

The Christian and Christ's Enemies

Philippians 3:17-4:1

A jarring reality in the midst of our indiscriminately 'tolerant' society is the Bible's insistence that there are, foundationally, two kinds of people in the world. While these two groups may appear to be endlessly varied, they may all be simplified into a pair of opposing categories. There are citizens of heaven - those saved by grace through faith in Christ - and the enemies of the cross of Christ (Mt. 12:30). And many who think themselves members of the former group are actually of the latter. In this morning's passage, Paul pleads with the Philippians to stand firm (Php. 4:1) – persevering in the faith, that they may avoid the destruction awaiting Christ's enemies (Php. 3:18) and receive the blessed hope (Php. 3:20) that is guaranteed by the very power that Christ is using even now to assert his authority over all creation (Php. 3:21).

Imitation vs. Individualism

Paul begins the passage with a practical instruction for *how* the Philippians ought to stand firm, saying, "Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us." While this command is utterly sensible, it runs contrary to the core value of our society: individualism. Historian Jacques Barzun, in his book *Dawn to Decadence* identifies *emancipation* as the preeminent theme of modern Western culture, saying,

"The now full-blown individual wields a panoply of rights, including the right to do "his own thing" without hindrance from authority."

Paul illustrates the incompatibility of Christian discipleship with this sort of unfettered individualism by commanding *imitation*. Paul challenges our tendency toward self-determination by commending to us into a method of spiritual growth that relies utterly on the self-denial that is characteristic of Jesus' teaching (Mt. 16:24). The kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit (Mt. 5:3), who, recognizing their poverty, willingly submit to discipleship. But the path of sanctification is closed to the proud – those unwilling to submit and imitate.

The Incentive to Imitate

As a wise pastor, Paul likely recognized how contrary submission and imitation are to the proud human heart. And so, in the following verses (Php. 3:18-21) Paul draws a stark distinction between the two aforementioned groups; the enemies of the cross of Christ and the citizens of heaven, saved by grace through faith. To encourage us toward perseverance, Paul makes clear that the enemies are headed toward destruction, whereas the citizens of heaven are headed for glorious transformation. To help us understand the nature of these enemies, Paul issues a rapid-fire list of character traits; their god is their belly, the glory in their shame, and their minds are set on earthly things (Php. 3:19). This list stands as a condemnation of the enemies and a warning to the Philippians. But the warning is followed closely by a reassurance; a reminder of the blessed hope that awaits the citizen of heaven. Our Savior will return, and with the same power through which he is making all things subject to himself, he will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body (Php. 3:21).

A Compassionate Command

So – having delineated the ends of these two groups of people, Paul uses the warmest possible language to call the Philippians to perseverance: "Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and my crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved." (Php. 4:1). Reminding them of his great love for them, and their special place in his heart, he calls them to stand firm in the Lord.