

I hope you all had a wonderful Christmas. Traditionally on this Sunday between Christmas and New year's, I give a brief sermon and then we open up the mic for a time of testimonies from all of you. However, given the realities of our situation with COVID, it would not be wise to share the mic like that, so I will just give a shorter sermon today and give you some time for silent reflection. New Year's is a time for reflecting on the past year and looking ahead to what is to come. I have always found Philippians 3:1-14, part of Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, to be a great passage to reflect upon during this season. Let's read that this morning and take to heart the three lessons we learn there.

***Philippians 3:1-6** - Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. ² Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. ³ For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh-- ⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put 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; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.*

1) Your righteousness, or right standing with God, does not depend upon your spiritual resume but on the gospel

Whether or not we are acceptable to God does not depend upon what we have or have not done or what family we are born into. Paul begins this chapter by warning the Philippian church to watch out a group of religious teachers known as the Judaizers, who were trying to convince them that in order to be right with God, they not only had to believe in Jesus but they needed to become Jewish as well, particularly undergoing circumcision - which was the sign under the old covenant that you belonged to God - and following the Old Testament laws of Moses. Paul tells them in no uncertain terms to watch out for those who try to convince you that you can put any confidence in the flesh – in your good works, your family history, or anything else you have done. Your spiritual resume counts for nothing before God when it comes to salvation, making you right with God. Salvation is only found by faith in Jesus. Paul tells them that we glory, or boast, in Jesus, and not in anything we have done. Salvation is not Jesus plus circumcision or Jesus plus obeying the law, or Jesus plus anything – Jesus plus speaking in tongues, Jesus plus baptism, Jesus plus the sacraments, or even Jesus plus belonging to a specific church or denomination.

We are not saved by our good works but by trusting in what Jesus has done for us.

Romans 3:20-24 - *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. ²¹ But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

2 Corinthians 5:21 *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Ephesians 2:8-9 - *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.*

In other words, we learn in these verses to watch out for anyone who is essentially teaching you that God is going to be looking at your spiritual resume when you stand before him. To prove his point, Paul goes on to tell them that if anyone has reason to put confidence in their heritage or good works, it is him. After all, he is a religious leader from a leading tribe and zealous in obeying the law of God. If anyone could stand before God with an impressive spiritual resume, it is Paul. But then he tells them that all of that counts for nothing before God:

⁷ But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, 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 is through faith in Christ-- the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. 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, ¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Paul tells them his spiritual resume not only counts for nothing, but it only gets in the way of his preeminent desire now, which is to know Jesus more. This is because Paul knows that those who think they are good people with a great spiritual resume are actually in the most danger, because they think they can stand before a holy God on the basis of their own good works or family history instead of trusting in Christ. He goes as far as to say that his spiritual resume is rubbish,

skubalon, dog excrement. He knows that salvation is not by his resume, not by his good works, that his righteousness or right relationship with God comes only by faith in Jesus.

You need to understand this. If any of you think that somehow you are right with God because of your spiritual resume, you are mistaken. Maybe you grew up in church. You are a moral person. You read the Bible. You tithe. You were baptized. You went through the sacraments. You are a pastor. Whatever your resume, **God is not impressed.**

All he wants is to know Christ, the power of his resurrection, and to share in his suffering.

¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

2) Make knowing Jesus your number one desire

Look how single-minded he is. And as he says in verse 12, he is dedicated to knowing Jesus because Jesus first took hold of him. His passion for Jesus does not come from himself, but is a response to Christ's single-minded life and death that saved him.

1 John 4:19 - **We love because he** first loved us.

Consider how the writer of Hebrews puts it:

Hebrews 12:1-2 - *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. ² Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

What gives us the passion and endurance to run after Jesus the way Paul did? It comes from seeing Jesus living and dying out of love for us. But once you have

understood and seen this gospel, this love, then respond with your whole heart, soul, strength, and mind, putting your desire to know Him above everything and everyone else. Look at how single-minded Paul says – he even wants to know Christ not just in the power of his resurrection but also in the fellowship that comes from sharing in His sufferings and giving his life for those he loves.

In Joni Eareckson Tada's book *"When God weeps: why our sufferings matter to the Almighty,"* she tells of a five year-old boy named Matthew, who volunteered with his parents and his brother at one of Joni's retreats for disabled people (Joni is a quadriplegic). She writes how at the end of the retreat, Matthew asked his father, "When do I get to have my wheelchair, Daddy?" As Joni puts it:

This little boy doesn't need a wheelchair. He has no use for one. But try telling him that! A wheelchair, for Matthew, would top his Christmas wish list. A wheelchair means a joy ride. It also means an initiation into a wonderful club: a special group of kids who enjoy a special relationship with Joni. This five-year-old hasn't a clue about the pain and paralysis, the heartaches and hurdles. He discounts all of that, disregarding the dark side. All he desires is a chance to be among my best friends, a chance to identify with me, be like me, a chance to know me. If it means having a wheelchair, great. He'll welcome it.

Matthew wanted so much to be like Joni and her friends that if it meant having a wheelchair, then that is what he wanted. That's laser focus – all that matters is knowing Him, even if it means losing all else. It's what Thomas Chalmers called "The expulsive power of a new affection." As Christ's love captivates your heart, every other affection and desire becomes less desirable. **Christ is the sun, rising in the morning, whose light eclipses the stars of night.**

This is what Jesus illustrated in **Matthew 13:44-46** - *"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. ⁴⁵ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶ When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.*

Make Jesus your number one desire, as you see how loving and saving you was His single-minded focus in coming and dying. When knowing Jesus is your single-minded focus, then anything that happens to you will only serve to further that goal. As Tim Keller put it:

“If your ultimate love and joy is found in the treasures of this world, then suffering will rob you of your joy and make you sadder and madder. But if your ultimate love and joy is found in God, then suffering will drive you deeper into the source of that joy.”

Nothing can separate us; in fact, it drives us closer. Death, cancer, job loss, financial troubles, relationship struggles. If knowing Jesus is your primary desire, then all of those things can drive you closer to your goal. Make knowing Jesus your number one desire in 2021.

3) Forget what is behind and run after what is ahead

¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

I'm not sure what comes to mind when you hear him say forget what is behind. If your number one desire is to know Christ, there is a certain amount of forgetting that you will have to do, so that you are not held back in the race, not weighed down in your pursuit of Him.

What does it mean to forget what is behind?

Forget those things that once gave you identity and self-worth –

***Philippians 3:7-8** - But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.*

All that I once found my identity and self-worth in is in the past. My bank account. My looks. My talents. My pedigree. My reputation. My possessions. All in the past. Forgotten. All I want is Christ.

Forget your sins –

2 Corinthians 5:21 - God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Accept his forgiveness for your past. His mercies are new every morning. Clean slate.

They are forgiven. They can not hold me back.

Forget the heights you have already reached

It's like the team saying "0-0" after scoring a goal. Do not become complacent. Press on to the prize of knowing Christ and having eternal life

Forget all of these things and focus like a laser on my own goal, which is knowing Christ, walking as He walked. Eternal life is knowing Christ. I want you to have life to the fullest.

Read the Bible in a year. Prioritize him. Turn to God before turning to apps. Listen to Him. Pray to Him. Seek Him. Run after Him like he came after you. Amen.