

WORKING OUT GOD'S GOOD WORK IN YOUR HEART

Studies in the Book of Philippians - Part Twelve

Sunday, April 10th, 2016, 10:00 a.m. - Teaching #1876

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COUNTING EVERYTHING LOSS - THE PROCESS OF KNOWING CHRIST DEEPLY

Philippians 3:1-11 - "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. [2] Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. [3] For we are the real circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— [4] though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: [5] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; [6] as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless. [7] But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. [8] Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ [9] and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— [10] that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, [11] that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead."

There is a striking feature in the first two verses of this profound text. There is nothing in verses 2 through 11 that would make you think Paul's topic was in any way related to *joy*. Yet he *starts* his whole string of thoughts by letting us know it is precisely *joy* that he's thinking and writing about - "**Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord.**"

This is instructive. It tells me true, Christ-centered joy doesn't come from trying to think happy thoughts. It is not some mystically induced, trance-like state. And it is not *denial* of circumstances. It doesn't come from avoiding trouble. I can't *manufacture* some kind of joyful state of mind in my walk with Jesus, and I'm not expected to. Joy is found, in our text, at the end of a path that, on the surface of things, looks dark and uphill. You wouldn't expect to find joy at the end of it.

Because this path to joy doesn't look immediately inviting or exciting Paul feels he needs to *remind* me to stay on the path where joy will be found. Because he knows my tendency to look for joy in all the wrong places he is going to keep me "*safe*"(1) by *making sure I don't side-step the right path.*

There is something else here - another little nugget of wisdom that can easily be overlooked. Paul knows *everyone* wants joy. He knows we all want a life well lived. This hunger can drive us into searches for joy that can be reckless and desperate. We can constantly be victims of the latest spiritual huckster with some new remedy for our ills. So Paul says joy will be found, *not* in discovering something we've never heard before, but in *relearning* truth we've *already* known:

"...To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you"(1b). In fact, it is easier to heed something *brand new* than something *repeated*. Paul approaches this subject knowing a *repeated message* is sometimes the least interesting - both to *deliver* and *receive*. This is why he says he's not going to be "*troubled*"(1) or *put off* from giving the most important message - "**To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you**"(3:1).

Note that little phrase. If you want to keep your life "*safe*" - *safely anchored in flavorful riches of true joy* - you need to take Paul's words deeply into your heart and memory. Make sure you are *spiritually prepared* to do that as you listen today. Paul says your safety is at stake. And, as he's led by the Holy Spirit in the selection of his words, he is careful, more so than usual, to *set up his message* in a way that will alert us to the fact that its importance is probably greater than we might take the time to notice at first glance.

I see *three surprising insights* in this text. And I think this is why Paul takes the time to set them up for us the way he does. There is nothing in our *cultural conditioning* to cause us to think the way Paul is going to tell us to think in this text. These three surprising insights go against all the daily conditioning of our world. Here they are:

- 1) **IF YOU WANT TO FIND DEEPEST JOY IN KNOWING CHRIST YOU MUST SET YOURSELF TO BE AGAINST WHAT IS CONTRARY TO HIM**

To follow Christ is to set yourself to be **against** certain things. You can't be **passionate** about knowing Christ and also be **mild** in your judgment of everything that is **contrary** to Christ. In Romans chapter twelve Paul says we must **hate** what is evil if we are to have any hope at all of **clinging** to what is good (**Romans 12:9**). That's the same idea.

The spirit of this age is far too intelligent to attack Christian commitment by enticing you and me directly to **deny** Christ. He doesn't bother with this because he knows he doesn't **have** to. He knows there is a much more effective way to win the battle for your heart and mind. The attack that has much greater success than enticing me to **deny** Christ is to press me, by the peer pressure of this age, to **accept** everything else along **with** my commitment to Christ. Here Satan shows his true genius. This is denying Christ by **casual, gradual default** rather than by explicit **statement and intent**.

To help us see this Paul launches his words with a deliberate shock to our system: "**Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh**" (3:2). At first we're a little taken back. Then, of course, we remember this was a somewhat common expression used to show the uncleanness of Gentiles as opposed to ceremonial purity of the Jews in the New Testament.

It's even found on the lips of Jesus (**Matthew 7:6,15:26**). And that might help explain Paul's use were it not for the fact that Paul **isn't** using the term to describe **Gentiles**. The best evidence is he's using it to describe **Jews** (Jewish members of the church) who were trying to subvert the centrality of Christ in the lives of these Philippian converts.

