

# HEAVEN'S PATTERN FOR EARTHLY LIVING

SERIES: TENACIOUS TOGETHER



Catalog No. 20180603  
Philippians 3:17-21  
Eighth Message  
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June 3, 2018

*Philippians 3:17-21*

In popular thought, heaven and earth have little to do with each other. Heaven is some place your soul goes after you die. Until then, heaven means very little. Even then, heaven doesn't seem to be much to look forward to. For now, God may be looking down from heaven. Every once in a while he may answer a prayer or two. But for the most part, he's removed from earthly life.

The Scriptures tell a different story. The apostle Paul says that heaven has established an outpost on earth. Together, those of us who follow Jesus constitute a colony of heaven commissioned by God to spread the influence of heaven. As members of this colony, our citizenship is in heaven. One day, heaven will rule earth. God's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Knowing these things, we live according to the laws of heaven, not earth. The pattern that heaven gives us for earthly living is that of self-giving love.

Paul's story in Philippians 3:4-14 features passion for knowing Christ and willingness to relinquish power, status, and privileges for the sake of knowing and following Jesus. He follows the heavenly pattern, and in verses 17 through 21, he offers it to us.

## **Philippians 3:17-19:**

**Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. 18 For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.**

## **Good and bad patterns**

Paul has just told the story of his life so that his readers might follow his example. The story shows how Paul was willing to abandon his privileges as an elite Jew for the sake of Christ. The "example" that Paul gave the Philippians and that others model is that of self-giving love. In this letter, the pattern is seen in Paul

(Philippians 1:12-26, 3:4-14), Timothy (Philippians 2:19-24), Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25-30), and, most significantly, Christ (Philippians 2:6-11). Many of those living in Philippi, a Roman colony, had the privilege of Roman citizenship. Where Christ and Caesar vie for the affections of one's heart, no question must remain as to who wins the battle. If the privileges provided by Caesar cause one to distance oneself from Christ and the self-giving love that he calls for, such privileges must be set aside.

Paul's pattern is not the only one, however. Just as some "walk" according to Paul's pattern (verse 17), many "walk" according to a different pattern (verse 18). So Paul warns the Philippians about these people and their way of life, lest the believers imitate them instead of him.

The identity of these "enemies of the cross of Christ" is the subject of much debate in scholarly circles. They may be unbelieving Jews, inasmuch as Paul tells his readers about them "with tears." Elsewhere Paul speaks about unbelieving Jews in similar language, saying "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart" for them (Romans 9:2). Paul describes these people in five ways:

- They are "enemies of the cross of Christ."
- Their "end is destruction."
- Their "god is their belly."
- They "glory in their shame."
- Their minds are "set on earthly things."

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:23 that the preaching of Christ crucified is a "stumbling block to Jews." Most Jews, of course, were not only enemies of the cross of Christ they were also enemies of all crosses. Crucifixion was a form of execution that Rome employed to keep its subjects, such as the Jews, in line. For many Jews, the last place their messiah would be found was hanging on a Roman cross. Jesus, as a would-be messiah, did not endorse the nationalist agenda of Israel and called it to account for abandoning its God. The Jewish leaders perceived him to be a threat and handed him over to the Romans, who crucified him. As enemies of the cross of Christ, they would not have endorsed the pattern of self-abandonment that Paul was advocating. On the

contrary, they would have been grasping for status, power, and privileges.

Paul earlier indicated that the pagans who oppose the Philippian believers would be destroyed (Philippians 1:28). Here he also speaks of the “destruction” that unbelievers are destined for, in this case perhaps unbelieving Jews. In 2 Thessalonians 1:9 Paul describes “eternal destruction” as being “away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.” Why would enemies of the cross of Christ want to spend eternity in his presence?

The phrase “their god is their belly” may be a reference to the Jewish food laws that supposedly helped mark out the Jews as God’s people. Many Jews used the food laws as a way to distinguish themselves from the Gentiles and as a way to keep the Gentiles, who didn’t receive or follow such laws, from accessing God. They had elevated the food laws to such an extent that here they are seen as worshipping their bellies instead of God (Colossians 2:16, 20-21, 23; Hebrews 9:10; Mark 7:1-16). Grammatically, the next phrase, “they glory in their shame,” is linked to the previous phrase. These people who worship their belly “glory,” or delight in, such worship, but Paul says it is actually to their shame and that they should be satisfied with it.

