**Philippians 3:17-4:1** February 21, 2016

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*Philippians 3:17 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!*

Dear Friends in Christ,

There was a woman who enjoyed cooking. She often cooked big meals for her family. Whenever she prepared a roast, before putting it in the oven, she neatly cut off the ends. One day, her mother was helping her prepare a holiday meal and noticed her daughter preparing a roast. Curious, her mother asked, “Why in the world do you cut off the ends of the beef roast?” “Mother, I learned it from you. You *always* cut off the ends of the beef roast.” “Dear Girl, when we were just starting out I only had a small roast pan. I cut off the ends because otherwise it wouldn’t fit.”

Ah! The power of example. Eyes watching, ears listening, we are impressionable, very impressionable.

Examples change us more than we realize. But we think, “No they don’t. I am a person of conviction. I am not easily swayed!” Really? Why is it that we buy new clothes? For most of us it isn’t that our clothes wear out. First you see it on TV—people wearing things that don’t look like what you are wearing. Then the ads from the store near you show those new, cool, cute styles—on sale! Pretty soon everyone else is wearing those things. Suddenly we part with a good deal of our hard-earned cash to update our wardrobe. It’s not because we need new clothes. Call it what you will, it is the power of example. And if you doubt me, just think about Ugly Sweater Day. All those polyester sweaters have decades of wear still in them. Why not save the money and wear them?

Examples matter in the basics of life: food and clothing. Examples also figure in the most important matters, matters of faith. Today we think about…

**The Power of a Christian Example**

**We Need Christian Examples!**

Every single one of us has people we look up to and admire. Their examples influence us. Think of an admired teacher who taught well and treated all students with respect – and influenced you. Think of a co-worker who always has a way of encouraging and lifting the spirits of others – and it challenges you to be a positive influence. Think of your parents. While no parent can claim to be a perfect example, I hope you can say that the best of them has rubbed off on you. (On this point I would again point to John Newton, the writer of *Amazing Grace* which will be the subject of Sunday Bible study in a few weeks. Amazing story about his mother’s example!)

It is so important for us to have good examples. We are not as steadfast and tenacious and rock-solid in our convictions as we imagine. We overhear a criticism and our spirits sink. Our ideas get shot down, and next time we hesitate to share an opinion. Someone we respect voices an opinion contrary to ours and we start to wonder if we really are on the right track in life.

Knowing the power of example, the Apostle Paul, prompted by the Holy Spirit, tells these Christians, ***“Join with others in following my example.”*** (17). Now, that sounds arrogant! Sitting at the lunch table with your friends, you say, “You know, you guys should think about being a little more like me.” Ah, yah. That’ll work!

But, you know, Christian examples are important. Most, if not all of you, had at least one Christian parent. Where would you have been without that living example? A few of you had the wonderful blessings of a Christian school education. Think of all those years you were blessed to see living Christian examples in those teachers.

But what if you are one of the few (though hardly unique) Christians who has had little to no Christian example in your first twenty or more years of life? If that is you, then you will understand exactly what Paul was saying when he said, ***“Join with others in following my example.”*** You will understand Paul better than me.

Here’s how: Not one of these Christians at Philippi had been a Christian more than a year or two. These Christians could not remember back to the Christian training their parents had given them., because none of them had Christian parents. They couldn’t remember going to church as kids because Christianity didn’t even exist when they were kids!

So these new, inexperienced Christians looked at each other at every point, with every question, with every disagreement that came up in the church, and they asked, “What should we do?” They didn’t have quick and easy answers based on a long history of people who spiritually wrestled with these questions and searched God’s Word and figured them out. No 20/20 hindsight to look back on what had been done in the past. No wise, veteran Christians to weigh in on the issues with what they had discovered in God’s Word over the years. If I were a Christian of this early church, I would have often felt like I was just faking it. “I don’t know what I’m doing. Give me an example!”

How often don’t I hear people say, “Don’t teach me how it’s done, show me.” People want to see things worked out. When I fix the seal on the refrigerator, I would rather watch a ten minute You-tube video than read a three minute page of instructions. Show me. Give me the example! In unfamiliar territory, we all feel more comfortable with a real-life example.

