

Citizens of Heaven Bear Fruit between Two Ditches

- 1) Pharisee- confidence in your rule-keeping
- 2) Prodigal- no rules, your god is your stomach

To all God's holy people in Christ Jesus... Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:1,2) That's the greeting Paul gave to the Philippians and what I repeat to you today!

Our worship series title, *The Beginning of the End*, is one that naturally invites some self-reflection. If the beginning of the end has already begun, but the end isn't quite here yet, well, what needs to happen before then? What preparations need to be made ready, what changes need to be made? And not just out there in the world, but in me?

It's this kind of self-reflection that brings to my mind a very thoughtful and honest hymn from the confession/absolution section of the hymnal It's not the kind of hymn we trot out to begin a service on a chipper note. No, it's title, "In Hopelessness and Near Despair" strikes a different chord. The second verse will help give us a framework as we reflect on the condition of our hearts in view of the Last Day- The End. The hymnwriter Jaroslav Vajda reflects, "*I see my heart's condition now, my heart's diverse affections. Why do I love the thing you loathe? I'm torn in two directions: **now prodigal, now Pharisee**, O God, be merciful to me; who else but you can help me.*" (CW 651. *In Hopelessness and Near Despair*).

Those two directions, or two ditches we might call them, prodigal and Pharisee, bring to mind the *Parable the Prodigal Son*, or what is sometimes more accurately called *Parable of the Two Lost Sons*. The prodigal son ran off and squandered his inheritance in wild living. He made his god his stomach until there was nothing left but the muck at the bottom of a pig pen. Meanwhile, the other son, the older brother, lived and worked at home, slaving all those years, trusting that his hard work and obedience to his father had made him deserving of his father's love and inheritance. The prodigal Son lived as if there were no rules, and the other we might call the pharisee (that's who Jesus was addressing) lived as though he had earned heaven by his hard labor and rule-following life.

These two ditches—now prodigal now pharisee—give us a helpful framework as we meditate on our sermon text, Paul's words in Philippians 3, which serve as a lamp for our feet and a light for our path down the middle of two ditches.

Part I. Paul first addresses the temptation of being a Pharisee, or legalism, it's sometimes called—confidence in your rule-keeping—is maybe the simplest way to say it. Paul starts out our section saying, "**Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal.**" (Php 3:12) What hasn't he attained or arrived at? Heaven, perfection, the glorification of his earthly body. None of us can arrive at that until either our own end comes, or the End comes. But Paul is addressing a segment of false teachers in and around Philippi called the Judaizers, who carried on the religion of the Pharisees—all thinking they could or even had achieved perfection and could put confidence in their flesh, their lineage, and their rule-keeping of the law of Moses. It brings to mind the teacher of the law Jesus met who thought he had kept all the commandments since he was a boy!

In the first part of this chapter, Paul had been remembering back to the first half of his life when he lived as a Pharisee, wholeheartedly stuck in this ditch—the best outward rule keeper of them all. "**If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more.**" (Php 3:4) (I was better)...circumcised on the 8th day, from the tribe of Benjamin, Hebrew of Hebrews, Pharisee of Pharisee, so zealous, I persecuted the church, and as for righteousness based on the law, on my rule keeping—faultless. Today, Paul might

proclaim that in his former life as Saul, he was the G.O.A.T- Greatest of All Time of Pharisees. And now... he considered all of that garbage, worthless and wasted time, a pile of stinking manure in comparison with knowing Christ and a righteousness, that didn't come from himself, but was given to him by grace, through faith.

This righteousness freely given is what makes lost sons and daughters right with our Father in heaven. And now during this time period called the beginning of the end, we live in a state of *"already and yet not yet."* God has declared us righteous already, but we don't experience the full perfect transformation of that righteousness until we get to heaven. We still sin here on earth. It's like our Father has adopted us back into the family through our baptisms and written our names into his will as heirs who will receive perfect righteousness and heaven as an inheritance. Our names are on the deed, but it's not in our hands yet. So Paul declares, **"I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it."** (Php 3:13)

So we press on continually, never living as if we arrived at a suitable level of holiness, as if we accomplished enough, perfected ourselves. We live seeking to grow more and more in our spiritual lives, to be conformed back to the image of God's Son by the work of his Spirit, and to live a more and more God-pleasing life according to God's command. Paul pictures it like an intense race, **"Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead. I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."** (Php 3:13-14).

