THE RIGHT AND WRONG
WAY TO LIVE

Philippians 3:17-4:1

By

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September 10, 1995

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Imagine two young men in their early twenties. Both are of comparable intelligence and natural ability. They live only 20 miles apart. But their circumstances are very different. The first young man lives in a comfortable apartment, drives a decent car, has many fine clothes in his closet, eats well, and is pursuing the career for which he has just been educated in college. The second young man lives in a dirt-floored shanty, has no car, has only one ragged change of clothes, eats a minimal diet, has no hope for an education, and tries to find manual labor jobs to make ends meet.

What’s the difference between these two young men? Citizenship! The first young man lives in San Diego, California, and is a United States citizen. The second young man lives in Tijuana, Mexico, and is a citizen of that country. The way these men live is greatly affected by their respective citizenships. If the young man from Mexico could somehow move north, acquire his U.S. citizenship, and get an education and a better paying job, his life would change dramatically.

In Philippians 3:17-4:1 (4:1 ought to be the concluding verse of chapter 3), Paul uses this analogy of citizenship to show that as citizens of heaven, we should live differently than those who are citizens of this earth. In Philippians 3:1-11, Paul uses the analogy of an accountant to show that the human effort and merit he formerly was counting on for right standing with God he had written off as loss so that he could gain Christ as his righteousness. In 3:12-16 he uses the analogy of an athlete to show that the Christian life is a marathon race in which we must keep pressing on toward the goal, the purpose for which Christ first laid hold of us. Now (3:17-4:1) he uses the analogy of an alien to show that ...

Christians must live as citizens of heaven,
not as citizens of this earth.

As we saw in our introductory study some months ago, this analogy would have especially related to the Philippians. Philippi was
a Roman colony, some 800 miles east of Rome, surrounded by territory subject to Rome but whose residents lacked Roman citizenship. But those in Philippi had legal status as Roman citizens, so that the city was an outpost of Roman life. It was governed by Roman law. They practiced Roman customs. A Roman could go to Philippi and feel right at home, just as a British citizen in the last century could have gone to India, Hong Kong, Australia, or New Zealand and felt quite comfortable because those places were British colonies.

To these Christians who lived in a city that took pride in its Roman citizenship, Paul is saying, “You have a higher citizenship than that of Rome. You are citizens of heaven. Just as your Roman citizenship greatly affects the way you live, even more so your heavenly citizenship should affect how you live. Don’t fall into the trap of living as those around you.” Apparently there were some, even in the church, who professed to be Christians, but whose lives revealed that they were not true citizens of heaven. So Paul warns the flock of this danger and urges them to stand firm in the Lord.

The word “walk” (3:17 & 18) reveals two different ways of life, one right, the other wrong. First we’ll look at the way we’re not supposed to live, and then at how we are to live.

1. **Christians must not live as citizens of this earth (3:18-19).**

In our day, if you warn the church about false teachers, you are labeled as an alarmist or heresy hunter. Instead, we’re encouraged to focus on the positive and not worry about doctrinal error. But the apostle Paul repeatedly (“often told you”) warned the Philippians about these promoters of a false version of Christianity. One of the primary tasks of elders is to guard the flock from wolves who come in sheep’s clothing (Acts 20:28-31; Matt. 7:15; Titus 1:9-16).

Who were these dangerous false teachers (in Phil. 3:18-19)? We know that Paul was talking about people who circulated among the churches professing to be Christians, not about pagans or outsiders. Paul would not have been so deeply disturbed as to warn them often with tears about such licentious behavior among the heathen, since he knew that heathens live for sensual pleasure and the things of this earth. Paul was upset because these people made
claim of being Christian, but didn’t live as Christians, thus causing great confusion both in the church and outside. We don’t know whether they had actually infiltrated the church at Philippi or if it was just a serious danger for which the church needed to be on guard, but probably the latter.

Many commentators think that this group was the Judaizers, whom Paul has already warned against earlier in this chapter. The problem with this view is, the people in 3:18-19 seem more inclined to loose, licentious living than to the legalistic, ascetic practices of the Judaizers. It seems clear that Paul is warning about people who turned the grace of God into licentiousness, taking their freedom from the Jewish law off the deep end into supposed freedom from God’s moral law. Of course, legalists often just have a thin veneer of morality papered over a heart that is full of sensuality and indulgence (see Matt. 23:25-28; Col. 2:20-3:5; Gal. 5:2-24). So perhaps the Judaizers, like some TV preachers in our recent history, made a profession of living according to God’s Word, but actually lived a double life. Whoever they were, Paul gives us three distinguishing marks that show us how we, as citizens of God’s kingdom, are not to live:

