

“Walk as fellow-imitators!” Philippians 3:17-4:1

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. Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Today we are blessed to meditate upon Paul's letter to Philippians. We can call it one of Paul's prison letters, for he wrote it from prison in Rome. Or we can call it Paul's joyful letter, for he doesn't cease inviting us: "Rejoice, rejoice always!"

Whatever we call it, one of the main concerns for Paul writing this letter was our new lives in Christ. **How shall we live so that our lives would honour and praise our Father and would be worthy of the Gospel that we have received?**

How shall we live? Let's see what the Spirit speaks to us through Paul. Paul addresses us as "brothers". We could add "and sisters". Why does he say it? Because he wants to remind us about our new God-given identity, our new status.

That in your baptism you were made members of the Divine family. That you all have received this new identity – sons and daughters of God the Father. That you all have been elevated to the highest status that there exists.

And then Paul writes something that we could translate as: "Brothers, become fellow-imitators with me!" Fellow-imitators... That is an interesting way of speaking about our new life in Christ. Fellow-imitators!

We all are communal beings. Since childhood we learn things by imitating. We all do, no question. The question is though – who do we imitate? Whose example shapes how we lead our lives? The world is full of influencers, and celebrities and trend-setters and the powerful who have their crowds of followers and imitators.

Paul urges Christians in Philippi and also us to become fellow-imitators of him, as Paul himself is imitator of Christ. Examine yourself, dear saints, do you strive to imitate the great apostle Paul, as he imitates Jesus? Do you ask: "How can I live out my identity as a child of God trying to become more and more Christ-like?"

I remember the time when Jesus called me to follow Him, how exciting it was. Responding to God's call. Following Jesus. Embarking on this mission to walk as Jesus' disciple. Reorienting my entire life according to God's good will.

Fighting to deny myself, my selfish and sinful desires. Striving to live according to God's Commandments. Reviewing and transforming everything I did. My loyalties, priorities, my actions, my words. Sins of the tongue may be easiest to commit and hardest to avoid. Regularly attending private confession, consciously battling with those sins that just wouldn't go away. Trying to imitate Jesus. Exciting times.

But time goes on. The first love tends to grow cold. I began to notice that I was becoming more and more complacent. Our hearts are so good at justifying us.

"That's okay, we all are sinners, we all live by God's grace, others are worse, take it easy!" But where is the passion? Where is the zeal to be imitators of Jesus?

Where is the energy of the Holy Spirit in us that stirs us up, turns our lives upside down, drives us to live passionately for Jesus, imitating Paul, even laying down our lives so that people around us can learn about this God and His love for them?

What is your story? How passionate are you in imitating Christ? Or imitating those Christians, like Paul, whose faith and passion shines like the sun in this twisted and indifferent world? Do we even like such Christians?

Or do we consider them too extreme? That's too much... And then we silence our consciences so that we don't need to interrupt our comfortable lives. Or worse. We misuse our own beautiful Lutheran theology to justify our complacency.

It is often said that we are the church of the Gospel, we are not the church of the Law. The idea being that there is no place for exhortations, or church discipline, or deliberate imitation of Christ. That's all Law, and we want nothing to do with it!

Thus, we create this spineless and ugly caricature of Christianity where everyone can do what is good in their own eyes, where Christians are not expected to lead holy and pure lives, where we turn away as we see others sinning, and where the new highest commandment demands: "You shall not judge, you shall not offend!"

Why don't more people follow Christ? Maybe it is because of us? Maybe it is because we actually don't teach and don't encourage to imitate Christ? Maybe because we are afraid to expect it even from our members? What if we see them sinning and dare to call to repentance, what if they get offended?

It is a little wonder that such Christianity fades into oblivion. How can such weak, cowardly and formless Christianity be attractive to anyone? There is no new life, no excitement, no sacrifice, no energy, no imitating Jesus...

But we just need to take a quick look at Paul's letters, and we see a totally different picture, full of life and action, of commitment and courage. Paul's letters are saturated with exhortations, which are addressed to all Christians, which we are supposed to take seriously and are to expect from one another.

