

Fellowship with Christ

Philippians 3:10-11

This morning we're going to talk about fellowship with Christ. Relating with and *knowing* Jesus. Paul's chief ambition, as we see in 3:10, is to know Christ. Sounds like a good thing.

But knowing Jesus of course can mean a lot of different things to different people. Some of us are tempted to treat our relationship with Christ like an expensive shirt. We bought it because of the way it looked on us, but when we got home and read the tag that says "Dry Clean Only," it gets left in the back of the closet, or else crumpled at the bottom of the hamper for months on end. We bought it because of what we thought we would get out of it, but when we realized the actual cost, we weren't really interested anymore.

Others might be more tempted to know Jesus like we know the DVD collection of our favorite television series. We spend regular time with them, we refer to and even quote them often, we even know some episodes frontward and back. But our knowledge of them doesn't do a blessed thing to change the way we think or live.

So what does Paul mean when speaks of his desire to know Christ? What does this kind of relationship, this fellowship, really look like?

If ch. 1:27-2:11 was the instructional heart of Paul's letter to the Philippians (his appeal to live in a manner worthy of the gospel), then 3:10-11 is the theological heart. Everything in this book flows out of and points back to what Paul is talking about right here. It's the climax of his exhortation back in v. 1: "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord!"—rejoice in Jesus! We saw the *urgency* of rejoicing in Jesus in vv. 2-3, with Paul's warning against counterfeit Christianities. Last week we saw the *necessity* of rejoicing in Jesus in vv. 4-9, how taking hold of Jesus meant saying no to all other would-be saviors, because there is no gain in this world that compares to knowing Christ and being found righteous in him. This morning we're going to look at the *essence* or heart of knowing Jesus—fellowship with Christ, which means walking in the power of his resurrection and following the pattern of his cross.

Look at 3:10 with me: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the *fellowship* of sharing in his sufferings." Our passage this morning is not the first time we've seen the word *fellowship* in the book of Philippians. We noted early in this series that the whole book is about our fellowship (or as we've been saying, our *partnership*) in and for the gospel of Jesus. In ch. 1, Paul prayed with joy for the Philippian church because of their *fellowship* or *partnership* in the gospel (1:5)—same word as in our passage. At the end of the book, Paul thanks them again for their *fellowship* in giving and receiving for the advance of the gospel—to make the good news of Jesus known to the ends of the earth (4:14-15). As the people of God in Christ, we are

called to be a community shaped by the gospel, working together for the cause of the gospel. That's what Paul means by fellowship. He's not talking about punch and cookies, but laboring side-by-side, amid serious opposition, to make Jesus known.

But our fellowship or partnership with one another is bound up in our fellowship with God. Paul ties it to our fellowship with the Holy Spirit in ch. 2:2, and here in ch. 3, to our fellowship with Christ. Partnership with one another is impossible apart from our partnership or fellowship with God. So whatever it means to know Christ here, and to fellowship with him, somehow shapes and fuels our fellowship with one another as partners in and for the gospel of Jesus.

So what does Paul mean when he says he wants to “know Christ”? He's reiterating the same desire he expressed in vv. 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 . . .*” Paul is willing to lose *everything*, counting it all rubbish, for the sake of knowing Christ. Knowing Jesus is Paul's singular, all-consuming passion.

But what does knowing Jesus mean?

For Paul, knowing Jesus more than a *sterile intellectualism*, like knowing a book or a collection of DVDs. We might feel good about ourselves and our knowledge, and we might even impress others with it, but it bears no transforming fruit in our lives. Or to use Francis Schaeffer's illustration, this kind of knowledge “would be rather like a starving man sitting in front of great heaps of food and say, ‘I believe the food exists; I believe it is real,’ and yet never eating it.”¹ Knowing Christ is more than agreeing with who he is or knowing facts about him. It's more than intellectual assent.

And it's different than a *self-serving contractual obligation*, where I do my part (be good); he does his part (make me happy), and nobody gets hurt. Treating Jesus like a shirt—using him for what we get out of him, and then discarding him when he's no longer needed. Sadly, this way of relating with God has really become the default mode of religion in North America, even among Christians . . . *conservative* Christians. Sociologists even have a name for it: *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*. Sociologist Christian Smith, in his landmark study of the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers, writes:

We suggest that the de facto dominant religion among contemporary U.S. teenagers [later he ascribes it to older generations as well] is what we might call ‘Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.’ The creed of this religion [if there was one, would sound] something like this:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.

