

Sermon Summary #14

The Surpassing Worth of Knowing Jesus Philippians 3:1-11

I have a simple but profound philosophy when it comes to the Christian life. When it is fully understood it can be revolutionary. By that I mean it can take a self-absorbed, idolatrous rebel and empower him to pursue a life that truly honors God. It can take a hopelessly depressed, self-loathing woman and restore meaning and value and joy to her lowly life.

You've heard me say this before, so I doubt if it will strike you as novel or unique. But here it is again:

The key to the Christian life comes not from trying harder but from enjoying more. Before you jump to the wrong conclusion, let me explain. I'm not saying you can experience success in Christian living without trying harder. I'm not at all suggesting that the Christian life isn't hard work. It's a war, a daily conflict, a moment-by-moment challenge that stretches us often beyond our limits. What I am saying is that ***pleasure in God is the power for purity. It is the enjoyment of Jesus Christ that empowers the human heart to exert the necessary effort to live as God would have us to live.***

Today, and at least for one more Sunday as well, I want to demonstrate this to you from what Paul says in Philippians 3:1-11.

I know that many of you are still skeptical. I know that you are asking yourself right now: ***"Can fascination with God and delight in Jesus really help me overcome my failures? Can my life genuinely be changed? Can this truth really make a difference down in the gutter of lust and greed and pride and envy and shame where I live?"***

Yes! I honestly believe it can. It certainly did in the life of the apostle Paul, and I have to believe that one reason the Spirit led him to say what he says in Philippians 3 is to encourage other Christians that it's possible for them too.

This passage is all about a transformation, a personal revolution, a moral and mental 180 in one man's life and how it can happen in our lives as well. It is as if Paul envisions himself walking down a certain path in life, heading in a specific direction, believing certain things, honoring and valuing what he was convinced would bring him life, cherishing and nourishing his earthly achievements, only to find himself suddenly walking in the opposite direction. "Those things of which I once boasted and loved and pursued, those things that energized me and gave me joy and got my juices flowing; I now look upon them and say, YUK!"

How did he do it? Why did he do it? How do you explain this phenomenal experience that all of us yearn for so deeply?

First, we must look at what Paul used to prize. There are seven things in which he had once placed his confidence. The first four relate to birth and upbringing, the last three to personal choice.

In vv. 5-6 he lists the following: 1) circumcised the 8th day; 2) of the nation of Israel; 3) of the tribe of Benjamin; 4) a Hebrew of Hebrews; 5) as to the Law, a Pharisee; 6) as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; 7) as to righteousness, blameless.

We will look more closely at these in a subsequent sermon, but for now one can almost hear Paul's prideful reminder: ***"No one did it better than I. I was the best. I was number one. If it is possible to have good reason and warrant for boasting in human achievement and religious excellence and ethnic purity, I did it! If it's possible to live in such a way that one can justifiably boast in the flesh and in human achievement, I did it!"***

Perhaps it would be wise for each of us to pause at this point and draw up our own list. They will undoubtedly be different from Paul's, but that's o.k. So let me ask you: *What are the seven things in this world, in your life, that compete with the most intensity to win your heart away from Jesus?* If you were of a mind to boast in earthly achievements and accolades, what would they be?

Your educational degrees?
Your annual salary?
Your investment portfolio?
Your physical beauty?
Your reputation in town, at school, at your place of work, in your church?
Where you live and the car you drive and the position you hold in your company?
Your high level of self-esteem?
The achievements of your children?

Are you getting a mental picture of what you cherish most, of what you prize most highly, of what you subconsciously depend upon to find happiness in life and a reason to get up in the morning?

The second thing of importance is for us to recognize we are not going to simply wake up one morning and discover that we suddenly hate what we used to love. The things of this world will never appear as "dung" when viewed in and of themselves. They will smell good and taste good and feel good and bring satisfaction and we will treasure and value them and fight for them and work for them and find every excuse imaginable to get them at any and all cost; they will retain their magnetic appeal and allure and power *until* they are set over against the surpassing value and beauty of Christ Jesus.

