



### Philippians 3:17-4:1

LENT 2 C  
28 February AD 2010

*The Philippians reading not only does fits my agenda to preach through the epistle readings, but it is a text which is appropriate to the spirit of the Lenten season.*

In Philippians 3 Paul has written eloquently about *the race* he has run. As if he were an Olympic athlete “*he forgets about all that is behind him and presses forward to the goal.*” His path is ever upwards, and he reaches out for the prize Jesus himself. (vv. 14-15) This morning’s reading follows that theme. *Joshua-like*, Paul offers you a choice between two paths, two roads—two different ways of life.

The Judaizers are always in the background of Paul’s letters. They sought to impose their agenda: the Jewish law was for all Christian converts. In Galatians Paul also warns against all those “preaching a different Gospel.” Whoever they are, their behavior suggests that they are unable or unwilling to conform their lives to Christ and the Gospel. The fact that they are anonymous allows us to see it could be anyone, even us. These however, live hedonistically. Though it is unclear who Paul is speaking about in verses 18 and 19, their life style labels them as enemies of the Cross.

Paul says, they “*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.*” (Philippians 3:18-19) He invites you, his readers, to join him. “*Join in imitating me*” he says. “*...observe (mark, take notice of) those who live according to the example you have in us.*”

If you want to label the paths, they can be contrasted as the Way of the Cross and the Way of the Flesh.\* Christians have been struggling with life style issues from the beginning. “I’m a Christian. I believe in Jesus, now what?” When you fully understand that we are a people saved by the grace of God and not by works, you begin to realize that we walk a very fine line. The moment you start insisting on certain behaviors (life styles) as necessary to the faith, then you’re in the camp of the Judaizers, those who insist on certain laws.

The issues are real enough. To walk the way of the cross is walk between extremes. There is a reasoning that you still hear today which says, “We’re all

*\* There is a Christian devotional classic whose title was suggested by this periscope. The Imitation of Christ was written by Thomas a’Kempis in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It has gone through 2000 editions!*

God's children. God loves everybody. Someday everyone will be in heaven." That's Universalism. It's a false security that allows people to do whatever they please, and to believe whatever they want without consequence. In a free society where we are all equals under law, that's what you hear all the time.

Another way of reasoning says, "If I am saved only by the *mercy* of God, then whatever I do does not matter." For these people *being saved* is a matter of belief, a matter of knowledge and the intellect. It divorces life in the flesh from the eternal life to come. One has nothing to do with the other. "Flesh is flesh, spirit is spirit," they reason. They can even point to Jesus. This is the ancient heresy called Gnosticism. In 2010 Gnosticism is very much alive.

It's why people in poll after poll say they believe in God, but the numbers of people who belong to any organized religious foundation, like a church, are at an all time low.

- They claim to pray
- They know that grandma is watching over them from heaven
- They claim to be very spiritual (but there is nothing in the way they live their lives that would suggest anything we'd recognize as a living faith)

Walking the line between extremes, (true) Christians affirm that humans are spiritual as well as physical creatures. We have a body and a soul; together they form a single being. Christians confess the "resurrection of the body," which is why the story of Doubting Thomas is so important. Throughout Christian history we've been careful to respectfully inter our dead in the hope of the resurrection.

For us the ceremonial law finds its fulfillment at the cross. More accurately it's not the cross (which is only wood) but in Christ, in his body that the law is fulfilled on our behalf. The moral law, the Ten Commandments, they are for us a mirror. God's Law shows us how we lived. It also shows us how we ought to live, and that we need divine help.

This law sets us on a path toward wisdom. Even when we're not talking one of "the big ten" we know how to live. I may want to go out with my fellow pastors for a beer and some fraternal conversation; that's okay. No law stands in my way. But suppose we planned to go out and get smashed; somewhere between the two extremes of legalism and being a libertine, we crossed a line.

Crossing that line we became sinners. Worse, our conduct, while falling in a gray area with regard to the Law, totally denies what we confess is our faith. Trying to

discern what is right and what is wrong requires a sincere love for God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It requires a living faith.

People, even some we love, live lives that are examples of Christian virtue. They don't mean to be God's enemies. They might be first class citizens, excellent neighbors, generous to a fault and kind to every lost puppy that crosses their front yard. They don't see themselves as enemies of God; some may even believe themselves to be quite spiritual. But at some point they crossed a line and became enemies of God—frequently it's the sensual that trips people up.

Paul simply lays out the two paths. One is the way of carnality and sensuality, it is the way of the flesh. According to Proverbs, it is "*the way that leads to destruction.*" You and I have a commitment to the way of the Cross. For the sake of Christ we embrace ridicule and suffering, grief and self denial. But in the end we do not belong to this world; we may live here for a while, but "*our citizenship is in heaven.*" Ours must be the Way of the Cross. Stand firm in it.

Hear Paul again, "*Stick with me, friends. Keep track of those you see running this same course, headed for this same goal. There are many out there taking other paths, choosing other goals, and trying to get you to go along with them. I've warned you of them many times; sadly, I'm having to do it a gain. All they want is easy street. They hate Christ's Cross...*" (*The Message: Phil 3:17 ff.*)

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