

Philippians 3:17-4:1.

17 Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. 18 For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!

Stand firm in the Lord.

- 1. Take note of examples of faith.***
- 2. Join in living for Christ.***

Many kids around our country who pick up basketballs do their best to imitate their favorite NBA stars. They try to dribble like Chris Paul, shoot like Steph Curry, or take over a game like LeBron. But today I pray that children and adults alike would take note of an NBA coach and the example of faith in Jesus Christ that Monty Williams has recently laid before our county. Monty Williams is the assistant head coach of the Oklahoma City Thunder and this past week there has been several articles and news stories that were dedicated to this man nationwide. Many of those articles centered on the fact that his faith in Jesus helped him stand during a time of devastating tragedy. You see, Monty's wife of 20 years, Ingrid, was killed in a devastating car crash. A speeding car crossed over the median and hit Ingrid's SUV head-on, this mother of 5 would later die from the injuries that she sustained. This horrible tragedy would be enough to leave anyone broken and crushed, but Monty Williams was able to stand at his wife's funeral and with remarkable composure he would speak of his faith in Jesus.

During a roughly seven-minute eulogy he spoke about his wife and how much he would miss her. As he spoke he read from Scripture and made sure to share with those in attendance that God is good, God is love, God can make all things work out, and God loved him so much that he sent his Son to die on the cross to take away his sins. In the midst of his heartbreak he expressed his confidence and joy in Jesus. With faith-given certainty he explained how he hadn't lost his wife, he knew exactly where she was, she was in heaven. By the grace of God, Monty was also able to stand before those who had gathered for that emotional day and with strength that could only come from God he thanked his friends and colleagues for their prayers, but then asked them to pray for the family of the driver the other car who had also died. He spoke of forgiveness and then requested his colleagues and friends and his family to pray for that family too. In this awful tragedy, Monty Williams, this man of faith, made sure to point people to that which was important, *What Jesus Christ did on the cross that's what is important*, he said. If you haven't seen the video of this remarkable display of faith, go home and find it and watch it. It is an example of faith that is so encouraging, so touching, so genuine. I can only

imagine that many people will be built up in their faith because of how this man was able to stand firm in the LORD!

To take note of this man's faith would certainly be in line with what Paul encouraged the Philippians to do. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul encouraged his fellow believers to ***take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.*** In Philippians, Paul writes of the peace and lasting satisfaction that Jesus alone can bring. Already in this letter Paul had encouraged the Philippians to live a life worthy of the gospel, to imitate Christ, to live their faith, to live in the peace and confidence that Christ alone can give as they shine as stars in this wicked world until they reach their goal of heaven. But before Paul gets into the heart of chapter four, before he tells the Philippians to, ***"Rejoice in the Lord always"***, he encourages them here at the end of chapter three, to take note of the example, the model, the pattern, that Paul and the other believers had set before them. They were to be encouraged and built up in their faith by positive Christian examples around them.

Let it be clear that this was not a case of Paul's inner Pharisee resurfacing. He wasn't calling attention to himself saying, *"I am sure glad that I not like the rest of men, like those tax collectors and sinners out there."* Rather he was bringing attention to a simple observation that he hoped would prove helpful for those early believers. As Paul and his fellow believers not only stood firm in teaching, they had stood firm in the way that they lived their lives. Their faith was daily expressed in the way that they lived, in the temptations and the sinful lifestyles that with God's help they were able to avoid. They had been sanctified, set apart through faith to live for God, to bring glory to their Savior, by living a Godly self-controlled life. God had given their lives purpose and meaning and fulfillment in Christ Jesus, and God had blessed them to this end. That was something that God had accomplished through them and therefore that was something that ought to be held up, not in a boastful way, but as a way of encouraging fellow believers to live the life that they had been called to as well.

In this wicked world there will always be plenty of negative examples all around us. Certainly in Paul's day there were so many who were living in defiance of God's holy will that it made Paul emotional just to think about all those people out there who were living without the certainty, the joy, the forgiveness, the purpose, and meaning that Jesus gives to his believers. He wasn't looking down on everybody else from his high horse or his ivory tower, but he had to choke back the tears whenever he realized that so many were living in a way that ignored Christ's sacrifice. His heart broke when he thought about those who ignored God's will, and his word, and the Savior, and only lived for themselves; and his heart broke and the tears came because he knew the destiny for such lives of unbelief was so clearly eternal destruction in hell. ***¹⁸ For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.***

