

The passage for this morning is a little bit longer, so to give appropriate time to it we're going to skip our usual recap and get right into the text. But I do want to encourage you to continue challenging yourself to read the book of Philippians as a whole, to review the chapters that we've already covered, and also to read the passage ahead of time for the upcoming week. It's a wonderful book that is worthy of becoming familiar with.

Read Philippians 3:1-14.

There's a number of things going on in this passage, and I want to tackle them one at a time—because as we do so, we'll actually come to realize that there is in fact one overriding concern or theme speaking out of this passage that I believe is God's desire for us to hear this morning.

Notice how Paul starts off this section by reminding the Philippians to rejoice—a familiar word in the book of Philippians, a word that he's mentioned multiple times already. I rejoice. I will continue to rejoice.

But here he specifically calls *them* to rejoice in the Lord. And he has no shame in doing this and reiterating this over-and-over because he knows that it's an antidote to some of the criticisms and accusations the church has been receiving.

"It is a safeguard to you," Paul says. Because evidently there are 'dogs, evildoers, mutilators of the flesh' that are putting pressure on the Philippian church. And based on the list he's given here, it seems to be the case that there are some ultra-Jewish Jesus followers—perhaps some travelling teachers—who believe (and are urging the church to believe) that circumcision is still necessary.

If you remember from our study in the book of Galatians last year, this was a huge problem in the early church. Because circumcision was a highly significant part of Jewish faith that physically marked the Jews—specifically Jewish men—as the people of God. It was an outward sign of faithfulness and loyalty.

But Paul's already made it clear that this is no longer the way that God wants His people to be identified. Because *the Holy Spirit* is now the indicator or distinguishing 'mark' of the people of God—for *both* men and women.

Which is why Paul says in verse 3: *"For it is we who are the circumcision...."* In other words, the Spirit within us as a community has replaced that tradition. And this is all over the gospels—that an outward sign of loyalty has never been sufficient. God's desire was for something more transformative. Something better was coming. And you can't put new wine into old wine skins.

"It is we who are the circumcision," says Paul, *"we who serve God by his Spirit [there it is, the key identifying factor], who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh."*

So Paul's emphasizing here that because of the gospel, we are in a new era. The old has gone, the new has come. It's not as if the old doesn't matter—it's still a part of the story—but you don't get to use it anymore to justify your own righteousness. Because that heritage of the Old Covenant now serves as the *precursor* to the better and more fulfilling reality that is available to us in Christ.

It paved the way for the freedom we now have in the Spirit—who is the guarantee or the 'down-payment' of our belonging and salvation in Christ and eternal life with God.

Of anyone who would be inclined to fall back into 'old order' or old covenant patterns, it would be Paul. And he knows this. It's why he goes to such lengths to outline his own list of previous identities.

Of anyone, he says, who could boast in their 'flesh,' it would be me. "*Circumcised on the eighth day* [as all good Jewish boys were], *of the people of Israel* [born into the nation], *of the tribe of Benjamin* [a very respected tribe], *a Hebrew of Hebrews* [born of Hebrew parents, who all speak the holy language]; *in regard to the law, a Pharisee* [of the purest variety of teachers, knows the Jewish law forwards-and-backwards,]; *as for zeal, persecuting the church* [he literally went around stamping out what-he-believed was shameful to God]; *as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.*"

In other words, says Paul, if God wanted to use *that* way of doing things—the Mosaic law, the Jewish oral traditions, and Israelite lineage and heritage—as the means for attaining righteousness and having good standing before God, *I would still be a Pharisee.*

It's the classic case of assuming that our worth is in what we do. We 'sanctify' others all the time based on what they do; it's only natural that we would put ourselves under the same pressures. Just look at this image of world-famous soccer player, Cristiano Ronaldo (image). We love to give people status based on what they accomplish. We do this all the time.

We don't even realize how much we're undermining the gospel when we do this—or at the very least training our minds to think in a non-gospel way.