Take the letter to the Philippians. **"Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ ... standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side**

for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents.” (Phi 1:27-28) Is it us, or not? How can we improve? **“Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life.”** (Phi 2:14-16) Is that how we live, is that how we shine?

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me-- practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.” (Phi 4:8-9)

Are we even interested in those things, or are we comfortable as we are, or are we more interested in our preferences? But the Spirit shatters our selfish indifference and demands: **“Keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.”** Become fellow-imitators! Meaning, we should do it together.

Walk together! Help one another to grow in Christ! Graciously call one another to repentance! Share forgiveness! Abundantly! Share God’s wisdom! Encourage and support one another! Pray for one another! Keep one another accountable!

Learn to understand God’s design for our lives and strive to live accordingly! Look regularly in the mirror of the Ten Commandments! Learn to understand how to live in all our callings, in family, at work, in congregation and strive to do it faithfully, talk with your pastors, ask for advice and rejoice always!

Be intentional about it! Be passionate! Don’t be afraid or ashamed to confess what you believe, speak the truth. Be proud to be counted among Jesus’ disciples even if it costs you dearly. And if it does cost, rejoice with the apostles and countless brothers and sisters around the world, that you are counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name [of Jesus]. (Act 5:41) For this is what it means to be a fellow-imitator of Christ.

But then Paul goes on lamenting those who identify as Christian but are not. **“For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.”** Notice, he speaks about those in the Church.

Pastor Paul speaks about such people in tears, because his Christian heart is in pain for them as well. This was true in the first century and it is true now as well – there are those who claim that they are Christians, but act as enemies of Jesus and His Church. Christian is not an identity that we can claim for ourselves. It is a precious gift of God, unmerited, undeserved, bought by the blood of Jesus, it can be lost, and true Christians value and cherish this gift more than anything.

What Paul says next is scary: **“Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.”** Their end is

destruction... Destruction, not salvation! He is speaking about people in the Church. It is no different today. Such people say that they are Christians, but then disregard God's will, when it doesn't suit their desired ends.

They say they are Christians, but what they really care about is their belly. Their minds are set not on Christ, but on their own purposes, on earthly things. And, sure, we all live in this world, we all need to deal with earthly things.

We all need to deal with our daily problems. Health issues and financial pressures, problems in family, problems at work, problems at church, raising up children in the world that keeps finding new ways to challenge us. No one is spared from that.

So, the question is – how can we still be joyful fellow-imitators of Jesus and of Paul? How can we escape the daily drudgery and set our minds on things that are above? Paul gives us his answer. He points us to the main source of our peace and joy, and it doesn't come from this world, not from 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.”

This is where our hope and peace and joy come from. From the place that we call our true home, our ultimate destination. From the place where longings of your hearts will be fully satisfied. From the Kingdom whose citizens you are already.

Our hope and peace and joy come from the Lord Jesus Christ, who is coming soon. And when He does, He will transform our lowly and sin ridden bodies to be like His glorious body. Just imagine – you will be like Jesus in His glorified body. You will be like Him, and You will see Him as He is. That is what the Spirit of God who dwells in us tells us. This is what awaits us. Divine glory! Divine blessedness! Divine joy!

“Therefore [because your gracious Father has prepared all of this for you], my brothers [and sisters], whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.”

Therefore, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved! Look at this most beautiful Jesus, strive to imitate Him as passionately as Paul did, remain in His Word daily, remain in His family always, enjoy and cherish the support of one another, bear one another's burdens, walk together as fellow-imitators and strive to do your best to become more and more Christ-like!

Strive to live as who you truly are, as Christians, as fellow-heirs with Jesus, as members of the Divine Family. And don't take this gift for granted, cherish and protect it, so that one day, when we finally see Paul the apostle in the company of all God's saints, we could shake his hand, embrace him, kiss him and thank him personally for all his encouraging words that gave us life and direction.

That day is not far away... Amen.