

Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. ¹⁸ For, as I have often told you before and now say 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 on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior 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. ^{4:1} Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends! (Philippians 3:17-4:1)

It's Scary to be a Christian Today

Do you know what the top grossing movie was last weekend? *Deadpool*. It made over \$130,000,000 in its opening week. If you don't know what it's about, it's a superhero movie. But it's a really, really raunchy movie, filled with filthy language and some very graphic sex scenes. On the radio, a reviewer called it "a hard R" rated movie. So what do you think would happen if you told people at work that it's just wrong to make movies like that? Don't you think you'd get some funny looks? Don't you think that someone would tell you, "If you don't like movies like that, don't go to them. But don't judge us if we do." That's pretty much where our society is – you Christians can be against whatever you want to be against as long as you keep it to yourselves. You don't get to tell the rest of us what's right and wrong. What happens when we do? We get treated like we're the real problem in our society. So what do we do? Most of the time, we keep our opinions to ourselves. We "pick our battles." And every day our society does a better and better job of silencing the voice of the law that God built into every human heart, and sin becomes more open and more acceptable. You know what? Jesus said that was going to happen. The world is an evil, dying place. That means **it's scary to be a Christian today.**

I.

St. Paul says, "**For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.**" Notice how Paul puts two things together: living as an enemy of Christ means having your stomach for your god and having the things that you consider to be your glory really be your shame. Doesn't that sound like the world we live in? In many ways, our whole society is built on the idea of having your stomach be your god. During the Super Bowl, Quicken Loans had a commercial about getting a "rocket mortgage" on your phone and how that would lead to people buying more and more furnishings for their new houses and then the people who make that stuff would buy more houses and more and more furnishings for their houses. It finished by asking, "Isn't that the power of America itself?" The power of America is buying more and more stuff.

When St. Paul said that people's god was their stomach, he meant that people put their wants and desires, their comfort and wealth first in their lives. When that attitude rules, it doesn't take much for your glory to be your shame. I doubt anyone connected with a movie that grossed \$130,000,000 in its first week is going to apologize for the filthy language or the raunchy sex scenes. I doubt they're going to listen respectfully to Christians who object to young people watching movies like that. I think they'd mock us and move on.

It's tough to stand up for a Christian lifestyle in a society that has totally bought in to the devil's way of thinking. But I don't know that St. Paul was only talking about people "out there" when he wrote these words. How many of us live as enemies of the cross? How many people who stood up here and promised to conform their lives to God's Word and to be faithful in hearing the Word and taking the sacrament and to suffer death and all rather than fall away – how many of them embrace the godless way of life that is so popular today? How many Christians are replacing serving the Lord with serving their own pleasures and desires? Are we in danger of making our stomach into a god? Paul says, "**Their minds are on earthly things.**" What occupies the majority of our attention? God and his word or the worries and pleasures of this life? Paul says very clearly where that leads: "**their destiny is destruction.**" He's talking about death and hell. Certainly, if we are far more concerned about how good or bad our life is here than we are with heaven, we need to recognize that sin and turn from that attitude.

Hopefully though, most of us are standing with St. Paul while all this is going on. He says these things with tears in his eyes. We might, too. Our tears certainly come from sadness over how people are wasting God's gift of life. It's tragic. But the tears might also be frustration as how living for Christ has become evil in our society. The devil isn't going to back down and if our society can be turned around, it's only going to happen through a slow and painful process. We might not live to see it be successful. So what are we going to do? St. Paul says, **"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."** The world is going to continue to be sinful and broken until Jesus comes back. So while we work every day to lead people to the truth here, our mind and our heart are on heaven. That's where our true citizenship is.

I've lived a total of seven years outside the United States. It was a real privilege to do that. But you know what? At no time in those seven years did I ever even consider renouncing my American citizenship and becoming something else. I always intended to come home. Well, every one of us is living in a foreign country. Sometimes, we need to remember where our true citizenship is. That focus comforts us when we see this temporary home crashing and burning. That citizenship in heaven gives us hope even when we see fellow Christians turning their backs on God and making this world their true home.

Jesus is going to come back. When he does, he is going to change everything, starting with us. He will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. All that's wrong with our bodies will be healed and we will be made perfect. And all that's wrong with our hearts – the sin that longs to embrace this world and to enjoy the pleasures of this life, that worships our stomach and our desires, will be gone forever. We will rejoice in Christ in a perfect world for all eternity.

