

“Whose example is worth imitating?” (Philippians 3:15-21)

We’ve been studying the letter to Philippians, the sermon series of “Living worthily of the Gospel.”

This is a story which I read long time ago, so I don’t remember the title or the author, but it was someone’s autobiography. This happened in the days when people had to travel by ship, not by airplane like today.

One Japanese young man, who lived in the countryside had this vision to study in the United States. There was only one man who knew English in his village. He went to him and studied with him. He worked very hard and mastered all his teacher taught him. Now, the day he was going to America was drawing near. The day before he left for Yokohama to take a ship to U.S., he went to his teacher to say goodbye.

After he politely and sincerely thanked his teacher, the teacher said to him, “I taught you everything I knew, and you mastered them all.” Then after a moment of silence, he continued, “I have to tell you one thing. I think you’ll be fine with reading and writing. But you may not understand people when they speak to you. And people may not understand you when you speak to them. Actually, I have never heard English.”

It is very important to choose whom we imitate. If it is just about English, we can fix it later. Of course, it’ll take a lot of hard work though. But if it is about faith, it is so important. It will determine your eternal destiny. So our question is “Whose example is worth imitating?” If this is your thought, like me, today’s message is for you. This portion of the Bible is written for you.

## **1. Let us have this mind**

### Phil 3:15

Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you.

NKJ translated in this way, “Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind.” What is “this mind” then? As this sentence start with the word, “Therefore”, Paul is saying “this mind” in response to the previous section.

So let’s look at the previous section quickly.

Paul is saying he wants to somehow attain to the resurrection of Christ (3:11). He is pressing on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called him heavenwards in Christ Jesus (3:14). He doesn’t consider himself yet to have taken hold of it at all. But one thing he does is to strain towards the goal (3:13-14).

In response to this, here Paul says, “You who are mature in faith can understand these thoughts of mine, right? You are also pressing on towards the goal like me, right? If in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal even this to you. And I hope, all of you will have this same mind. I want you to have this same mind at any cost.”

#### Phil 3:16

Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.

It doesn’t matter how successfully you have been walking in faith. It doesn’t matter whether you are close to the goal, or you still have a long way to go. And it doesn’t matter who is ahead of you, and who is very behind.

The point is each of us should keep going, not stop there, nor backslide. Paul is saying “Don’t look back, just press on towards the goal. Continue to run this race, and complete the race. Please have this same mind. I believe you already have.”

#### Phil 3:17

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.

Paul first shared with them what kind of thoughts he had, and what was the goal of his walk in faith, and how he was running that race. And he exhorted them to have this same mind, and to keep going forward, to the degree that they have already attained.

And here he is inviting them to follow his example as he was actually living like this.

And he also mentioned that he was not the only one who was pressing on towards the goal in the walk of faith, but there were others who were also walking like him. And he encouraged them to join in their walk of faith.

In verse 14, Paul says that he is pressing on towards the goal to win the prize. In other letter, he also says that he will receive the crown of righteousness (2 Tim 4:8).

When you hear of someone receiving the crown by finishing the race, what comes to your mind? For example, track and field in Olympics. In order to be elected as a member of national team, you have to qualify through many regional preliminary races. And even at the Olympics, there are many preliminary races and only eight people who qualified can go to the final. And the one who was the fastest wins the gold medal. The fourth and after can't receive any medal. They can't stand on the podium. No matter how many people participated the race, it is just one person who receives the crown of victory.

Now I want to show you a short video clip.

The first one is Kendama, the cup and ball. It is a Japanese traditional game. You must catch the ball with the cup. It may look easy, but it's actually difficult. In the video, they were trying how many people could continuously catch it successfully.

This is the game officially recognized by Guinness Book of World Records. Now the best record is about 120 people. If more than 100 people can do it continuously, that is significant. Everyone will rejoice together. If 150 people can do it, the joy will be greater. Then 200 people, then 300 people. The greater the number of people who join, the greater their joy becomes.

The second one is the long rope jumping. Here they are also trying how many people can do it successfully continuously. If 50 people succeed, the honor for 50 people. If 100 people, then the honor will be greater. And if 1000 people, the honor will be even greater. Of course the greater the number of people who join, the greater their joy becomes.

And this joy is not just for one person, but for all of them. All of them share the same joy. As the number of participants grow, their joy grows greater.

What Paul is trying to say here is like these.

If it is just him who reaches the goal, it is just one person. There may be some others who also reaches the goal, but the joy is still too small. He wants more and more people to join the race, and more and more people to reach the goal. He wants all of them to share the honor and rejoice together. The more the people, the greater the joy. The greater the number of people, the greater the glory.

Because of this, Paul is saying, “Join with others in following my example, brothers and sisters, and take note of according to the pattern we gave you.”

It's like doing Kendama. You should look someone doing it good. Look, you can do Kendama like this. Hold here, use your hand like this. See, you can do it. Don't look at those who can't do it, because you will never be able to do it by observing them. If you are looking at those who are doing other things, there is no way you'll be able to do it. Look, there are many people who are doing this well, here and there. See, they are all doing it the same way. Let's do it together!

