

CHOOSING THE RIGHT ROLE MODEL PHILIPPIANS 3:17-21

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The way that students who go off to college live their first year away from home often reveals a lot about the future course of their lives. I lived in a dormitory for three years at a public university. Three times I saw a new set of freshmen come into the dorms. For most of them it was the first time that they had lived away from their parents. It was a fascinating experience to watch how these freshmen responded to their new independence. Some remained fairly disciplined and conservative in their lifestyles. Many began exploring the limits of their newfound freedom.

One guy stands out in my mind. Leonard started college the same year that I did and lived just a few doors down the hall. He came from a conservative Christian background. His parents seemed to have set definite limits for Leonard when he was living at home. Church had been a big part of his life, and Leonard professed to be a born-again Christian.

When Leonard got to college, he began to cautiously explore his newfound freedom. In a secular college dormitory, there was a lot of pressure to try things like alcohol and drugs and sex. Today, unfortunately, more of that experimentation happens in high school years and even earlier.

One weekend night Leonard went with some other guys from the dorm to a bar. I don't think that he had ever been in a bar before, and it did not seem to him like such a bad place. He went some more on weekends and started having a few drinks. Back in that ancient history alcohol could be purchased at age 18.

Leonard did not see that there was anything sinful about having a drink or two. But then he decided that he would like to see what it was like to get drunk. So he tried that. He discovered that getting drunk loosened him up, and other people thought that he was pretty funny after he had a few drinks. Getting drunk started to be a regular weekend activity.

A bit later Leonard decided to check out what the female gender was all about. So he tried to get to know some college coeds. He found them to be enjoyable company. But things went a little further than what he had been taught at home and at church. By his second year in college Leonard was well on his way to becoming an alcoholic, and he was unwisely involved with women. His academic life suffered, and he had to drop out of school. In the last contact that I had with Leonard a few years after that he had a child and a messed up marriage and a definite problem with alcohol.

Finding the balance between rules and freedom can be a tough job, not only for young people moving away from home for the first time but also for adults entering the Christian life. The New Testament does include certain rules and boundaries, but it also speaks of freedoms. The temptation is to move toward one extreme or the other. The main threat that the Apostle Paul in #3 of Philippians saw to the church in that city in Greece in the first century was legalism. Jews who claimed to be followers of Jesus were encouraging Christians to live up to an outmoded Mosaic Law and the Jewish traditions that went along with it. They were trying to move Christians away from the gospel of grace.

In the passage before us today Paul indicates that there were other people at Philippi, probably claiming to be Christians, who had swung toward the opposite extreme. They had become libertines; that is, they had rejected most rules and were focused upon enjoying freedom. Perhaps they bought into the idea that salvation is a gift received by grace through faith. If I am promised eternal life and have the guarantee of heaven, why not have lots of fun in the meantime. So in vv. 17-21 of #3 the apostle tells the Philippian church, and us as well, why we ought to avoid the temptation that comes from libertinism, the temptation to focus on liberty to the exclusion of rules and responsibilities.

I.

In v. 17 the author first mentions THE IMPORTANCE OF A GOOD EXAMPLE. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE IMPORTANCE OF A GOOD EXAMPLE) He writes, **“Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.”** In Jewish education, more so than in Greek and Roman education, there was an emphasis placed upon students becoming like their teachers in character and behavior. Modern public education tends to follow the Roman and Greek models today. Education is too often focused upon simply communicating information.

We need to also remember that at the time when Paul was writing this letter, there was no New Testament. There was no manual for church doctrine and procedures. There were no Christian bookstores where church people could go and read up on Christian subjects. The Old Testament was available to some. That was helpful in many areas. But the death and resurrection of Jesus and the formation of the church made some aspects of the Old Testament no longer applicable. So understanding how local churches should operate and how Christians should live was still a work in progress.