If these people are Jews, the earthly things they set their minds on would concern circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath keeping. Such laws were given as symbols of heavenly realities, but many people gutted them of their meaning and clung to their forms as a way of self-preservation and as a way to persuade God to take action.

Lest we accuse Paul of being anti-Jewish, we must, of course, remember that he himself was a Jew and that he anguished over the unrepentant state of his unbelieving countrymen. He even said, “For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Romans 9:3).

If this is a polemic against Jews who are enemies of Christ, what is it doing here, in Paul’s letter to the Philippians? Paul has already described some Jews in pagan terms (Philippians 3:2-3). It’s likely that his warning throughout Philippians 3 is against the lure of both Judaism and paganism, with the latter probably being the more significant concern. The particular pagan feature that Paul seems most preoccupied with is the Caesar cult of the Roman empire. The attraction

of following Caesar instead of Christ was a strong one in the Roman colony of Philippi.

## Look for examples

Here again in this letter we see that “examples” are important for us. We not only need instruction in how to live, we need to see what following such instruction looks like in a life. Here the pattern is abandoning privileges when they conflict with knowing and following Christ. In Philippians, we see the pattern in Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus. Their stories are inspiring. We could benefit from being on the lookout for figures in history who followed the pattern. Biographies are a good source.

I remember being blown away when I first came upon the story of Jim Elliot, the missionary who was killed, at the age of twenty-eight, by the natives he was trying to reach with the Gospel. His oft-quoted adage has inspired many through the years: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

In my sermon last week, I referenced Eric Liddel, the Scottish runner who won the Olympic 400 meters in 1924 and went on to become a missionary in China. I had seen the movie *Chariots of Fire*, which features Liddel’s running career. His faith plays a part in the inspiring movie. But I had not been aware that a movie had been made in 2016 that features the rest of the story: Liddel’s time as a missionary in China. On a recent flight back from our missions trip to India I discovered it among the offerings, and it too was inspiring. First watch *Chariots of Fire*; then watch *On Wings of Eagles*.

I’m often encouraged at memorial services for believers who have walked with the Lord for many years. I listen to the stories of the impact that such people have had on the lives of others, and I’m encouraged to carry on.

Last Sunday, I attended a memorial service for Jim Gaderland, the longtime pastor of Foothill Covenant Church in Mountain View who had been battling cancer for ten years up until his death at age seventy-two. Jim in many ways was a pastor to pastors, both within his denomination and without, and after he retired, he continued serving at his church by teaching in the children’s ministry. Story after story was shared of Jim’s love for Jesus and love for others.

When I was praying the next morning, I realized that I had incorporated an aspect of my prayer routine after having met with Jim. He was a living example for me,

and, as the writer of Hebrews says, “though he died, he still speaks” (Hebrews 11:4).

Also, we need to take note of those who are following the pattern today. They serve as living examples. If we have the opportunity to seek out these people, to talk with them and get to know them, so much the better.

A friend of mine who lives in Arroyo Grande has had dementia for about ten years. I’ve been visiting Don and his wife Julie at least twice a year for those years to be an encouragement to both of them. I visited again two weeks ago. And I realized this time after visiting them that Julie has been an encouragement to me all these years with the way she cares for her declining husband. She’s following the pattern. And being around her inspires me to do the same.

With some people, it’s not so much what they or even how they say it, it’s who they are. Who they are gives meaning to what they say and how they say it. For example, if you hear the words “Trust the Lord,” it might mean more to you coming from someone who has suffered much in life and is herself trusting in the Lord.

I’m encouraged and inspired by many people in this church who are modeling the Christ pattern of self-giving love. I’ll share about two of them later.

## The other pattern

We need to take note of those who are following this pattern because the pattern that our culture gives us, and that most are following, is one of self-preservation, self-advancement, and self-exaltation. Those who follow the cultural pattern are enemies of the cross of Christ in that they oppose self-abandonment and promote self-advancement. Although those who follow such a pattern may be living it up, their destiny, if the pattern doesn’t change, is destruction. We need to remember this, lest we conform our lives to their pattern. Their god is their belly: they have their own set of laws in order to distinguish themselves from others and keep others from reaching their heights or breaking into their club. The exclusivity they revel in is actually to their shame. Their minds are thus set on earthly things: they rejoice in and protect earthly status, power, and privileges.

