

Atten-tion! Forward, March!

In the name of our eagerly awaited Savior from heaven, beloved brothers and sisters in Christ: the United States military has a culture and a mindset all its own. There is an almost other-worldly aspect to it. Soldiers find that they have their life on the inside where everything works according to a specific set of rigid rules and order, and they have their life on the civilian outside where a different way of understanding and coping prevails. Indeed, this is the main purpose of basic training – what used to be called boot camp. It's to introduce and reorder the new recruits' way of thinking to the military model and standard. And so effective is this indoctrination into the military way of life that veterans often have a hard time readapting to the ways of civilian society when their time of service is done. This is especially true if they've seen combat or served in a war's theater of operations.

But going back to that initial induction phase: every new soldier knows how to get dressed, sure; but now he has to learn to dress himself in the military fashion. There's a reason they call it a uniform. There's only one way to dress. Likewise, they know how to take care of their appearance, but now they have to follow the military standard: hair no longer than so, properly shaved, no jewelry beyond these minimal limits, and so on. It gets down to the most elementary basics. If you're a new recruit, you already know how to stand; but now you have to learn to stand properly as a soldier. Atten-tion! Feet placed heels together with toes at a 45 degree angle, back straight, chin up, eyes forward, and hands held just so with the thumbs against the outer seams of your trousers. Likewise, you know how to walk, but now you have to learn to march: left, right, left, right, at precisely the proper cadence and in step with everyone else. And how do you learn these things, this new way of existence? You learn by watching and by imitating what you see. That and by getting yelled at a lot and doing countless pushups.

All of which brings me to today's Epistle lesson in which St. Paul tells his dearly loved fellow Christians at Philippi to imitate him and keep their eyes fixed on those who walk according to the example that he gave them. There's a right way to think as a Christian. There's a right way to walk. There's a right way to conduct yourself. And all of them are radically different than the worldly way of doing them. Being called by the Word and Holy Spirit into the Christian faith means being inducted into and immersed in a culture and mindset that are totally at odds with the ways of the world. Paul says he set the example for the Philippian Christians. He showed them how. Now he tells them to think and walk as imitators of what he showed them.

What was his example? Let's start with what brought Paul to Philippi to begin with. It was his passion for Gospel, for making the saving truth of Christ known, for reaching souls dying in ignorance and sin and headed for hell's destruction, and bring them into the knowledge of the love and forgiveness of God in Christ Jesus. Paul was on the second of his four mission journeys. After revisiting the churches he had planted in Galatia on his first trip, he set out west to reach virgin territory – places where the Gospel had not yet been preached; but the Holy Spirit wouldn't let him go there. He tried to go north, but he was prevented from that too. It turns out the Holy Spirit had other plans. Rather than use Paul to reach backwater towns and villages, he wanted to put Paul to work doing evangelism in cities that were hubs on the main trade routes for both shipping and caravans. Plant churches in those places and the Gospel would spread much faster.

Trouble is Paul didn't know that yet. He was frustrated that he couldn't go to the places he planned to, but the Holy Spirit was guiding him to the extreme northwest coast of what is Turkey today. Paul felt like he had come to the edge of the world. But there in the city of Troas the Lord

sent him a dream of a man from Macedonia calling for help – that’s across the sea in Greece, a place Paul never dreamed of visiting. His vision wasn’t as big as the Lord’s. But that’s how Paul ended up in Philippi.

His normal practice was to first preach Christ at the local Jewish synagogue. They were the people expecting a Savior sent from God. All Paul had to do was explain that God had done so in Jesus. There was no such synagogue in Philippi. But Paul heard that a small group of women met for prayer on the Sabbath down by a river. They were Gentile proselytes to the Jewish faith. He joined them and began preaching Christ. It turns out that the man from Macedonia and the first European convert to Christianity was a woman named Lydia. Her home became the first house church on the continent. It grew rapidly. But again, what was evident to these new believers was Paul’s passion for reaching the lost. That’s brought him to them 800 miles and across a sea from where he started. He wanted them to imitate his example with the same passion for winning souls for Christ.

But that was only part of the example he set before them. Paul stressed the necessity for pure doctrine, taught only the truth, and rebutted and rejected anyone who taught falsely. Paul demonstrated great patience and the ability to put up with hardship and being treated unjustly. While in Philippi he was falsely accused of stirring up trouble, beaten illegally without a trial, and jailed. Instead of bemoaning his fate, he sang praises to God. At midnight an earthquake hit that opened the doors of the cells and knocked the chains off all the prisoners. (That was one surgical quake!) The warden was going to kill himself, thinking that all the prisoners had escaped and he would be held liable. Paul intervened to rescue him from himself. He fell at Paul’s knees and asked what he had to do to be saved. Paul told him he didn’t have to do anything. He needed to believe in Jesus. That man and his family all became Christians that night.

Paul demonstrated forgiveness. The next morning the city magistrates who ordered his beating had him brought before them. When they discovered that Paul was a Roman citizen and that they had beat him illegally they were terrified. If Paul complained to the Roman Proconsul, they would all lose their jobs and likely their lives. Instead Paul prayed for those who had abused him and forgave them – not unlike Jesus when being crucified.