That is why apostles and prophets were so important in the early church. They communicated revelation from God about how Christians should live and how the church should operate. Their example, and the example of other mature Christians who were influenced by them, were essential for the development of Christians and churches.

Paul begins in v. 17 by making mention of the example of his own life. At the end of the verse he uses the plural pronoun “us.” Timothy and Epaphroditus were both with Paul in

Rome. They had both been involved at the church at Philippi. Both of them were now returning to that congregation. Paul must have had at least these two individuals, along with himself, in mind when he spoke about good examples.

Today we don't have to depend upon apostles and prophets for revelation from God and instructions about how to live the Christian life. We have the New Testament, which records the revelation and inspired instruction that they received. But good examples are always powerful teaching tools. Those of us who have children and grandchildren are often reminded of that, as we see mannerisms and personalities that are reflective of us.

Part of the reason that our society has problems with juvenile delinquency and teen pregnancy and drug abuse is that too many kids grow up without having good examples to follow. Too many parents are absent. It appears that the young mass murderer in Texas this week had grown up, at least in recent years, without a dad. Other kids have parents who work long hours and have limited time with their kids. Then the next generation becomes parents, and they don't know how to be good parents. So just being a reasonably good parent and trying to follow Biblical guidelines can have a positive effect, not only on one's own kids but also on other parents who need good examples.

Paul's focus in our passage is upon having Christians choose good examples to follow. He wants believers to emulate Christians in the church and larger Christian community who have right doctrine and right behavior. In the following verses he sets up a contrast between two kinds of examples that people can choose to follow.

II.

In vv. 18 & 19 Paul describes people who are bad examples. He talks specifically about THE DESTINY OF LIBERTINES. (II. THE DESTINY OF LIBERTINES) He writes in v. 18, **“For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.”** It was obvious that those who did not associate themselves with Christianity did not live in accordance with Christian values. Philippian Christians did not need to be told that. It appears that Paul is referring here to people who claim to be followers of Jesus but who are not. They are actually enemies of the gospel.

Enemies of the cross of Christ can be one of two types. They can be doctrinal enemies or practical enemies. Doctrinal enemies are usually religious people. The most difficult people whom Jesus had to deal with in His early ministry were Pharisees. These were religious Jews who followed strict rules. Too often the rules they followed violated the spirit and even the letter of the Old Testament law. They refused to recognize that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament law and Old Testament prophecies.

Paul in this letter was dealing with the problem of Judaizers. These were Jews who had become followers of Jesus in some sense, But they insisted that Gentile Christians had to follow Jewish laws and traditions in order to be right with God. Trust in Jesus alone

and what He did by dying on the cross was not enough for one to be accepted by the God of the Bible.

The modern equivalent of the Judaizers would be many of the cults. Typically most of these cults claim to be followers of Jesus in some fashion. Often they call themselves Christians. Usually they do not accept the doctrine of the Trinity. They do not believe that Jesus was fully God. They do not believe that the death of Jesus on the cross was sufficient to pay the penalty for our sins. There is some kind of work or commitment or behavior which is necessary for us to get to heaven. Faith alone in Jesus is not enough. Some additional effort on the part of us humans is necessary to get us to be accepted by God.

There are other kinds of doctrinal enemies of the cross today who can be found in Christian churches and denominations. A research center at Arizona Christian University earlier this month released findings which they did of a scientific sampling of American pastors. They tried to determine how many pastors have what they called "a Biblical worldview." They took into account pastoral views of the authority of the Bible, the purpose of life, the proper operation of the family, the origin of life, the nature of sin, proper human lifestyles, and personal faith. In their analysis only 37% of American pastors have what they consider to be a Biblical worldview. Only 39% of pastors have a Biblical belief in the authority of Scriptures and the nature of truth and human morality. Other surveys have found that many mainline pastors do not believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, the virgin birth of Jesus, and the physical resurrection of Christ from the dead.

Paul's perspective, and God's perspective, is that such leaders who claim to be Christians but who deny fundamental truths of the faith are enemies of the cross. They are leading people astray and giving them a false sense of security. They are doctrinal enemies.