This is precisely what Paul is describing in Philippians 3. *The things of the world* (what we value, do, purchase, think about, possess, want, etc.) *will not, in and of themselves, cease to be appealing*. There is no magical transformation. In fact, their power to draw you into their trap will actually increase. Transformation will never happen until your heart is captivated by a rival attraction that is comparatively superior. Merely praying for sin to lose its grip on your heart won't work. Merely fighting against sin won't work.

In other words, to give up something simply for the sake of giving it up may work for a time, but in the long run you'll return to it. Saying No to sin simply because you recognize it as evil may have momentary impact, but in the long run you will find a way to rationalize and excuse and justify your return to it. Saying No for no other reason than "my parents told me it was the right thing to do," or "my teachers taught me . . .," or "my pastor preached that . . .," or even "the Bible says so . . ." has limited value in loosening the vice-grip of sin on our souls.

Let me share with you a story that I've told before, several years ago if I'm not mistaken. My guess is that most of you have forgotten it. I never will. It's about one of the most influential men in the history of the Christian church: **Augustine**.

He was born on November 13, 354, in the small North African city of Thagaste. He died on August 28, 430. His father, Patricius, was a pagan who reportedly professed faith in Christ and was baptized just before his death in 370. Augustine's relationship with his father was less than ideal. He was incredibly lax when it came to discipline and permitted his son to do pretty much as he pleased. Augustine had an older brother (Navigius) and a sister whose name he never mentioned.

Augustine's mother, **Monica**, was a devout Christian who prayed for her son without fail. Her intercession was fueled by a dream in which she saw herself and her son walking hand-in-hand in heaven. At eleven Augustine was sent to Madaura, 20 miles south of Thagaste, where he was trained in the classical poets and orators as well as Latin grammar. He stayed in Madaura until he was sixteen.

By his own confession, *Augustine was a wild and lawless youth*. He stole simply for the pleasure of stealing and excelled at lying. Notwithstanding his father's lack of involvement, Augustine didn't escape harsh discipline. He was beaten repeatedly in school, for arrogance and for gambling.

When he turned eighteen he was sent to Carthage in North Africa where he soon became chief in the school of rhetoric. Before he arrived there his mother had given him a warning:

“My mother commanded me not to commit fornication, and especially that I should not defile any man’s wife. This seemed to me no better than women’s counsels, which it would be a shame for me to follow. . . . I ran headlong with such blindness that I was ashamed among my equals to be guilty of less impudence than they were, whom I heard brag mightily of their naughtiness; yea, and so much the more boasting by how much more they had been beastly; and I took pleasure to do it, not for the pleasure of the act only, but for the praise of it also” (quoted by Payne, 13-14).

He defiantly obtained a mistress, with whom he lived for many years, who also bore him his only child, a son named Adeodatus (lit., "gift of God"). Augustine became engrossed in the theater and the imaginary joys and sorrows of its actors. He was set free from this fantasy world when he was introduced to philosophy through the reading of Cicero's *Hortensius*. He was soon enamored with Manichaeism, a form of Gnostic philosophy that espoused a radical form of *metaphysical dualism*. The Manichaeans believed that good and evil were both eternal, co-equal in power, and engaged in unending conflict with the outcome uncertain. Augustine remained a Manichaeist for nine years, after which he settled in Milan, Italy, to resume his teaching career.

While in Milan, Augustine came under the influence of its intelligent and articulate bishop, Ambrose. However, if there was a decisive human factor in his ultimate conversion, it was his mother Monica and her undying intercession. She “shed more tears [over] my spiritual death,” said Augustine, “than other mothers shed for the bodily death of a son” (*Confessions*, 3.11). Once, when Monica sought the advice of an aged bishop, she was told: “Leave him alone. Just pray to God for him. From his own reading he will discover his mistakes and the depth of his profanity. . . . Leave me and go in peace. It cannot be that the son of these tears should be lost” (3.12).

