

UNBROKEN JOY
CITIZENS OF HEAVEN
Philippians 3:17-21

Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 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.

That's a powerful passage of scripture. Verses 20 and 21 contain some very important words that give us instruction into a very important doctrine.

It made me think of a time when I was single and in graduate school. My brother and I took a summer and we went to Europe. We backpacked through Europe. We tried to do Europe on \$10 a day. That tells you how long ago this was. I'm not sure you could get to the airport now for \$10. We had an incredible experience. But you know, everywhere we would go, we would almost be immediately identified as Americans. We were both born in America and I suppose we would be typical Americans. If you travel any, you will find out that in some places Americans are loved, in other places not so much. Sometimes they want to know, "Are you British or are you American?" Depending on where you are, that could be good news or bad news as to how you answer that question. For example, particularly in Paris, when we were there the Parisians did not care for Americans a whole lot. Even if they could speak English, they spoke French just to annoy me. I wasn't quite as sanctified then as I am now, so I expressed my annoyance more than once, I'm sure.

Our citizenship -- it's who we are and where we reside. To some degree, rightfully so, we express a certain pride in terms of, "Where is home?" The Apostle Paul writes in Philippians 3:20-21 that our citizenship is in heaven and that this, as Mr. Muffet said of the gathering of the Church: "It's a colony of heaven, right here on earth." The Apostle Paul is doing something very intentional here in Philippians, Chapter 3. He is trying to weave together two important things. He is telling us what to believe, and then he is talking to us about putting those things into practice.

Just think about the interaction of those two things: belief, or we might say doctrine, and practice. The Apostle Paul is always concerned with both. He is not interested in just giving you what to do - some dos and don'ts. He wants to give you the underpinnings of that activity. He wants to talk to you about how to think and what to believe, but he's not interested in just stopping with ideas. He wants you to know how to put those into practice, and he believes that these two are unavoidably connected.

As he does that throughout this book and especially in Chapter 3, he is fighting against two forms of false teaching, two very dangerous teachings. In one, he is warning against the dangers of trying to save yourself. There is a particular false teaching -- individuals who would follow Jesus and say, "Listen, if you want to really be saved, you have to not only trust in Christ, but you have to keep certain religious ceremonies. You have to become Jewish. You have to be circumcised and keep the ceremonial law." Paul wants to address that, not just because in this particular flavor it was, "You must become Jewish," but because the idea of you saving yourself is a completely false teaching and very dangerous spiritually. So in the strongest language in verse 3 he says, "For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh..." he gives us a definition of what a real Christian is -- none of this trust in religious ceremony. And there is strong language in verse 2: "Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh." He takes this religious ceremony of circumcision and is saying, "Listen, if you believe that's going to save you, and if you teach that, you are a mutilator of the flesh. You are actually working against God."

The second danger that he is warning against here is really almost an opposite. It's particularly seen in our text this morning, where Paul warns against what we call lawlessness. This is a teaching that says, "Okay, you don't save yourself by being religious or moral or good." This is a teaching that says, "It doesn't matter what you do. You just go out and sin and do whatever you feel like." This particular teaching can take many different forms. It can also be religious in its roots, but it sometimes is very anti-religious. You could just simplify it and say, "You have religious sin. I'm trying to be moral. I'm trying to save myself, either by keeping the rules or through religious ceremony, or I'm free from all that. I'm just living in sin and therefore I'm better than those religious people." You can hear the pride in both of those expressions, and Paul is warning against both.

Both of those dangers, by the way, are alive and well today. Both of those dangers are real, present, spiritual dangers for us. Religious sin – I’ll call it fleshly sin -- the remedy for both is Jesus Christ. The remedy for trying to save yourself is Jesus Christ. The remedy for saying, “I don’t need to save myself, I’m going to just live in sin” is Jesus Christ. Paul is dealing in these closing verses with this license -- I can just go on and sin. Unfortunately, there are individuals today who take the grace of God and use it as permission to live in sin. It’s very prevalent. It’s taught frequently. We are forgiven of our sin and therefore it’s okay to just go and live however you want to.

You have in these verses individuals that Paul is identifying as, well, they think they are Christians. He is heartbroken. He is weeping over these individuals and he is warning about their practice. He is saying their lives so contradict the righteousness of God that he treats them as complete unbelievers and he weeps over their spiritual condition.

Now, as we read this passage, we might, if we’re Christians, say, “Okay, maybe I’m not going to proclaim that I can just go out and sin and live in sin.” But it is possible for me to be tempted to use the grace of God to ignore sin and to take a light view of it, and to place myself in a position of spiritual danger. There is something that Paul does here where he gives us, really, a helpful key in overcoming the sins of the flesh. He gives us a central thought that will guide us in defeating fleshly sin, and that thought is heaven – a heavenly mindedness. We could summarize Paul’s teaching as it addresses this spiritual danger of just going into sin and just being alright with sin by saying that the remedy is faith in Christ and the practice of walking in victory over fleshly sin is thinking about heaven – a heavenly mindedness.

