**. They ought to be ashamed of themselves, but they aren't they celebrate their foolishness. The kinds of things they really value, far from being praiseworthy, or inspiring, or good, or glorious, or worthy of imitation are really shameful, because they are the very things for which Jesus died.

Third, Paul says, they have their **minds set on earthly things**. Their whole point of view, their whole way of looking at things, is earthbound. They have no view to eternity, no view to what really matters, no view to the coming judgment, no view to the coming of Christ. Their goals are skewed. They are concerned about how they can make a name for themselves, how they can amass material things, how they can be “better than others.” They are looking to earthly applause rather than heavenly approval. They want present satisfaction rather than heavenly joy. Instant gratification at any cost... even the denial of faith. If they speak of God at all, they are quick to define Him as they wish Him to be – a great dispenser of earthly benefits who demands no faithfulness or allegiance and so reduce the God from holy and awesome to an idol. They are earthly. They simply do not want Christ to reign over them.

You've got to see how this kind of life is so opposed to the cross of Jesus Christ, how it is enmity with God. On the cross, Jesus condemned the attempt to find salvation with God by just doing better and trying harder to be good. He bore in His body on the tree the sin of self-righteousness, the sin of self-salvation, the sinfulness of all of our imagined righteousness. On the cross He also identified with our base sinfulness, with our moral wickedness, with sinful self-indulgence, with every form of wickedness, and became in

himself the sin that condemned us. By bearing our sin in His body on the cross, he paid our debt before God, wiped away our past, and remade us in His own image. To foolishly cling to some kind of self-righteousness that we believe can save us, or that we believe makes us better than other sinners or to continue in and make excuses for sin as if He had never died, to use His death as a license to keep on sinning, to live for this world as if Christ had not opened our eyes to the glories of heaven, and to remain bound by the old life as if Jesus had not accomplished new and eternal life for sinners – is not all of this enmity with the cross of Jesus Christ? It is. And the future of such enemies of the cross is more grim than can be imagined.

Their end is destruction. When the one who has lived as an enemy of the cross dies, he will face the most awful moment any human being will ever be called upon to face. He will stand alone before the judgment of God and will have to answer to God for breaking His eternal, just, holy and perfect law. With no Mediator to stand between him and the judgment of God, he will go to destruction, because he has scorned the one Mediator with God, the man Christ Jesus. We must take care that we do not live as enemies of the cross! That is Paul's point to us – not as the legalistic kind of enemy or the sinfully indulgent kind of enemy. Do not live as an enemy of the cross because that is not who we are in Christ! Not if we belong to Christ by saving faith. For unlike the enemies of the cross, we

Long For the Coming of Our King (20-21) Paul makes clear the distinction between the enemies of the gospel and the people of God, the flock of Christ by saying: ***“But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.”*** (Philippians 3:20–21, ESV)

We see ourselves as we are, as citizens of another world, of heaven itself, where our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ, who is infinitely worthy and glorious, is ruling the universe. This is what we are beloved, not enemies of the cross, but those who glory in it. ***“But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”*** (Galatians 6:14, ESV) This is who we are, citizens of another realm, a colony of heaven on earth. We have a King in heaven for whose glory we live. We live to make His name known, to make His rule known, to make His gospel known. We live to bring Him praise. We live to follow Him, and imitate him, to honor Him and represent Him. That's how Paul wants us to live – trusting in Christ alone for salvation and not our works,

striving to know Him more, pursuing Christ and obedience to Him and, empowered by His grace, fighting against sin our souls and doing it all awaiting our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Awaiting the coming of our King, our final salvation, and the hope of heaven realized.

The bodily return of Jesus Christ in power and glory is one of the most frequently emphasized truths in the New Testament. It is mentioned in every book of the New Testament except four. Just as He promised that He came the first time to die for our sins and kept His word, so He promised to return and The Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven, with His mighty angels, **“to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed.” (2 Thessalonians 1:10, ESV)** And he will complete what He started, transforming our lowly bodies – both outwardly and inwardly. Outwardly, we receive bodies not subject to disease and death and inwardly we will be spiritually transformed, delivered finally and forever from all sin and fully prepared for the glories of heaven. We are not earthbound, but bound for heaven and we look with expectation to see Christ.

