

To look like Jesus follow my example

Philippians 3:15-4:3

February 10, 2013

Dan Hoffman

[Pray]

As most of you know Nikki and I lived in South Korea for four years before we responded to God's call and returned to Canada ultimately to come to Fort George.

While we were there, one of the most interesting phenomena for me was the sense of where home was. When we first arrived we found ourselves watching BCTV online almost every night even though we had never watched it when we lived in Canada – we were lonely for home.

But then I can vividly remember one day, having just gotten off the plane after a particularly stressful visit in Canada, something we did every 18 months or so. Nikki and I were sitting in the back seat of a taxi and weaving our way through the narrow streets of Busan on the way back to our apartment. And then I realized it. I realized I loved the familiarity of the small little shops and back street culture we were passing. I felt comfortable with the language I had been able to acquire and I enjoyed both my friendships and my work – we were Canadians, but Busan had become home.

...

We continue this morning with our series through Paul's letter to the Philippians. It is a letter he wrote while in prison and facing the possibility of being executed. And yet it is a letter full of confidence, joy and love both for God and for the Philippian church.

Today we are in the second half of chapter 3 and I would encourage you to take out your Bibles and follow along.

This morning the big idea of our text centers around Christian perfection or maturity and is as follows: **Christian perfection means imitating those who allow their Heavenly citizenship to transform their earthly lives.**

So let's start by looking at the first part of this sentence, "Christian perfection". Look with me at verses 15 and 16.

[Read Philippians 3:15-16]

Paul starts this paragraph by speaking about himself and to anyone else who is spiritually mature. Now who is he talking to here? Is anyone willing to put their hand up and say "Yup, that's me, I'm mature!" What does this word "mature" mean?

Well actually Paul uses this word very similar to the way he uses the word “holy”. In its ultimate form “holiness” only describes God and yet Paul also uses it to describe people who have dedicated themselves pursuing holiness even though they are still people.

In Colossians Paul describes Christians as those “who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved” but then he encourages these holy people to “put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (Colossians 3:12)

So they are holy, but they haven’t arrived at ultimate holiness yet.

And this is the same thing Paul is doing here. Notice that just three verses earlier Paul speaks of himself saying:

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made **perfect...**” (Philippians 3:12)

How can Paul have not attained “perfection” in verse 12, but be “mature” in verse 15 – especially since perfection and maturity are the same word in the Greek?

...

This isn’t a contradiction, what Paul is giving us here is a definition of spiritually maturity or perfection. Spiritual maturity equals hunger for God. It’s not about knowledge, how many years we’ve been in church, how many Bible studies we’ve attended or how good we are at Greek or Hebrew. Instead spiritual maturity is about desire, acknowledging that we desperately need more of God.

So Paul hasn’t attained maturity in verse 12 because it isn’t something you can attain once for all. But in verse 15 he is mature because he is among those who are constantly hungry for more of God.

Have you ever been around a brand new Christian who just can’t get enough of praying or reading her Bible?

By this definition this person is more mature than someone who has been in the church a long time but grown board of seeking God. Do you get it?

Ask yourself “Am I hungry for more of God?” Am I someone who longs to mature in my faith and is pursuing this on a daily basis?”

If you can answer “yes” to that question then Paul would describe you as mature regardless of whether you became a Christian yesterday or 60 years ago. It is the desire for more of God not knowledge about God that marks maturity.

Are you on that path today? Sure you still struggle with sin from time to time, but because of what you understand Christ has done for you, you are continually pursuing Him? Or have you allowed the cares of this world to distract you from what is most important?

When I realize I've fallen into not seeking God the way I should I pray "God I want to want you more. Have mercy on me and increase my desire for You."

...

Paul then takes this thought to the next level, and here we get to the second part of our big idea: **Christian perfection means imitating...**

Look at verse 17

[Read Philippians 3:17-19]

Now if you had a hard time thinking of yourself as someone who is spiritually mature try to swallow this one. Here Paul says "follow my example". This week when Willie arrived at the church to put the sermon title on the sign outside Leanne came up and asked if I was sure of what I wanted to put up. And the reason she asked me is because the title I had come up with several months back when I planned out this series was "To look like Jesus look like us".

And we looked at each other for a minute and I chickened out. My thoughts went to the people driving down 15th who would see the sign and I thought "this is a bit presumptuous". When people see this sign are they going to glorify God because they can't argue with the strength of our testimony? If Jesus were living in Prince George today would He be doing no more than what we are doing to impact our city? And instead I got Willie to use the generic title "Following Christian example."

But this is what this text is talking about. In verse 17 Paul hangs out a sign that says: "If you want to look like Jesus, look like me."

And this isn't just an offhand comment for Paul. In Thessalonians he commends the church saying:

You became imitators of us and of the Lord, in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. (1 Thessalonians 1:6)

And in Corinthians Paul goes right out and commands the church there to:

Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:1)

Is Paul overly proud of his spirituality here? Or is there something else going on?