¹ *Death in the City*, ch. 9, in Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1996); as quoted in Adrian Warnock, *Raised With Christ: How the Resurrection Changes Everything* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 198.

4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.²

That's what it means for the average Christian to know Christ and relate with God. He's talking largely about *Christians* here. Notice that there's nothing about the death and resurrection of Christ, nothing about sin, faith, repentance, obedience, and so on. Smith continues:

In short, God is something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: he is always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in the process.³

So knowing Jesus in that sense becomes all about me and what I get out of it. *Nothing* could be farther from Paul's mind. No, beyond a sterile book-knowledge or a self-serving contract, Paul actually tells us what he means by "knowing Christ." He says "I want to know Christ" (that's his general statement, and then he gets specific—here's what that means—) "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). In other words, knowing Jesus means *walking in the power of the resurrection, and following the pattern of the cross.*

Walk in the Power of the Resurrection

Think first with me about knowing the power of Christ's resurrection. Jesus, the God-man (fully God, fully human) was crucified, nailed to a cross, murdered as an innocent man, to pay the penalty of our sin and rebellion. He died, he was buried, wrapped in linen cloths with 75 pounds of spices, and placed in a tomb (Jn. 19:40). And three days later he rose from the dead. He wasn't just sleeping; he wasn't just passed out; he wasn't mostly dead; was all-dead, as dead as dead gets. And he *rose* from the dead. He conquered the grave. Remember that death was not part of God's design for creation—it was a result of sin. And so in destroying the power of sin on the cross by taking it on himself and exhausting his Father's holy anger against that sin (in our place), Jesus defeated the power of death. Death is no longer the final word; it has lost its sting! Rather, life has the final word—eternal life for those who are in Christ. That is the Christian hope, and it is for all who believe in Jesus.

What kind of power does it take, to take a dead human being, rotting in the ground for three days, and not just resuscitate it, but to make it fully alive again? Jesus didn't come crawling out of the tomb, weary and wounded, clinging to life; neither was he some sort of zombie-like living-dead. What had been a cold, smelly, lifeless corpse, was now made new, resurrected, brimming with life. A perfect physical body, never to be subject to decay again. What kind of power does that take? A power infinitely beyond anything we can imagine.

That's the power Paul wants to know in his relationship with Christ—the power of his resurrection, the power of the Holy Spirit. It's the power that will one day raise our bodies from

² Christians Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), Kindle edition.

³ Ibid.

the dead, just like Jesus. As Paul says at the end of ch. 3: “But our citizenship is in heaven. 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; cf. 1 Cor. 15:21-26). But it’s also the power that is already at work in us, to give new life to our souls (cf. Eph. 1:19-20; 1 Pet. 1:3). Think of Romans 8:11: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, *he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you*” (ESV). So the resurrection is a future hope, but it’s also a present power by God’s Spirit, that’s already at work in those who believe in Christ.

So if knowing Jesus means walking in the power the resurrection, then we’re talking about a lot more than just knowing facts about a religion, or manipulating a distant deity to get what we want out of life. We’re talking about *relating with God personally*—the God who has made himself known by the power of the Spirit in the face of Jesus Christ. By God’s grace we know Jesus *not* like we know a book, but more like we know a friend, or a spouse. It’s a deep, personal, delightful knowledge. Walking in the power of the resurrection means first, relating with God *personally*.

Second, walking in the power of the resurrection means *not relying on our own effort*, on our corrupt and sinful flesh, in order to know and serve God. No, contrary to the temptation to depend on ourselves, whether our cold intellectual knowledge or our moralistic performance (doing more good things than bad ones, the very things Paul has lost and counted rubbish in order to gain Christ), walking in the power of the resurrection means *depending on God’s Spirit*, who lives within us. It means living by faith that *the God who raises the dead is at work in you*—to take weak, broken, sinful people like you and me and to bring something beautiful and holy out of this mess, giving us the strength we need to delight in him and do his will, despite the circumstances we face. We need the power of the resurrection, the power of God’s Spirit.

How often, when we face a problem or dilemma—we lose our job, our parent gets sick and can no longer live on their own, our child makes some foolish decisions, the money runs out, someone we love is hurt or betrayed by someone else—how often amid those difficulties do we stop and remind ourselves that we serve the God who raises the dead, and that this God lives within us by the Holy Spirit? That he is *with* us and *for* us by the grace of Christ, and he’s the one who is actually able to do something about our problem? How would that change our outlook on the situation—to believe that the God who raises the dead is in control of all this and strong enough to change it or carry us through it?

