

## **“And the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4:9)**

A sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Philippians 4:1-9

In 1897 a book came out, *In His Steps*, by Charles Sheldon. It had been produced as a serial in a magazine the year before. When it came out in book form, it was instantly a best seller. For the next sixty years it was the best-selling religious book next to the Bible. Why? Because many people want to know: How are we to live? How do we follow “in his steps”?

To be sure, there are persons in extreme circumstances, especially on Good Friday particularly in places like Latin America and the Philippines, who whip themselves, carry a heavy cross, and even tie themselves up on a cross. What does it mean “to take up your cross”? What does it mean to follow “in his steps”?

There is an international Christian mission called “Two by Twos,” which takes from Luke 10:1-11 the idea that these are the ways, these are the steps we are to follow. There are also those, particularly in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, who say “in his steps” means living in poverty, chastity, and obedience (monasticism). We ask ourselves: How shall we live?

The book *In His Steps* is still in print, and today the same idea is seen in the WWJD movement – “What Would Jesus Do?” There are a lot of jokes about WWJD, but it really is continuing the question: How would Jesus do it? How should we live?

Here in Philippians Paul is raising that question, especially in the second part of that letter. Romans 2:6 states: “You will be judged by your works.” In Romans 2:15 it says there is something in you that says this is good and that is bad. The text doesn’t use our idea of conscience, but it’s that idea. In Romans 14 there is a huge discussion by Paul about what foods to eat, what days to observe, you must not trouble your neighbor with these views. It is very much like a longer passage in 1 Corinthians 8-10 about conscience. You must not offend the conscience of somebody else, although at the end of 1 Corinthians 10:29, Paul also writes (paraphrase): “You must not let your conscience be dominated by another conscience either.”

Then we have in Philippians 4:9: “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do.” This is like Philippians 3:17: “Brethren, join in imitating me.” That way of thinking is found in many other places in Paul. In 1 Corinthians 4:16-17: “Be imitators of me. I have sent to you Timothy to remind you of my ways in Christ

as I teach them everywhere in every church.” Then in 1 Cor 11:1 he writes: “Be imitators of me as I am of Christ.” Similarly in a passage that is coming in 1 Thessalonians 1:6: “And you became imitators of us and of the Lord.”

How are we to imitate him? Are we to be tentmakers, travel around the eastern Mediterranean? Make sure that we don’t have long hair? What does it mean to imitate him? Paul has several lists. We have one of his lists in Philippians 4:8:

“Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is holy, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

We remember the much more familiar list in Galatians 5:22-23 where he talks about the fruit of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – nine of them altogether. We think about them as well as the list in Phil 4:8 and ask: “How do we live?” How does that work? It says how we should live. When we try, as Luther points out very specifically, we end up either in spiritual pride or despair. We think: “I’m doing it.” And that’s of course hypocrisy because we don’t and we can’t. When we don’t do it, we despair.

What we have to realize is that “How to live?” is the devil’s own question. It’s the wrong question. It’s the question to mislead us. What is the question? The question is: What are we living for? We can see that as we look at the whole New Testament, but in this case we are looking at writings of Paul. There are several very specific points.

The first point is something we mention often, but we have to bring it up again and again because people think we’re making it up. Paul understands the end is coming within his generation. This is found in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 where he writes:

“Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.”

Paul says much the same thing in 1 Thessalonians 4:15, and if you look at what he writes in 1 Corinthians 7:20-39, where in view of the approaching end, Paul says stay in the state you are. If you are married or not married, don’t worry about it. If you’re a slave, don’t try to be free. Be content. He himself says: I’m not married; I don’t have time for that because the end is near.

The same thing is found in Matt 10:23 and Mark 9:1. This is not only in Paul but also some places in the four Gospels. You may say Paul was wrong, and what does that have to do with us? Five times in the New Testament, in the Gospels, in Paul, and in the Book of Revelation it says the end will come like a thief in the night (Matt 24:43, 1 Thessalonians 5:2, 2 Peter 3:10, Rev. 3:3, 16:15).

That applies not only to Paul and the New Testament but also to you and me. The New Testament talks about the fact that nobody knows when the end comes. Therefore, be ready.

The second point that Paul makes is: "What do we have to do?" When we study the travels of Paul, we see him running around the Eastern part of the Mediterranean and then in Romans 15:24 he writes (paraphrase): "I'm on my way to Spain." We don't know that he made it, but he was trying to. Why? Because the end is near, and the only important thing is to get the Gospel out.