In other words, there was **nothing**, even in Paul's day, that was culturally acceptable in his use of the term in this context. It was plain, outright, shocking. And this isn't the only time Paul did this. You will find four or five times - just in the letters we have recorded in the New Testament - where Paul uses equally descriptive terms to address those who turn themselves against the cross of Christ. This wasn't a rare, uncontrolled outburst from Paul. This wasn't just **name calling**. It seems to be his standard, studied, repeated response to those who set themselves against the rich grace of Jesus Christ.

I don't have time to unfold this the way it deserves. But here is the question - a very **important** question: **How prepared are you to stand for Christ when it means, not just liking Him, or singing love songs to Him, but when it means standing against something or someone else?**

This is not a plea for arrogance or lovelessness. Christians must always respond with grace when they are wronged and persecuted. Mark that sentence. We must always respond with grace and mercy when **we** are wronged **personally**. But while I have breath I will never respond with acquiescence when **Christ** is maligned and **salvation** threatened. My own belief is God has allowed the uprise of strong anti-Christian voices in our own land to expose the church's entrenched **relativism**. Eventually, in His wise grace, He will force us out of our comfortable tolerance by the increasing pressure brought against His name.

Let me say it again, Paul is describing the **surprising pathway to joy**. And here's the first key point. With all the life God grants me on this earth before I die the **only** way I manifest my **devotion** to Christ Jesus is by the way I **reject** what would displease Him. **Any** other commitment to Christ is just empty love-talk. It's **flat tire** discipleship. And there will be no joy in it because I will **never** find joy in Jesus until **I press myself to choose His side over another**. Joy comes from planting the flag when there's a real price for doing so.

This has become increasingly hard for us because we are constantly being trained to believe it is only narrow minded, fundamentalist bigots who choose **against** anything. Tolerant people are **for** things - not **against** things. This has greatly flattened out meaningful Christian discipleship. Remember, it is never loveless to be against what grieves the heart of Christ Jesus.

There is another surprising insight in this text:

2) **RELIGIOUS DEVOTION AND MORAL PERFORMANCE, IF IT FAILS TO EXALT THE GREATNESS OF CHRIST, IS A HINDRANCE RATHER THAN A HELP IN KNOWING GOD**

This theme takes the majority of Paul's emphasis in our text:

Philippians 3:2-9 - “Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. [3] For we are the real circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— [4] though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: [5] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; [6] as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless.”

[7] “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. [8] Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ [9] and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith....”

This sets Paul’s words in the first verse in their proper context. The term “**dogs**” isn’t **name** calling. These Jewish legalists knew dogs were emblematic of what God had set off as **unclean**. That’s **why** this became such a generic, all-inclusive descriptive term for the Gentiles.

Now Paul flips the tables. What is **truly** unclean, says Paul, is any devotion at all that supplants or supplements the work of Christ. Paul then becomes autobiographical in his own religious pedigree. Outshining them all in his personal devotion (4-6), he then makes what is his key point in **verse 7** - “**But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.**”

This is the crucial verse. We must let it say **all** the words **mean** to say or we will miss Paul’s point. Paul’s point is **not** that he has become **indifferent** to his former religious devotion - like he can now **take** it or **leave** it. No. That’s not even close to Paul’s meaning. He means what he used to count as a **plus** - a **help** - an **aid** - in his pursuit of God, he has now come to see as a **minus** - a **hindrance** - not a **gain** at all, but a “**loss**”(7).

Most people don’t recognize it, but what Paul is describing for us in this story of his life is the process of his own **repentance**. We think of repenting of the **bad** things we have done. And we do it, in common church understanding, at the **beginning** of our Christian life. But Paul isn’t talking about the **bad** things he did. He’s talking about what his life used to be at its very **best**. He’s talking about the way he spent his time and his very best moral and intellectual efforts in the construction of his life.

This process was what he had to repent of. Repentance means becoming **divinely indifferent** to what used to enamor. It means turning from what was once considered **best** in life - not what was **worst**. Repentance means turning a cold shoulder to what were formerly objects of **devotion**. Very precisely, it means we **replace** what was more precious and wonderful to us than anything else in life with **Christ**.

Karl Barth says it brilliantly in his little commentary on Philippians - “**The repentance Paul describes here is nothing less than seeing the heights upon which I used to stand as now being abysmal; the assurance in which I used to live as lostness; the light I used to have as darkness....the plus itself changes into a minus.**”

Then Paul gets to the heart of the matter in **verse 8** - “**Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ....**”

Now we’re coming to the heart of Paul’s surprising quest for the flavor of joy. This change of his life’s orientation - this **counting everything once important and precious as “loss”** - this **wasn’t** a one time emotional catharsis - or a one time adjustment. This was Paul’s **settled state of affairs** - “**Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord....**”(8).

