

FOLLOW MY EXAMPLE

Worthy (Part 5) | Philippians 3:15-21

I

Over these past few Sundays we've been studying the contents of an amazing letter written by the Apostle Paul to a group of Christ-followers living in the ancient city of Philippi. Located near the central coast between modern-day Greece and Turkey, Philippi had a storied history I want to tell you a little more about today.

The city was named after Philip II of Macedon who freed its people from their neighboring Thracian overlords in 358 B.C. It was from this place that Philip's nineteen year-old son... the brilliant general we would come to know as Alexander the Great... the man who was said to have wept because there were no more worlds to conquer... went forth to establish a vast Greek empire whose common language and philosophy would make possible the spread of the Christian message 400 years later.

You can still visit the ruins of ancient Philippi today. If you ever do, then you'll see that it's most dominant feature is this 750-foot-high cliff, once crowned by a citadel that stood watch over this capitol city. Philippi was known for its great amphitheater, fine homes, beautiful shopping arcades, fertile fields and nearby gold mines. When Roman soldiers finally conquered the Macedonians in 168 B.C., they added their culture to Philippi. In fact – apart from Rome itself – Philippi was said to be the *most Roman* city of the ancient world, a place where military heroes liked to retire.

I imagine you can see why – if you lived in Philippi -- the temptation to make power and prosperity your major focus would have been very high. And no celebrity was a greater symbol of power and prosperity than the emperor, Caesar, himself. A succession of Roman Caesars held themselves out as not only the greatest symbol but the supreme source of hope for all people. In fact, on an annual basis, every citizen of Philippi would be summoned to walk past a flame on a ceremonial altar, toss in a bit of incense, and say the words – *Caesar est kurios* – “Caesar is Lord.” As long as you were willing to do this – to say, in effect, “the government is my hope” – you were free to do a lot of things in Roman Philippi.

For example, as long as you agreed to declare the Roman Emperor Lord above all, you could define the object of your “religion” pretty much any way you wanted. And people did. We know that there were three major Thracian gods that had a following in Philippi. Some people worshipped a deity named Liber Pater (the later Greeks and Romans called him Bacchus or Dionysius). He was god of the grape harvest and, therefore, wine, intoxication, and self-administered anesthesia. Others followed a god named Thracian Rider who was associated with hunting and gathering, the ancient form of shopping or video games, I think. Then there was a Thracian goddess named Bendis

-- later identified with the Greek god, Artemis, and the Roman god, Diana. Bendis was always pictured in short skirts and boots, carrying a weapon, and looking highly athletic. It was difficult not to be attracted to Bendis.

We also know that the Greek and Roman cult of Apollo flourished in Philippi. Apollo was the god of youth and beauty – a symbol of vital life and healing – arguably the most beloved of all the gods. In Philippi, he was often associated with and worshipped alongside the Egyptian god, Isis, the queen of fertility and fame. Ancient images of her look strikingly like Kim Kardashian. Thousands of years later, of course, I'm sure we are far too sophisticated to make these sorts of objects our deities or idols, but this is how it was in Philippi. Based on a variety of stone inscriptions found in the ruins of Philippi, scholars estimate that more than forty different religions were actively practiced there.

II

Are you getting this picture? In first century Philippi: The object of life was to pursue greater authority and affluence for yourself, as Caesar did. You needed to acknowledge the government as your Lord and source of hope. You were free to pick whatever religious pursuit you felt drawn to – intoxication, shopping, sports, sex, youth and beauty, fertility or fame, maybe all of these things. This was the setting into which the Apostle Paul strode on his second missionary journey, around 51 A.D.

When Paul arrived in Philippi, there were very few Jews there and no synagogue. So Paul just built relationships with people where he found them. In the marketplace, at the arts and sporting events, alongside the river where people were drawing water or washing clothes, Paul got to know people's stories, their hurts and hopes. And he shared the gospel (the good news) of Jesus Christ with them. He spoke of the GOD we've been talking about throughout this message series – a GOD greater than the little gods we're tempted to pursue... a GOD who showed us the transformative mindset we need... a GOD who humbled himself and gave up his life for our forgiveness and to inspire our love... a God who is WORTHY of our wanting to know and follow and serve.