Well it isn't just Paul the Philippians are encouraged to imitate. He also goes on to advise that they take note of those who are in their church who are living according to the pattern he gave them. This isn't about Paul thinking he is amazing, this is about living in the way Christ has called us to live. And this is something he was doing as well as something he knew a bunch of the Philippians were doing along with him.

And there are people in our midst who look like Jesus. Without wanting to embarrass anyone I want to tell you two brief stories.

The first one is about a lady who came up to me before Christmas and said "Pastor Dan I'm pretty new here so I don't know people well, but my husband and I really want to bless someone. Do you know anyone that we could help?" I gave her a name and she went and put together a substantial gift basket. This lady was so hungry to show the love of Christ that she went out of her way to find someone to bless. You know who you are, I commend you. This action made you look like Jesus.

Second, as you all know Nikki is pregnant. And when she was in her first trimester she was having quite a difficult time with morning sickness.

Without knowing this a couple in the church asked if there was anything they could do to help out. They offered to clean our house which Nikki turned down but she told them she was having a tough time cooking with her nausea.

When they showed up at our house the next Saturday with several meals we were blown away. But then they continued to show up every Saturday for four weeks with meals until Nikki was finally feeling better. We couldn't believe it! You know who you are, thank you. You look like Jesus!

And there are lots more examples that I could tell you about people here who have sacrificed from their own time and resources to bless those around them. Like Paul I encourage us all to keep our eyes open for these people and imitate them because they look like Jesus.

As I considered the sermon title this week it wasn't that no one here is living like Christ, that isn't true, but I wondered how our church was doing? How are we perceived in the city? Has our church been intentional about getting into our neighbourhood and looking like Jesus?

I think I told you once of a church I heard of that found itself in a small community with a real littering problem. And as a church they decided to start picking up garbage to bless their neighbours.

Another church in our city targeted the VLA neighbourhood which if you don't know is one of the poorest neighbourhoods in town. And they invited all the children to a party where they bought about 400 kids Christmas gifts and told them about Jesus.

Another church concluded that there was a shortage of housing for women seeking to leave prostitution behind. The church got together and bought a house with a whole bunch of bedrooms and started housing recovering prostitutes.

These are churches that are looking like Jesus in their neighbourhoods. They aren't acting for their own good; they are sacrificing to bless their city. And these are the kinds of people and churches Paul encourages us to follow.

Paul then describes the opposite kind of people in verses 18 and 19. People Paul says are enemies of the cross of Christ and who are headed for destruction.

What kinds of terrible people is Paul describing here? Well it might not be who you are thinking of. First of all they are people in the church. This is why Paul speaks of them with tears in his eyes. They are people he has invested in. But instead of imitating him and ultimately imitating Christ these people have focused on themselves.

So what are they doing that is so terrible? Are they off raping and pillaging? No, Paul says "their god is their stomach and their minds are on earthly things. Paul isn't talking about the Hittlers and the Stalins of the world. He is talking about people in the church who aren't thinking about others and instead are only thinking about themselves and their own needs.

So what is the big deal with thinking about ourselves instead of others? I mean, that's a pretty natural tendency. Why does Paul say these people are headed to destruction?

The simple answer is that people who go to Heaven – people who will spend eternity with Christ – are people who have been transformed into His image. They have the same attitude and focus Jesus had when He did not consider His divinity something to be taken advantage of, but humbled Himself to become humanity's servant.

And this is why something seemingly small like an attitude marks the defining difference between Christians and non-Christians. Christians look like Jesus, non-Christians look like everyone else. Christians are weird; they don't make sense to the world they live in because their attitude isn't... earthly.

Why not? What enables Christians to have the same attitude as Jesus? Here is where we get to the third part of our big idea: **Christian perfection means imitating those who allow their Heavenly citizenship...**

Look with me at verse 20.

[Read Philippians 3:20-21]

The primary thing that enables Christians to have an attitude that is so different from what is natural is that we recognize we are citizens of another place.

In the first century Philippi was a Roman outpost populated by a lot of soldiers who were as Roman as you could be. And yet they were at home in Philippi because when Rome extended its reach into the world it also extended its influence so that its citizens could be at home wherever they lived.

And Paul takes this idea and applies it to the Christians in Philippi. Like Roman soldiers brought Rome with them, the Philippian Christians were ambassadors of Heaven.

This meant that they weren't just living in Philippi and longing to go to Heaven. Instead they were living in Philippi and working to bring Heaven here.

Don't get trapped into thinking Heaven is a place we have to wait for till we die. Heaven is where God is present and this primarily includes places where Christians are looking like Christ. This is why Jesus teaches His followers to pray

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name, Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6:9-10)

When Nikki and I were in Korea one thing we found out first hand was that Asians eat rice three meals a day. They love rice, and if you don't get rice with a meal then you haven't eaten. But we didn't really go for that. And I remember turning down rice a few times and coming face to face with a blank stare of disbelief – how could I possibly not want rice! But then my friends would look at my white skin and remember that while I was at home in Korea my citizenship was really in another place – a place I told them was flowing with bread and honey... not rice and kimchi.