There are also practical enemies of the cross of Christ. These are people who may have correct doctrine on the basics of the faith, but they do not live according to their teaching. In our generation we can think of megachurch pastors who are discovered to have mistresses and TV evangelists who preach about the cross but who have lifestyles which rival the best secular materialists. They have multiple homes and have their own jets and collect huge salaries and have lavish lifestyles. They say, "Follow Jesus." Yet their example says, "Follow your lusts and desires." Jesus' commandment to take up your cross and follow me has little evidence in their lives.

The people whom Paul seems to be describing in our passage were both practical and doctrinal enemies of the cross. A few commentators argue that the Judaizers are primarily in view in vv. 18 & 19. But the language of v. 19 does not seem to fit with what we know of the Judaizers. The Judaizers were religious people who wanted Gentile Christians to follow the strict standards of the Jewish law. These Jewish Christians were probably moral people in most aspects of their behavior.

Paul in v. 19 appears to be talking about people who are wild in their lifestyle. He describes them in v. 19 as those whose **“end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.”** The expression “their god is their belly” may go back to a classic Greek writer by the name of Euripides. He had a character in one of his famous plays called the Cyclops. The Cyclops on one occasion says this, **“My flocks which I sacrifice to no one but myself and not to the gods, [but] to this my belly, the greatest of the gods; for to eat and drink each day, and to give one’s self no trouble, this is the god of wise men.”**

In Paul’s day there were people who would gorge themselves at a banquet, drink something that would make them throw up when they were full, and then start all over again. That was their idea of a good time.

Apparently there were people around who claimed to be Christians who were acting like that. They found some things about Jesus and His teaching that were appealing. They focused on what He said about forgiveness of sins and freedom from the law and a loving and gracious God to the exclusion of what Jesus taught about responsibility and right and wrong and judgment. Paul says about such people that **“they glory in their shame.”** They take pride in things for which they should be ashamed.

We don’t have to look very far to find examples of this kind of behavior today. Most of us can think of people who boast about how much they can eat or how much they can drink. When I was in college I had a roommate who would go to church late Saturday afternoon, go immediately afterward for supper in the school cafeteria, and spend the rest of the night drinking and smoking pot. He would stay in bed the next morning with a hangover. He was happy with this routine. He saw no inconsistency with this behavior of going to church to supposedly worship Jesus and then to go out and get wild. The truth was that this behavior was shameful. He was not really a Christian--- not so much because of his behavior, but rather because he had never trusted in Jesus as his Savior. I had talked about the gospel with him. He didn’t really believe it. His behavior was just a reflection of what he really believed.

There is a denomination today called the Metropolitan Community Churches, which describe themselves as a gay church and an LGBTQ church. Their members describe themselves as Christians, yet they celebrate a lifestyle which the Bible describes as contrary to God’s plan for humanity. Genuine Christians should have sympathy and compassion for those who struggle with their sexual identity. But people in this denomination take pride in something that is not right. Their glory is in their shame.

In the secular world in which we live, religion is no longer sacred. Choice is sacred. The right to choose our sexual identity, the right to choose divorce, the right to die, and the right to choose abortion are sacred. The heroes are women faced with difficult personal circumstances who choose to abort their babies. The heroes are individuals with painful diseases who choose to end their lives early. Their glory is in their shame.

Carl Trueman, a professor at Grove City College recently wrote a book entitled *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*. In it he speaks about the autonomous self. He argues that modern people have determined that we as individuals are in charge. We have the right to decide everything about ourselves, even our own gender identity. We have the right to decide what we do with our bodies and when we end our lives. Personal happiness and fulfillment are the proper goals in life.

