

**"Pressing on with the Mission"  
Pin the Tail on the Mission  
The Philippians 3:17-4:1**

**Introduction**

- [Slide #1] I want you to imagine a group of kids at a birthday party playing pin the tail on the donkey. At least that's what we did at birthday parties when I was a kid. I want you to imagine blind folds. Spinning kids. People cheering and parents gently nudging, aiming their son or daughter in the direction of the target. And the kids, feet shuffling, groping the air with one hand, the donkey's tail in the other.
- Pin the tail on the donkey is a great party game for the simple reason that most of the tails never end up where there supposed to be. On occasion you'll one kid will get lucky. For the most part you got tails on the donkey's head. Tails on the hooves. Tails everywhere except where they need to be. On the rump.
- As a kid I remember the feeling, the satisfaction of finally sticking that tail where I thought it needed to go and being absolutely convinced I had placed the tail in the perfect spot. I remember ripping the blindfold from my eyes and being devastated. In plain sight of everyone, my tail protruding from the donkey's neck. Not even close.
- It seems to me that the goal of seeing every person in the church on the mission Jesus launched is a little bit like the game pin the tale on the donkey. It feels too much like a crapshoot.
- The target is the mission. Not just doing church but all of us making disciples who make disciples who make disciples. And you got people like me, functioning in the role of a spiritual parent, constantly urging us, cheering us, nudging us in that direction. But on the receiving end, from your perspective, what that must feel like is being blindfolded, spun around and shoved.
- If that's how you feel. You're not alone. I feel that way too. Sometimes I look at my life and I look at target I'm shooting for and I feel like that kid all over again. I feel like I'm going to nail the target, I want to nail the target. But then I take the blind fold off and do some self-evaluation and I'm not even close. Even harder for me, as a pastor I feel responsible for nudging all of us in the right direction. Like in pin the tail on the donkey the path you start out on is everything. You launch out on the wrong path and missing the target is a foregone conclusion.
- The same is true with the mission. The pathway is everything. If we launch out on the wrong path none of us will hit the intended target.

**Transition**

When I read **Philippians 3:17-4:1** this theme really comes through. [Slide #2]

**Big Idea**

- **The pathway to Jesus' mission is a cross-shaped path**
- I really am convinced that the theme in this section is a repetition of the main theme of this letter. Paul's purpose with this letter? Pin the tail on the mission. As a spiritual father to the

Philippians, Paul doesn't just want to blindfold them, spin them around and shove them in the direction of the mission. More than anything he wants to see them nail the target. And in **Philippians 3:17-4:1** the pathway to Jesus' mission is a cross-shaped path.

### Transition

The title of this message, pin the tail on the mission. The text, **Philippians 3:17-4:1**, where Paul presents...

### Organizational Sentence

- **Two very different paths**
- The first is cross-shaped and leads to the mission. The other is self-centered and ends in destruction.

### Background

- Let me show you how Paul sets this up. Look at **verse 17**. Paul says *join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you*. Take note. Pay attention. Look around and pick out, model yourself after those who are following a particular pattern with their life. Take note of those who have pinned the tail on the mission. By pointing out that some believers make excellent models for others to follow, the implication is that some others are not.<sup>1</sup> *Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you*.
- The obvious question is what's the pattern? The pattern is what Paul has already described and has been describing throughout the letter. It's the path of downward mobility, service, humility, sacrifice, others first. It's the pattern set by Christ in **2:5-11**, modeled by Timothy in **2:19-24** and Epaphroditus in **2:25-30**, and lastly the example of Paul himself. *Join with others in following my example*, he says. That's the first path. It's a cross-shaped path.
- And then **verse 18**. The second path. *For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ*. The word live is the key word in each verse. Two very different ways to live. The first live according to the pattern Paul gave them. The second live as enemies of the cross of Christ.
- In the original text that word live is literally the word walk. Paul pictures people walking, along a path if you will, two very different paths leading to two very different destinations. **[Slide #3] Path #1 ends in destruction because it has self as its vision. Path #2 leads to the mission because it has Jesus as its vision.**

### Transition

Let's follow path #1 to its logical end. **Verses 17-19**. If you're hoping to pin the tail on the mission, this is not the way. Listen.

### Main Points

- *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*

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<sup>1</sup> Carson, p. 91.

*destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.*

- Look at the text. There's nothing cross-shaped about the path described in [verses 18-19](#). Instead, it is a path consumed with self. The path described by Paul here is a path, a way of life that is completely and totally contrary to the way of the cross. It is a self-shaped path.
- *Their god is their stomach.* In other words, those on this path don't obey God, big G God, but their stomach, their belly. Their god is in their midriff. They obey their passions. Their passions are their god. They obey what their flesh tells them to do. Their flesh, like a hungry, grumbling stomach tells them what to do and they obey. *Their god is their stomach.*
- Paul says *their glory is in their shame.* The kind of things they really and truly value, far from being inspiring and glorious and worthy of imitation, are downright shameful.<sup>2</sup>
- *Their mind is on earthly things.* They have their mind set on living only for the present. "They have abandoned the pursuit of the heavenly prize, in favor of what belongs only to the present scheme of things."<sup>3</sup> *Their mind is on earthly things.*
- [Slide #4] The picture I get when I read Paul's words here is picture summed up by this cartoon of Superman chucking the cross. Those Paul describes here have forsaken the path of the cross in order to pursue the path of self.
- And the logical end, the result of following this self-shaped path, Paul says, is destruction. *Their destiny is destruction.* Why? Because this path is totally opposed to all that the cross stands for.<sup>4</sup> Paul says following this path, the path which has as its vision self, makes you an enemy of the cross of Christ and leads to destruction. *Their destiny is destruction.* If you're hoping to pin the tail on the mission this is not the way.

### Transition

Let's follow path #2 to its logical end and then we'll draw some applications. Look at [verses 20-4:1](#). If you're hoping to pin the tail on the mission, this is the way, this is the path. [Slide #5] **Path #2 leads to the mission because it has Jesus as its vision.** Listen.

- *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. 4:1 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!*
- The contrast, the difference between the two paths described by Paul in this section couldn't be sharper, could it? Those on path #1 have their minds set on earthly things. Those on path #2 have their minds set on the *Lord Jesus Christ* and his return. Those on path #1 are ruled by their bellies, their passions. Those on path #2 are ruled by Jesus and his resurrection power which *enables him to bring everything under his control*—even our passions.
- Those on path #1 glory in their shame. Those on path #2 glory in a Savior. Those on path #1 are bound for destruction. Those on path #2 are bound for heaven. Those on path #1 pin the tail on self. Those on path #2 pin the tail on Jesus; he is what they are shooting for. He is the

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<sup>2</sup> Carson, p. 92.

<sup>3</sup> Fee, p. 374.

<sup>4</sup> Fee, p. 371.

target. They walk his path, a cross-shaped path. He is goal. He is the vision. And when you're on the cross-shaped path that leads to Jesus, his mission, the mission of making disciples, is just a byproduct of the journey.

- Think about it like this. The reason Dorothy made it to Oz was because she had as her vision meeting the Wizard. That's what kept her on the yellow brick road, on the path toward Oz.
- The only thing that keeps us on the cross-shaped path toward our Oz is Jesus. He is the goal. He is the target. And just like Dorothy, if we are passionate about the final destination, about meeting the wizard, people will naturally join us. The mission of making disciples, the mission of gathering followers of Jesus, like Scarecrows and Tin Mans and Cowardly Lions, all that happens quite naturally if the goal, if the vision is Jesus. If he is what you are shooting for, if he's the target, if you're willing to walk and stay on his cross-shaped path you will necessarily find yourself on mission.
- The reason path #1 never gets to Oz is because it has as its vision self; and the end of that path is destruction. The reason path #2 leads to heaven is because it has Jesus as its vision.
- Do you remember what we talked about last week, what Paul said in **Philippians 3:10**? *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain the resurrection from the dead.* That is Paul's description of the cross-shaped path. That is the Christian's yellow brick road.
- Back to pin the tail on the donkey. The target is not a crapshoot. Being on the mission is not a crapshoot if Jesus is your vision. Those who follow this path, the path of becoming like Jesus in his death, the path of sharing in his sufferings, those who live according to this pattern and have Jesus as their vision pin the tail on the mission every time.
- So which path are you on? The self-shaped path that ends in destruction? Or the cross-shaped, self-denying, others focused, downwardly mobile path of humility and service and sacrifice that has Jesus as its goal and ends with heaven?

### **Conclusion**

- You can't be on both paths at the same time. You can't straddle both paths at the same time. The two paths, what they stand for, are diametrically opposed to each other. They lead in opposite directions.
- On the other hand, it's possible to stray from the yellow brick road and make your way back. If that's where you're at, what are you waiting for? Come back. Rejoin the mission. Rejoin the journey toward Jesus with all the other rag tag followers all the other broken down Tin Mans, and all the other Cowardly Lions and messed up Scarecrows in search Jesus, the one and only Savior who graciously, mercifully saves us from ourselves.
- And the promise of what awaits those who seek Jesus on this cross-shaped path far outweighs the risk and danger and cost of walking that path. *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.*