And Paul says, while these Christians were comfortable in Philippi they needed to remember that they were citizens of Heaven first.

And this meant they lived in Christ now which is the most fulfilling life possible regardless of what hardships you encounter. And yet above this they had the hope of a coming Saviour who will one day take them to the land of their actual citizenship.

And verse 21 is the confirmation that this is possible. In spite of the fact that the world we live in appears totally out of control, the reality is Jesus is King. Even though we may lose our lives in this world Jesus has the power to bring everything under His control and indeed is bringing this to pass.

This is an incredibly peace inducing reality. Now this doesn't mean that everything on earth will work out for our health and wealth. Remember that Paul is writing this as he sits in prison expecting a death sentence.

But even here God is in control. And the greatest promise here is that eventually God will transform our lowly bodies, our carnal bodies that are susceptible to hunger and sickness and death – God will transform these bodies into glorious bodies like His own.

This is why nothing threatens a Christian who has placed their fear in God. Because the worst that the world can throw at us can only hurt the temporary body we have.

...

Friends are you living in this reality? Are you filled with an attitude like Christ Jesus' because you know that the worst this world can throw at you has no power to take you from His hand? Even death itself is only a doorway to the greater reality God has for us in Christ Jesus. Amen!

And here we come to our final section: **Christian perfection means imitating those who allow their Heavenly citizenship to transform their earthly lives.**

This is where the theology Paul has been preaching gets worked out practically. Look with me at chapter 4 verses 1 through 3.

[Read Philippians 4:1-3]

Paul once again is overcome with emotion. He loves this church in Philippi. They have joined with him in the Gospel, sacrificially giving of themselves in a way that no other church in the first century had done.

And this is why he calls them brothers and dear friends. They are people he longs for; and they are his joy and his crown before God.

And then he fleshes out two practical applications for what he has been talking about. While the Philippians were mature, having committed themselves to the pursuit of Christ, they had not arrived at ultimate perfection yet.

The first application is a general one that comes at the end of verse one where he says "stand firm." This is actually the second time he has encouraged the Philippians to do this. Back in chapter one he said:

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ. Then... I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the Gospel. (Philippians 1:27)

The Philippians were facing some severe struggles. They were suffering for their faith. It would have been tempting in light of the difficulty to throw everything off and just develop earthly minds like all their neighbours. But in light of the future glory Paul encourages them “don’t give up, stand firm.”

Brothers and sisters whatever you have come across that makes it difficult for you to follow Christ. Whether that is a busy work schedule that demands your time, or friends who mock your faith, do not fall into an earthly perspective – remember that you are citizens of another place and choose to keep on having the same God attitude that was in Christ Jesus. That’s the first thing Paul encourages.

...

The second example that Paul gives is very specific. How would you like to be one of a few people who got their name in the Bible only to find out that you were being called out for arguing with someone?

Euodia and Syntyche(Sin-ti-kae) were two women who were leaders in the church in Philippi that Paul notes had labored along side him for the Gospel. But something had sprung up between them. What it is we aren’t told, but it was likely a different perspective or preference for how to deal with something within the church.

And so Paul encouraged them, especially because they were influential, to get along; he told them “agree with each other in the Lord.”

Now how can you agree with someone when you have a different perspective or preference? Isn’t that the whole point of being different? Can’t we just agree to disagree?

Well that sounds very Canadian, but here Paul doesn’t give that option. He says “agree in the Lord.” This means recognize that there is something in the Lord that is much more significant than your area of disagreement. Of primary concern for Christians is to have in themselves the same attitude that was in Christ Jesus. That attitude of preferring someone else over yourself to the point of being willing to die for them.

Paul says get this attitude in yourself Euodia and Syntyche (Sin-ti-kae), and see if your petty areas of disagreement don’t fade away.

Brothers and sisters are there people in our midst that you don't see eye to eye with? When it comes to our service here are there certain people who like things that you don't appreciate? Does the style of music or the style of dress or the order of service or the smell of someone's perfume annoy you?

If it does that is a very natural feeling to have. But it runs in conflict with the God attitude that we are called to have as Christians – as people who have been transformed into the image of Christ. So I encourage you, don't worry about standing up for your rights. Allow someone else to have it their way. Even allow it twice, or 10 times.

In Romans Paul says:

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor (Romans 12:10)

This is what it means to have the same attitude in ourselves that was in Christ Jesus. He spent His life looking out for the wellbeing of humanity; He wasn't worried about His rights. And this is why Christian perfection or maturity involves imitating those who allow their Heavenly citizenship to transform their earthly lives.

...

In conclusion, where are you at today? While you live in Prince George does the reality that your citizenship is in Heaven transform the way you live? Choose today to follow those among us who look like Jesus and allow God to transform your mind, taking it off your earthly concerns and fixing it on the foundation of your Heavenly citizenship in His Son.