



A Colony of Heaven

Philippians 3:17-4:1 | J. Austin Becton | August 6, 2017

“This isn’t right!” We’ve all thought this at one time or another. With the advent technology, mass and social media, and the interconnectedness of modern society the pangs and ripples of life in a broken world are felt by all. Touched by this brokenness—hate, violence, self-interest, greed, sin, death, evil—one cannot help but hope for something better...something new...something otherworldly. This morning, as you know, we are going to be looking at Philippians 3:17-4:1. We will be examining what it means to have our minds set on earthly things, to have our citizenship in heaven, and to stand firm in the Lord.

Earthly Things

We are going to begin with verses 18 and 19, we’ll circle back to v. 17 later. “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.” Paul refers to those “who set their minds on earthly things” as “enemies of the cross of Christ.” Seems a little extreme! But, what is he really getting at? First, there is much debate surrounding two of Paul’s phrases in v.19: “their god is in the bellies” and “their glory in their shame.” One camp says it refers to the Jewish dietary restrictions and laws along with the practice of circumcision. We will call this **religiosity**. The other camp claims that it refers to the sinful appetites of man, and their relishing in these appetites. We’ll refer to this as **revelry**. But, perhaps the crux of his point is revealed within the tension of the two camps. Paul synthesizes these two phrases into one when he says that their minds dwell on “earthly things.” In some form or other some were serving and finding satisfaction in things of this world, things within their sphere of control, things they could see, touch, and feel. “Earthly things.” Earthly things can be seized and controlled, as opposed to being outside our grasp of control. So, whether religiosity or revelry, we rely upon earthly things. For example, personally, I tend towards religiosity. Religiosity is ultimately about religious performance. If I do enough good, or punish myself enough, feel enough guilt, or if I repent frequently enough, practice all the right spiritual disciplines, serve with a selfless heart, never express negative emotions, always be joyful, hopeful, compassionate, pure, and so forth and so on, I will earn God’s approval and love. Paul calls all this performance “rubbish” or “dung” (Phil. 3:8). Not because the practices themselves are “bad,” but because of our disillusionment of control. Ultimately, I’ve said I am in control. It’s about what I can do, achieve, and accomplish. In this, I have replaced Jesus with myself, my finite work with his eternal work, and in turn I stand in opposition to the cross of Christ—as an enemy of the cross. I’m declaring, “I do not **need** the cross!” I can save and fix myself. I can repair my own brokenness and restore my humanity. The other side is revelry. Just as a note, I’m drawing poles here—I’m not saying you will fit neatly into one or the other, nor does one signify those “in” the Church and those “outside” the Church. We all waffle between the two in some degree. That said, revelry says, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” It’s about the present—present experiences, pleasures, sufferings, sentiments, feelings. Here, one says, “I do **want** the cross.” I want to do my own thing and live the way I see and believe to be best. No one knows better than myself how to live my life. And, this too places us in opposition to the cross. As we see, this actually includes each of us—from Atheist to Zealot and all in between. We all stand in opposition to the cross—knowingly or not—this is the havoc wreaked by sin and our brokenness. The end of this is our “destruction.” We are disillusioned by our brokenness, infiniteness, and our utter lack of control of ourselves...let alone the world around us. And so, when we act or behave like we



are in control, we have it all figured out, or like we need nothing but ourselves we essentially put our faith and hope in what is passing. For earthly things are subjected to death or decay.