But notice something. The focus of the Christian’s hope is not a place, not a condition, but a person. We may well look forward to a great deal – deliverance at last from the presence of sin and temptation, deliverance from sickness and death, reunion with loved ones who have died in Christ, the glory of the heavenly places. All these are great, but what makes heaven, heaven, is Jesus Christ. Do you understand that is it the very presence of Christ that makes heaven, heaven? It is the presence of the very One who loved us, the very one Who died for us, the very one who poured out His life’s blood to purchase for rebels the inheritance of sons, the one who was crushed for our iniquities so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him – it is His presence that makes heaven, heaven. It is the very heart and soul of heaven to be with Christ. Do you see it, beloved? The truth of Jesus’ sacrificial death for the payment of our sins and His resurrection from the dead for our justification is great joy. The salvation that we receive by faith alone, by his grace alone is great joy. The truth that He reveals to us through His word is great joy, the life he empowers by his grace is great joy, our citizenship in heaven is great joy, but the greatest joy of the gospel is the promise of fellowship with Christ himself. It is the freedom to fully and completely enjoy communion with Christ for all of eternity.

To be brought into the immediate presence of the King of kings and Lord of lords at His return, into the presence of Him who is our elder Brother, the great Shepherd of our souls, who is the Living water, the Everlasting bread, whose love none can measure; and to be with

all of His saints, ten thousand times ten thousand, all together with Him – that is glorious. But the great joy is what it will mean for us. Seeing Christ and beholding His glory. Jesus said, **“Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.” (John 17:24, ESV)** The only appetite, the only longing, that will ever be satisfied is the appetite for Christ. Self-righteousness, self-glory, self-indulgence – none of these can ever satisfy or be satisfied. The only appetite, the only longing, that will ever be satisfied is the appetite for Christ. When He comes from heaven, He will raise us, raise and transform these lowly bodies to be like His, for this very purpose – so we can be satisfied in Him forever.

And listen; there is nothing that can derail this plan. Nothing. Christ will come and He will make us fit for heaven, fit to be in His presence forever. Paul’s confident declaration at the beginning of this letter will at long last be realized. **“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 1:6, ESV)**

Christ will bring the good work of salvation that he began in us to completion, and how? **By the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.** This kind of transformation demands vast power. No creature can do it. But there is One who has been entrusted by the Father with power over all things. The same Jesus who can mold and shape mind and heart into His own image can also transform our lowly bodies. So ends this incredible chapter in which Paul has taken us through the wonders of salvation through faith in Christ alone, justification and sanctification, with the goal of becoming like Christ always in view, and now the consummation when soul and body, the entire person together with all the saints, will glorify God in Christ, in the new heaven and the new earth forever and ever. And all of this, through God’s sovereign grace and power, to His everlasting glory.

Oh beloved, this is what it all comes down to. Do we live with a sense of expectation of the return of Christ in glory or have our senses been dulled by the prevailing unbelief of our generation? Are we tired of pursuing pleasures that do not last or trying to silence our guilty consciences by our own self-discipline or imagined goodness? Are we finding our greatest joy in Christ? Are we lovers of the cross? Only the cross of Christ reveals the truth about all of us. It shows us what we deserve – what Jesus endured there. But that same cross also shows us the love of God for sinners, the grace of God to the lost, the grace of God He continues to pour upon the saved – the truth that God has so loved this world of sinners that

He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. Is this not worthy of your faith and life? Is this not worthy of your fullest pursuit? Is this not worthy of your hope? You know it is. You just need to be reminded of it daily, just like I do.

I have to remind myself everyday or I will forget – I am saved, not because of what I have done or because of what I can do, but because of what Christ has done for me. Jesus came to do everything I haven't done and could never do, and He did it sinlessly and perfectly. Then, he died the atoning, forgiving, life-giving death on the cross and then rose from the dead to give to me the righteousness that comes, not from my sinful attempts as being good, or by doing religious stuff, but only through faith in Christ. I can add nothing to what Jesus has done, only believe, only trust in Him. He did not save me so that I could indulge my flesh or trample His Lordship in my life, but so that I could know Him in His fullness, so that I could experience the power of His resurrection life in me, and know the joy of becoming like Him. He saved me to make me holy, not to indulge my flesh, not to give me license to pursue sin as if it didn't matter, but to pursue Him, to know Him more and more, to press on and pursue a character and life that looks like His, not on my own power but by the power of the Holy Spirit who lives in me. I do not do this alone; He has given me brothers and sisters to run this race with me. I am not of this earth anymore. The pleasures and blessings of this earth will not be my master. My citizenship is in heaven and I am living my life so that I may make the gospel of Jesus Christ known to the lost, through my words and deeds, even as I await my Savior from heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ. I am living so that on the day of His return, I will experience the greatest joy imaginable of which every joy on this earth is only a shadow. That is what I am living for. I have to remind myself of that every single day, and so do you, or we will forget the truth about who Jesus is and who we are.

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