

February 24, 2013

Philippians 3:17-21

Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. 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. 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.

Albert Einstein once said, "The universe is not merely more complicated than we can understand. It's more complicated than we can IMAGINE." That's an interesting thing to think about; how this whole Universe was formed by design. What a complex design it is! God had it in His mind's eye before it ever came to be, then He spoke it into existence exactly according to His pattern.

Patterns are good and easy to follow. They make life easier to live. If your child knows when to go to bed at night; if you have a routine; life is easier to live. Even though they may complain about it, they crave and they want structure. It's how we're designed.

The Old Testament worship and life was designed to follow a specific pattern. Every morning and evening there was a sacrifice at specific times with specific animals. The tabernacle and temple were built according to specific design. The patterns were to help regulate life for the Israelites and keep them from chaos. In the big picture of the pattern all of those individual laws and sacrifices were meant to ultimately point the Israelites to their sin and their need for a sacrifice; for a Messiah to come and save them.

It's this concept of pattern that Paul spoke of in today's text. He wrote, **Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.** Paul was not afraid to think of himself as a role model. He wanted people to follow his pattern of living. That word for pattern basically means "a figure formed by a blow or impression." I think of having a hammer with a chisel and meticulously chiseling a pattern into stone blow by blow. This is what Paul wanted to happen with the Philippians; that their lives would be according to his pattern.

Live According to the Pattern

I. Living without a pattern is the Devil's pattern

Do you have a specific goal or design behind the way you live and the things you choose to do or not do? Or do you just do whatever comes next without any thought or purpose? If you have no ideal or no purpose or goal behind your life, you will have no means of testing whether something should be added into the pattern of your life or not. Satan will be able to weave all kinds of garbage into your life; and your life will soon fall apart. The Satanic pattern is one of chaos.

I think of what Moses came down from Mt. Sinai after receiving the Ten Commandments. Exodus 32:25 says, "Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies." Think of how quickly the people of Israel fell apart! This is what Satan wants: people living by no pattern but their own, which is in reality his.

Paul described people that live this way by saying, **Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.** Think of Cain who was driven from civilization with his murder of Abel. It only took five generations of his descendants to go from running and hiding because of murder to then BRAGGING about murder. Lamech bragged to his wives,

I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me.

If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times. (Genesis 4:23)

He gloried in his power and his vengeful spirit. When the right pattern is lost, the wrong pattern quickly becomes the ideal. Those of you who have witnessed the shift in America's attitude towards divorce, adultery, and homosexuality have seen it firsthand. Once you go down that road, chaos hits real quickly.

What really concern me are the less-insidious patterns that enter into our lives. Imagine your life to be a blanket, and you have certain yarns and threads that you want to be integral into the fabric of your life. There are other fabrics that aren't as essential, but they add a little variety in life. One Christian might enjoy sports, while another enjoys music. One may love boating and another may love hunting. God allows and even encourages us to use the gifts that He's given us to the glory of His name. The problem occurs when those things become the main fabric or pattern which you build your life around. That which was meant to add a little variety ends up becoming the main variety that you revolve your life around.

Just recently I sent out an email with the statistics of attendance for our kids in 9th through 12th grade for the past 13 months. Out of a total of 49 kids -

- 18 have been to church 5 or fewer times
- 7 have been to church 6-10 times
- 14 have been to church 68 percent of the time or more
- They have an overall average of 33 percent attendance

Not surprisingly, the pattern of attendance for the children almost always mirrors the attendance of the parents. What we are witnessing is not just here but all across America - seems to be a culture of indifference that is coming on stronger and stronger with each generation. It can start in those who are faithful to worship but don't include Jesus in their conversation. It then progresses from there. Jesus goes from every Sunday to once a month. The next generation takes time for him quarterly; then twice a year; then never.

This isn't the only bad pattern. Children that witness parents who yell and scream at each other are taught that is the norm for marriage. They see how they are regarded as nuisances and they are taught that children are curses instead of blessings. They witness anger and laziness. It is hammered into their souls day after day. "Marriage stinks. Children are a nuisance. Church is boring. Life is miserable."

II. The cross is the pattern

Paul did not regard such behavior with indifference. He wrote, "I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ." Just as Jesus wept over Jerusalem, Paul wept over those who decided to worship their stomachs. He even said that they were living as enemies of the cross of Christ.

The cross shows us God's pattern. It tells us that sin is not acceptable and neither are we. It tells us it must be crucified and damned by God. God's pattern is not to accept sinners as they are, but to damn them to hell. God took sin so seriously that He was willing to damn His Son because of it. Jesus wasn't tolerant of sin. He fought against it with all of His might. He willingly died under it. God's pattern was to crucify the sins of the world in His Son Jesus Christ.

The pattern of the cross then is imprinted on your heart in your baptism. His routine is to condemn you to make you despair, so that you look to Jesus for your salvation. He wants you to feel guilty over your indifference. He wants you to hate your anger. But He also wants you to come to Jesus with it in prayer and in Word and sacrament. He wants a part of your pattern to constantly remember your baptism and go to the Lord's Supper for forgiveness and strength. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross repeatedly is meant to show you the seriousness of sin and the depth of God's grace. This is not exactly a comfortable way of living. It is a constant driving from sin to Savior; from death to life; from hell to heaven. The cross is meant to be the base of the tapestry. Even with no fun, your blanket of forgiveness is complete. Were God to allow no frills and no fun, you wouldn't need to complain because of the warmth of Jesus and His forgiveness.

