

March 17, 2019 – Philippians 3:17-4:1

It's a pretty arrogant thing that Paul does in our Epistle lesson today. At least, it seems that way at first glance. *“Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.”* How many role models today could possibly say that and get away with it?

I mean, it's become trendy to do exactly the opposite. Athletes and movie stars say on a regular basis, “I am not a role model. I don't claim to be a role model. I don't want to be a role model.”

They usually say something like that shortly after they do something incredibly selfish or stupid. After they get arrested for drunk driving or suspended for steroid use or caught cheating on their spouse. And they're right. They shouldn't be a role model. But they usually still are anyway.

Then again, there are people who also embrace being a role model. Politicians love to point out all the wonderful things they've done and how we should all follow their example. Wealthy financial gurus will insist that they have the secret to making money.

And many popular pastors of the prosperity gospel have a nasty habit of doing this. “God has blessed me with so much because I did the things in my book. So buy my book, do those things, send me your money, and you will be blessed too.”

Thus, it can seem a little surprising or a little suspicious to hear Paul so brazenly saying, “Imitate me.” Make me your role model. Do what I do.

Were the Philippians desperate for good role models, like St Paul? To hear Paul tell it, not really. They were a strong healthy church. Most of Paul's letter to them is one of encouragement. Keep up the good work. Don't let the world slow you down. You're on the right path.

So why this command to imitate him? What do they have to gain if they're already doing such good work? And why assume that the way Paul is doing things is so much better than the way they're doing things? Isn't that a little arrogant?

Not really. Because to understand Paul's exhortation to imitate him, we have to understand what Paul wants them to imitate. And, unfortunately, that section isn't in our reading for today. This is actually only half of this particular section.

The other half occurs just before this, in the first part of chapter 3. Where Paul does a really wonderful job listing off all his accomplishments. All of the reasons why he could claim to be better than them.

The church in Philippi is mostly Greek Gentile converts to Christianity. Men and women who knew nothing about God's Word before Paul came to them. Many of them weren't and still aren't circumcised, as all good Jewish men would be.

Whereas, Paul was circumcised on the eighth day, as commanded by Moses, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews. He was a Pharisee, who knew God's Word inside and out. He was so zealous for the Lord that he was put in charge of persecuting the church, before his conversion to Christianity. He was as righteousness and blameless under the Law as a person can be.

Is that what they're supposed to imitate? No. No, Paul rejects all of that. He says, *“Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ.”*

That is what Paul is telling them. Imitate me... in counting every good thing you've ever done as rubbish. Worthless. Filth. A pile of dung. None of it matters. Imitate that.

Kinda changes things, doesn't it? Paul is not being arrogant. Paul is not encouraging them to be arrogant. Quite the opposite. Paul is being humble and contrite. Paul is encouraging them to be humble and contrite. Because if there's one thing that every good Christianity needs to hear, it's that you are not a good Christian.

Let me repeat that: every good Christian needs to know that they are not a good Christian. That's really Paul's core message here. The more you focus on your own goodness, the further you go from Christ's goodness. Until eventually, you become an enemy of God. You become an enemy of the cross of Christ.

And there's a very simple reason for that. In order to focus on your own goodness, you must focus on your own body. Your own earthly life.

But your earthly life doesn't have much good to focus on, really. Not "good" in a divine sense. Not "good" in an eternal sense. Your earthly life ends in destruction. It ends in death. It ends in failure to keep God's Law. Why would you want to take pride in something that's doomed to fail?

Your earthly life is full of false gods. And they all revolve around your belly. I love that verse. And it's not just because I know a thing or two about having a belly. No, this isn't a fat joke here. Paul is making the rather profound observation: There is no way for us to truly love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Because, in the end, we still have bellies to fill.

We still have daily physically needs that must be met. And those needs will always be a higher priority to us than serving the Lord. We can't help but be slaves to our physically needs. We can't help but be constantly tempted to seek luxury and pleasure and physical security. Such that, eventually, all those needs and wants and desires becomes idols. And our god is our belly.

Of course, most of the world doesn't find anything wrong with that. In fact, most of the world considers it a virtue. They would say that we should seek out luxury and pleasure and physical security. We should be ruled by our passions. We should enjoy the immorality of lust and enjoy the happiness of greed and enjoy the thrill of hatred.

And, of course, such perversions are excused by saying things like, "I'm not hurting anyone." And, "I earned it." And, "They deserve it." But it boils down to the same message: That we should glory in our shame, with minds set on earthly things.

That, my friends, is not the way of Christ. Nor was it the way of St Paul. Nor that of those who walked according to the example we should follow.

Following the example of the St Paul and the Apostles – imitating them – has nothing to do with how good you are. Because being good on earth means keeping your eyes focused entirely on earth. And earth is where evil happens.

Earth is where we must feed and clothe and shelter frail bodies of flesh. Earth is where we let sin run rampant in our lives and glory in that which we should be ashamed of. Earth is where we die. Our bodies are made of earth. And to earth they will return. There's very little good about earthly things.

Rather, we focus our minds on things above. On heavenly things. On the things of Christ, prepared for us by him.

We focus our minds on our citizenship in heaven. Bought for us by the blood of Christ on the cross. Prepared for us even now as we await his second coming.

We focus our minds on our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Who will transform our sinful, lowly bodies, to be like his glorious body. Who has the power to subject all things to himself. Even this sinful earth. So that it becomes the paradise once again that it was always meant to be.

We focus our minds not on earthly things, but on heavenly things. Because our eternity is in heavenly things. These bodies that we must constantly feed. These bodies that are tempted by shameful things. These bodies will one day die. But we will not die. Because our Lord has something heavenly in store for us.

So until then we do... what? Nothing? Do we just sit around like monks pondering the mysteries of heaven? Avoiding the world so that we don't sin?

No. No, it turns out that there is one earthly thing, and only one earthly thing, that Paul still values. That Paul still takes pride in. That Paul still calls his joy and his crown.

And that is the brothers he's talking to in the city of Philippi. The brothers and sister of the church there that he loves and longs for. The people he shared the good news of Jesus Christ with. Those are his joy and his crown.

Those people are what made life worth living for St Paul. Because if he could take one enemy of the cross of Christ and turn them into a citizen of heaven, then that made all this time on earth worthwhile to him.

That's what makes all this time on earth worthwhile to us as well. Paul worked to be someone that those men and women could imitate, so that they would know the joy of their savior. We too work toward that goal.

We work to share the good news of God's salvation. The good news that this earthly life is not all there is. The good news that everything I have done is worth nothing compared to what Christ has done for me. So that we too might find our joy and our crown in the brothers and sisters who become citizens of heaven alongside of us. Amen.