The major obstacle in Augustine’s life was not intellectual but moral: he had lived with his mistress for fifteen years. One of his prayers was: "Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet!" He often spoke of how lust raged within his soul, driving him over the precipice of desire into repeated fornication. In one place he lamented the fact that he

“cared nothing but to love and be loved. But my love went beyond the affection of one mind for another, beyond the arc of the bright beam of friendship. Bodily desire, like a morass, and adolescent sex welling up within me exuded mists which clouded over and obscured my heart, so that I could not distinguish the clear light of true love from the murk of lust” (2.2).

Notwithstanding his struggle, the Lord graciously sought him out and, in a manner of speaking, cornered him in a small garden attached to the house where he lived:

“I now found myself driven by the tumult in my breast to take refuge in this garden, where no one could interrupt that fierce struggle in which I was my own contestant. . . . I was beside myself with madness that would bring me sanity. I was dying a death that would bring me life. . . . I was frantic, overcome by violent anger with myself for not accepting your will and entering into your covenant. . . . I tore my hair and hammered forehead with my fists; I locked my fingers and hugged my knees” (8.8).

Finally, while praying, he relates uttering these words: "How long, how long? Tomorrow and tomorrow? Why not now? Why is there not this hour an end to my uncleanness?" Then came the miracle of saving grace:

"I was saying these things and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when lo, I heard the voice as of a boy or girl, I know not which, coming from a neighbouring house, chanting, and oft repeating: 'Take up and read; take up and read' [*tolle lege; tolle lege*]. I grasped the Bible, opened, and in silence read that paragraph on which my eyes first fell: 'not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof.' No further would I read, nor did I need; for instantly, as the sentence ended -- by a light, as it were, of security into my heart -- all the gloom of doubt vanished away” (8.12).

His resistance was overcome by “sovereign joy,” the name he gave to divine grace. He writes:

“How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose . . . ! You drove them from me and took their place, you who are sweeter than all pleasure. . . . O Lord my God, my Light, my Wealth, and my Salvation” (9.1).

Do you hear in Augustine’s confession an echo of Paul in Philippians 3? Where Paul spoke of ethnic pride and education and self-righteousness, all of which he came to view as nothing in comparison with knowing Christ,, Augustine spoke of “fruitless joys” that have now been replaced in his soul with the God who is “sweeter than all pleasure.”

Whatever failure or frustration you’ve experienced in life is directly related to the degree to which you have given your heart to fruitless joys. What an interesting choice of words: “fruitless joys”. What are they? Why did Augustine describe his life in these terms?

Fruitless joys are what we turn to when life is boring and gray and lonely and we know that tomorrow nothing will have changed. Fruitless joys aren’t necessarily scandalous sins. They may be little more than harmless hobbies in which we invest countless hours to make life a little less dull. They may be the newest gadgets we work so hard to own and worry about losing. They may be the fantasies and daydreams that swirl around in our heads that we know will never come true but somehow strangely bring a measure of excitement to an otherwise dreary life.

Fruitless joys vary from person to person. For one, it may be lingering bitterness of heart against someone who betrayed them. For another, disillusionment with how life has turned out. For another, anger and unforgiveness that energize the soul in a perverse sort of way. Fruitless joys can be anything from the mental escape that comes from identifying with the life of a Hollywood actress to the sheer excitement of new gossip. Or it may be something more serious such as internet pornography or cheating on your taxes or pride or infidelity or alcohol or drugs or whatever it is, as Augustine said, that you’re convinced you can’t live without, something without which life can’t be faced. For Augustine, it was something he once “feared to lose”.

For some it’s not just the fear of loss. They’re convinced they *deserve* them. “If you only knew how many times people let me down. God too. If you only knew how much I’ve had to put up with, you’d ease up and concede me a few fruitless joys!”

But why call them “fruitless” joys? If you think about it, it’s obvious. They are **fruitless** because no matter how effective they seem right now, in the long term they can’t satisfy. Often they leave us feeling guilty for our having squandered so much time and energy and money on something so trivial and petty. They lack the capacity to go beyond surface impact. They fail to reach deep into the soul and make a difference where it counts. They leave us empty and wondering aloud, “There’s got to be more to living than *this*.” Fruitless joys are whatever we trust to bring change but prove powerless to help us in our battle with temptation. No matter how well they work in the immediate present, we know God made us for something bigger and better and more satisfying.