When you do rope jumping, look at the person in front of you. You fall, because you look away. You must concentrate, because it is very fast. Jump with the same rhythm, with the same tempo and with the same pattern, and you can do well. Come, let's do it together.

“Paul is encouraging the Philippians to “consider” as role-models only those who can lead them in the way of honor and salvation.”<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Telling with tears

### Phil 3:18

For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears.

Here Paul is telling this with tears. This is not the tears of joy for receiving the honor in the race. This is also not the tear of excitement for being able to walk with many people. This is the tears of sorrow, tears of regret, tears of distress.

At the beginning of this letter, Paul wrote, “In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy. (1:4)” And he also says, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. (4:4)” But now he is in tears because of sorrow.

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Geoffrion, “The Rhetorical Purpose and the Political and Military Character of Philippians,” Edwin Mellen Press, 1993, p.157

It is not because he is in prison, not because he was flogged, not because some people are stirring up trouble for him while he is in chains. It is because many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.

They were “former friends who did not remain steadfast to the way of Christ.”<sup>2</sup> They used to run the race of faith together. But now they left them and started to run to different direction. Once they were ‘insiders’ but now ‘outsiders’.<sup>3</sup> When he thought of them, Paul couldn’t help crying.

### Phil 3:19-21

Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.<sup>20</sup> But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>21</sup> He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

Here Paul is comparing enemies of the cross and friends of Christ Jesus.

God; for the enemies of the cross, their god is the belly, their stomachs. For friends of Jesus, Jesus is their Savior, Lord and God.

Power; for the enemies of the cross, their power is their greed, self-interest, self-centeredness, selfish-ambition (cf. Rom 16:18; Eph 5:5). For friends of Jesus, their power is the power of Jesus’ resurrection, the power of the Holy Spirit.

Glory; for the enemies of the cross, their glory is in their shame. For friends of Jesus, the glory of the heavenly Saviour.

Mindset; for the enemies of the cross, their minds are set on earthly things. For friends of Jesus, our citizenship is in heaven, setting hearts and minds on things above, heaven (Col 3:1-2), living worthily of the Gospel.

Destination; for the enemies of the cross, their end is destruction. For friends of Jesus, resurrection, being like his glorious body, and eternal life in the heaven.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.154

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.154; “ ‘The enemies of the cross’ are probably libertine or nominal ‘Christians’ who were once ‘insiders’ but now ‘outsiders.’ ”

Phil 3:19-21	Enemies of the cross	Friends of Jesus
God	their belly	Jesus
Power	greed, self-interest	Jesus' resurrection, the Holy Spirit
Glory	their shame	the heavenly Saviour
Mindset	earthly things	things above, heaven
Destination	destruction	eternal life

Enemies of the cross were not enemies originally. They used to be their friends. They used to run the race of faith together with them. But somehow they left them and started to run toward different direction. Their destination is destruction. But originally they were citizens of heaven. They could have been filled with the power of resurrection and the Holy Spirit and could have been able to show the glory of Christ. But now they made their shame their glory, and became enemies of the cross. Thinking of them, Paul was heartbroken and filled with sorrow.

In the church in Philippi, there were many opponents and they were frightened (1:28). Many people around them live as enemies of the cross of Christ (3:18). Their faith in Jesus was attacked, and they were emotionally shaken. So “they wavered in their commitment to the Gospel.”<sup>4</sup>

Their destination will be decided by whom they will make their guide and with whom they will walk. If they imitate enemies of the cross, and join them and walk with them, they will become like them. If the church in Philippi become like this, Paul's sorrow will become even greater.

So Paul spoke to them with tears, “Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. (3:17)” “Paul urges the Philippians to resist at all cost, they are to stand firm in their faith, hope and calling.”<sup>5</sup>

Whose example is worth imitating?

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.115

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.158

The simplest answer is the example of those who are following Christ's example. Paul is imitating Christ who devoted himself to the Father's will. And he presses on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus (3:14). And he is inviting all Philippians and all of us to join him, go with him. He is saying, Come, join me. Let's make it together!

### **3. Paul's three examples**

#### **1) Being a friend of Jesus**

In the book of Amos, it says this, "Do two walk hand in hand if they aren't going to the same place?" (Amos 3:3, MSG)

Friendship will start between likeminded people, and a friend is a person whom you can truly trust. Friends respect each other, they never think of using the other, and their hearts are united.

The relationship between Paul and Jesus wasn't just one-way. It wasn't just Paul who always received, but he also offered himself to Jesus. Their relationship was two-way. Paul didn't just receive Jesus' love, but he also accepted to suffer for Christ (Phil 1:29). So it was a fellowship between true friends (cf. 1 Cor 1:9). Paul set a good example as Jesus' friend.

And the very Jesus himself calls us his friends (John 15:15).

