

Philippians 3:17–4:1

3:17 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. **18** 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. **19** Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. **20** But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, **21** 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. **4** I Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!

Luke 13:31-35

31 At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, 'Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you.'
32 He replied, 'Go and tell that fox, "I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal." **33** In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day – for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!
34 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. **35** Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Role models

Philippians 3:17–4:1; Luke 13:31-35

I'm looking at our reading from Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, and the city of Philippi was near what's now Kavala in North Eastern Greece. It had been populated in 42BC by an influx of the Roman army who had won a nearby battle and then hung around and formed what was basically a colony of Rome, on orders of the Emperor because he didn't want them back in town and bringing down the neighbourhood. So Philippi in the first century was still a bit of a carbon copy of Rome, which meant that for most of the population the Emperor was pretty much God. So the church at Philippi was under threat from the start, and as with most of the early churches, was having internal problems as well. Paul here is addressing the issues. Who is your role model? Who do you admire and hope to emulate? We often talk about famous people as being brilliant but it's usually on a trivial level, and not necessarily in the sense that we would want to live in the way they do. More often it's actually our parents or people who we observe over long periods of time who we grow to respect. Paul here is putting himself forward, and presumably some of the other church leaders, as role models for the rest of the church, who unlike us, had no foundation of teaching like we have. They had no New Testament, just the Torah – the Law and the Prophets. The Christian faith was brand new.

People were struggling with it.

So when Paul describes *many who live as enemies of the cross of Christ*, he's talking to the church. Not about the Romans or the pagan neighbours or even 'that fox' Herod as Jesus called him. To say the least Paul is *not happy*.

For citizens of Rome then, verse 20 is anathema. *We are citizens of heaven* – this is a deliberate contradiction and contrast with the prevailing Roman law. As a colony of heaven! we need to live a radically different way of life and some groups within the church were not doing this at all. To simplify a complicated situation there were 2 big issues in the church in Philippi.

The Judaizers and the Gnostics.

Judaizers were the Jews who were trying to combine Jewish laws with christian faith, clinging on to what felt safe. They were still trying to make faith about rule keeping and following traditions, which Jesus had clearly said were unnecessary.

Gnostics were the other group who were a real problem throughout the new churches. Their belief was that because, as Paul taught, we're saved by faith, through God's grace, oh!! we don't have to bother about keeping the 10 commandments! and so they simply did what they liked.

And so Paul's frustrated because they *cannot* see that both things have to be held in balance. Yes we are saved by our faith and God's grace not by whether we keep the moral laws, which we sometimes do and sometimes don't.

BUT when Jesus said not one part of the law is abolished he was talking about the moral law. So we still have to respond to God's love by loving him and loving others. That is, as Jesus said, the whole of the law.

Love God and love others. There is no let out clause from that. This was too risky for the Jewish group who felt safer just strictly following rules.

The gnostics said well if we're not saved by keeping the rules we just won't bother keeping the rules! Here is Paul's opinion
18 ... many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame.

Paul is talking about christians, members of the church who are indulging in whatever pleasures of the flesh they fancy, it's not specific. He doesn't need to spell it out.

He says in various places in his letters you can't have Jesus plus Moses/the Law= salvation (Romans 10:4-13), or Jesus plus circumcision=salvation (Galatians 2:3-4) or Jesus plus worship of angels=salvation (Colossians 2:18). Or here, Jesus *plus* drunkenness and sexual promiscuity does not equal salvation. Now we think having had many years of bible preaching that we know all this, but sadly there are many churches who still don't get the balance right. Partly because they don't preach the bible but survive on thoughts for the day. There are strict fundamentalists who will throw you out over doctrinal disagreements.

There are evangelicals who still seem to believe that the more money you donate the more saved you are, or that they're free to give advice on who to vote for in elections. There are traditionalists who would like to damp down any mention of the Holy Spirit, and disapprove of any expression of actual joy or excitement in worship.

Still others who feel women should not be permitted a leadership role, or think LGBT Christians should not even be seen in a church. Or the guy in my Alpha group once who felt God was just about acceptable but couldn't be doing with all the Jesus stuff and walked away.

To start with I struggled with what God had to say to us from this passage, but eventually I found it spoke directly to me.

What, or more importantly who, is at the centre of my faith?

Who is my role model?

If it isn't Jesus why?

We have to know that we're saved purely by faith through grace. But at the same time we also need to keep the moral laws in response to God's love for us because they are right, not because they will save us. They'll show us where we go wrong, but they won't save us, only faith in Jesus will.

The good news is that we're all loved and forgiven by God and that we as followers of Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit, must be united in taking this message of freedom and healing to every nation and every culture. Amen.