In all of these materials we've been dealing with, he asks: "How then do we live? What do we do?" He doesn't set up a social program. He's not a revolutionary. In Romans 13:1-7 where he writes about the state, he says (paraphrase): "Pay your taxes and pay the dues that are due for border customs." He also says obey the rulers and the rules.

In light of the fact that the end is near, what he does is ask: "How can we keep chaos down?" Not that he goes along with all of the abuses of the time, but he follows more or less the kinds of practices he found among the Jewish people. For example, the surrounding culture practiced infanticide, but the Jewish people did not. The Jewish people also did not allow radical sexual freedom but established boundaries protecting the family. As a result, their culture thrived. They represented the best thinking of the time. Paul followed in this tradition of the best thinking of the time because he was concerned to get the Gospel out.

The same is true for us. We need roads and food and boundaries to keep chaos from taking over. But our job is not to build the kingdom on earth. Our job is to get the Gospel out as we live in harmony rather than as revolutionaries. There were all kinds of radical groups in Paul's day which he did not buy into.

You can see this in the materials we've been dealing with. First of all, in this whole matter of "imitation." We have mentioned a few of these texts, and there are more texts like that. Recall Ephesians 5:1: "Be imitators of God." How do we do that?

1 Peter 1:16 states: "Be holy as I am holy." The idea of having models for life was very common in that day. There was someone called Plutarch who wrote a whole series of lives, not just for biographical reasons, but to show how character was shaped by virtues and vices.

In a book we don't use because it's in the Apocrypha, called Sirach, chapters 44-50 start out: "Let us now remember famous men," and these models are lifted up. We find a similar thing in Hebrews 11 and 12. We have saints' lives. We have this idea that there is some way of helping ourselves by looking at how people have lived.

The same thing is true about conscience. There are some people who think there's a little spark of God in us that tells us what's right and what's wrong. But not according to Paul. Most of what is said about conscience in the New Testament is said by Paul. He understands conscience to mean that everybody has some sense of right and wrong, but the content is filled by whatever. If you know something about Roman Catholic thinking, you know that Aquinas, the great teacher, said one has to live according to conscience. But when this comes up in discussions in the Roman Catholic Church, it is said that the conscience has to be formed by the Church. Conscience is not itself an authority or a source of revelation.

This gives us a different perspective on these lists we've mentioned, for example, in Gal 5:22-23: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We ask: "What does that mean?" Or the list we have in the text for today – whatever is pure, honorable, just, etc. Or the list of sins in Romans 1:29-31 and Galatians 5:19-21. When we look at these lists, we think: "Isn't he clever? Aren't these remarkable?" Until you study the time. There have been some scholarly studies of this that show these lists were current in the rhetoric of the time, and Paul took them and put them in his letters as a way of saying how we can live so we can get the Gospel out.

The same is true for the material in Colossians 3:18-4:1 and Ephesians 5:21-6:9. Both books say wives obey your husbands, husbands love your wives, children obey your parents, slaves obey your masters, or words to that effect. This was not some invention in the New Testament. We have thousands of examples of this kind of list that were put on the wall of the kitchen in those days. A generation ago it used to be common for people to have a plaque on the kitchen wall that said: "God Bless Our Home." More recently, before we had so many electronic gadgets, it was common to have a calendar with pictures and sayings or admonitions for how to live.

These materials are gathered as a way of saying this is how we can get along, keep the chaos back, so that we can do what is most important: What are we living for? To get the Gospel out.

There are three big conclusions from this:

First, every bit of ethical material in the New Testament is from the surrounding time. There is nothing unique or specific that says: This is specifically Christian ethics. Not only "Love your neighbor," which is found in many cultures, but even "Love your enemies" (Matt 5:44) are found outside of the New Testament.

Second, there is then nothing that is specifically a Christian good work. There are good works and they are seen by reason. The best guide we have is the one that Paul gives us in Romans 13:10 where he discusses what it means to love your neighbor: "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." In other words, one uses common reason.

Third, as we look at how Paul works and how the New Testament works, we live by faith and not by sight. What happens and how God is working is not basically open to us in the world in general and even in us ourselves. He is working in his way and we let him run the universe and run our lives.

Finally, it's not WWJD but it's WDJD – What Did Jesus Do? That's what it's about. And it's put from God's point of view most specifically in a way that we return to quite often, quoting Paul in 2 Cor 5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

How then does this give us perspective in our lives? In the middle of that chapter about foods and days in Romans 14, Paul writes (verses 7-9):

"None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living."

Amen