

# Lent: Imitation and Transformation

Philippians 3:17-4:1  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
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You've probably seen the bumper sticker that reads, "Jesus, save me from your followers!" Funny, yes. But the element of truth behind it is a harsh yet accurate critique of the Christianity lived out by far too many in this country. Notice that it's not judging whether someone is a Christian or not, but rather that certain attitudes and behaviors are not Christ-like.

Perhaps that's what Pope Francis was addressing when he stated earlier this week, "A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian. This is not the gospel." I interpret that as the Pope's response to 'What would Jesus do – or not do' as it applies to the biblical command to love our neighbor as ourselves, let alone to love our enemies and to extend hospitality to strangers.

In a similar vein, a quote often attributed to Mohandas Gandhi declares, "Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." In case we're tempted at this point to point a finger at others, remember that when we do that, there's always three other fingers pointing right back at ourselves.

These relevant critiques in our day and age aren't addressing anything new. Evidently, the apostle Paul had a similar critique about the Philippian Christians. In his letter to that community of faith, which he founded, Paul writes, "Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us" (Phil. 3:17). Out of context, this sounds remarkably egotistical and conceited. In context, however, that is not really the case.

Paul was simply reminding them of his task as an apostle – that the example he sets as a role model is based on *his* imitation of Christ. Jesus Christ is the archetype that made an imprint on Paul's life. And I suggest that it makes an imprint on your and my life as well.

Paul's words, therefore, should be understood as meaning "Be co-imitators of Christ *with* me" rather than "be imitator *of* me." The same can be said today. When you and I see someone living out the teachings of Jesus, it is good that you and I join in imitating those actions. In fact, later in his letter, Paul instructs them, "Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you" (Phil. 4:8-9).

As parents are especially aware as their children grow up, our behavior and the lifestyle we lead does indeed have a profound impact on others. Children are particularly good imitators. I know that from living in the fish bowl inhabited by pastors. Teachers, as well as parents, pastors, politicians and others, also know the fish bowl all too well.

This season of Lent, with its emphasis on repentance and transformation, is a great time to remember all these things.

Paul goes on to say, “For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ... Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is their shame; their minds are set on earthly things” (Phil. 3:18-19). It’s important to note that for Paul, “earthly” referred not to the physical creation itself, but rather those things opposed to the ways of God. And there’s a bit of debate among biblical scholars as to just who Paul may be referring to as “enemies of the cross of Christ.” If I were leading a Bible study, I would certainly spend the time necessary to explore the historical context and meaning in depth. For the purpose of this sermon, however, let’s just say that the “enemies of the cross of Christ” are those who do not follow the example of Jesus as modeled by Paul.

With the phrases, “their god is the belly” and “their minds are set on earthly things” Paul describes these “enemies” as people who live life guided by indulgence and their own self-serving desires. It most likely refers to those who live according to legalism, who turn obedience to religious laws into a form of idolatry – something still common today. In context, that would apply to those who insisted on following all the Jewish food laws, or insisted on circumcision. It refers to anyone who is not guided by the pattern of humility and self-sacrificial service to others. It refers to those who deny Christ not by their confession or words, but by their behavior.

In his biblical commentary on Philippians (*Interpretation*), Fred Craddock warns, “Wherever Paul’s gospel of freedom from the law was heard, it was also misheard. Some, perhaps, were too immature to see that liberty-become-license is really a new kind of bondage.”

In contrast to Paul’s criticism of those whose minds are set on earthly things (those things opposed to the ways of God), he reminds the Philippian Christians, and us as well, that **our citizenship, our commonwealth and home, is in heaven.** This phrase “would have been especially meaningful in the ancient city of Philippi [located in what is now northeastern Greece], with its high patriotism as a Roman colony. **We as Christians, says Paul, [are not a colony of Rome, but] a colony of heaven.**” (*Interpretation*, pg. 68-69.) As a commonwealth, “it also serves to remind us that the kind of living to which we are called is not a solitary job, but is necessarily done in community” (Elizabeth Shively, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)).

Paul’s point is that if our citizenship, our ultimate allegiance, is to be heavenly-minded, then we are to be governed by the gospel – by the ways and teachings of Jesus. This raises an interesting dilemma. **What happens when the ways of our city, state, and/or national government run contrary to what we believe are the ways of Jesus? What is our ultimate allegiance then? Is not our directive as Christians to challenge and speak truth to power, to seek reform and transformation of the system itself?**

**I find it both ironic and sad that Christians on the far right and the far left, politically, often have such different understandings of what it means to be “heavenly-minded” – i.e. Christ-like.** And there’s nothing like a presidential campaign to shine a glaring spotlight on those differences. Yes, **one’s theological perspective can and does inform one’s political perspective – and visa versa.**

In essence, Paul is also saying that as Christians, with our citizenship in heaven, we find ourselves, then, living in a foreign land. With this perspective, I guess that makes us refugees and resident aliens, if you will, in our own land. Maybe that should be part of the discussion in how we approach the current issue of refugees seeking asylum in this country.

Here's something else very important that Paul reveals. **As citizens of heaven living in this world it is heaven that is brought to earth, rather than of our being brought to heaven. That's a profound thought. That makes sense, of course, when we acknowledge that the Sacred Presence, which we call God, is among and within all of creation.** So of course, heaven is here on earth.

Teresa of Avila, a prominent Spanish mystic, Roman Catholic saint, and Carmelite nun who lived during the era of the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, expresses our task this way:

*Christ has no body on earth but yours.  
Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion is to look out to the world.  
Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good.  
Yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now.*

So here's a Lenten reflection to ponder this week: **Do others look at you and me and think, "In that person I can see something of what it means to be like Christ?"** During this season of Lent, and always for that matter, **we are being challenged to imitate Christ-like behavior.** That's quite a responsibility and an obligation.

A final thought. **In Paul's day, Roman emperors bore the official title "Savior". Paul was teaching the Philippian Christians, and us today, that our allegiance to any nationalistic power of this world is not our savior. Rather, salvation in this life is found in our allegiance – our loyalty, faithfulness and commitment – to Christ;** to the following of Jesus' teachings and ways of being in the world. **It's all about imitation and transformation.**

That's the very purpose of living a life of faith – to allow ourselves to be transformed in our thinking and in our actions by the Sacred Presence of God within us and among us? **Imitate and be transformed!**

Amen.