

Catching Joy ~ A Study Of Philippians

Week 5 ~ Philippians chapter 3

Between 3:1 and 3:2 we see a pretty hard shift of gears by Paul. To paraphrase, “*Rejoice!*” (3:1) and “*Beware!*” (3:2) “*Rejoice in the Lord!*” seems to be pretty consistent with what Paul has laid out so far in this letter and sticks to the overall theme of the letter. Hmm, but, “*Watch out for those dogs, those people who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh.*”, seems like a whole new direction for this letter...because it is.

What, or who, is Paul referring to? The next verse gives us a (major) clue to what/who Paul is talking about when he mentions “*circumcision*” and “*confidence in the flesh*”. This narrows the target to the Judaizers. Who are the Judaizers? I’m glad you asked.

Judaizers were Jewish Christians who believed that Gentiles believers needed to follow the Mosaic Law, represented primarily by circumcision. Or, in other words, they believed that people first had to become Jewish, then they could become Christians. Now, you might be thinking, didn’t the Jerusalem Council (see Acts 15...which occurred more than a decade prior to the writing of this letter) already deal with this issue and conclude rather emphatically and decisively that Gentiles DID NOT, if fact, need to follow the Mosaic Law or become Jewish in order to follow Jesus? Yes, that is correct. So, then, why is the issue being brought up again?

Well, apparently, there were some folks (again, the Judaizers) who didn’t like the Council’s ruling and went around spreading this false teaching. Specifically, they liked to trail behind Paul, going to places Paul evangelized and causing trouble for brand-new believers, throwing them into confusion regarding what they needed to do to follow Jesus. As you can imagine, Paul took sharp exception to these people. But what could Paul do at this point? He was in prison (house arrest) in Rome. So if Paul caught wind that believers in a place in which he preached the gospel and established a church were being disturbed by the Judaizers, he would write to them and encourage them. Or, perhaps preemptively, since it happened so often, Paul might get ahead of them and offer a warning before it became an issue (which seems to be what he’s doing here in Philippians). What Paul deals with in just a few paragraphs in the letter to the Philippians actually takes up the bulk of his argument in the letter to the Galatians where it was a major issue.

Now, you and I are not likely prone to the specific false teaching that was promoted by the Judaizers. That doesn’t mean that some variation of that false teaching isn’t around today that we need to be aware of. Namely, any teaching (subtle/implicit or overt) that says that what Jesus accomplished on the Cross was not all-sufficient for salvation should be red-flagged. Yes, we need to respond to what Christ has done, but our faith is not in our response (that would be placing confidence in the flesh) but in what Christ did. Additionally, the proper response to the gospel has nothing to do with ethnicity, nationality, or culture (or “the flesh” as Paul puts it). The invitation to the Kingdom is open to all.

As Paul put it, we are those “...*who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh...*” (3:3, emphasis added) Notice the contrast Paul lays out

between the Spirit and the flesh. Life with God is powered by God (via the Spirit) not by us (i.e. the flesh). Again, this gets explained more fully in Galatians. For our purposes here, this will suffice...

“So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with one another, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.” (Galatians 5:16-18) Incidentally, this topic is also broached in Romans (see chapter 8). All that to say, this was a major issue in the first century...one that Paul repeatedly had to address.

Another angle from which we could understand putting “*confidence in the flesh*” is: what do we place our value, worth, significance, security, and identity in? Paul goes on to make the argument that placing confidence in our own works/efforts, our own accomplishments or achievements, our own performance (religious or otherwise), our own zealotry, or our own ancestry/heritage/culture...anything we are tempted to prop ourselves up with that makes us feel like we’re something special...is hollow, empty, and foolish. (And it is particularly galling when we use religious/spiritual props.) It also has the negative effect of creating, in essence, winners and losers (high performers and low achievers; haves and have-nots; the privileged and the left-overs; those who matter and those who don’t...or not as much.) To say it another way, placing confidence in the flesh creates a pecking order. This is foreign to, and antithetical to, the Kingdom of God and does grave damage to the Church community as a holy/set apart, peculiar people.

- *Judaizers were a particular type of “false teacher” in the first century. What kind of false teaching/false teachers can we identify today? Or, if Paul was writing to us today, who might he warn us about? (And what is the negative result of that false teaching?)*

Putting “*confidence in the flesh*” is basically how human nature operates apart from God. But God has set His people apart. Part of what that means is that we function differently, with a different set of principles and values, established in the person and work of Jesus.