**Being Examples**

And so Paul told these Christians to follow his example. They had no other living breathing example of Christianity than Paul! This Paul told them, ***“Join with others in following my example.”*** But he wasn’t some sort of manipulative cult leader. He added, ***“And take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.”*** Christian examples were not limited to the early apostles. Nor are Christian examples limited to pastors and church leaders. Every Christian has the privilege of being a positive example.

Christians exist in a community. Christians are not islands. We are more like counties. We border other people on all sides of our lives. We see them, they see us. Our example can encourage them, and they encourage me. That’s why we have many fellowship opportunities. We are not only a group of people who gets together once every week or two to individually worship God and go our own ways. We share our lives. We live in the ways that God has blessed us to be examples to others. We benefit from others who are examples in their own ways. The Bible tells us, *“Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds… let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching”* (Hebrews 10:24-25).

**Looking for Examples**

Let us be examples, but also let us be *looking for* the right kinds of examples.

There is a saying, “Show me your friends, and I will tell you who you are.” Maybe, in this age of less and less personal contact, it would be, “Tell me who you follow on social media, tell me what you put into the internet search engine, and I will tell you who you are.” What enters your eyes, your ears, your minds? What examples are floating around in your life?

While Paul directed these Christians to godly examples, he also cautioned them, ***“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.”*** (18-19). Most of the people putting things out there to influence you, could not be less concerned about your spiritual well-being. Immorality is the eye candy of the teen-age and adult world. Earthly belongings are the goal of life. The highest respect and honor are given to those who can dominate other people whether openly or through behind-the-back conniving.

The rewards of these worldly examples are so pleasing to our senses and satisfying to our selfishness that we confess having given in to these things, even when we don’t want to. We have sat before an altar (not God’s altar, by the way) and watched the examples of violence, hatred, disrespect, immorality, atheism, envy being glorified. We must ask God to forgive all those times we have been satisfied gazing on, even pursuing those examples.

As redeemed children of God, we need to ask ourselves, how much of it is healthy for us to ingest before these ungodly examples begin to influence us. Here’s God’s answer: *“Brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things… And the God of peace will be with you.”* (Philippians 4:8-9).

The healthiest habits of all are those that take us back to our Lord and Savior frequently. Let me say it again. The best examples we can show are not examples that point to our or anyone else’s virtues, even Christian virtues, but ones that direct people to God. Oh yes, real life lived in front of other people is important. But we are not the source of spiritual life. God is. ***“Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who… will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body”*** (20-21).

There is in the British Museum, a clay tablet from a couple thousand years ago. It is a child’s school lesson. Since they didn’t have paper in those days, they would use a moist clay tablet for the school work. At the end of the exercise it could be wiped clean and smooth and used again. For whatever reason, this one never got wiped clean, and this child’s homework has been preserved for thousands of years for us to critique. (And who says doing your homework doesn’t matter!) This particular tablet is a writing exercise. At the top of the tablet, the tutor wrote a neat lesson. Practicing his lesson, the student copied the tutor all the way down the tablet. But there was a problem. On the first line, the student copied the tutor. But then he copied his copy. Then his copy of a copy, and so on. As you go down the tablet, the lesson deteriorates because he never went back to the tutor’s original example. [[1]](#endnote-1)

Parents who have daily devotions – those are valuable not just because of the knowledge they impart, but in the example of continual reference to the source: God’s Word. The attitude of a parent that says, “Whatever happens, we go to church on Sunday.” That attitude that will bear fruit in children and grandchildren, into the 22nd century. On the other side, indifference is an example that is equally well taught and caught by those around us.

We do well to have people who show godly examples to us. They are precious. But more precious yet, are habits that lead us not to human excellence, but to God’s perfection—habits that lead people directly back here to God’s house every week, back to his word in daily devotions, back to Him in prayer with our every worry and concern, our every joy and victory. Because while our examples can mightily influence life, nothing but God can give life.

***“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!”*** Amen.

1. Tan, P. L. (1996). *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (p. 986). Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)