

Paul Refutes the False Teaching of Lawlessness

Philippians 3:15-19

Philippians 3:15-19: *“Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. 16 Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind. 17 Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. 18 For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: 19 whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things.”*

Background Notes

When Paul wrote this epistle to the Philippians, he had several items in mind. He wanted to thank them for the gift that they had sent to him through Epaphroditus, and he wanted to deal with the growing problem of disunity in the church.

In chapter 3 Paul wrote about an area of concern - the danger of false teaching. In the first half of the chapter he covered the false teaching of Judaism. The influence of Judaism distorted the Christian faith by mixing in observance and works of the Old Testament Law with the grace of God.

In verses 12-14 Paul refuted the false teaching of perfectionism. He left no doubt that the teaching of perfectionism - that you can become sinless in this life - is false teaching. That certainly lines up with what is taught in the rest of the New Testament.

In verses 15-19, and particularly verses 17-19, it seems that a third group of false teachers was mentioned – the “antinomians,” or libertines. Antinomianism means “against law,” and it was (and is) the false teaching that once you’re saved, you can do whatever you want. After all, salvation is by faith alone, so once you’re saved you can do as you please. Right? Wrong! Paul refuted the false teaching of antinomianism in verses 15-19, just as he had refuted the false teaching of perfectionism in verses 12-14.

Doctrinal Points

1. Spiritually mature believers do not modify Christian doctrine.

Verses 15-16: *“Therefore let us, as many as are perfect, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind.”* Some translations have the word “perfect” in verse 15. That’s not a contradiction with verse 12 where Paul says that he is not yet perfected. In verse 15 the word “perfect” means “mature.”

Christians who are mature should have “this mind,” Paul says. What mind? Here Paul was referring to the doctrines that he had just presented: the doctrine that the present goal of the Christian is to know Christ more; the doctrine that the future prize of the Christian is to be fully conformed to the image of Christ; and the doctrine that we cannot attain perfection in this lifetime.

Paul said that if you don’t quite agree with this doctrine, or if you can’t quite handle this doctrine, or if in any way you think differently, **don’t modify the doctrine!** Don’t try to change a clear doctrine to suit your thinking! Wait on God! Hang in there, because *“God will reveal this even to you” (v15)*.

Verse 16: *“Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind.”* Live up to the content of faith that you **can** understand and what you **can** handle! Then wait on God to give you further insight. But **don’t modify** any doctrine that you can’t fully appreciate now or understand now!

Don’t walk away from the fellowship, and don’t start your own doctrinal “splinter group.” The spiritually mature believer does not modify Christian doctrine to suit his own hang-ups, or to suit his selfish desires. Spiritually mature believers remain orthodox, even if they can’t always understand or appreciate *what* the Bible teaches, or *why* it teaches a particular doctrine.

For example: the Bible clearly teaches that spiritual leadership is not a part of the role for women in the Church. Women have many important roles in the Church, but they don’t include taking spiritual authority.

So if you’re a mature Christian, what do you do if you can’t understand that? First - you don’t try to modify it or change it because you disagree with it, or to be politically correct. To suit your own purposes, you don’t attempt to modify a doctrine that is the clear teaching of Scripture and has been a doctrine of the Church for 2000 years. Second - you live up to the content of faith that you can understand and handle (v16). Third – you wait on God to give you further insight (v15).

Remember - spiritually mature believers do not modify Christian doctrine.

2. Spiritually mature believers do not abuse Christian liberty.

Verses 17-19, *“Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things.”*

In these verses, Paul was refuting the false teaching of the antinomians, or libertines. They were not Christians, because *“they are enemies of the cross of Christ”* (v18), and *“whose end is destruction”* (v19). That word “destruction” does not mean annihilation or extinction, but a state of total ruin and eternal separation from God.

The non-Christian false teachers had not penetrated the church at Philippi, but the danger of their false teaching existed both then and today. The Bible teaches that when we become Christians, we are free from the Law. We have Christian liberty, but we are not to abuse that Christian liberty. We are not to think that our liberty gives us permission to do whatever we please!

We are free from the law as the way of salvation, and we are free from the law as the way of sanctification - but we are not lawless! 1 Peter 2:16 says, *“As free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God.”* Spiritually mature believers do not abuse Christian liberty.

Notice three characteristics of these ungodly false teachers:

- a. *“whose god is their belly”* - they have unrestrained physical appetites for pleasure. They live for self only. They use the ministry for personal gain. I think we all know of some “media evangelists” who fall into this category.
- b. *“whose glory is their shame”*- they actually boast about what they should be ashamed of. An example would be gay pride parades and “Gay Pride Day” at Disneyland – they’re blatantly proud of what the Bible calls sin. Boasting of this sin has even penetrated into the professing church today.
- c. *“who set their mind on earthly things”* – they are concerned about this life only. Their lives are characterized by selfish desire for power, possessions, prestige and pleasure.

These are the characteristics of the false teaching of antinomianism, or lawlessness. Paul was warning the Philippians not to be influenced by this false teaching and thus abuse their Christian liberty. In the same way, God is warning us not to abuse our Christian liberty. Watch out for those three characteristics! Spiritually mature believers do not abuse Christian liberty.

Practical Applications

1. Let's keep in step together.

In verses 16-18, two different Greek words are used for the word "walk" or "live."

Verse 16: *"Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind."* The word that's used for "walk" here means to walk in line in relationship to others. That is, let's walk together!

Verse 17: *"Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern."* That is, walk as individuals. Also verse 18: *"For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ."* Here, in reference to the false teachers, the word "walk" is used here to refer to an individual walk.

In verse 16 the emphasis is on walking *together*. Here again we see the emphasis on unity that is repeated throughout this epistle. This exhortation is for us as well. Let's keep in step together! Remember that the context of this verse is the danger of false teaching. So "walking together" is a safeguard against falling away into false doctrine. Stay in step with other believers. Don't go off on your own theological tangents!

Did you ever watch a military drill team in action? Everyone is in step together. No individuals are "doing their own thing" - they function as a unit. It's a great illustration for us. Let's keep in step together!

2. What kind of a person would a new Christian be, if he or she imitated me?

Verse 17: *"Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern."* Paul was able to say here, **"Follow my example."** Most of us would have to say, "Do as I say, not as I do." However, the truth is that a new Christian will often follow our example, whether our example is good or bad.

Let's suppose your non-Christian friend becomes a Christian. To some degree, they're going to follow your example. So think about it - what kind of example are you setting? What kind of a Christian will they turn out to be if they follow your example? Complacent? Apathetic? Materialistic? Or dedicated and on fire for the Lord? What kind of a person would a new Christian be, if he or she imitated me?