Paul was doing everything *perfectly* in exactly the way that he believed God had desired of him. He was faultless, and was seeking to ensure that others, too, would fall in line.

Why would God have wanted anything different from him? *Unless* Paul was somehow missing Him in the process? And missing out on something *fundamental* about who God is?

Tim Keller once said that Christians have a tendency to treat Jesus as someone who is *useful*—because He forgives our sins and gives us salvation, etc.—as someone who can do something for us, rather than viewing Him as their greatest treasure.

And I think for Paul, he simply didn't know the treasure that he'd been missing out on. Blinded by his own efforts at attaining righteousness, he couldn't grasp the depth of God's character that many of the prophets had alluded to, the mysteries of His ways, the heights of His plans for Israel, and the expansiveness of His love for *all* people.

Paul simply had no clue what God was doing until Jesus Himself intervened. And when that happened, in that never-forget moment on the road to Damascus (Acts 9), Paul was never the same. He had encountered the risen Jesus, who had shown him undeniable grace. Have you every paused for a moment to really think about that?

Because remember, Paul had formerly been repulsed by the idea of Jesus, let alone a Jesus who had died on a cross. So he saw these disciples of Jesus as blasphemers who worshipped a dead messiah and needed to be extinguished.

But how mind-boggling, then, for Jesus to appear to Paul in the light of haven and *not* smite him or punish him for persecuting His Body? That *alone* would have dramatically changed Paul's life.

And I wonder—before we continue in the text—to better understand him, I wonder if we need to ask ourselves the same questions that Paul would have been asking after having had such an encounter with Jesus.

How could I have gotten it so wrong? What have I been missing? How have I been so blinded by my own agenda and my own day-to-day rhythms that I didn't see it? Were my assumptions about what you wanted from so 'off' that I wasn't You clearly? Or even looking for you?

In what ways might *you* be thinking that you 'have it all together'? How's your humility? Is there margin in your life for God to shake you up? To question you on whether Christ is truly your greatest treasure, the one thing that you simply cannot do without?

Over the last week and a half, after the devastating earthquakes in Venezuela, rescue workers have continued to look for any survivors among the crumbled buildings. And among the survivors was a woman with her 18-day-old son. Her husband had just gotten home when the quakes happened, so he'd been able to get out. But she had been trapped for about a day and half.

And in sharing her story, she explained how when the quakes happened, she ran to her son to cradle him and then suddenly felt like she was flying as the building began to collapse. She fell into a pit, felt herself sinking into water and dirt, and got crushed against rock and furniture.

And amazingly, she was still cradling her baby—even though they had fallen from the 8th floor. And for the first while, she said, she screamed and tried to get help to come to her.

But then, she says, “I found hope when I felt a Bible beneath me. *And there began my journey of survival.*” From that point on, she was able to remain calm, to pray, and to save her energy for when it would be needed—if she heard voices or steps nearby.

And it’s interesting because photos of this rescue have been shared around the world, and this little boy has ended up becoming a symbol of hope for the people of Venezuela.

But in reality, what truly gave *this woman* hope and the strength to survive, was the presence of God’s Word beneath her. It was she needed to stay alert rather than fall into despair.

Similarly, when our lives find themselves in Christ, He is what becomes the source of our hope and enables us to press on. He is the one thing that we simply cannot do without. Because look at where Paul takes us now in this passage.

Starting at verse 7: “*But whatever were gains for me [however many hours and days and years I’ve spent studying the Law, building up my knowledge, and proving myself] I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ.*”

Again, it’s not as if all that Paul had achieved in His life didn’t matter anymore. God chose Paul in part because of the education that he had. He was the perfect person to link Jesus with the fulfilment of the Law—to connect the dots.

But He also chose Paul for his zeal, *so that* this zealous and passionate Pharisee could experience the great humility that is necessary to be a follower of Christ. To help him understand that it’s all grace.