Why? Because Jesus lived here as one of us. He endured the pain and the hardships we go through. He knew what it was like to see people who had so much more than he did. He knew what it felt like to watch people who should have known better buy into the lies of this world. Through it all, he was perfect in his heart and his mind, in his words and his actions, perfect for you and me. Then he died and paid for all the times we did live for our stomach. He died and paid for all the times we were jealous of those who had more than we do. He died and paid for that sinner inside us who sabotages us over and over again. Then he rose and declared that we are holy in his sight. He rose and he promised that we too will rise. He ascended into heaven to rule all things for our good. Every day that we are here, we are waiting for him to come back. He is coming to give us that perfect world. **It is scary to be a Christian today. So trust in where God will bring us tomorrow.** He will bring us to eternal life.

II.

But being focused on heaven does not mean that we don't care what's going on here. Knowing that this world is sinful does not mean that we make no effort to improve it. God pictures this world in terms of labor pains. Now, I've never personally experienced labor pains, but someone I love has. If my observations are correct, they came and they went. The contractions were intense and painful and they got closer and closer together. But there were breaks in between them. That's how Jesus describes this sinful world. It is not all pain, all the time for most people. We have breaks – we have wonderful blessings. And God does work in this world to create societies where the natural law that he wrote in our hearts is understood at least in part. So there is work for us to do here.

Even if our society completely rejects all that God says, God still calls us to live lives of faith. Paul said, **"Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you."** We are not in this alone. He calls us to join with others in living our Christian life. The whole point of having a church is so that we have people on our side, people who are cheering us on to live as Christ calls us to live, because we all have people who tear our Christian lives down. We all know people who mock and ridicule going to church and walking the straight and narrow. We all know people who tempt us to turn away from God. It's hard to be faithful. So God in his love and wisdom gave us this body right here to help us be faithful. This group of believers and the gospel they hear and share is God's gift of love to you and me.

And in every congregation, he gives people who can model true Christian faith. What does it look like to be a Christian father? What does it look like to be a Christian mother? If you didn't grow up with one, you wouldn't know. But God gives us a congregation so that you can find those models here. Use them! Don't

think you're the only one who needs them. We all do. I've often told the story of how a Christian family that I knew in the army showed me what home devotions looked like. I didn't grow up in a family that did them. I needed a model. I did grow up in a family that came to church regularly. So I did see that model growing up and that's what I copy in my life as a husband and father. For years before I was married, I saw models of men who married Christian women who supported their faith and also models of Christian men who married women who didn't support it, maybe didn't even share it. I knew which one I wanted. The model God gave me helped me to seek a spouse who wanted that Christian life. I cannot express how much that has blessed me and my family.

I'm sure that many of you could also tell stories of the models of faith that your parents were, that friends in the congregation and pastors and teachers have been for you. Don't stop looking for those models. None of us will ever be finished growing in faith on this side of heaven. Even the most mature of us will see in other Christians parts of our lives that we could live better. Especially, when we come face to face with the shortcomings in our Christian lives, it's a wonderful blessing to find a Christian model and follow the pattern of their faith. God gives us those people because he loves us.

God also gives us people who need a model. We live in a tough time to be a Christian. One of the real challenges we face are broken families. There are children in our congregation who don't have a model of Christian father or of a Christian mother in their lives. They desperately need that model. They fervently long for it, although they probably couldn't put that into words. Have compassion on those children and be that model for them in their life.

All that is what Paul calls us to this morning. He winds it up by saying, **"Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!"** Listen to the love in his words. I'm not always good at showing that love. But look what a blessing it is to have people to stand with when the world is against us. Look what a joy it is to encourage others and to be encouraged. We stand firm. Not because we have any power in ourselves. But because the Holy Spirit works through us. He works through the gospel that we share with each other. He works through the guidance and modeling we do. He works through the love which is born from his love. That is his recipe for a Christian life in this world until our Lord returns. **It's scary to be a Christian today. So live a life of faith today.**

There's really nothing else for us to do but focus on Christ and his promises and encourage one another. While we live here today, we live our faith. We live every day looking forward to going home, but doing the best we can to let the light of Christ shine here. My friends, stand firm in these scary times, knowing that Christ is with you and he will carry you through until you stand with him. Amen.