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Living the Jesus Life: Stand Firm in the Lord

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TEXT: Philippians 3:17 – 4:1 (ESV)

Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. 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. 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.

Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

Dear friends:

When George Shultz was Secretary of State during Ronald Reagan's administration, he kept a large globe in his office. When newly-appointed ambassadors had an interview with him and when ambassadors returning from their posts for their first visit with him were leaving his office, he would test them. He would say, "You have to go over to my globe and prove to me that you can identify your country." They would go over, spin the globe, and put their finger on the country to which they were sent. When Shultz' old friend, and former Senate Majority Leader, Mike Mansfield was appointed ambassador to Japan, even he was put to test. This time, however, Ambassador Mansfield spun the globe and put his hand on the United States, and he said "That's my country." Years later, in 1993, Shultz related the story to Brian Lamb on C-SPAN's *Book Notes*, and he said "You know, I've told that story subsequently to all the ambassadors going out, and

I say to them, 'Never forget: you're over there in that country, but your country is the United States. You're there to represent us take care of our interests, and never forget it. You're representing the best country in the world.'

We get some instruction like that today from the apostle Paul in today's passage. As a person living the Jesus life in this world, how is one to conduct himself or herself as a citizen of Heaven, or as an "ambassador for Christ," as Paul describes Jesus followers in another letter? Well, Paul relates to us three things today. The first thing he says is, "Follow my lead." He says, "Brothers and sisters, imitate me, my conduct, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us." He's saying "follow our pattern," (Timothy and Paul's). He's not claiming superiority here and he's not being egotistical about himself, he's just mentoring them in order to help them mature all the more into effective disciples of Jesus. That's how the rabbis and teachers taught in those days. "Watch me, do when I do," they'd say. Paul understood this principle I came across in a leadership magazine a while back: "we teach what we know, we reproduce what we are." In this case Paul is saying, like he said to another congregation called the Corinthians, "Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ." Paul's life was that of God's obedient servant – walking in the footsteps of Jesus with humility, sacrificial love, and obedience to God's commands. And Paul is saying "So keep your eyes on me and on those who are mature in the faith, who are 'walking the talk.'"

Now, for me personally, I can't help but thinking about Pastor Homer Larsen, my predecessor, who was like that for me: instructing me and modeling for me along the way what it meant to be an ambassador for Christ and a preacher of the gospel. He was such a blessing in my life. Howard Hendricks, a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, wrote in his book for Promise Keepers entitled *Men of Integrity*, this wonderful little statement. He said,

Every man should seek to have three individuals in his life: a Paul, a Barnabas, and a Timothy. First, a Paul: and older man who's willing to mentor you, to build into your life. Not someone who's smarter or more gifted than you, but somebody who's been down the road; somebody willing to share his strengths and weaknesses, everything he's learned in the laboratory of life; somebody whose faith you'll want to imitate. And you need a Barnabas: a brother, someone who loves you but is not impressed by you, who can hold you accountable. And then you need a Timothy: a younger man into whose life you're building.

Here's Paul, he is the quintessential mentor to Timothy, building into life of his protégé, affirming, encouraging, teaching, correcting, directing, and praying; three important relationships for any Christian. We need a "Paul."

The second bit of instruction that Paul gives us in this passage today is, "Follow me but don't follow their lead." Now, we have to find out who are "they". They are others who you don't want to imitate, that Paul describes with "tears" he says – perhaps because they started out together in ministry and these individuals have fallen along the way. He said, "For many walk as enemies of the cross of Christ." These are professing Christians who have thrown off all restraints. By their lawless lives they've become enemies of the cross and the new life in Jesus Christ that should issue from it. They profess Christ with their mouths but their lives are so degenerate that it's clear to Paul that they have never been regenerated by the gospel. Their attitudes and actions pose a danger to the church, and their example and attitude could lead to the ruin of other believers who might be easily influenced. Paul says, "Their god, you see, is their belly."

He's describing people who we call "sensualists", who indulge their physical appetites without restraint. They're idolaters, they are worshiping themselves and their selfish desires, and not God. Paul talks about these people in another place, in Romans 16. He says, "They serve their own appetites, and by their smooth talk they deceive the heart of the naïve." Or we read in 2 Timothy 3:

But understand this: that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. People will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, love of pleasure rather than love of God, having the appearance of godliness but denying its power. Avoid these people.