What else? Paul set an example for being unattached to worldly wealth. He lived simply and frugally. He was clearly not doing his work for Christ’s kingdom in the hope of getting rich. Paul demonstrated gratitude to God for the little he had. He showed that he was a man of prayer. He showed integrity and honesty and generosity. He showed care for the poor and needy. Above all he demonstrated the elusive gift of Christian humility. It always staggered Paul that God was so gracious as to choose him, a man who had gleefully and violently persecuted the followers of Jesus, a man who could not have been more undeserving, and make him into an Apostle and Evangelist of Jesus Christ to make his salvation known to the ends of the earth. He better than anyone understood that before God he had worse than nothing to his credit, but in Christ alone he was counted righteous.

All these virtues together were the example Paul set before the believers at Philippi. Imitate me, he tells them, and keep your eyes on those who walk in this way. We’re marching together in step. We’re marching together in a different way of life than the rest of the world.

Paul then proceeds to warn the Philippians to mark and avoid those who aren’t marching in step with the example he set. You can hear the concern in his voice as he tells them, “for many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.” And please understand that Paul is not speaking of people who are outside of the church. We expect the worldly to march in the way of the world. They know no other way. No, Paul means

people who claim to have faith in Christ and yet are still walking in the way of the world. They joined the Army, so to speak, but don't wear the uniform or march in step. When that's true of a soldier, he gets discharged; thrown out. And so it is with these folks: their end is destruction, Paul says. They won't be saved.

Paul has some other things to say of them. First, that their god is their belly. They serve themselves. They're in it for what they can get out of it. And sadly we see this throughout the history of the church, from Simon the sorcerer who thought he could buy the power to give the Holy Spirit and thus make money from it, to medieval popes and bishops who lived like kings and sold the forgiveness of sins to their unwitting flocks, to the televangelists of today who urge their hearers to send in their seed money so that they can buy another mansion or Gulfstream, there have always been those who claim to be servants of Christ when in fact they care only for themselves.

Second, Paul says they glory in their shame. This can be taken two ways. One way to glory in shame is to take a libertine approach to the Gospel. The idea is that because Christ died for all sin, sin no longer matters. God's Law is cancelled. Do as you please. It's all good. And I'm proving how enlightened and godly I am by telling you so. Again, the church has always been afflicted by such self-exalted teachers. We see it today in the mainline liberal churches that actively promote abortion and lifestyles that God's Word calls abominations – and they're proud of it. They literally glory in shame.

The other way to glory in shame is what Paul was doing before his conversion to Christ. He was a Pharisee, dedicated to keeping the Law of God whole and undefiled. And he imagined that he was doing a pretty good job of it. Sin? What sin? I have no need to repent. I'm quite proud of my record. After his conversion Paul said of that attitude, "everything I counted as gain, I now count as loss". He recognized that what he counted his glory was shame before God. In the Christian church this idea creeps in as legalism: adding manmade rules that supposedly make you better or more holy. In Paul's day it was the Judaizers who told Gentile Christians that they had to follow Jewish dietary laws and observe Old Testament festivals to be good Christians. In the middle ages and even today there are the monasteries and convents where the strict rules supposedly bring you closer to God. And today we've got those who think they are earning part of their standing before God by worshipping on Saturday rather than Sunday, or by avoiding alcohol or pork, or by following whatever other manmade rule or tradition they come up with. Anything you can hold up before God and say, "I'm proud of this" is an abomination to him who counts our imagined righteous deeds as filthy rags. If I take credit for anything before God, I make myself an enemy of the cross of Christ in which alone is my righteousness before God.

Finally Paul says of these people he's warning us about, "their minds are set on earthly things." For them it's all about this life and what it has to offer. They seek the things this world counts good: glory, honor, prestige, power, authority, wealth, comfort, the praise of men, being served rather than serving; all the things that Paul by his example showed us to turn from and walk with Christ in a different way – in the way of the cross, as soldiers of the cross and not as enemies of it.

For, as Paul reminds us, "our citizenship is in heaven". As followers of Christ we belong to a different world. We belong to the life of the world to come. And from heaven we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly bodies – now beset by sin and weakness and subject to death – to be like his glorious body: perfect, sinless, immortal, filled with God's glory, and made for his eternal praise. That's what we look forward to with joyful hope. But for the time being we are to walk in the example Paul set before us – a way that Paul walked until the very end.

He writes these tender words to his beloved Philippians from a prison cell in Rome. He is soon to stand trial and is uncertain of its outcome. He has no fear of death. He understands that if he is martyred, he will be with Christ in glory. And he likes that idea very much. He also knows that if he's acquitted or given a sentence short of death like a beating or being sent into exile, he'll be able to continue to serve Christ's faithful people and help extend the Gospel to others. He's content with that idea too. The point is he knows he's in Christ's hands and that either way he can't lose.

That too is part of his example that we, the faithful, should imitate. We know that all things are in the loving hands of our Lord Jesus, who loved us and gave himself for us, and who turns all things in this world for our good. Knowing and trusting this we can, like Paul, with courage and grace stand firm at attention and march together in unity as soldiers of the cross. In Jesus' name.

Soli Deo Gloria!