This pattern is all around us—in the people we work with, in the shows we watch, in the social media we consume, and in the websites we visit. The pattern almost seems to seep into our thinking through the air we breathe. We need to see the pattern for what it is—an enemy of the cross of Christ. And we need to breathe in

the biblical pattern that abandons privileges for the sake of knowing and following Christ.

Why should we follow the Christ pattern?

## Colony of heaven

### Philippians 3:20-21:

**But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.**

Verse 20 begins with a word that is usually translated “for,” not “but.” In verses 20 and 21 Paul is explaining why his readers should follow his example. They should do so—they can do so—because they know what will happen at the end of the story. The Christ pattern of love will one day be the law of the land, so they can live now in the light of that day.

In contrast to those whose minds are on earthly things, Paul indicates that believers’ citizenship is in heaven. Believers, therefore, should set their minds on the heavenly things that pertain to their citizenship. Some of the readers of Paul’s letter would have been citizens of Rome. Even if the Philippians have Roman citizenship, their more significant citizenship is in heaven. A colony was established to secure a conquered country by permeating it with Roman culture. If the natives threatened the colony, Caesar, who was called “savior” and “lord,” would come to rescue and liberate his people.

Paul is saying that the Philippian believers, as citizens of heaven, are called to spread the influence of heaven in their city. Their Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ, will one day come to finish the job and liberate them. Rome will try to orient their minds toward earthly things, but the believers must hold to their citizenship in heaven and its calling.

When Christ does come to save the citizens of heaven at the end of the age, he will “transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body.” Our bodies are “lowly” now in that they are subject to temptation, sin, illness, frailty, decay, and death.

Christ’s body was transformed when he was resurrected. He still had a human body, but it was a different kind of human body. This may partially explain

why his followers didn't recognize him after he was resurrected (Luke 24:16, John 20:15). It also may explain how he was able to appear in a room with locked doors (John 20:19, 26). The word "glorious" pertains to Christ's exaltation and sovereignty. Caesar had a certain "glory," but it will be shown to be pitiful and transient in light of the glory of Christ.

David, in writing to God in Psalm 8:3-8, speaks of "man" in this way:

When I look at your heavens, the work of  
your fingers,  
the moon and the stars, which you have set  
in place,  
what is man that you are mindful of him,  
and the son of man that you care for him?  
Yet you have made him a little lower than the  
heavenly beings  
and crowned him with glory and honor.  
You have given him dominion over the works of  
your hands;  
you have put all things under his feet,  
all sheep and oxen,  
and also the beasts of the field,  
the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,  
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

God intended humanity to be sovereign, to rule over his creation. The New Testament says Psalm 8 is fulfilled in Christ (Hebrews 2:6-8, Ephesians 1:22). He becomes the new Adam, the truly human one.

The bodies of believers, once they are transformed, will be like the body of Christ. These will be physical bodies, somewhat like the bodies we have now, but completely suited to, and animated by, the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 15:35-49). And these bodies will enable us to fulfill God's intention for us to rule over his creation—only it will be a new creation that will have undergone its own transformation (Romans 8:20-21). The new creation will be filled with the glory of God—his presence and majesty (Habakkuk 2:14, Revelation 21:23).

The transformation of our bodies will take place by the "power" that enables Christ to "subject all things to himself." The power that Christ has is that of the one true King. He will use that power, as our Savior and Lord, to transform our bodies. Not only will he transform our bodies, but he will also bring everything under his control, including Caesar and all other powers who oppose him and oppress his people (1 Corinthians 15:27-28).

In verses 20 and 21, Paul picks up several strands from his poem about Christ in Philippians 2:6-11, which spoke of the incarnation and exaltation of Christ. He does so to show us that the exaltation of Christ means that we too will be exalted and that we must take the same lowly road that Christ took.

### **The third alternative**

As members of the church of Jesus Christ, we have been sent by our Lord and Savior to form a colonial outpost from which we spread the influence of heaven. The church has often opted for one of two extremes. We have withdrawn from the world in order to avoid being stained by it. Or we have entered the world in order to dominate. Withdraw or dominate: Both inclinations have their basis in fear. When we withdraw, we fear contamination. When we dominate, we fear annihilation.

The Scriptures offer us a third alternative. We gather together to adopt and reinforce the Christ pattern of self-abandonment. Then we enter the world and influence it through this pattern—through the power of love rather than the love of power. This third alternative will always contain some tension. We will often wonder if we're falling off on the side of withdrawal or domination, and we will feel pulled in both directions. Isolation and power each have their appeal. We will have to think and pray and use all the wisdom that God gives us in order to take the third path, but it is the path to which we are called.