Paul's response to the behavior which stems from that kind of thinking was not hatred, not homophobia, not hate speech, but sadness. **"For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ."** This attitude should be reflective of our response as well. We can be angry about government efforts to give immoral actions special protection. We can object to school districts which seek to indoctrinate our children about the choice that they should be able to have of choosing their own gender identity. But we should feel sadness and compassion toward the individuals who get caught up in this wrong thinking and wrong behavior.

What is the destiny of these libertines, these people who want to cast off all rules and simply satisfy their own wants? Verse 19 says that their end is destruction. Sometimes the destructive effects of an immoral lifestyle are seen on this side of the grave. Consider the possible results related to sexually transmitted diseases, divorce, drug abuse, abortion, and alcoholism.

Years ago our church in Connecticut had an outdoor concert in the town square. After the concert my brother and I brought an alcoholic who was laying around in a semiconscious state to the VA hospital about thirty miles away. He was a veteran. So the hospital had to take him in to dry out. This guy was probably around my age, but it looked like most of his real teeth were gone. He smelled. He looked a mess. He had been kicked out of the homeless shelter in town. His life was nearing destruction. I found out from a volunteer at the homeless shelter that the guy a few days later was back in the park again, apparently having left the hospital so he could have more alcohol. His god was his appetite. His end was seemingly destruction.

Ultimately the wages of sin for people like this who never turn to the God who is there will be received in the life to come. After an earthquake struck southern California in 1933, W. C. Fields supposedly remarked, **"We're crazy to live here, but there sure are a lot of us."** That is the attitude which many people have toward hell. How many times have you heard people say, "I would rather go to hell, because that is where all my friends will be anyway."

The friends may all be there, but that will do little to make the place more livable. Jesus in the gospels said more about hell than he did about heaven. In Matthew #25 v. 26 He called hell a place of eternal punishment. Those who die never having trusted in Jesus will not simply be burned up and have their conscious existence come to an end. Their punishment will be eternal. Revelation #20 v. 10 calls the final resting place of the lost

“a lake of fire and brimstone.” That verse says that the inhabitants of this lake of fire will be tormented day and night forever.

How could a loving God send people to such a place? Because people refuse to accept the gracious gift that this God provided in sending His Son to die on a cross for the forgiveness of their sins. This loving God is also a just God whose righteous and holy character demand punishment for evil.

III.

Does living by high standards at times seem too hard? Does the lifestyle of the libertine at times seem attractive? Don't follow it. It is the way of destruction. It promises life and happiness, but in the end it provides death. There is a better example and role model which we should choose. It is the example of the godly Christian. In vv. 20 & 21 Paul describes THE DESTINY OF CHRISTIANS. (III. THE DESTINY OF CHRISTIANS) In v. 20 Paul begins, **“But our citizenship is in heaven...”**

The word translated here as “citizenship” is not the usual term for “citizenship.” It is not the word that is used in the Book of Acts to describe Paul's status as a Roman citizen. Instead Paul uses a word here to describe a different situation. Some of the largest cities of the first century Roman Empire had residents who came from other parts of the world. These residents tended to live together in a particular section of the city, even as New York City and San Francisco have Chinatown and other ethnic communities. In some of the Roman cities these ethnic groups had their own local governments.

Jews were one of these groups of immigrants found in many Roman cities. Alexandria, Egypt, for example, had a large Jewish population with its own local government. The word that Paul used in v. 20 was the same one that was used to describe resident aliens like these. Resident aliens were members of a community who lived in a city that was not really their own. That is an accurate description of Christians, who have ultimate loyalties toward a place which is not in this world.