There is something so profound in that sentence. I pray you see it today. You only know the **worth** of something - of **anything** - when you **compare it with something else**. If you cling to **everything equally** you don’t know the superior worth of **anything particularly**.

Paul didn’t just know Christ was wonderful and good and gracious and loving and mighty. He knew in his own experience the **worth** of Christ precisely because he had found Christ **surpassed** everything else he previously considered great and wonderful in his life. Notice carefully that this is the very word Paul uses in connection with

his discovery of the worth of Christ - ***“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ”***(8).

This is surprising truth number two in the quest for joy. Real faith isn't just **affection** toward Christ - not even **great** affection. Real faith - the kind that produces great excitement and joy - always **barters** for Christ. It is constantly **trading away what seems precious in favor of the surpassing greatness of Christ**. The greatest threat to robust Christian joy is **not** having too little, but embracing too much.

On to surprising insight number three in the quest for joy:

3) **OUR LIVES ARE DEEPENED IN RICHNESS AS WE EMBRACE THE JOY OF SUFFERING FOR THE CAUSE OF CHRIST**

Philippians 3:10-11 - ***“...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, [11] that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”***

If you watch religious television on Sunday afternoon you will probably get the impression that the power of Christ's resurrection is power to **overcome** suffering, opposition, and strife. That's why it's so interesting that Paul specifically states the **purpose** of the power of Christ's resurrection, as it's experienced in our lives, is to **lead us into** suffering for Christ. The **first** thing Paul mentions after the power of Christ's resurrection is **suffering** in Christ's name - ***“that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death....”***(10).

The **meaning** of this suffering for Christ is best made clear in **Philippians 1:27-30** - ***“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, [28] and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. [29] For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, [30] engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.”***

This is what the power of Christ's resurrection is **for**. It is given to create a clear **“sign”** of how precious Jesus Christ really is. How will the world **know** there is **“surpassing”** worth (3:8) in following Christ? Of course, they can hear my **words** about how wonderful Jesus is. I suppose they could come into one of our worship services and see me with my eyes closed and my hands raised - sort of ***“lost in wonder, love and praise,”*** as the hymn says. But that would only prove that I **love** Jesus. It wouldn't prove I love Him **more** than anything else.

So how would they see I love Jesus **more** than I love anything else? How will they see that, to me, Christ has **“surpassing”** worth over all else - even the things I hold quite dear and precious? There's only one way that can happen. They will watch what I am joyfully willing to **lose** for Christ. They will watch to see what happens when following the call of Christ means losing a dear friendship, or a good job, or a chunk of material wealth, or a promotion. They will watch to see if I bend under the pressure of my peers - ***will Daniel bow to the idol when everyone else does on cue?*** They will take note of how I **spend precious time** - when I only have so many hours to get so many things done, yet Christ calls me to give much of that precious, limited time to worship and service.

“Those are very hard choices to make, Pastor Don. I don't think I have that kind of inward strength. It's just not in me.”

You're right. In fact, it's not in **any** of us. That's where the power of Christ's resurrection kicks in. That's why the Holy Spirit is given. That's why Paul says sharing in Christ's suffering is the **highest evidence** of both the **worth** and the **power** of Christ in our hearts.

Now the link with Paul's theme of **abounding, resilient, joy** becomes clear. Suffering for the cause of Christ brings joy because it brings **fruit** for Christ's kingdom. Our lives start to eternally **mean** something. We cease being merely **consumers** and start becoming **agents of the life and grace of Jesus**. What we do finally

matters.

But what of those difficult words in **verses 10 and 11 - especially verse 11?** “...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, [11] that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

Does Paul mean he has questions about whether the resurrection is certain or not? Does he mean he has doubts about it all? No, that's not it. What he means is he strives - and wants to **keep** striving - to make sure he lives his present life constantly willing to demonstrate the surpassing greatness of Christ. He doesn't take this for granted. It's not easy to do. So he **labors** constantly in that direction.

Perhaps he says it all most clearly in **Romans 8:16-17** - “**The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, [17] and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.**”

Understandably, we usually only quote **verse 16** as a stand alone thought. But it doesn't stand alone. It's unbreakably linked to **verse 17**. Our lives participate in Christ's power and resurrection, not lightly or automatically. We demonstrate we are “**heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ**” only in our joyful willingness to suffer the loss of all things to radiate the surpassing beauty and greatness of knowing Jesus Christ. God help us all to fulfill this high and holy calling. And God deepen our joy as we do.