So why do we hold on to them so vigorously? Why do we live in constant fear that they might be taken from us? Because they are fruitless “joys”. No matter how fleeting or transient or ultimately unsatisfying they may be, they are, nonetheless, **joys**. Augustine didn’t speak of fruitless “events” or fruitless “things” but of fruitless “joys”. We continually revert to them in times of boredom and distress because they work! At least, for the moment they do.

Consider what this tells us about the nature of our souls. Your heart will always be drawn to whatever brings it greatest joy. Don’t apologize for it. This isn’t the result of poor nurture or genetic error or inadequate education. Far less is it the fruit of sin. God created you with a “joy meter” in your soul, such that you invariably choose whatever options in life register most loudly and most deeply. You may be emotionally bruised, perhaps black and blue, from beating up on yourself for wanting to feel good or for wanting to experience happiness and joy. Stop it! Don’t repent.

Augustine was convinced that if not philosophy then fornication, and if not fornication then the fantasies of the theater would bring him optimum, maximum joy. That’s why he was so terrified of losing the “fruitless joys” on which he had relied his whole life, . . . until he met Jesus Christ. When by grace he tasted the goodness of God, the

sweetness of salvation, those joys that had so long held his heart captive turned sour in his soul and became bitter to the taste and a stench in his nostrils.

Augustine's fruitless joys, just like Paul's religious achievements, don't magically lose their capacity to satisfy your soul. They don't go away of their own accord. If their power to please begins to wane, the human soul will soon find adequate replacements. If Augustine, in describing his conversion and Christian life, had stopped upon saying "You [God] drove them from me," other fruitless joys would quickly have been found to take the place of those he had forsaken.

Fruitless joys don't transmute of their own accord into pain and discomfort and ugliness. **They will lose their grip on your soul only when they are displaced by greater joys, more pleasing joys, joys that satisfy not for the moment but forever.** That is why Augustine declared, "You [God] drove them from me and *took their place, you who are sweeter than all pleasure!*" **Augustine didn't cease his sinful indulgence because he had given up on pleasure.** He simply found a more pleasing pleasure, a longer-lasting joy, a fullness of joy and pleasures that never end (Psalm 16:11). By grace, his soul turned from reliance on fruitless joys to reliance on God's promise of a superior delight in his Son, Jesus Christ.

For the apostle Paul, his primary "fruitless joy" wasn't fornication, like Augustine. It wasn't women or wealth. **For Paul, it was tradition, heritage, education, and above all else, religion.** Where did Paul find greatest satisfaction and joy and a sense of value and meaning in life? He found it in his Jewish heritage, his ethnic identity, his educational accomplishments, and above all else in his religious devotion to the Law of Moses.

As we look more closely at what Paul says, one might have expected Paul to say that his previous personal advantages, although still good, are being left behind because he has found something better. But this was not a decision to go from good to better. Once he saw the "surpassing value" of knowing Jesus, he re-evaluated what he formerly regarded as gain, was struck with revulsion at it, realizing that it was actually working against him, that it blinded him to his need for Christ as well as to the beauty of Christ. Now he views it all as loss, as dung.

The key is found in what Paul identifies as **the ground or motive** for his decision: it was because of Christ. It was **the prospect of gaining Christ**, the promise of all that God is for him in Jesus that provoked and stirred and stimulated him and accounts for his re-evaluation of everything in his life. Paul actually makes this point no fewer than eight times!

First, it was "for the sake of Christ" (v. 7a), with a view to a personal relationship of love and prayer and praise and guidance with the Son of God, that I now count all things as loss.

Second, Paul made this momentous decision "because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (v. 8a). Or, to put it in other words, Paul wanted to experience "the overwhelming gain" and "the unparalleled excellency" of Jesus. He yearned for "the supreme advantage" and "the ultimate value" of walking and talking with the second person of the Trinity. His vision was fixed on "the surpassing greatness" and "the incomparable excellence" of knowing Jesus! Paul said No to earthly achievements and fleshly pleasures because his heart and will were energized and empowered by the prospect of a superior delight: knowing Jesus.