A. Citizens of this earth are enemies of the cross of Christ.

The cross of Christ is the central principle of the gospel and of the Christian life. “For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18). The cross humbles human pride, because it shows us that our good works are not able to make us right with a holy God. It shows us that we cannot save ourselves from God’s righteous judgment. It shows that we cannot even help God out, because we are not saved by our merit, but only by the worthiness of the Lord Jesus and His shed blood. To come to the cross for salvation means that we must abandon all hope in our ability to commend ourselves to God and we must trust completely in the merits of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Enemies of the cross diminish its value by emphasizing human worth or merit in addition to what Christ did on the cross. They lift up fallen man and bring down the holy God, thus shortening the “mighty gulf that God did span at Calvary.” One prominent enemy of the cross says, “If Christ died for me, I must be of
infinite value in God's sight” (Robert Schuller, Self-Esteem: The New Reformation [Word], p. 74). This man redefines our sinfulness. He says, “... our rebellion is a reaction, not our nature. By nature we are fearful, not bad. Original sin is not a mean streak; it is a nontrusting inclination” (p. 67). He explains that the core of original sin “could be considered an innate inability to adequately value ourselves. Label it a ‘negative self-image,’ but do not say that the central core of the human soul is wickedness” (ibid.). He goes on to say, “To be born again means that we must be changed from a negative to a positive self-image—from inferiority to self-esteem, from fear to love, from doubt to trust” (p. 68). He even has the audacity to twist the Lord’s Prayer, claiming that we can now pray, “Our Father in heaven, honorable is our name” (p. 69, emphasis his)!

The amazing thing is that this man is welcomed into evangelical circles as being completely orthodox. On the book jacket is a glowing endorsement from the president of a major evangelical seminary, as well as a recommendation from a prominent Southern Baptist preacher who tells us that the theology is traditional! Test all theology and self-help books by this: Does it diminish or elevate the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ? The cross means death to our pride.

B. Citizens of this earth are heading for eternal punishment.

“Whose end is destruction” (3:19). Paul is referring to eternal punishment, not to some temporal judgment. Destruction does not mean annihilation, that these sinners are wiped out by God so that they cease to exist. The uniform teaching of Scripture is that those who reject God’s mercy at the cross will be cast into the lake of fire where they will endure eternal punishment (John 3:16; Rev. 20:10, 15). Thus destruction means eternal ruin or loss. While this is not an easy or pleasant teaching, it is the clear teaching of the Lord Jesus (Mark 9:42-48). If you struggle with this, I encourage you to read Jonathan Edwards’ sermon, “The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners” (The Works of Jonathan Edwards [Banner of Truth], 1:668-679), where he argues that sin against God is a violation of infinite obligations and therefore is an infinitely heinous crime, deserving of infinite punishment.

C. Citizens of this earth live for the things of this earth.
Their “god is their appetite” (3:19), which means that they live for selfish and sensual pleasures, rather than denying self in order to live for Christ. The Bible does not promote asceticism, the self-imposed denial of all pleasure as a means of purifying oneself and getting right with God. Rather, it teaches that God has richly supplied us with all things to enjoy (1 Tim. 6:17). But if we remove God from the center as the chief object of our joy and replace it with some earthly pleasure, we are guilty of idolatry.

These false teachers gloried “in their shame” (3:19). They boasted in their supposed “freedom,” when in reality they were slaves to their lusts. Many well-known Christians today glory in things they should be ashamed of, writing books and appearing on TV talk shows to tell titillating stories about their sinful “addictions.”

Further, they “set their minds on earthly things” (3:19). One form this takes in our day is our emphasis on how Christ can make you happy in the here and now. He can give you peace, joy, and a happy marriage. He can solve all your problems. So people come to Jesus and find out that they have trials and persecutions, as the Bible clearly promises, so they bail out. Obviously, we all have earthly things that consume our time and energy: jobs, bills to pay, houses to maintain, family problems, health problems, etc. But the point is, the true Christian does not put earthly comfort and happiness at the center of his life. We should put Christ and our hope of being with Him in heaven at the center, and that enables us to deal properly with the earthly problems we all encounter. Setting our minds on Christ and the things above is the key to dealing with sin and relational problems (Col. 3:1-17).

So, Paul’s point is that as citizens of heaven, Christians are not to live as citizens of this earth, who are enemies of the cross of Christ, who are headed for eternal destruction, who live for the things of this earth. Remember, these people were in the church, making a profession of knowing Christ, but they were not truly converted to Christ.

Two practical applications before we move on: (1) Don’t be turned from the truth of the gospel because of the presence of hypocrites in the church. Just because there are counterfeit dollar bills doesn’t mean that you give up earning and spending money. There are coun-
terfeits because the real thing is worth imitating. Satan has always made sure that there are counterfeit Christians who talk as if they’re true believers, but whose lives belie that fact. But the existence of hypocrites does not deny the reality of the truth. Even true Christians will disappoint you, because as we saw last week, they’re all in process, which means, they still sin. But Christianity centers on the person of Jesus Christ, not on Christians.