Paul makes his argument by using himself as an example. His “resume” (see verses 5-6) was quite impressive. Interestingly, half of Paul’s list, the things he could chalk up as a “credit” or a “gain” to him, he actually had no control over. Think about it—he was circumcised on the 8th day (credit goes to his parents for that); of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin (a result of the birth lottery...he can’t take any credit for where or to whom he was born). And the things he could take some credit for (being a zealous, faultless, Pharisee) he considered “rubbish” (a not-so-polite term for dung/excrement). In light of Jesus, Paul could see how completely worthless, useless, and empty all this was.

What is of value, of ultimate worth, according to Paul is “...*the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*” (3:8) Paul understood and wanted his readers—then and now—to understand that “righteousness” (again, in this context, value, worth, significance, security,

identity) comes from Jesus. To say it another way, our “status” is that of being “in Christ”. It’s nothing we can generate; it’s nothing we can inherit from anyone other than Him.

- *What are some ways people today put confidence in the flesh? Or what are some things people put their value, worth, significance, security and identity into? Or, what do people like to use to prop themselves up to make themselves special or stand out in some way?*

Some of my thoughts in answering this question include: income or socioeconomic status, career or education (some jobs and some academic institutions are more prestigious than others), nationality or ethnicity, relationship status, the achievements of spouses or children, where they live (neighborhood/part of town), network of friends and associates, possessions—houses, cars, recreational toys, etc., status at church or in other social groups, reputation in the community. There’s nothing inherently wrong with any of these things. Rather, it’s the role/place they have in our lives that can be the issue. Our value, worth, significance, security, and identity isn’t found in them or defined by them.

As Paul makes crystal clear in this passage, it’s all about Jesus. (High Christology, Baby!) We simply cannot overstate Jesus. And there is nothing of greater worth, value, or significance than our relationship with Jesus. This (or He) is what life is all about. As Paul goes on to say, “*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 to the resurrection from the dead.*” (3:10-11) That is quite a statement. Do we feel similarly?

- *We could (accurately) say that Paul was obsessed with Jesus (in all the best, good, right, healthy ways). If someone looked at our lives (individually or collectively as a congregation) would they say we are obsessed with Jesus? Is that how you/we want to be seen? Explain.*

Reflecting back to our Lenten series in Matthew, recall the words of Jesus, “*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.*” (Matthew 13:44-46) Paul was a living example of a man who found a treasure in the field or a merchant who found a pearl of great value. Jesus is worth any/every cost. And as we know from the life of Paul, he was well acquainted with the cost that came with following Jesus.

You never get the sense from Paul that he begrudged the cost of following Jesus. For him, Jesus was worth it all. (Check out II Corinthians 11:23b-33 for a “resume” of Paul’s sufferings on behalf of Jesus.)

So, why is knowing Jesus so great? Think back to the Christ hymn (2:6-11). It seems quite advantageous to know the most exalted One, doesn’t it? It seems wise to be on familiar terms with the One to whom all will eventually submit.

Paul also seems to understand the invitation/call to follow in Jesus' footsteps as the highest calling of humans, even if that requires suffering. Interestingly, 3:4-11 follows a similar pattern/trajectory as the Christ hymn in chapter 2...i.e. emptying oneself, being obedient whatever the cost, and allowing God to glorify. This is the pattern, the model, the template to follow for human flourishing.

We could say that Paul was running a "cost/benefit analysis". He uses accounting terms like "profit" (3:7) and "loss" (3:8) and "gain" (3:8). Picture a scale (nevermind, here's a picture of one).



The case Paul is making is that knowing Christ is on the low/heavy side of that scale. And there is nothing, ABSOLUTELY NOTHING, that can be placed on the other side that can outweigh the value/worth of knowing Jesus. For Paul, based on such an analysis, it is perfectly logical, rational, reasonable to be passionate, zealous, "all in" for Jesus.

- *Who do you know that is passionate/zealous, "all in" for Jesus? Would you describe yourself as passionate/zealous, "all in" for Jesus? (Would anyone else describe you that way?) Is this something you desire to be?*
- *When you think of adjectives such as "passionate" and "zealous" to describe a person, what sort of image/person comes to your mind?*

Paul's confidence in Jesus could not be dissuaded. Take note of Paul's words, "...I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me." (3:12, emphasis added) and "I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (3:14, emphasis added) Synonyms for "press on" are "pursue" or "strive after"...it denotes intentional and intense effort.