Now, just stop for a moment. Are you heavenly minded? Do you know how to measure that? Do you know how to diagnose yourself if you are earthly minded? Well, I have good news for you, because this passage will help you. This passage will help you diagnose earthly mindedness and then it will give you a cure, a remedy. Let me just say this before I give you the five characteristics of earthly mindedness. Let me stop for a moment and talk to you about the flesh.

Do you have flesh? Do you know what the scripture says about flesh, about your sinful nature? That there is a temptation living in our bodies to sin? Sometimes scripture speaks of this flesh in a negative way, saying, “Okay, we’re physical – that’s good. We are created by God, but because of sin, sometimes our fleshly nature is just wanting the wrong things.” As scripture addresses this, we are aware of the dangers for us spiritually. As we get into these characteristics, I just want to say

this by the way of background. First of all, we are forgiven for our sin because of what Jesus Christ has done for us. We are told to receive forgiveness and we defeat the sins of the flesh by putting them to death in Christ. That would be the message of Romans, Chapter 8, if you are taking notes. You might just write that down and go to Romans 8, verses 5 and following on your own time. And scripture, we need to be reminded, tells us that all that's created -- creation itself -- is good. It's marred because of sin, but I don't want you to misunderstand and to think that we are against the physical. We're not. It is created by God and it is affected by sin. So, we want to put to death the sins of the flesh.

I'm just giving you a couple of background thoughts. We don't want to make the mistake of thinking that physical things are inherently evil. Alright? But Paul, in helping us to overcome sin, makes a connection here that will really help you, okay? Sins of the flesh, sins of appetite, sexual sins, food sins, drinking sins, sleeping sins – some of you are committing that sin right now, right? Where I am governed by my appetites, just good old-fashioned sin: I want, I crave, I get greedy, I get mean, I want it and I want it now! -- scripture says, "You are forgiven in Christ. Christ is the remedy. Put to death that nature." Alright? That's all background.

But Paul makes the connection to help you think, Christian, and that connection – here it is – are you ready? He connects fleshly sin with earthly thinking. Earth = flesh. Just think of a little equals sign between the two.

Now go with me to Colossians 3 -- it's just one or two pages to your right -- and look at Colossians 3:1. "If you then have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God." Put your finger right there at the end of verse 1. He is telling you here to be heavenly minded. He is telling you to think about the things that are above. In verse 2 he states it clearly: "Set your mind on things that are above..." Here it is. Here is the connection: "...not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory." Okay – put your finger right there. What I want you to see is that Colossians 3 is a parallel passage to what we're reading at the end of Philippians. Same themes: Christ will appear. You are going to be transformed. Set your mind on things that are above.

Let's continue reading. "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you..." Now, before we start to read Paul's list, I'm just calling attention to you that earthly is used here in a way where you almost

expect the word “fleshly” to be used. But if you go to Romans 8, you will find the word “fleshly” used synonymously with how “earthly” is used here.

You might be saying, “Brian, what are you doing? Earthly, fleshly, okay, sin, sin.” No, no – you’ve got to think for a moment, okay? You are actually going to have to think this morning. You see, Paul is wanting you to understand that if you just drift along in the stream of this world, your sinful nature will get the best of you. One approach spiritually is to just kill it! Declare war on sinful desire because it is out to destroy you. But, Paul wants you to be renewed in your thinking. So he is saying, “Okay, I’m going to help you. I’m going to give you some Christian aids here -- some means of grace. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth.” Now look at the “earthly sins” that he describes here.

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away (all away): anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

Alright, back to Philippians, Chapter 3. Here is what we have tried to establish: that there is religious sin and there is just good old carnal sin; that there is a way to think if we are going to walk in victory over carnal sin, and that is to be heavenly minded, that these sins have an earthly connection. So let’s diagnose them. He says five things about them.

1. These individuals walk as enemies of the cross. I am taking these phrases right from the text. Earthly mindedness. They walk as enemies of the cross, reminding us that the cross is essential. There we find the forgiveness of our sin. Do you remember the account of Peter before Jesus in Matthew, Chapter 16, where Jesus asked him the great question: “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter, speaking for the apostles, confesses Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God. In that moment, that is the most important question you will answer in life: “Who is Jesus Christ? Will you trust in him?” As soon as Peter receives that revelation, Jesus says, “Peter, I’m going to do marvelous things through you. You have