(2) Deeds are a more certain evidence of what people truly are than their words. Jesus said that we can spot false prophets, wolves in sheep’s clothing, by their fruit or deeds (Matt. 7:15-20). Paul warned of those who “profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient, and worthless for any good deed” (Titus 1:16). Again, this does not mean that believers are sinless. But, if a true believer sins, he will make it right by confessing that sin, asking forgiveness, and seeking to rectify the problem. Look at the walk, not the words.

Enough about the wrong way to live. Let’s focus on the right way to live:


Just as being a citizen of Rome meant that you lived differently than those lacking such a privilege, so being a citizen of heaven means that you live distinctly, representing your native land in this alien land where you are temporarily staying. Three things distinguish the citizens of heaven:

A. Citizens of heaven follow godly examples.

“Join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us” (3:17). Paul is not being egotistical. It is a false humility that denies the truth by saying, “Well, I’m really not worth imitating.” Paul knew that he lived with integrity before God. He also just admitted that he was still in the process of coming to know Christ and the power of His resurrection (3:12-14), so he is not implying that he is sinlessly perfect. But his life was an example of how believers should live. He also adds that there were others, probably referring to Timothy, Epaphroditus, and men like them who walked with God. Such men show us in practical ways how we should walk with God, how we should deal with relationships, etc.
The most helpful source for spiritual growth for me, apart from studying the Bible, has been reading the biographies of men of God. The summer of 1970 was a turning point in my walk with God because of reading *George Muller of Bristol*, by A. T. Pierson. That book showed me in human form a man who lived by faith, prayer, and obedience to the Word. Since then I've been helped immensely to read the lives of John Calvin, Martin Luther, Jonathan Edwards, Adoniram Judson, C. H. Spurgeon, Hudson Taylor, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Francis Schaeffer, and many others. I have an article in print on this as well as a bibliography if you’re interested.

B. Citizens of heaven eagerly wait for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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 Galatians, which deals with a particular doctrinal matter, and the short books of Philemon and 2 & 3 John. While there may be debate over the particulars, there is no debate over the certainty of His bodily return. Just as He promised that He came the first time to die for our sins and kept His word, so He promised to return.

When He comes, it will be in power to rule and reign. Two things will happen. First, He will transform our “lowly bodies,” which are subject to disease and death and prone toward sin, into conformity to His resurrection body. This will involve not only an outward, physical transformation, in which we receive bodies not subject to disease and death; but also an inward, spiritual transformation, in which we are delivered finally and forever from all sin. If you wonder how God will do it, Paul simply states that it is by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.

That’s the second thing that will happen when Jesus comes: He will subject all things to Himself. If you are not willingly subject to Him, you will be forced into subjection to Him. His enemies will bow before Him. He will reign as King of kings and Lord of lords. Because of this, you should make certain that you are in submission to the Lord Jesus Christ now, so that He comes as your Savior, not as your Judge. It’s safe to say that the extent to which we wait for
His coming now reveals the condition of our hearts before Him. Citizens of heaven long for His appearing.

C. Citizens of heaven stand firm in the Lord in light of His coming.

As mentioned, 4:1 is really the conclusion of chapter 3: "Therefore" means, in light of this truth of His coming, stand firm in the Lord. Notice Paul’s tender heart for these people, whom he calls “my beloved brethren,” “my joy and my crown,” and again, “my beloved.” He longs to see them, and especially to see them standing firm in the Lord, not swayed by these false teachers. Remember, Christianity is knowing Christ Himself, and being found in Him. He is our wisdom, our righteousness, our sanctification, and our redemption (1 Cor. 1:30). He is our all in all (Col. 3:11). He is our sufficiency for every need, our refuge, our rock in times of trouble. Stand firm in the Lord!

CONCLUSION

Are you a citizen of heaven right now? You can only become such through birth, the new birth. Just as you could not do anything to bring about your physical birth, so you can do nothing to effect your spiritual birth. It must come from the Lord. Just as He is powerful to raise the dead and subject all things to Himself when He comes again, so He is powerful now to raise the dead spiritually and impart new life to all who call upon Him. He can even now take your rebellious heart and bring it into submission to Him through His mighty power. Scripture promises, “Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom. 10:13). Cry out to Him for the new birth.

Our text is especially a warning to those who profess to be Christians, but who really are living as citizens of this earth, living for self and pleasure, with no view to the coming of our Lord. I can think of nothing more tragic than to profess to be a Christian, to be involved in serving Christ, and to stand before Him one day and say, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?” only to hear the horrifying words, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.” (Matt. 7:22-23). Make sure your citi-
zenship is truly in heaven. Then live as a citizen of heaven, not as a citizen of this earth.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Can a professing Christian who is living in sin have assurance of salvation? Use Scripture to defend your answer.

2. Is it wrong to present the gospel by emphasizing the temporal benefits over and above the eternal?

3. How can a Christian who honestly is caught up with the things of this life gain a deeper love for the Lord’s return?

4. Many confuse grace with sloppy living and obedience with legalism. Why is this wrong (see Titus 2:11-14)?

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