It is important to note as we read this text that Paul's point here is not "us vs. them." This attitude arises predominately in our religious and political beliefs, but we also see it within our socio-economic status, or national and racial affiliations. We are quick to pass judgement upon someone who is or believes even slightly different than us. But, **Matthew 13:24-30** delivers a powerful parable which is applicable here. I shared this with the church leaders yesterday so they get to hear it twice. Eugene Petterson's *The Message* tells the parable like this: "God's kingdom is like a farmer who planted good seed in his field. That night, while his hired men were asleep, his enemy sowed thistles all through the wheat and slipped away before dawn. When the first green shoots appeared and the grain began to form, the thistles showed up, too. The farmhands came to the farmer and said, 'Master, that was clean seed you planted, wasn't it? Where did these thistles come from?' He answered, 'Some enemy did this.' The farmhands asked, 'Should we weed out the thistles?' He said, 'No, if you weed the thistles, you'll pull up the wheat, too. Let them grow together until harvest time. Then I'll instruct the harvesters to pull up the thistles and tie them in bundles for the fire, then gather the wheat and put it in the barn.'" Here's the point—when it comes down to it we do not know the heart. We are unable to truly differentiate weed from wheat. And, likely, most of us truly do not know our own hearts. You see, only the farmer—the Son of Man Jesus—knows weed from wheat. Only he knows the heart. All we can do is humbly and graciously tend and till the soil as faithful farmhands, it is not our job to go about trying to pluck the field clean of weeds—in fact, if we do we might actually be uprooting wheat. So, rather than quickly trying to identify ever weed or sin, perhaps we need to create a little space for people and allow God to do the work only he can do. Rather than words of judgement and disapproval perhaps a word of encouragement and healing is what is required. Rather than quickly seeing the speck in your neighbor's eye perhaps first we could bring the log (or logs) in our own eye to the Lord. And, rather than contempt or judgement for those "who walk as enemies of the cross of Christ," perhaps we need to weep as Paul did. Notice here, he is not saying they are *forever* enemies of Christ with no hope of redemption and restoration, but that they presently "walk" in opposition to the cross. He's referring to the present condition of their hearts. So, rather than quickly assessing our neighbor let's slow down and begin to encounter our own hearts, weep at the disillusionment, brokenness, and sin not just in our neighbors but ourselves, and allow our gentle and gracious Lord to care the task of separating weed from wheat.

Citizens of Heaven

"**But our citizenship is in heaven.**" With this transition, Paul reminds the Philippian Christians of their new citizenship. You see, while some had taking upon themselves an earthly citizenship—rooted in this passing and fading world, he reminds them of their otherworldly citizenship. He reminds them that although they might be dwelling on earth their citizenship not of this world, but rather they are citizens of heaven, the Kingdom of God. And, it's because of this heavenly citizenship that Paul (1) urges the Philippians to "imitate him," and (2) shines a light upon the tension of the already-not of this colony—if you will—for which they were now citizens of. **First**, imitation. This passage always has a prickly effect on me. When I am told to imitate someone, especially if someone were to directly tell me to imitate him or her my "self-righteous person proximity alarm" would go off, blaring as loud as tornado sirens. Mentally, I would probably give them the middle

finger, go my own way, and fume to a friend about the audacity and arrogance of the individual. But, we need to be careful not to read our emotions into this passage. Paul's urging for the Philippians to "join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us" was not some salvific command, nor was his intent to convey they were perfect, without flaw, and sinless—doing all things right in all situations at all times. **Not at all!** Paul has just noted this in the preceding text. He says, Philippians 3:12-14, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own [...] I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal." But how was this to be done? Gordon Fee notes, "At issue throughout is living a cruciform existence, discipleship marked by the cross and evidenced by suffering on behalf of Christ." What Paul wanted them to imitate was his imitation of Christ. Therefore, Paul declares his life motto at the beginning of his letter to the Philippians: "For me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain!" He was calling them to the cruciform life, to live Christ out moment by moment, and to find their ultimate profit or reward in "being with Christ" one day (1:21-23). Paul didn't expect them to imitate every word, thought, and deed he did—that would be scary for all of us to be Paul. Consider this. He has just shared how he counted his Jewish successes, honors, and privileges as "rubbish" in order to gain Christ (3:4-11). Contextually, this is important because many of them were not Jewish, therefore they would not be able to imitate him exactly. Therefore, as NT Wright notes, "They must think out, and so must we, what this allegiance to Jesus will mean in terms of the other claims to allegiance that press upon us." So, our "other" allegiances will vary from person to person, as such we must learn, each of us, what it means to have our allegiance in Christ and to live this call to a cruciform life. **Second**, the tension of the already-not yet; on earth, but citizens of heaven. Imagine a colony. The notion of colony today may have a negative connotation due European colonial period, but the idea of colony would have been easy for the Philippians to understand as they were a colony of Rome. Rome had relocated some of their soldiers who were returning from battle. Their goal was to bring the Latin rule and reign of Rome to bear upon the Greek region of Philippi. Paul's point in declaring them as citizens of heaven was simple: *They were [presently] a colony of heaven upon earth, and as citizens of heaven, they carry with them the charge of bringing heaven to bear on earth.* Here's the tension. Although, we are citizens of heaven and have the task of charge of bringing heaven to bear on earth, yet "we," as Wright notes, "are not, of course, very good at doing this; we often find ourselves weak and helpless, and our physical bodies themselves are growing old and tired, decaying and ready to die." **This is the "already."** Nevertheless, we still "await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." And so, we hope with great expectation. We anticipate his return with the fullness of heaven, the kingdom of God, establishing his rule and reign and making all things new again, including us. **This is the "not yet."** Wright notes, "He is going to transform the entire world so that it is full of his glory, full of the life and power of heaven. And, as part of that, he is going to transform our bodies so that they are like his glorious body, the body which was itself transformed after his cruel death so that it became wonderfully alive again with a life that death and decay could never touch again." Please hear this! If this is all you hear this morning please hear this. Jesus will bring this about "by the power that enables him to subject all things to himself." This means that death, violence, evil, hate, sin, jealousy, envy, pain, hurt, suffering, heartache, all of it will be brought under his reign and authority never allowed to breathe another breath. But, why doesn't he do it now? Honestly, I do not know. All I know is that what we have been giving in the Scriptures: **2 Peter 3:9, Philippians 1:29, and Psalms 27:14.** That said, I know it is not easy. The idea of suffering for the sake of Christ and patiently waiting for the Lord is not meant to be some



