

Philippians 3:17-4:1 Brothers, join together in imitating me and in paying attention to those who are walking according to the pattern we gave you. ¹⁸To be sure, many walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. I told you about them often, and now I am saying it while weeping. ¹⁹Their end is destruction, their god is their appetite, and their glory is in their shame. They are thinking only about earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven. We are eagerly waiting for a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹By the power that enables him to subject all things to himself, he will transform our humble bodies to be like his glorious body. ^{4:1}So then, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, in this way keep standing firm in the Lord, my dear friends.

It's interesting to me how the Bible often uses some posture that our bodies might be in to describe a deeper spiritual truth. Take Psalm 1 for example, "**How blessed is the man who does not walk in the advice of the wicked, who does not stand on the path with sinners, and who does not sit in a meeting with mockers.**" Walking, standing, sitting. I'll save walking for just a little bit.

To stand with someone in this context means to show agreement or support for them. We do that in English. We might say, "I stand with (fill in whatever political cause you support)." Obviously every human being is a sinner, but the Psalmist is emphasizing that this is the way that they want to live their lives. I can't be a believer while simultaneously supporting people who hate what God's Word says.

To sit in someone's company shows that we like being around them. It's good for us to join together as brothers and sisters in the faith. Mockers are people who openly and publicly mock God and everything he says. Once again, I can't be a believer and hang out with people like that at the same time. In this text Paul uses the picture of standing again. We won't let ourselves get blown all over the place by false teaching, but we will be firmly planted in our God and in his Word. Keep Standing Firm in the Lord. Be careful who you imitate and look forward to your real home.

Paul's letter to the Philippians has been called his epistle of joy because he uses words like joy and rejoice over and over again. From a human standpoint it would seem like he would have very little to be joyful about. He was not a free man. Actually he hadn't been for several years. The Jewish leaders had tried to murder him in Jerusalem. When the Romans got wind of that he was safely moved to Caesarea. Paul's trial went nowhere so he used his right as a Roman citizen to appeal to Caesar himself.

If you want to upset a pastor, keep him away from his people. When everything shut down for the pandemic I couldn't be around my people anymore. Don't get me wrong, I enjoyed spending more time with my family. But I couldn't help thinking in particular of my shut ins who were isolated. Even if I had to wear a mask, I could still see them. Paul had been kept from his people for way longer than that. That had to eat at him.

But his joy was in knowing that God's people were still living like God's people even if he couldn't be with them. The Philippians put their faith into practice and used this as an opportunity to show their love for Paul by sending supplies for him while he was under house arrest. I remember the joy I felt when our offerings actually went up during Covid even though people had their own financial challenges. The Word still worked!

So it is almost shocking to hear Paul say, "**I told you about them often, and now I am saying it while weeping.**" What in the world could bring Paul to tears in the middle of his epistle of joy? It's because he knew that even though the Philippians were living faithfully, there are many people who weren't. Right before that he said, "**¹⁸To be sure, many walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.**"

In the Scriptures that picture of walking is used to describe the way a person conducts their life. We use that sometimes in English too when we say things like, "Don't just talk the talk, but walk the walk." In other words, don't tell me something and then do the exact opposite. Why should I take what you say seriously when not even you are willing to follow it?

So what does it mean to be "**enemies of the cross of Christ**"? Some would be those who simply do not want to accept Jesus as their Savior. Maybe they reject this whole idea of sin and the consequences of sin altogether. Maybe, like so many, Jesus isn't enough. It's great that you believe in him, but you also have to do something else to get yourself into heaven. They would never think of themselves as enemies of Christ's cross, but if Christ isn't enough, you are taking glory from him and giving it to yourself.

It also helps to look at the way Paul describes them, "**¹⁹Their end is destruction, their god is their appetite, and their glory is in their shame. They are thinking only about earthly things.**" So they aren't just enemies of the cross that Christ hung on but also the crosses that God calls on every believer to bear. That's not trying to help earn our salvation. It's because living like a believer will automatically bring us into conflict in this world.

Jesus said, **“If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.”** The people Paul is describing have no interest in denying themselves anything. They will live whatever way they want to live. The more that they give into every sinful craving that happens to pop into their heads, the happier they are. Sometimes you even hear Christians say, “God wants you to be happy.” That is, at best, unclear. God wants you to be his. He wants you to live forever. If happiness means sinning, that is the last thing that he wants you to do.

Instead Paul says, **“Brothers, join together in imitating me and in paying attention to those who are walking according to the pattern we gave you.”** He isn’t claiming to be perfect, far from it. But ever since he was brought to faith, he was more than willing to take up his cross and follow his Savior. If that meant being arrested, jailed, beaten, or whatever for the sake of Christ’s name, then so be it.

None of us saw Paul’s example face-to-face, although we certainly have seen it in the book of Acts. But God has given us examples to follow in our own lives. The writer to the Hebrew Christians talked about some of them, **“Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Carefully consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.”**

I think of some of the examples I had in my life. I think of my grandfather who confirmed me. He gave me a glimpse of what the ministry would be like personally. My parents faithfully brought my sisters and me to church and encouraged me in my studies to be a pastor. I think of my supervising pastor when I was a vicar. I learned a lot from him and was privileged to perform his funeral. I’m sure you have examples like that too.