And, slowly, a community of people began to gather around the gospel of Jesus Christ. A circle of people who felt ready to live a Jesus-formed rather than a world-formed life began to grow. What was originally called a "church" grew up in Philippi -- defined not by a *building* but by a *belonging*. It was primarily made up of "Gentiles" which, in Bible-speak, means "not traditionally-religious people." A lot of men played major roles in the Philippian church, but we also know that women did too. The Book of Acts tells us that the church met in **Lydia's** home (Acts 16). In his letter, Paul calls out **Euodia** and **Syntyche** by name and refers to them as his **co-workers** (Phil 4:2-3). We know from the New Testament Epistles that the Philippian church was known for its exceptional generosity – expressed to Paul (Phil 4:15) and to other needy people (2 Cor 8:2-4). It was, as author James Bryan Smith would say, "a good and beautiful community." And through this community God furthered his project to re-form the world.

III

I pray that two thousand years from now Christ Church will be remembered with as much fondness as the Philippian church is today. That depends, I suppose, on whether you and I will, as Paul says: **Conduct [ourselves] in a manner WORTHY of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Phil 1:27)**. If you take nothing else from that verse or our attempt to reflect upon it during this series, I hope you will take this: It takes focus and commitment to be a Christ-follower. You and I need to think a lot about our daily “conduct” – the things we’re investing our time and energy in or not.

Growing in Christlikeness doesn’t happen by accident but only by intention. The American culture – like the Roman culture around the Philippians – is steadily calling us to put our hope in government and laws for the forming of a better world. Every day and in multiple ways, we are being tempted to focus our time and energies on intoxication, shopping, sports, sex, youth and beauty, fertility or fame, and maybe all of these things. But the Apostle Paul challenges us to pursue a higher vision: **All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained (Phil 3:15-16)**.

What Paul is saying here is that Jesus has already attained for those who follow him an eternal security. If you have put your trust in Christ, you don’t need to worry about securing your identity or future on the basis of the stuff that the Roman or American world tells you that you should be anxiously chasing. **You are good right now**. Because of Jesus, you have already **attained** the security and significance and worthiness you seek.

Paul goes on to say: I know that this is highly counter-intuitive. **For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. (Phil 3:18)**. In other words, many people keep living – and you probably know such people (and it’s good to check ourselves to make sure we are not one of such people) -- as if they have they can secure themselves apart from what Jesus did upon the Cross. They think they can establish their significance apart from God’s grace. They follow some legalistic rule-set believing that will save them. Or else they reject religion altogether, feeling they can save themselves. But Paul says: **Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. (Phil 3:19)** Because of the effect of sin on our MIND (our perceptions), we keep thinking that we can count on our appetite for what is good, our estimation of what is glorious versus shameful, but we can’t. We’ve been living too long in Philippi – in the Roman and American culture – instead of in the kingdom of God.

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. (Phil 3:20-21).

IV

The good news is that we are heading for heaven. If you and I put our trust in Jesus Christ, he will transform us fully and make us like him. In the meantime, says Paul, ***FOLLOW MY EXAMPLE. Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do (Phil 3:17).***

As I bring this message to a close, let me make one observation and then pose two questions for you to think on as you go. First, an observation: We need better EXAMPLES than are being presented to us in many of our life and leadership circles today. Our country is in trouble. This trouble is at a level of complexity and severity greater than at any point in my lifetime (and maybe yours) and needs people who intentionally exemplify a more WORTHY way of living.

I will reflect more on that during my message on July 3rd, but let me just observe today that I believe we are living in Philippian times. By that I mean that there is a powerful empire at work that is inviting us to put our faith and hope in the wrong things. With God's help, we CAN turn things around, but we need to be honest about what has gone wrong. Please be here for the message on July 3 as we talk about this.

Then, let me pose TWO QUESTIONS, suggested by St. Paul. The first one is: ***WHO are you following as an example?*** When I was a young pastor trying to figure out what it looked like to live with both integrity and influence, God set my eyes on the person of Lloyd John Ogilvie [*Dan unpacks this*]. My question for you is: Who is YOUR model for living like Jesus? The word "disciple" literally means "imitator." So who are you intentionally patterning your life and leadership after? If you do not have in your view a person WORTHY of imitation, look and pray harder to be led to such a person. Parse how that Jesus-like person lives and strive to imitate her or him.

My final question is: ***How are YOU setting an example for others to follow?*** If there was a camera-mounted drone following you around every day, what would the camera record concerning how you treat difficult people... how you handle conflict... how you spend your time, talent or treasure... how you use your voice or power... how you treat your family or your co-workers or the person waiting on you... how you face suffering or loss or unexpected gain. Then, consider this: That camera is already there. It's eyes are your children, your spouse, your co-workers, the stranger looking for evidence of God in the world. So: **Conduct yourselves in a manner WORTHY of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Phil 1:27).**