Therefore, if you want to live for pleasure you must ultimately dig in your heels against the cross. It is inevitable. You must angrily find excuses as to why the sacrament isn't that important to you. You must blame the church or blame your parents or even blame Jesus. You must tell yourself that the cross is boring and old news. You must convince yourself that Christianity needs to move on from the cross. You might even make fun of those who worry about you and say, "Don't worry! Lighten up. It's not like I'm going to burn in hell!" All you can keep your patterns of sinfulness; so you can weave your blanket of life the way you want to. Paul grew up in a religious culture of hard work and pride. He was a Jew of Jews and a Pharisee of Pharisees. But when Paul was shown the cross of Christ his life changed. Listen went from doing all he could to earn his righteousness to doing all he could to cling to the righteousness He had in Christ.

I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us 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.

Notice how Paul put that ó how his life changed ó how Jesus had taken hold of him; how he had already attained righteousness from God in Christ.

Think of the story. Paul was on the way to Damascus looking to persecute more Christians and lock them up. Jesus confronted Paul and scared him with a direct vision. But then instead of killing Paul, Jesus reached out to Paul and grabbed hold of His soul with His mercy and forgiveness. He gave Paul free and total forgiveness in the cross. When Paul realized that his righteousness was not something that he had to work for but something that was given to him through faith in Jesus, it changed his life. All of his previous life was considered garbage. He dropped it all and lived a new life; pressing on towards the goal and straining ahead to the promise of heaven. He wanted to live up to what He had attained in Christ.

III. Strain for the pattern

This was his new pattern. This was his new design of life that he wanted the Philippians to follow; not to live life seeking to flee the cross but wanting to cling to it. He used word translated into English such as "straining" and "pressing on." He wanted the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings; to even become like Christ in his death. The word in the Greek means to "pursue" and even to "persecute." It was used of those who pursue after something with great passion.

He wrote, "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." Paul described it as if he and the Philippians were strangers living in a foreign country. They were only passing through on the way to the Promised Land. It reminds me of the hymn, "I'm but a stranger here, heaven is my home." Last February my wife and I went to India for a wedding. It was obvious to the people there that we weren't from their country. We looked different. We dressed different. We acted different. We weren't used to the poverty and the mass of people there. We were eager to get home.

This is the way it was with Paul. He couldn't wait for the resurrection of the dead; when His body would be powerfully changed to be like the resurrected body of Christ. Then Paul wouldn't have to deal with his own laziness. He wouldn't have to deal with his thorn in the flesh any longer. Because of Jesus' death and

resurrection Paul knew that he was going to heaven. He couldn't wait, and he wanted others to receive that resurrection as well. So he worked hard with an eager hope; doing all he could to spread the message of Christ; so the Holy Spirit could bring others into the kingdom as well. Paul reminded the Philippians of the fact that they were headed there too. Their lowly bodies would be transformed as well. A seed doesn't grow unless it dies. Instead of fearing that he would work himself to death, Paul was glad to face that death, knowing that Jesus would raise him from the dead. This is what Paul wanted for the Philippians. This is what Paul wants for us. He wants to see a pattern of people who are straining towards what is ahead.

Would your kids or your parents or friends look at you and say, "He's really passionate about Jesus. She's dying for Christ." Or is your life one of mediocrity? Think of when you really want your child to succeed at a sport or at school. You encourage the child towards it. You pay for the training. You drive the child to the practice and pick him up. This is what Paul wants you to do with yourself and your family when it comes to Christ. Hunt Him down. Seek Him. Get to know Him really well. In the Greek there are two kinds of knowledge. There's a head knowledge and an experiential one. God wants you to have both. Don't just know how many days Jesus was in the grave and how long it was until His ascension. Know what kind of sins Jesus condemned. See Jesus dying on the cross for YOU. Listen to everything that Jesus said and see that everything He did was personally for you, because it was.

It seems the older I get the more I like the term, "sick and tired." I'm sick and tired of cleaning up after my kids. I'm sick and tired of waking up so early. I'm getting too old for this." Sometimes I maybe even many times I want to give up. Do you have a desire to be stagnant?

Today Paul has called on us to live according to the pattern he gave us. God didn't design the universe to be stagnant. He designed it to be moving. With the Fall into sin and its bondage to decay, God's word says that Creation isn't pessimistic about its fall. It is eagerly awaiting the resurrection where it will be freed from its bondage to decay. (Romans 8:19) The sun has not stopped shining and the moon hasn't stopped giving its light. The winds keep blowing and the seas keep churning even though they are going to burn. So should you. Jesus knew that He was going to die and be put through hell. But He also knew that wouldn't be the end. There would also be a resurrection; an eternal life of action. With an eager expectation of our redemption and resurrection He went forward with the reward in mind. He went to the cross with tears but also with hope; knowing that He would accomplish what He was sent to do; pay for our salvation.

In your baptism the Holy Spirit has grabbed hold of your soul and breathed new life into you. By the grace of God given to you in Christ you have God's word that you are going to shine like the stars forever in heaven. You are going to die, but because of the death and resurrection of Jesus you are also going to live forever. The pattern for life and hope is one of eager expectation and active hope. You were born again to grow in Christ. Instead of planning for retirement, strive for that which Christ has taken hold of you. Keep actively fighting against your sinful nature. Strive to take hold of that which Christ has taken hold of you. Do not expect this struggle to be easy. Eagerly expect it to be rewarding as you live according to Paul's pattern. Amen.