So now, let’s pay it forward as they say. Make your life a life worthy of imitating. I felt the best way I could thank my parents was by being a faithful father to my children. Then they will be equipped to do the same for my grandchildren, God willing. When you faithfully do your work even if your boss isn’t looking over your shoulder, you are preaching a powerful sermon to your coworkers. Let them see the love of your Savior through anything you say or do.

Keep Standing Firm in the Lord. Be careful who you imitate and look forward to your real home.

Paul doesn’t just say, “Imitate me!” with a frown on his face and shaking his fist. He always gives us the proper motivation to live like believers. Unlike the others who **“are thinking only about earthly things”** Paul reminds us that **“our citizenship is in heaven.”** I am happy to be a resident of Vassar in the great state of Michigan in the United States of America. Sure, things can get a little weird from time to time, but there’s no place I’d rather be.

As nice as it is to live here, this isn’t my real home. The Bible pictures us as wandering nomads, traveling from place to place until we reach our real, eternal home in heaven. It is God himself who made us citizens of heaven. Jesus said, **“Amen, Amen, I tell you: Anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He is not going to come into judgment but has crossed over from death to life.”**

In the Gospel lesson for today Jesus said, **“I will reach my goal.”** His goal was the cross just outside Jerusalem. He wanted to go there because he knew that only through his sacrifice could we be forgiven and made citizens of heaven. He wasn’t going to let either the earthly rulers or the spiritual rulers back then stop him. By reaching his goal, we all have been brought to our goal—heaven itself.

So no wonder Paul says next, **“We are eagerly waiting for a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.”** That does bring up a question: are you eagerly looking forward to Judgment Day? How often do you even think about it? Sadly sometimes we might even look at it as an inconvenience because we certainly wouldn’t want him to return before a relative graduates or get married or whatever.

If we think that way then aren’t we **“thinking only about earthly things”**? As wonderful as it is when someone graduates from college or finds a God-fearing spouse and get married, what are those things compared to eternal glory in heaven? Someone might have a degree, but it doesn’t help if the only job they can find involves asking, “Would you like fries with that?” Even marriage has its ups and downs. When you have two sinners living in close proximity to each other, sin will occur.

This week has really reminded me of how eager I am for our Lord’s return. One of our members was the victim of violence—a murder-suicide. I’ve seen the looks of shock, pain, and anger on the faces of the family. It just reminds us what the sinful nature is truly capable of. I just want to go home, not over there, but to my real home in heaven. Things like sin, death, and pain will be impossible there. There we will truly be happy forever basking in the glory and the love of our Savior-God.

Paul gives us a glimpse, just a taste, of what is waiting for us upon Jesus’ return, **“²¹By the power that enables him to subject all things to himself, he will transform our humble bodies to be like his glorious**

body.” This is one of those passages where my soul cries out with that good, Lutheran question, “What does this mean?” And my mind can only respond by saying, “I’m not sure, but it’s going to be awesome!”

So what do we know about Jesus’ glorious body? Well, we saw it on Transfiguration Sunday as Jesus appears in his full glory as true God. We saw the prophets Moses and Elijah there, shining in that exact same glory. We will see Jesus after his resurrection on Easter Sunday. Those wounds from the cross are still there, not causing him pain, but remaining as proof of our forgiveness. We will see him ascend into heaven where he lives and rules over everything for us.

So we can look at Moses and Elijah and say, “We’ll be something like that.” We will be what God wanted us to be ever since the sixth day of creation. There won’t be sickness or growing old. Nothing will ever make us sad again. This won’t be just for a day or two, or maybe a couple of years. It will be eternal. Time will be meaningless. In this life we’re always waiting for the second shoe to drop. In heaven neither one will.

In the end of this text Paul shows how this knowledge changes our relationship with each other while we wait patiently but eagerly for that day to come. **“^{4:1}So then, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, in this way keep standing firm in the Lord, my dear friends.”** Look at those terms of endearment that Paul piles up: brothers, love, long for, joy, crown, dear friends.

These words and many others brought me comfort as I traveled from Wisconsin to Michigan to be your pastor four years ago. I didn’t really know any of you, but I knew I was going to people who believe what the Bible says and are legitimately trying to put what it says into practice in their lives. I knew that was true because you called me to preach and administer the sacraments faithfully. It has been an honor to get to know you individually and become a part of this family of believers.

I’ve seen that love clearly this week. So many people have been asking about the Torrez family and how they can help. That’s just one of the ways that God brings blessings even out of unimaginable tragedies like this. God’s people don’t have to be told twice, or even once for that matter. Christian love moves them to spring into action. That’s so wonderful, but don’t just wait for something like that. Look for opportunities daily to live in Christian love for each other.

Keep Standing Firm in the Lord. Be careful who you imitate and look forward to your real home. If it was up to us to stand firm in the Lord by ourselves, we wouldn’t have a chance. But God works through his Word and Sacraments to keep us standing firm in him until the day comes when all that opposition will be taken away and we will stand in the presence of our Lord forever.