The term for citizenship also had special significance to the Philippians. (PHILIPPI MAP 2) For Philippi was a Roman colony, which meant that it had special privileges not available to most towns in the empire. Philippi had a form of government based on the kind used in the city of Rome. It operated on the basis of Roman law. A majority of its residents were also Roman citizens. Yet they were a long distance from Rome, and many of the Philippian citizens had never visited and never seen the object of their ultimate loyalties. That imagery also pictures our status as Christians. For we are citizens of a heavenly kingdom that we have not yet visited or seen. It is that place which is the object of our ultimate loyalties. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Do you ever feel at work or at school or in the neighborhood or even at family gatherings perhaps that you don't quite really fit--- that you don't totally belong? That may not be a bad thing. For we Christians are resident aliens. There is an old hymn that puts it this way: **“This world is not my home; I'm just a passing through. My treasures are laid up, Somewhere beyond the blue.”**

Meantime 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.**” There were some in Paul’s day who taught that the body is inherently bad and that only the soul is good. That is not taught by the Bible. There is a future for our bodies, though that future involves a transformation and a resurrection. Some day we will have a resurrection body that is similar to the resurrection body that Jesus received when He rose from the dead.

Knowing the destiny that we have as Christians, and knowing the destiny that awaits those who are libertines, we ought to choose to follow the example of those who lead godly lives. For that is the path to real joy and meaning in life. That is the road that leads to an eternal destiny of life and peace and joy.

As we consider our walk--- our life--- to see if it reflects our true destiny as Christians, there are three questions, or sets of questions, that we might ask ourselves. **First**, what is most important to me--- the temporal or the eternal, material things or spiritual things? What are my real priorities? If someone went through my checkbook, would he find evidence that my citizenship is in heaven? If someone looked at my Day-timer or my cell phone schedule, would he or she find evidence of Biblical priorities? If someone could eavesdrop on my conversations at work or at school or at home, could he find enough evidence to convict me of being a Christian?

Second, am I really looking forward to the Second Coming of Christ? Or am I so earthly-minded that I don’t really want Christ to come back right now? During my fourth year in seminary the thought went through my mind: What if Jesus returns before I graduate? My gut reaction was: After all of this work that I have put in for academic study, I would prefer that He waited until I graduate, or perhaps a little after that. When I was engaged to be married, I had the same thought. What if Jesus comes back before my wedding? I guess that would be OK. But I would really prefer that He would wait until after the honeymoon.

Third, do I control my body, or does my body control me? Are my physical appetites under control? God has given us food, sexuality, sleep as gifts that He intended for us to enjoy. But are they being enjoyed in their proper place? Do I live to eat, or do I eat to live? Do I use sex to get what I want, or to please my mate? Do I use sleep as an escape from reality? Are these things under proper control?

This world is not our ultimate destination. We should not get too comfortable here. Some day we will get to heaven and see Jesus--- if we have trusted Him as our Savior-- - and the thought of that ought to motivate us to pursue godliness, to choose the right role models.

In his book *Making Today Count for Eternity*, author Kent Crockett tells a story about William Montague Dyke. William Dyke was a young man who became blind when he was ten years old. Despite that handicap he grew to be an intelligent, witty, and

handsome man. While attending graduate school at Cambridge, William met the daughter of an English admiral. The two fell in love and were engaged to be married. Though he had never seen his bride, William loved her very much.

Shortly before the wedding the admiral brought his future son-in-law to an eye specialist, where he received treatment for his condition. He had to wear bandages over his eyes for a while. William insisted that he wanted the bandages removed during the wedding ceremony. If the treatment was successful, the first thing that he wanted to see was his wife's face.

As she came down the aisle of the church on that wedding day, William's father began to unwind the bandage from his head and eyes--- still not knowing if the medical procedure had been a success. The eye doctor was also present. He took out a scissors and cut off the last of the bandages. When those were removed, William looked into the face of his bride for the first time with eyes that could see. He said to his bride, **"You are more beautiful than I ever imagined."**

Some day we resident aliens are also going to see our king, and He is going to be better than we ever imagined. The prospect of that meeting ought to transform us. As the Apostle John said in his first epistle #3 v. 3, **"And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself just as He is pure."** Is our hope fixed on Him? Have we chosen the right role models? Are we living for things of eternal significance? As we close today, let's have a few moments of silent prayer as we reflect upon those questions. I will close in prayer in a moment.