Here he says their glory is in their shame. They actually celebrated, exalted in what they ought to have been ashamed of. Sometimes people take this newfound freedom in the gospel of Christ and use it as a license to do whatever they feel like, to satisfy their appetites. Paul described a situation like that in 1 Corinthians, he said, "I hear that you have someone in your church who is sleeping with his father's wife and you are arrogant about it, you're boasting about it. Ought you not, rather, to mourn and have that individual removed from among you?" In Romans 6 he addresses this question: "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we, who died to sin, still live in it?" Paul then says not only do they exalt what they should be

ashamed of, he says their minds are set on earthly things, their whole attention is fixed on physical, material interests, and not the kingdom of God. Maybe you've heard the statement "he's so heavenly-minded he is no earthly good"? Well here we have just the opposite: he's so earthly-minded he's no heavenly good.

And then Paul tells of their future, their eternity. Their end is destruction. Their ultimate end is being eternally lost. It brings to mind to me a story that I think is apropos here:

A Hunter raised his rifle and took aim at a large bear. When he was about to pull the trigger the bear spoke in a soft, soothing voice, "Isn't it better to talk than shoot? What do you want? Let's negotiate the matter."

Lowering his rifle, the Hunter said, "I want a fur coat."

"Good," said the bear, "that's a negotiable question. I want only a full stomach, so let us negotiate a compromise."

They sat down to negotiate, and after a time the bear walked out alone into the dense woods. The negotiations, you see, had been successful. The bear had a full stomach and the devoured hunter had his fur coat.

Satan is deceitful, you see. He wants us to negotiate the truth of God's commandments. You can be eternally lost, Paul says, if you follow the lead of those individuals he's just been describing for us.

Third, ultimately Paul says follow Heaven's lead. Remember whose you are: Jesus Christ's. He says, "But *our*..." (and that "our" is emphatic), "But our citizenship is in Heaven. Remember whose you are, that your citizenship lies in Heaven. That's where we're headed; that's who we belong to: our God in Heaven. And we await a Savior, he says, the Lord, meaning God, Jesus Christ, the son of God. "Christ" is the title of a messianic king; He's the anointed one besides, He's God, the messianic King.

The Philippians would understand this line of thinking, talking about citizenship, for they were a colony themselves of Rome. For many, that would be a point of pride. They would have the rights and privileges as citizens in Rome, even though most of them maybe had never even been there. And they also had a responsibility to act as good citizens of Rome, to be obedient to the laws of Rome, to honor the emperor. So Paul, when he uses that citizenship analogy to describe living your lives as citizens of Heaven, would really ring true for them, as he describes living as the church in the world. That's us, he's saying, we're a colony of Heaven. That's where our ultimate

citizenship is. We belong to God, we represent Christ in the world. We are ambassadors for Christ and our ultimate allegiance is to Christ alone: serving Him, walking in His footsteps. As Paul writes in Ephesians 5: "Be imitators of God as beloved children and walk in love as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God." We're the citizens.

As citizens, we are people with a very promising future, Paul tells us here. He says when Jesus reappears in power, He will transform our lowly bodies to be like His glorious body. Think of that! We are going to have transformed bodies like the resurrected Jesus; bodies that are no longer weak and disintegrating, but new and eternal. And Paul says He'll do that for us by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself. Jesus has power over all things, Paul is saying, Has the last word over everything. Like Paul says earlier in his letter: the day is coming when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, God, He has the last word. Amen!

"Therefore, my beloved, whom I love as citizens," Paul says, "here's how I want you to live: stand firm in the Lord." We, as followers of Christ Jesus, are called to holy living, set apart for Christ alone. Stand firm in the gospel and in that citizenship as heavenly citizens. Have total allegiance to Jesus and His kingdom, "seeking first the kingdom of God," walking obediently with Jesus. A Jesus follower, you see is to be a "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done" person for the rest of your days. And it begins with you giving Him absolute sway over all your life. "May Your kingdom come and Your will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven." Beginning with me; I want to live for You, Jesus. It means longing to see his kingdom come when Jesus reappears, and in the meantime longing to see His will done all over the world while we wait for that great day.

It also means by "Your will be done beginning with me." Christian writer Dorothy Sayers one time wrote, "It is not the business of the church to adapt Christ to men, but men to Christ." How true it is. And that's what Paul is talking about here, that's what he's shooting for: that our lives be lives that are adapted to Christ, to His kingdom values, having His character in us: doing the things that He would Do, loving as He has loved us.

So there you have another bit of helpful instruction from the apostle Paul in living the Jesus life once again. If you are trusting in Jesus Christ for eternal life, which I truly

hope you are because you don't want to miss out on that, may you stand firmly attached to that Savior who gave Himself for you. And live each day, and every day, with this one desire: Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, in my life, in Your church, and on Your Earth, as it is in Heaven. For all the power and all the glory belong to You, Jesus, forever and ever.

Amen.