You may think, "Jesus' friend? How can I be his friend, I am only an ordinary person..." That's the very reason why you must follow the example of Paul. He called himself "the worst sinner" (1 Tim 1:15). And he was not only forgiven by the cross of Jesus, but he could become a friend of Jesus. And he is deepening his friendship with Jesus with all his might.

Paul showed us an example of being a friend of Jesus, which is worth imitating.

#### **2) Being a friend of fellow friends of Jesus**

"A true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin. (Prov 18:24)"

If Paul just thought about himself, it was far more desirable for him to die, freed from all the sufferings he was facing because he had a physical body, and be with beloved Jesus in heaven.

But he chose to live, because it was more necessary for Christians in Philippi that he remained in the body (1:23-24). He thought about Christians in Philippi more than himself. We can see the depth of his friendship with them.

Paul also wrote about Epaphroditus in his letter. When people in Philippi heard that Paul was imprisoned, they sent Epaphroditus so that he would live close to Paul and take care of his needs. But while he was there with Paul, he became ill. The news reached Philippi. And Paul heard that people in Philippi were worried about Epaphroditus' illness.

As soon as Epaphroditus recovered from illness, Paul sent him back to Philippi with a letter. That very letter is the letter to Philippians. We can sense Paul's friendship and love for them everywhere in this letter.

He also wrote he wanted to visit Philippi in the near future. It's quite clearly how much Paul treasured, valued his friendship with them.

Paul was imprisoned and was in need. And Epaphroditus was the one who came to him and met his need. But Paul was more concerned about Christians in Philippi than his own need, so he sent him back to them. This is Paul's friendship with them.<sup>6</sup>

And of course, this is what Jesus showed us. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. (John 15:13)"

Paul gave us a worth-imitating example, which is being a friend of fellow friends of Jesus.

I think this is a good occasion to look at the vision of NLFOC, which is introduced on the bulletin every week. "To be a family of churches united in love and committed to mutual support so that together we fulfill God's mission in Asia and beyond for his eternal glory."

"Family," this describes our priority for relationships as a family that stems from our common heritage and history.

"United in love" means that it is mutual love that binds us in unity, and it's not just to sign the contract and follow guidelines without relationship. It prioritizes the significance of love that defines our relationships. The relationship among NLFOC churches is the demonstration of our love for Christ and our love for one another.

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<sup>6</sup> James Houston, "Prayer, The Transforming Friendship (Japanese translation)," Word of Life, 1999, pp.254-255

So we are the churches which are following Paul's example of being a friend of fellow friends of Jesus.

### 3) Being a friend of enemies of Jesus

It is said, "Only when we learn to care for others can our lives have meaning. Only those who make it their business to feel the pain of others can know true happiness."<sup>7</sup> Do you want to have a meaningful life? Do you want to experience true happiness? Whose example is worth imitating?

Paul couldn't help crying when he saw his former friends heading towards distraction. He called them "enemies of the cross" but they were still his friends. He didn't want to let them perish.

Paul demonstrated the real meaning of being a friend of enemies of Jesus. That is an example worth imitating, because Jesus is the model.

Jesus became a friend of sinners. One day Jesus was having meal at Matthew's house. Matthew used to be a tax collector. So many tax collectors, who were Matthew's colleagues, and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When religious leaders saw this, they criticized Jesus and said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered, "For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." (Matt 9:9-13)

Our friend Jesus spent time with sinners. He didn't participate in their sinful ways, but he told them the good news that their sins could be forgiven, and they could start a new life as a child of God. Jesus never overlooked their sins, when he was with sinners. He never participated in the destructive actions of the ungodly people.

As a "friend of sinners", Jesus showed them the truth that "God's kindness is intended to lead them to repentance" not just by words and teachings, but also through his actions and attitude (Rom 2:4). Many sinners were transformed through the relationship with Jesus. Matthew, Zacchaeus, Mary Magdalen, a woman at the well.... there is no end if you start counting them.

Religious leaders called Jesus "a friend of sinners" in order to insult him. But Jesus accepted this insult for God's glory and for our eternal salvation, and

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<sup>7</sup> Ari D. Kahn, "A River Flowed from Eden," Kodesh Press, 2015, p.73

he became a closest friend of us, sinners. It was because Jesus became a friend of sinners, even enemies of the cross that we could become Jesus' friend.

Paul gave us three examples which are worth imitating. First, being a friend of Jesus. Second, being a friend of fellow friends of Jesus. And third, being a friend of enemies of Jesus.

### **For Lifenet groups and self-reflection**

1. What can make those who used to run the race of faith stop the race and start running toward different direction?
2. What can make you keep away from Christ? How the world can confuse/deceive you? How do you cope with it?
3. How do you spend time with your friends? What do you talk about with friends?  
- How do you spend time with Jesus usually? Do you spend time with him as your friend? What do you do to deepen your friendship with him?
4. How important is it for a Christian to fellowship with other Christians?  
- What can we do in order to make fellowship meaningful as we continue the race of faith?
5. When you hear "Jesus is a friend of sinners", what comes to your mind? What does it mean to you?