

Philippians 3 (18) – Enemies of the Cross

There is an ongoing dilemma among many professing believers in the church. It has to do with your assurance of salvation. Some people, in the name of faith, look to their own holiness as the foundation of their assurance of salvation. On the opposite side, in the name of grace, others dismiss their own holiness as having any sort of significance at all. And what about my own life and soul? Once I say and think that I believe, is there nothing else to it? Does it really matter what I do? Or is there a line to be drawn? And who gets to determine where that line is?

In 2 Corinthians 13:5, the Apostle Paul says, “*Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith.*” Well, how do you do that? What is the standard? Because we know, according to our passage today, and according to other passages and books in the NT, that there may be a lot of people who *say* they are Christians, but not all of those people actually *are* Christians.

And there is a case to be made for “both sides” of this discussion. In the first place, while your holiness plays a crucial role in your quest for assurance, it can never be the foundation of your assurance of salvation – otherwise, it is your works rather than Christ’s works that save you. This is true even if those works are Christ motivated and empowered works. It isn’t your life and your growth in grace that saves you. It is the sinless life and atoning death of Jesus that saves you.

Having said that, the clear and consistent teaching of scripture is that a saving faith leads to a living faith, not a dismissal of holiness as if that were faith. The book of James and many other parts of the NT deal with this idea that grace is a license to sin. 1 John 2:4 says, “*Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him...*”

So how do you resolve the tension between relying on Jesus alone as the basis of your salvation, and working on your sanctification as a manifestation of your salvation? Here in this passage you see this tension fleshed out in a practical way so that you can understand what a living faith looks like, and what it doesn’t look like. Because there are many who say that they are trusting in the cross of Christ, but who *walk as enemies of the cross of Christ*. Who are these enemies, what makes them enemies, what’s the danger in being an enemy, and how can you know that you are not an enemy? That is what this passage will teach you, and how it will end the dilemma for you.

Who are the enemies? Who is Paul talking about when he says that many people *walk as enemies of the cross of Christ*? Of course, there are many people outside the church who do not profess to be Christians, and they would obviously be included in this. However, Paul is talking about those who call themselves Christians. He is telling people to walk like he does (vs.17), and not to walk like those who profess Christ but don’t walk like true Christians do (vs.18).

You can see Jesus describe these same people in Matthew 7:21-23. He describes them as people who call Jesus “Lord”, and who have done good works in Jesus’ name, but Jesus says that they are “*workers of lawlessness.*” That phrase is synonymous with Paul’s description. And Paul doesn’t leave it at this description, he further defines who these people are by what these people do.

What makes them enemies? It has to do with their lifestyle, their goals, passions, and pursuits – *their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things* (vs.19).

their god is their belly – this isn't primarily about gluttony, this is about desire. The word "belly" here is used as a figure of speech. Think of someone who says, "I don't have the stomach for this." They aren't necessarily talking about their physical stomach, but their mental sensitivity. If you look at John 7:38, you see the same root word – *Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water'* (KJV = belly). You also see it used in Romans 16:18 – *For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites* (KJV = belly). The phrase *their god is their belly* is talking about people whose god is their own worldly desires. This includes sensuality such as gluttony, drunkenness, and sexual immorality, as many have been mastered by these sorts of desires. But it is indicative of an idol of self-pleasure, and self-satisfaction. Their main goal is about themselves and about getting the most out of this life.

and they glory in their shame – these people are freely identified by their sins. Again, there are many who do this out in the world, but Paul is talking about professing Christians. This is not primarily about homosexuality, but about people who are not repentant, and act as if that means they have faith. All sins are equally damning, but not all are equally damaging. This is not about people who are sorry for their sin and aim to be repentant. This is about those who are careless or defiant about their sin, thinking it shows they have a real understanding of grace. They have no shame. But grace is a teacher (Titus 2:11-14) that changes the pattern of your life (1 John 3:4-10). Those whose *god is their belly* actually revel in their rebellion, and call it grace. This is a common NT theme, that false believers think and false teachers teach that grace is a license to sin.

with minds set on earthly things – the reason the enemies of the cross have their belly as their god, and why they glory in their shame, is that their minds are set on earthly things. This is the opposite of what Paul teaches (Romans 12:1-2 / Ephesians 4:22-24 / Colossians 3:2). Earthly things should not be your aim, your goal, your master. This doesn't mean that people shouldn't have educational, career, financial, family, or other goals. It means that people shouldn't focus on the earthly to the detriment or exclusion of the spiritual. It means that Christians should honor spiritual goals above worldly goals, and that eternal values dictate earthly goals. Jesus should be the center of your life, and all of your educational, career, financial, family, or other goals should revolve around honoring and serving him. The ultimate and all-encompassing goal must be to glorify God. For those on the wide road to destruction, Jesus isn't the goal, Jesus is just the means to the goal.

What's the danger for the enemies? Paul is clear that *their end is destruction* (vs.19). Now some might think that this "destruction" doesn't refer to ultimate damnation. The idea for them is that when Paul says they walk as enemies of the cross of Christ, they aren't *actually* enemies, they only *walk* as enemies. It just means that these enemies are actually saved but they don't walk right. So, Paul is only talking about inconsistent, uncommitted believers. And he is just telling them that they ought to live better and stop being hypocritical. Otherwise, they won't know God as intimately as they might. Or they won't experience God's best and will forfeit certain blessings. Or they won't be a good witness. And maybe they'll have to suffer more than they had to.

Some of those consequences may indeed be true, but this is not some simple exhortation to "go for God". This is a solemn warning that Paul has given many times before and now he has reached the point of tears (vs.18). Have you pleaded with people? When Paul says *their end is destruction*, he means their end is damnation. You can see this by contrasting the enemies with those whose *citizenship is in heaven* (vs.20). The enemies of the cross do not belong to the kingdom of heaven.