We are committed to a life of striving for Christlike perfection, and yet never for a second relying on that striving or work to contribute a single shred of merit to our salvation. We can neither stop running, nor rely on our running, but we wholeheartedly trust in Christ, whose power gives us energy to run the race of faith avoiding this ditch of trusting in ourselves to the very End.

Part II. Then Paul pleads with the Philippians to follow his example and keep their eyes on those who live as we do. He doesn't want them to cross over into the other ditch— into prodigal, no rules kind of living. Sure, we spent a lot of time establishing that rule-following won't get sinners through the door of heaven, but that's not endorsement for rule-breaking! That is sometimes the tendency for people to hear that we don't have to do good works to get to heaven and that we can't rely on them, so it doesn't really matter what we do. We might as well do whatever we want!

Paul describes this opposite mindset, the prodigal ditch. **"Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction. Their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things."** (Php 3:19-20). When the prodigal son ran off to wildly spend his Father's money, he was destroying the relationship he had with his Father and trying to satisfy the void with the base desires of the flesh- money and illicit sex, gluttony and drunkenness. His God became his stomach, he embarked on a glorious rampage of shame, until the money was gone and he hit rock-bottom in the pig pen. The Prodigal son no doubt serves as the blatant example of all-out no-rules kind of living and maybe there's times in our life that have looked like that, whether publicly or secretly.

But don't think that even regular, upstanding-looking people, who don't go on benders, are immune from setting their minds on earthly things. Maybe your god isn't your stomach, but the thing you wanted so badly that you began to serve it. Maybe the house you live in and the car you drive that you knew were a little too spendy, but were part of the dream, and now the payments for them suck up everything you have without a cent for God or his kingdom. We can easily get caught buying things and pieces of this earth as if the goal and the prize is to live as citizens of this world forever, and not the next.

It doesn't have to be a sharp and shocking plunge into debauchery, setting our minds on earthly things can be a mild slope we slowly slide down and don't realize we did. A week and half ago, my family got to go on an amazing all-expense paid trip to Florida, Disney World, the Magic Kingdom, and Epcot and Animal

Kingdom, Universal, SeaWorld- the whole 9 yards plus. Our daughter Josie, with all her medical needs qualified for the Make a Wish Program, and so this was her wish, and we are so thankful God blessed us to be able to go—all the smiles and memories and fun with our children. With Josie's make a wish badge, we got to skip the lines and people gave us discounts and special service everywhere we went. We got to meet Mickey and Minnie Mouse, and Nemo, and Rapunzel and Cinderella and all the princesses. At this stage in their life, it was like the best of all this world has to offer.

After 5 days of running around all the parks, day and night, eating ice-cream and crepes and cheesecake and riding rides and fireworks, then the last day came to go back home, and the gloom set in pretty hard. "Does it have to end, why can't this royal treatment last forever?"

At some point on the plane ride home it hit me. "A week-long trip, a short reprieve, is an amazing blessing, but to make our stay at the Magic Kingdom last forever would not be a blessing. It would be to set our hearts on being a citizen of this world and all it has to offer. To stay at Disneyland or any land, and eat, and drink, and be merry and make that all there is to life is make our stomach into god and set our minds on earthly things. Then I thought about all the people there for whom the magic castle was like their heaven, and beyond that there is no heaven.

But what does Paul say, **"Our citizenship is in heaven," (not this world's magic kingdom,) "and we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ!" (Php 3:20).** What an unbelievable truth. God, in his grace made us citizens of his kingdom, with all the privileges that come with it. **"He rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves."** Colossians 1:13 It's a kingdom that truly never ends and has more to offer than funnel cake and ice-cream. There, there's no three-year-olds melting down crying, or long lines or blazing hot, humid days. There we get to meet more than Mickey and Minnie and Rapunzel, we get to meet the Lamb, who shed his blood to purchase us for God and gave us a place at his side eternally.

So we set our minds and our eyes on heaven where God has granted us citizenship and an inheritance. As ***citizens of heaven, we bear fruit between two ditches***, in the time and space God has placed us until the End comes. We serve our God with grateful hearts and follow his commands, not because we're trying to earn heaven out of him, but because we love him. We walk on the path of his commands and steer clear of the ditch that leads to destruction because we recognize that life with our Creator is what we were made for, not for this world's passions and desires. And yes, bearing fruit between these two ditches will be painful and hard to stay on track at times, yet we do so, eagerly awaiting the return of our Savior, who will fully and finally **"transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body."** (Php 3:21) And the bliss we have on that day when we taste the kingdom of heaven in all its glory will truly never end. For now, during the beginning of the end, we press on to take hold of the prize for which Christ has taken hold of us. Amen.