When we withdraw, we lose whatever influence we might have. When we dominate, opting for the love of power rather than the power of love, we model the pattern of the culture instead of the pattern of Christ, and, again, we lose our influence.

Levi the tax collector was an outcast. Jews considered him a turncoat for collecting taxes for the Romans. Jesus, however, went to Levi's house and had dinner with many other tax collectors and sinners there. The scribes and Pharisees were aghast. Jesus was spreading the influence of heaven at a party of sinners—but without being influenced by them (Mark 2:13-17). We should consider attending such parties. If they won't come to our parties, we need to go to theirs. When Jesus entered the world of sinners, he was not contaminated by their sin. Rather, his holiness cleansed their sin (Mark 5:25-34). Jesus resides with us by his Spirit. He has made us holy (Ephesians 1:4). We too can venture forth into the world as a sanctifying influence.

N.T. Wright comments:

*We need people who will hold on to Christ firmly with one hand and reach out the other, with wit and skill and cheerfulness, with compassion and sorrow and tenderness, to the places where our world is in pain. We need people who will use all their God-given skills, as Paul used his, to analyze where things have gone wrong, to come to the place of pain, and to hold over the wound the only medicine which will really heal, which is the love of Christ made incarnate once more, the strange love of God turned into your flesh and mine, your smile and mine, your tears and mine, your patient analysis and mine, your frustration and mine, your joy and mine.*<sup>1</sup>

We can seek to influence the world through the power of love, and risk rejection, because we know that our Lord and Savior will come from heaven to finish the work. When he does, love will reign. The Christ pattern of love will be the law of the land. We are not waiting to go to heaven. We are waiting for heaven to come to earth. When our Savior comes to earth, he will transform God's creation and our bodies, and we will reign with Christ over this new creation. The scent of heavenly influence will be everywhere. Our minds and bodies will be perfectly suited for this new creation and this calling. Our bodies will be able to carry out the desires of our hearts, which will be perfectly in line with God's will. Our wills will conform to his, and we will delight in this alignment. We will be what God always intended us to be. We will be what we've always wanted to be. We will be the lords of the earth. And everything that is now out of control will be brought under the control of Christ.

Andy Crouch, in his book *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling*, says the church needs less critics of culture and more creators of culture.

I have dinner with a friend who lives in Redding, in the northern reaches of the state, once a year as I'm passing through. When we met a few days ago, the waiter who was serving us was quite intrigued as he heard us talking. "How long have you guys known each other?" He asked. "Since 1981," I answered. Later, when he came back, he asked us, "Do you have any advice for a young guy like me?" He looked to me to be about twenty-one years old. How would you answer? I said, "Trust in Jesus." Then Gary told him about the importance of the Scriptures. He seemed quite intrigued. That's spreading the influence of heaven, isn't it? And you never know when you're going to have an opportunity to do it.

## 'Birthmarks'

Bob and Muriel Thompson are people in this church I draw inspiration from. Bob had a stroke eleven years ago, but Bob and Muriel continue to talk about how good the Lord has been to them. They both put into practice the Christ pattern of self-giving love. In conclusion, I share with you a poem that Muriel wrote in 1993 to encourage someone else. With Muriel's permission, I share the poem with you. Muriel, who is now ninety-seven, is African-American. The poem is entitled "Birthmarks."

Dear Lord, the birthmark you gave me for all to  
see hasn't been easy for me  
It's been hard not to complain or place blame  
My inward parts You did form  
Wonderful, how I was woven, molded and colored  
brown  
Some are annoyed when I'm around; others  
ask what are you doing on this side of town  
Epithets, barbs, condescending words and tones  
pierce my ears dissonant sounds more  
stabbing blows  
You know  
Must a victim I become?

Softly, but firm I hear You say I Am your strength  
your hiding place, walk in Me  
Do not rely on others to validate whom you will be  
Thank you Lord for reminding me, no matter what  
color I may be  
In You I am free, and a child of the King  
now is not the time to put trust in this flesh  
Soon it will be put to rest

As heir of the King  
what joy and hope it brings  
Clothed in His strength and righteousness  
enables me to walk in faith  
With Him who loved me and gave Himself for me  
Allows me to face the future with peace  
and dignity

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *For All God's Worth*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 101.