With terms like "press on" and "straining toward" and "win the prize" (see 3:13-14), Paul switches his imagery from accounting to athletics. Paul was very adept at using metaphors to communicate spiritual truths and Kingdom realities and thereby connect with a wide variety of people. (His overall collection of writings is a treasure trove of images that Christians have found helpful for centuries. His rabbinical training certainly comes out in his writings, which are a profound gift to the Church.)

- *What images or metaphors have you found particularly helpful to you to gain a better grasp of matters of faith, spirituality, the Kingdom of God?*

Paul sums up his argument thus far with, "All of us who are mature should take such a view of things." (3:15) In other words, a "mature view" is one that understands where confidence should

be placed; views the cost/benefit analysis correctly; pursues Christ above all and at any cost. Notice that Paul is so sure of this that he's not even concerned if people disagree with him, but rather continues to put his confidence in God. "And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained." (3:15-16)

- *Based on how Paul lays it out, would you say that you have a "mature" view/understanding of the Christian life? Is your relationship with Jesus the driving force and the organizing center that everything else rotates around and is ordered by? (Perhaps more importantly, do you want that to be the case?)*

It is important to note that Paul did not feel as if he had "attained" or arrived at the goal yet. The finish line had not yet been crossed. This raises the question, "What is the goal?" Some might instinctually answer "heaven." But if we look more closely we'll see that's not exactly what Paul has in mind (at least not the way "heaven" is commonly conceived). Notice the word "resurrection" in verses 10 & 11. And while he does mention that "our citizenship is in heaven" (3:20), he goes on to say, "And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 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." (3:20-21, emphasis added)

Our future hope is not about us going to heaven, but rather Jesus bringing heaven to earth. Remember that important line in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." (Matthew 6:10) When that happens, everything will be subject to Jesus, and we will be transformed in a very physical way. In the meantime, life is all about learning the way of Jesus more and more (discipleship), becoming more like Him, submitting to Him more and more, so as to prepare ourselves for our glorious future.

- *How does this image/idea compare to how you generally think of the goal of the Christian life and/or the afterlife?*

Before we wrap up for this week, we should probably consider what/who Paul means when he mentions "enemies of the cross of Christ" (3:18) He does NOT likely mean the aforementioned Judaizers. What makes me say this? Notice that Paul says that "many live as enemies of the cross of Christ" (emphasis added). The Judaizers were a relatively small group of troublemakers, who also tend to be quite legalistic, morally and otherwise. Paul's description, "*Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.*" (3:19, emphasis added) doesn't really fit for the Judaizers.

In fact, again pulling from Matthew, it sounds more like what Jesus said, "*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*" (Matthew 7:13-14) So it would appear that Paul is simply, and generally, describing those who are not "in Christ"...or those whose citizenship is NOT in heaven.

The contrast Paul is drawing is really between the humble, self-emptying, obedient even to the point of death way of Jesus (and those who would follow Him) versus the general way of the

world that is all about self-aggrandizement, self-indulgence, self-centeredness, self-preservation, and following disordered desires and unhealed passions. The way of Jesus, which is the way of the Cross, is the way Paul was pressing hard toward, straining toward, and encouraging the Philippians (and us) to follow. This is the way that leads to healing, wholeness, and transformation.

- *In what ways have you experienced the way of Jesus to be counter-intuitive, counter-instinctual to the messaging you typically receive? In what ways have you experienced (or are you experiencing) the healing and transformation of your desires?*
- *In what ways does your/our citizenship in heaven come into conflict with your/our earthly citizenship? What points of tension do you feel regarding your ultimate loyalty, allegiance, and identity?*

Soul Training Exercise ~ Cost/Benefit Analysis

This week's invitation is to run a cost/benefit analysis. Make two sets of two columns...one for following Jesus and one for not following Jesus.

Cost (of following Jesus)

Benefit (of following Jesus)

Cost (of **not** following Jesus)

Benefit (of **not** following Jesus)

Try to be as honest, specific, and accurate as you can based on your own experience, observation, and understanding. Do this prayerfully...in conversation with Jesus...who Himself encouraged people to "count the cost" of following Him. (see Luke 14:25-35)

Share the results of your analysis with your Table Group and/or trusted friends. May this be an eye-opening and encouraging exercise for you.