Third, he refers to Jesus as the one for whose "sake I have suffered the loss of all things" (v. 8b). Again we see that he didn't suffer loss in a vacuum. He willingly suffered loss *for a living, loving person, to gain intimacy and peace with a person, to embrace and be embraced by a person*: Jesus. Lest you think that Paul's decision carries no relevance for you, observe that he refers to "whatever" things in v. 7 and "all things" in v. 8. It doesn't matter who is confronted with this decision, when it occurs, or what it is that one forsakes for the sake of knowing Jesus. The reward is the same.

Fourth, his decision was made "in order that I may gain Christ" (v. 8c). To lose or to give up or to forfeit or to turn away from something without a reason, namely, *to get something infinitely better*, is crazy. Paul makes it clear that it is Christ himself, not his blessings or favor or gifts but the person of the Son of God himself that accounts for this transformation in the allegiance of his soul. His decision was not grounded in fear, shame, boredom, or any other negative incentive. It was "because of Christ", i.e., the hope of getting more and better and greater and more

beautiful and more satisfying experience of the knowledge and fellowship found only in Christ that explains his revolutionary decision.

Fifth, it was in order that I may “be found in him” (v. 9) that he regarded the formerly fragrant achievements of life to be a repugnant stench of refuse. Whether in Rome or Philippi or Antioch or Oklahoma City; whether healthy or sick or worried or care free or wealthy or poor; it only matters that he (we) be “in him.” Thus, Paul says, “Not only do I want to get Christ; I want to get *in* Christ! I want to find him and then be found in him.”

There is no way around it: ***Paul is talking about a fundamental change in his personal identity.*** No longer did he see himself merely as Paul, or even as an apostle, or even merely as a Christian. Rather, in sweeping and comprehensive language he says I do everything for his sake; I evaluate everything else in comparison with him and invariably find it all to be worthless and Christ alone to be of incomparable excellence; I happily suffer the loss of everything that I once held dear; I only want to get him and gain him and hold onto him and to be found in him. **Christ is his magnificent obsession!**

Sixth, echoing his earlier statement in v. 8a, it was “that I may know him” (v. 10a). When I hear words such as this I am reminded of Paul’s reference in 2 Corinthians 2:14 to “the sweet aroma of the knowledge of him.” Knowing Jesus stimulates olfactory delights! There is a spiritual and emotional pleasure in knowing Jesus that can best be compared to the physical delight we experience when our nostrils are filled with the fragrance of the choicest of perfumes or the soothing aroma of our favorite food. Simply put, knowing Jesus smells good!

The **seventh** and **eighth** of his assertions pertain to his desire to know “the power of his resurrection” (v. 10b) and to “share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (v. 10c). These we will examine more closely in coming weeks.

Conclusion

I read this passage and I want to be able, with Paul, to honestly and sincerely and with joy say: “Those things in my life that used to have a stranglehold on me, I now regard as dung, as refuse, as rubbish; in comparison with the surpassing beauty and glory of Christ, they no longer have any appeal; their glitter and glamour have gone. My eye is no longer drawn to look upon them, my heart is no longer in love with them, my will is no longer enslaved to them, my mind no longer thinks about them, my taste buds no longer find them delicious.”

Jesus is incomparably better. Jesus is enough! This is the enjoyment and satisfaction and delight that alone have the power to kill sin in our souls.

And what can be said to those here today who until now have held on tightly to their worldly status and their educational achievements and their fleshly rewards and all the things that our society holds dear and wars to own? What can be said to those here today who perhaps for the first time are recognizing the bankruptcy of all such things and facing the emptiness of life that they produce?

Do you want to know Jesus? Do you desire to be found in him alone? Do you treasure him as of surpassing worth, exceeding all else in life? Do repudiate whatever so-called “righteousness” you think you’ve accumulated in life until now and cast yourself instead on the righteousness of Christ alone, received by faith alone?

If the answer is Yes, then entrust yourself to him today. Make Paul’s words your own. Make his confession your own. And Christ will be yours, and you will be his!

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