

## Leading by Example

*Philippians 3:17 – end*

### **Introduction**

Before I get into the text itself, I'd like to just spend a moment and offer a little bit of background context for this passage from Philippians.

Now Philippi was a Roman Colony and a key city in that region of Macedonia, and the Gospel's arrival in that city, is recorded for us in Acts chapter 16. It was of course, a gentile, pagan city, but when Paul first visited Philippi on his second missionary journey, accompanied by Silas, Timothy and Luke, they met with some women outside the city gate, at a place of prayer. These women openly received the Gospel message and one of them was called Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, and is the first known European to convert to Christianity.

Of course during Paul's ministry in the city, many others from Philippi also became Christians, and coming from the pagan world, they needed clear instruction on how to live as Christians. They knew how to live as pagans, but how should they conduct themselves now, as followers of Jesus? What were the rules? How were they expected to live, as disciples of Christ?

These were key questions for the many new converts from the pagan world of the Roman era; questions that Paul's epistles were designed to address. And in verse 17 of our reading this morning, Paul says this:

*“Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.”*

In essence Paul is saying... “look, if the teaching itself isn't clear enough, then just follow my example. If you want to know how to live as a Christian, then look at me, and do what I do.” Don't forget that these very first Christians didn't have a NT that they could sit down to read and study, with all its teaching nicely laid out.

Moreover, Christianity isn't just a matter of following a written code of rules – that's where people like the Pharisees often went wrong - but it's about who you are as person, it's about character, compassion and generosity of spirit. The code of Christianity is found, not so much in the NT, as in the person of Jesus Himself. It's Him we look to for our example of living. And Paul also, as an Apostle, was prepared to offer Himself as a living example of authentic Christianity.

Paul wasn't just happy to preach the Gospel and teach others, but he was also happy to hold himself up as an example for others to follow.

### ***Follow Me***

Now some may think this is a bit presumptuous of Paul, saying, "hey, look at me – follow my example, and do what I do". But for those early Christians, without the benefit of the physical presence of Jesus, it was essential that they had someone to look up to; someone who could set an example for them.

That Paul was prepared to do this, isn't really surprising, for two reasons. Firstly Paul was confident that the power of Christ had so completely transformed his life that he was able to live in such a way that he could call others to follow his example; confident that he was living as Jesus intended we should. Indeed, as Paul himself says in Corinthians (1 Cor 11:1)

*Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.*

Paul wasn't living life his own way, he was living it Christ's way.

Secondly, teaching by example was the main method of instructing new followers in NT times. Indeed it's at the heart of the concept of discipleship. A disciple follows the example of his master and imitates him in everything he does in order to become like him. And Paul, of course, had disciples of his own, such as Timothy and Epaphras, among others.

### ***Challenge***

But what a challenge this is for us today. I don't think I would be as eager as Paul was, to hold myself up to public scrutiny in the way he did. But as a clergyman, I would hope that my life would be sufficiently in line with Scripture to be a good example to others. But how would I feel if I was being closely watched every minute of every day; if everything I did and said was being scrutinised by others? Not too comfortable, I expect, and it's almost certain that there would be instances (probably too many) where I would feel inadequate; where I'd feel the need to apologise, and make excuses. Yet this is how Paul lived, as it's unlikely he had much, if any real privacy. More importantly, it's how Jesus Himself lived, constantly under the scrutiny, not just from His disciples, but from His enemies as well - eagerly watching for the least mistake or slip-up.

We're not used to this level of scrutiny in the West; we're used to and indeed enjoy, a great deal of privacy. We're used to a lifestyle where we can put on a public face when needed, but take it off again when we are in private. Politicians and celebrities are masters of this particular art of deception. There's a common saying in Hollywood: "It's not who you are that matters; it's who you're perceived to be that counts." This of course, is the very antithesis, the very opposite of what we are

called to be as followers of Jesus – it's who we really are that matters to God, not the image we project.

I suspect few of us here this morning would want to put ourselves forward as willing examples of model Christians, whom others can scrutinize and imitate. Few of us here would want to be under a spotlight 24/7, where all our words and actions are recorded. But the fact is we are under such a spotlight; and all our words and actions are being watched, recorded even.

And not by other Christians or the general public, but by God Himself. As Jesus Himself said (Matt 12:36):

*“But I tell you that everyone will have to give account... for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”*

We may not be bold enough or confident enough to put ourselves forward as a paragon of Christian discipleship, as St. Paul did, but it doesn't mean we can let our guard down, or not worry too much about how we live or behave. Because our first duty, above all else, is to live a life pleasing to God, and if we concentrate on that, then by default, we will find ourselves naturally becoming a good example for others to follow. Amen.