There are only two paths. You will either walk according to the example that Paul gives you (vs.17), or you are walking as an enemy of the cross (vs.18). Can you walk as an enemy but still be a Christian? No. Will you make it to heaven if you walk as an enemy? No. You can't walk towards hell and make it to heaven. And remember, Paul's warning isn't just for people who don't profess Jesus as their savior. This is talking about people who do. The road to hell doesn't lead to heaven. Knowing which road that you are on is of eternal importance.

For those of you who may now realize that they are walking the wrong way, you also need to realize this: the time to turn around is now. If you're walking the wrong way, your end will be destruction, but if you turn around, if you repent, you won't end up there.

How can you know that you are not an enemy? What is the difference between those who walk as enemies of the cross of Christ and those who walk like Paul, who walk consistently with the cross of Christ? It isn't enough to apply the negative example, and say that your god is not your belly, you don't glory in your shame, and your mind is not set on earthly things. Paul gives the positive sense of a walk that is consistent with the cross of Christ, spelling it out in detail.

If you really are a Christian, then Paul's message is not intended to beat you down, but to build you up. He says that there are others who are following the right way in vs.17. And he knows that Christians will not follow this pattern perfectly, like he admits in vs.12-13. But this will be the pattern of life for the true and maturing believer, in contrast to the pattern that Paul gives in vs.19. And you can use this passage to motivate you, to exhort yourself out of apathy and indifference when you are tempted to slide back into inconsistency and laziness.

A humble, honest, hunger for God (vs.12-14) – Paul knows he isn't perfected yet (*Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect*), and that he is still in the process and will always have room to grow (*Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own*). He doesn't rest on his triumphs and he doesn't beat himself up over his failures (*forgetting what lies behind*). But he strives for the prize in front of him (*straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal*). He is active, not passive. He is energetic, not casual. The goal of what he one day will fully be keeps moving forward, but it is never out of sight (*the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*). Paul keeps reaching out for it. He wants not to just get by, he wants to know Jesus as much as he possibly can (*I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own*).

A mature spiritual attitude (vs.15-17) – Paul was always involved in battling his sin, in studying the Word, in prayer, in fellowship, in evangelism, in discipleship, and in service. His aim was to honor and worship God by living for Christ, winning others to Christ, and edifying his brothers and sisters in Christ. And that's what he says you ought to be about too (*Let those of us who are mature think this way...Brothers, join in imitating me*).

Even though Paul forgot the past by not resting on his triumphs or beating himself up over his failures, he still learned from those things. A maturing Christian will keep building on the foundation of their spiritual life (*Only let us hold true to what we have attained*). You don't fall back and take it easy. You press on and move forward. And he says that if you are sensitive to the Holy Spirit, he will bring the proper conviction to you (*and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you*). And this means through godly individuals as well.

Paul is speaking not only to individuals, but to the whole local church. The church is, with mercy and grace, to lead, guide, and help each other in the direction of Christlikeness. The fellowship of the believers is the place where grace is rooted and grows properly (*and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us*). The church is an essential institution in God's economy for his glory, not merely a helpful support group for the individual Christian in their walk of faith. The maturing believer is not someone who doesn't "feel the need" for church, they are someone who realizes their need and responsibility for church and for others.

Yes, going through this life as a committed, consistent Christian can be very tough at times. It's easy to be a Christian when it's smooth sailing and it doesn't cost you anything. But you can't follow Jesus without going through distress, offense, and trouble. Costly discipleship is the acid test of faith and a refining fire. You learn the truth and your life is a witness to the truth that God is worth it. And these distresses, offenses, and troubles become God's tools to make you more like Jesus. But yes, it can hurt. It will hurt. This is when Christians must cling to the promises of the future, that the first shall be last and the last first. The pains, problems, and injustices of this life will be reversed in the afterlife. But they still hurt your heart in this life.

This is one reason why fellowship is so important, to sing when you don't feel like it, to hear the reminders when you think you've already heard it all, to serve others when you need to be served yourself. And this is one reason why the devil tries to get people to drift away from the fundamentals and then they think those fundamentals aren't really fundamental or necessary. If you're bored with church, or think no one values you here, or you think you don't need church or fellowship or worship or service, it isn't God telling you that.

However, Paul is not calling you to compare yourself or your church to him. This passage is not for the purpose of continual and morbid introspection and developing "spiritual melancholy". Paul is pointing to the joy of being on the right track for the right reasons. You see, this passage is an antidote to antinomianism, the idea that grace is a license to sin. But it is also an antidote to moralistic therapeutic deism, the idea that God exists to make you feel good and if you do good you will receive good. No, God is most important, not you. You exist because God is going to use you to glorify himself, and cause you to enjoy him forever. Paul is excited to be growing in grace and knowing God. And he says that those who truly know God will follow the same pattern. They won't do it perfectly, and they may not do it as good as Paul, but they will do it for Jesus, because he is their goal. That's a mature spiritual attitude. You need to be an example, like Paul.

A focus on the future (vs.20-21) – a maturing Christian, one whose walk is consistent with the cross of Christ, is one who lives like heaven is their home (*our citizenship is in heaven*), who lives like seeing Jesus is their greatest desire (*and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ*), and who lives like Jesus wants them to live (vs.21). 1 John 3:2-3 tells you this same truth – *Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure*. This is what happens to those who truly know Jesus – they walk towards him, not away from him. Paul isn't exhorting you to an outwardly strict lifestyle. He is telling you what a true, effective, grace empowered, fruit-bearing faith looks like: it is humble and it recognizes the need to be continually rescued from a desire for things and an entitlement mentality as it strives to know and be more like Jesus.