no idea of the important role that you are going to play in the building of the Church. Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you. My Father revealed it to you.” Okay? So far things are going great for Peter. This is a resume-building day for Peter. Then the next thing that happens is that Jesus begins to teach Peter and the disciples about the cross. As soon as Peter begins to hear about the cross, he immediately resists Jesus. And then those famous words, not so helpful for your resume, when Jesus said to Peter, “Get thee behind me, Satan!” Get behind me. You are speaking for and from Satan himself. There is something in us where we love the idea of salvation and triumph and victory, but we don’t like the idea so much of the cross. One of the indicators for us that we are thinking earthly thoughts is that we resist the cross. We resist not only our need for the cross, but that God has called us to be conformed to the image of the cross of Jesus Christ. He has called you into a life of taking up your cross, a life of self-denial, a life of death as he died. Just think of the verse earlier in this chapter, Philippians 3:10, where Paul cries out, “...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death...” I am being shaped to the crucifix. I am being formed and molded to the image of dying to self. The first characteristic is, “Are you resistant to a cross lifestyle?”

2. Their end is destruction. Their end is destruction. Paul tells us that many individuals fall in this category. Many individuals walk as enemies of the cross. This is not a small group. I think of the words of Jesus at the end of Matthew 7:21-23:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of (listen to this word) lawlessness.’”

Now, friends, the ramifications of this last little paragraph in Philippians 3 are very concerning to me. Paul is saying throughout the book of Philippians, “You are saved by the grace of God. You can’t save yourself. It’s a gift. You receive it simply by faith. But, understand this: When Christ comes in, he transforms your life so that you become a citizen of heaven.” And Paul is so bold as to say, “If your every concern is this life, then you are not yet a citizen of heaven.” Now, that is a troubling statement. Paul is saying that if all you

care about is now and what I want and my flesh that is troubling. Paul weeps over this group of people. There's a lot we don't know about who he is specifically addressing. Probably these individuals actually taught that it wasn't important what you do, and that it was okay to live a life of sin. Nonetheless, it causes us concern and the warning is here: Their end is destruction.

3. Their god is their belly. Their god is their belly. They are controlled by their appetites. I think we can understand here that "belly" is symbolic of all the physical appetites. These physical appetites are God-given. They are appropriate. And when they are moderately enjoyed to the glory of God, they are good things. But when they are enjoyed in sin, they control us. They become gods. They become idols. They possess absolute power in our lives. Food, sleep, sex, drunkenness -- just some characteristics. God wants us to not be ruled by appetites.
4. They glory in their shame. The very things that these individuals should be ashamed about, they boast about. They boast about their freedom to sin. They boast about the actual sin. This is not a hard characteristic for you to understand, because this is happening around us every day. There is a complete reversal of spiritual value, where the very things that are called sin in scripture, that we should be ashamed of, people are boasting in. It's becoming ridiculously radical. It's not unusual for me to read an article that supports abortion and opposes adoption, where international adoptions are opposed and the motives behind domestic adoptions are questioned. Can we get any more backward than that? Is it even possible to say that somehow to adopt children without parents is evil? It's ridiculous. It's boasting in what we should be ashamed of. It's true, whether it's drunkenness or sexual sin or materialism. There is a beauty salon in California. California. Sorry, if you're from California, for my cynicism. \$25,000 manicure – diamond encrusted manicure. It's just lunacy -- that we would boast in the things that we should be ashamed of and brokenhearted about! They glory in their shame.
5. Their minds are set on earthly things. It's not that they think about earthly things. It's not that they make room for or attend to earthly things, but their minds are fixed on that which is temporal.

The remedy given to us, then, is that our citizenship is in heaven. I'll just give you three characteristics here -- three ways to think about heaven. This is what Paul says.

1. We await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. The first thing we think about when we think about heaven is who is in heaven: the person, the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior. We look forward to his personal return. Jesus – the Christ, the Lord. He is human. He is God. He is the Messiah. He is Lord of all. The pope recently visited Cuba and the U.S. It attracted a lot of attention. I thought it was humorous when he turned down lunch with certain members of Congress. But then I thought it was right and inspirational when instead of going to that lunch, he had lunch with the homeless. Jesus will return, and he will personally and visibly welcome to himself all who belong to him. It isn't the dignitaries of this world that Jesus will draw to himself. It is those who confess him as Savior and Lord, and he will gather us to a great celebration feast. #1 – We await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.
2. This is really good: He will transform our lowly bodies. This is a good place to say, "Amen." If you are under 30, you are not aware yet of this need. If you are in your thirties, some very bad news is just starting to dawn. I'm in my fifties, and it's beyond dispute. We will receive what is called here "glorious bodies." Our lowly bodies are going to be like his glorious body. We await the personal return of Jesus Christ, the Lord of all. We look to our Savior and when we see him, he will transform our lowly bodies -- #2.
3. He subjects all things to himself. There is something important here in this last statement -- really in all three. Paul has been making this point all along. I think of the Great Commission, Matthew 28:18-20, where Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Jesus possesses all authority. When we were studying through Philippians 2, do you remember that we were told to have the mind of Jesus, to follow his example? He has given you a model for how to live. He became a man. He left the throne room of heaven. Just think about this for a moment. Think about a young man who wants to be a doctor. He works hard to study and to get an opportunity to go to college. He fights for the grades and fights for the scores. He gets accepted to med school and goes through all the rigors of med school, then goes into his internship and does his internship. He gets ready to practice medicine and there he is -- he is ready and he's got this dream. Then all of a sudden, there is this call: I want you to lay that down. I want you to set aside