Because now, for Paul, what once was the pride and joy of His life is now something he refers to as ‘**garbage**,’ worthy of being throwing out—*compared to* the surpassing greatest of knowing Christ. When it came to knowing Christ *as His righteousness*, Paul would have been happy to discard everything he had ever learned or experienced—to tabula rasa his brain, have a completely blank slate, a white canvas—so that the *only thing* on his mind, the only knowledge he had, was of Christ.

I want only to be found in Him, says Paul in verse 9. Not in my identity as a Jew or a Pharisee, not in my citizenship as an Israelite, not in my education or my accomplishments. I want only to be found in Him. I want others to see me *in Him*. I want to be known for being *in Him*.

“*I want to know Christ*,” he says. That’s all I want. “*I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.*”

‘Where do you find your identity?’ then, I think, is the question that Paul is asking of the Philippians, and then indirectly asking of us. Where do you find *your* identity?

Is it in what you know? In your convictions? In your sense of self? Is it in what you do? What’s you’ve accomplished? What you have, or what you want to have? Is it in what you’ve made? What you’ve produced? What you’ve created? Is it in how others see you? What they’ve said of you? How they speak about you?

‘In what do you put your pride?’ is another way of asking the same question. What are you most prideful in? Again, is it your own sense of self? Your country? Your family? Your work? What drives your sense of purpose? To be fulfilled? To be the best at something? To figure it all out?

As believers, this passage reminds us that our only requirement is to boast *in Christ*. Again, Paul’s not talking about throwing everything else out the window. What he’s saying is that everything else *pales in comparison* to the surpassing goodness of knowing Jesus.

Because knowing Jesus puts everything else in proper view. The way we see our family, our work, our sense of self, is dramatically transformed when we find ourselves—not in them—but in Christ.

And because this section comes directly after the last few about humility and oneness in Christ, Paul’s implication here is that our unity and one-mindedness with each other *depends* on this identity piece being true for us. It relies on us upholding Christ as our greatest Treasure. Not simply Someone who we believe saves us, but Someone who *in-and-of-Himself* is the best part of our lives.

It’s why, at the end of this passage, Paul’s only goal—his only ambition—is to take hold of what Christ Jesus has for him. His whole life revolves around what lies in front of him. “*I press on*,” he says, “*toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*”

There was a news story this past week of a Russian couple who sought to achieve a different kind of heavenward prize. (I’m not normally afraid of heights; but the video of this made me a little queasy.) They had climbed to the very top of the Empire State Building in New York City, literally to the tip of the needle, and unravelled a banner that read, “When the power of love beats the love of power the world knows peace.” And then they apparently got engaged, gave each other a kiss, and headed back down.

Now, that story alone suggests that we humans are inclined to wrap up our self-made identities and agendas with our hopes for the future. Because in this case, both individuals are Russian and evidently upset by Russia’s war efforts against Ukraine, and they want to get a message across about peace *while also* promoting a specific *kind* of love, risking their lives, getting on the news, and inevitably enhancing their own social media presence.

So there's a lot of mixed motivations. There's clearly a desire for peace, but what kind of love are can grant us this peace? What sort of love will solve the human drive for power? Whose definition of love are we talking about here? Is it a romantic love? Love for 'the other'? Or the love that was found by a Venezuelan mother trapped under rubble and rock?

In both scenarios, they are seeking to find hope—but on very different foundations.

From Paul's vantage, one hope, one ambition or goal, stands out above all the others. Because there is only *one* goal that truly has transforming power.

And when all of us are pressing on towards that same goal, to build together that same identity, what a beautiful thing that is. When we all seek to find ourselves in Christ, *that* endeavour, *that* partnership with Him is what defines and sheds lights on everything else.

So that rather than asserting with pride, "This is who *I* am and what *I've* done," the Christian can say with humility and rejoicing, "*He* is who I am, and this is what *He's* done." It is our sense of self *in Him* that defines everything else, that is the mark on our lives which claims us as His own, that gifts us with a faultless righteousness that we could never earn.

And oh, how freeing that is.