It doesn't take us long to think of people in our world that live in such a way. In fact, those are the examples that are so often placed in front of our eyes. The wholesome, God-fearing, models of modesty and obedience aren't the ones whose faces are splashed across the magazines in the grocery store checkout aisles or those that we hear about so often when we turn on our TVs. Instead we live in this strange world where athletes and movie stars and

musicians are raised to a level of idol-worship as the newspapers and magazines and entire television stations are dedicated to the reporting of all the goings on of these celebrities. And so very often we hear of these idols of society engaging in one worldly exploit after another. We hear of celebrity athletes who have participated in extravagant and questionable activities, we have heard of television and movie stars and famous musicians who have plunged themselves into the pursuit of pleasure or have misbehaved in some fashion or another. And not only do we see this strong urge in our society to know what they are doing, much of the time those pursuits are wrapped up in attractive ways so that it looks like the kind of pleasures we should all be pursuing. And certainly in times of crisis and emotional pain and stress the temptation will be even stronger to try to numb our pain, to ignore our problems, and find some level of happiness by using the same kind of harmful distractions that such lives of sin promote and this sinful world so readily has to offer. Looking for answers at the bottom of bottle, pursuing comfort in the over indulgence of food or gambling or some other vice, divulging in other sinful pleasures and selfish desires, this all comes so naturally to the sinner. It's part of our flesh, it's the god of the stomach that Paul speaks of, acting on gut instinct and appeal, doing whatever feels right at the time becomes the rule, and suddenly that which should be appalling to the Christian is so appealing because it is so natural. But there are no real answers, no lasting comfort, no true satisfaction to be found in such empty pursuits. However, such worldly pleasures are nothing more than temptations that can so easily consume the unbeliever, such temptations can chase down and pursue and drag the believer away from God. This is the case even when life is rather normal, but such pressures only intensify when life becomes difficult. We live in a world where the lie is so commonly fed to us that comfort and stress relief and release are found in indulging and even overindulging in the pleasures of this life.

That is another item of concern that Monty Williams was able to touch on as he spoke to those gathered at his wife's funeral. He warned those gathered to watch out for such unhelpful and harmful ways especially when life gets tough and so Mr. Williams spoke some words of encouragement in the LORD, *"You just can't quit, you can't give in. You see, the Bible says, Satan comes to steal, kill, and destroy. And America teaches us to just numb that, {to say that} it is not true... but you get outside these walls and it is true... We are going to have tough times... What we need is the Lord."* What this man of faith was getting at is, that no one or nothing in this world could heal his broken heart or soothe his pain, or give him lasting help and comfort like God can in Christ Jesus. What we need is the Lord!

But what we need is too often not what we want or instinctively pursue. And so God in his wisdom and love gives us his Word that warns us that ultimately the pursuit of pleasure can't bring us lasting fulfillment. Our God also allows experience and even sound logic to stand as witnesses that reveal the pursuit of pleasure in order to find happiness and comfort is nothing more than an empty pursuit, for so often the same pleasure seeking stars and athletes that we think have it made are often exposed as unhappy and unfulfilled. C.S. Lewis, a famous author and a well-known atheist turned Christian, once wrote this very logical and eye-opening observation, *"If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world."* The desires of this world cannot satisfy, we were made for paradise, we were made for life with God.

Paul speaks of this very thing, when he encourages believers to consider themselves as citizens of heaven. We were made for another world. Heaven is our home and as we live here we know that one day our Savior will come for us and take us to the glories of heaven. What we need is the LORD. What we have by God's grace is faith in Jesus. Only the Lord Jesus Christ can give us true comfort and contentment, peace and purpose that never ends, as one day we will be in that home in paradise, that other world that we were created for. Paul writes these words of encouragement, ²⁰ ***But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ,*** ²¹ ***who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!***

So, dear friends, share this story about Monty Williams, take note and share such examples of Christians men and women standing firm in their faith and living as citizens of heaven while living as strangers in this world. Hold up such examples in your everyday conversation, encourage each other by sharing and speaking of such men and women of faith. But remember that we can do more than just share these stories, we can do more than direct our friends and our children, our neighbors and our co-workers, to YouTube or Facebook, but we too can live our lives in a way that will show the meaning and the purpose that he has given to our lives. We can point people to Paul and other examples in the Bible, we can point our friends and family to examples of faith that we read about or hear about, or see in this life, but by God's grace and strength and power we too can live our lives in a way that reflects Christ's glory. We too can answer Paul's call to ¹⁷ ***Join with others in following my example.***

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, as we live in a world that so often chooses to follow the wide and broad path to destruction we must be warned that this is also the path that we would naturally choose. However, as redeemed children of Christ we are daily changed and transformed and encouraged by the love of Christ so let us live as those who reflect Christ in our lives. By faith in Jesus we are citizens of heaven. Let us live for the one who died for us and was raised again so that we might live with him in our eternal home. Let us shine with the eternal glory that Christ has given us in how we live our faith, how we love and forgive each other, and how we willingly pursue God's will. During times of both joy and difficulty let us live in a way that is God pleasing so that others may see our good deeds and praise our Father in heaven.

For our Father in his love for us sent his son to save us sinners and by the Son's humble death and glorious resurrection Christ has defeated the power of Satan, that enemy that comes to steal, kill, and destroy, and now our Savior graciously comes to us through Word and Sacrament to give, and to heal, and to save. He comes to us to comfort and to strengthen so that we may stand firm in our faith until that day that we will stand in the LORD's presence forever. May this good news encourage us daily in our life of faith. We are citizens of heaven made strong to live as strangers in this world by the example of fellow believers. We are made strong by the steadfast love of Christ who willingly followed the Father's will to save us. By God's grace our Savior helps us to stand firm in the LORD until that day Christ our Savior will bring us to our home in glory. Amen.