your dream, your career, your hopes, your aspirations and I want you to go to this remote place and serve these individuals. If you try to fathom any kind of human analogy, it's impossible. The eternal Lord Jesus, the Son of God, all of eternity past, without beginning, in perfect fellowship with the Father -- he leaves that to be born of a virgin, to be placed in a feeding bowl for animals, wrapped in strips of cloth -- to serve you and me so that he can go to the cross to give his life for our sin! It's beyond our ability to grasp.

One of my particularly troubling sins is that my pride can flare up when I'm absolutely convinced that I'm right and someone disagrees with me, and then does it in an insulting manner. That's just too much to bear. I think you can understand that. And I can become very indignant, and sinful and ungodly in a second. I just can't even understand the Creator of the universe being mocked by his creation as he comes to lay down his life for our sin. We are waiting for his return.

This subjection of everything – in one sense we would say, “Well, he's God. He's God of all, so he's Lord of all. He already has authority.” But the scripture teaches (you may remember this when we studied our way through the book of Hebrews) the scripture teaches that by becoming a man, there was something that was completed in his mission of redemption. He was perfectly fit to the mission of saving you, of identifying with you in your humanity, knowing your weakness, knowing your temptation, so that now he has taken all of creation back and redeemed it under the rule of God. The message of Philippians, as is the message of the rest of scripture, when scripture says “He subjected all things” -- it's not just talking about that big view -- “Well, he's God. Everything is under his authority.” No, it's on top of that. He went on mission to save us, and was perfectly fit to be our Savior, and rule over all. So now there's a process. Everything is under his authority, but he has not yet manifested that and will not make that clearly visible until the day of his return. Now he is making space, because he is so merciful, for the rebellious to be saved from sin and eternal damnation.

So friends, think about this. We now experience by the Spirit of God the reign, the kingdom of God. We experience heaven by the Holy Spirit and we look to an ultimate fulfillment where we will see Jesus, where we will have completed, perfect, human bodies, glorious bodies. And we will experience not just spiritual renewal, but the renewal of all of creation,

so that we will physically and spiritually worship and enjoy the Lord. We, in Christ, are citizens of heaven.

I've used this analogy before, I'll use it again. We just celebrated yesterday 28 years of marriage. Yeah. I'm sure they're clapping for you, Sweetheart, just the accomplishment. I want to tell you that 28 years ago today I was on a plane to Hawaii and I was not thinking about what I had left behind. I was thinking about my bride. I was thinking, "We're going to paradise!" I was thinking about being together, forever!

You are a citizen of heaven! It's ridiculous to go on an all-expense paid trip to paradise and be thinking, "Oh, I just want to have one more experience before I leave! I just want a little bit more of the slums before I go to paradise! I want a little bit more cancer, and death, and greed, and all of the pain that we commit to each other. Just give me a little bit more before I'm in your presence!" Our weapon against fleshly sin is heaven. To be ruled by our appetites, to live for momentary pleasure when we've been promised eternal pleasure, which we can experience in this moment by the Spirit of God is just unthinkable. We are not thinking. That's why Paul's theme is "rejoice." Rejoice. This will manifest itself in our finances. This will manifest itself in our use of time, in the expression of our appetites.

I will end with this. Imagine you are on a plane. There is a plane and all of a sudden, the pilot passes out. Then the copilot passes out, then the plane begins to descend and is spiraling down. You are in the mountains and you are headed for a mountain. Everyone is just screaming and in complete panic. The plane is about to go down. Then all of a sudden, from the back of the plane, a guy jumps up and says, "Hey, I'm a pilot!" He runs down the aisle, he goes up, and he takes the plane out of this death spin and brings it back up. Now, you've been asleep the whole time. You've been sound asleep. You wake up and everyone is screaming for joy! Some of us are living the Christian life just like that. We are asleep to the spiritual realities of what we've been saved from and saved for. We are going to get to heaven and say, "What is everyone screaming about?" I don't want to be morbid, friends. I am heartbroken at every report of how humanity hurts humanity. But this plane is going down. The evidence is undeniable. God -- right now, because Jesus has everything subject to him -- he holds it up. And one day he will make it all new. Are you a citizen of heaven?