sort of platitude or Christian rhetoric. I don't know what each of you have had to deal with in this life. I don't know your sins, nor the sins that have been committed against you. I don't know your losses. I don't know your suffering. I don't know the hurt you carry around every day. But, I do know that I have sinned, I've been sinned against, I have gone through horrible suffering, and I have carried around my share of hurt, fear, and shame. So, what real comfort can I offer you? There isn't a guarantee, that things on *this* earth...in *this* world...in *your* world will ever get better without a change to its very essence. I pray they do, but there is no guarantee. This is why I strongly believe we all need to give ourselves and one another space to feel the hurt of broken relationships, to cry out in agony, to be angry at injustice and violence, to feel the pangs and stings of death, to sense the weight of our sin. We shouldn't be quick to throw one another life preservers so that we get yanked out of these moments, avoiding the heaviness of our emotions and the brokenness of the world. Rather we should allow the Lord to teach us how to swim in their midst. St. John of the Cross refers to moments or seasons as "the dark nights of the soul." In these dark nights, we feel the tension of the already-not yet; we feel creation groaning as do our own spirits; there is something more to this; we desire so deeply to hope, anticipate, and expect that all the wrongs will one day be righted. His point is this: We need Divine aid more abundantly and more than we realize. He goes on to say, "However greatly the soul itself labours, it cannot actively purify itself so as to be in the least degree prepared for the Divine union of perfection of love, if God takes not its hand and purges it not in that dark fire." Sometimes our maturity, our being made whole and new again, our becoming like Christ, as we saw in Philippians 1:29, requires us to venture through some horribly dark nights.

A Call to Stand Firm

In the midst of this tension of the already-not yet, heaven on earth and heaven to come, dark nights of the soul while expecting all things being made new...Paul urges, "[stand firm in the Lord.](#)" You see, Paul, I believe, knew that this world provided a volatile foundation. And, when your feet are planted in something so instable you cannot help but to tumble to your destruction. We will continue to struggle with the allurements and disillusionment of the "earthly things" until the culmination of heaven on earth. Therefore, we have to continue to fight our fights of faith and to fight hard (**I Tim. 6:12**) standing firm in Christ. There is no doubt that you will feel the impact of our volatile, broken, and decaying world, and greatly so at times. All Christ is asking of you, is for patient trust in him. Faith. He's not asking you to place your faith in a detached deity. Although, and I will be the first to acknowledge it, it may feel that way at times. He's asking you to set your sights on the "[the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God](#)" (**Heb. 12:1-2**). He's asking you to remember your heavenly citizenship, stand firm in him, and let him lead you through the volatility of this life. And, I can assure you of this, *he will be faithful*, he will be there with you through the thick and the thin. Through the worst times and the best of times. Through every sin. Through every loss. Through trying to make sense of the horrible atrocities we see everyday. Through every hurt and pain. *He will be there*. You might not readily see it, feel it, or know it, but you can trust it. You can stand firm in him. He will be your Solid Rock (**Ps. 18:2; 62:6; Matt. 7:24-27**). He will be your firm footing so that you might begin looking forward, even if through tears, with hopeful anticipation, hearing the echo of his words in your heart, "It is finished." His work is done, and he won. Past. Present. And Future.