To know Jesus is to know the power of the resurrection. Everything Paul calls us to in this book rests on this core reality—the power of the resurrection of Christ at work within us. That’s what gives new life to our stillborn souls, that’s what enables us to know God and rejoice in Jesus, that’s what fuels the unity, humility, and love necessary to live as a gospel-centered community on mission for Christ.

But walking in resurrection power and depending on God’s Spirit means our life will take a certain shape—the shape of Christ’s sufferings. Ironically, the resurrection life is lived according to the pattern of the cross. And that’s Paul’s second point about what it means to know Jesus: to follow the pattern of the cross.

Follow the Pattern of the Cross

Paul continues in v. 10: “I want to know the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.” Now if we stop and think about this, that doesn’t make much sense. We just got done talking about how death has been defeated, how life gets the last word, and now he says the way to walk in the power of the resurrection is to die. Hmm. What’s up here Paul?

Sharing or fellowshiping in Christ’s sufferings is not only Paul’s desire, it’s part of God’s plan. Paul told us back in ch. 1 that it has been graciously granted to us not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for his sake (1:29; cf. 1 Pet. 2:21; Mk. 8:34-39). This is where any attempt to know Jesus in a mere textbook fashion, or as a means of achieving my own personal destiny in life (which usually involves *avoiding* suffering), falls dreadfully short of being biblical. Any attempt to know Jesus that doesn’t risk sharing in his sufferings is an attempt to know some other Jesus—not the one God would recognize as his Son. But why is knowing the sufferings of Christ so important to our relationship and service?

It’s *not* because his sacrifice was insufficient, and so we have to experience some sort of pain to atone for or make up for our sins. Paul’s not talking about some kind of living purgatory, where we’re punished by God to close the gap between what Christ has done and what God requires. That would go completely against everything the Scriptures teach us about the finished work of Christ. Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross was *sufficient* to pay for our sins; he drained the cup of God’s wrath against our rebellion, to the dregs, so that there is no wrath left for the believer; no punishment now, or after our death (cf. Rom. 8:1).

Neither is Paul saying that we share in Christ’s sufferings to help atone for the sins of others. That would be to make the same mistake.

So why do we suffer for Christ, and how does that help us know Jesus? We could say a lot here, but I think the book of Philippians highlights two reasons: first, to make the gospel known, and second, to be changed by his grace.

So first, we share in Jesus’ sufferings to make the gospel known. We follow the pattern of the cross to show the world what Christ was willing to do to rescue us from our sin and bring us back to God. It’s about mission. We are called to proclaim the gospel with words; we’re also called to demonstrate it with love—the kind of love Christ showed when he laid his life down for us. This is what Paul is demonstrating to the Philippians in this book. Remember that he writes this letter from prison—wrongfully incarcerated, facing possible death, because of his witness to Christ. And how does he respond? He rejoices at the privilege of suffering for Jesus in order to make him known (1:18; 2:18). He marvels that the entire prison guard is talking about Jesus because of his imprisonment for him, a tangible expression of Christ’s sacrificial love (1:12-13). He revels in the chance to honor Christ in his body, whether by his life or his death (1:20). We share in Christ’s suffering to make Jesus known, as a living picture of his love.

What happens when we love not just the people who like us, or the people whom we’re like, but those who don’t like us or the God we serve? What happens when we allow ourselves to be inconvenienced for the sake of the gospel, letting love for our neighbor interrupt our day with an opportunity to serve? What happens when we respond to a curse with blessing, instead of

dismissal or revenge? We show the world what the love of Christ is like, and we remind one another what the love of Christ is like. A love that wasn't reserved for those who earned it (since no one deserved it because of our sin), but a love that was poured out freely for us on the cross.

You need to know that if we are serious as a church about wanting to be a gospel-centered community living each day on mission for Christ (as our vision states), then it is going to cost us. It's going to mean suffering. It's going to mean that we say no to some things that we really love in this world, because knowing and sharing Jesus is even better. It's going to mean being opposed by the world, that we lose some relationships, because some people, in rejecting Jesus, will reject you also. It's going to mean death—dying to self, living for Jesus, loving others as he's loved us by his grace in the midst of our sin. And it's going to be beautiful. It's going to change peoples' lives by the grace of God, even as it changes ours.

And that's the second reason we suffer for Christ—to be changed by his grace. When we face rejection from friends or family members because of our witness to Christ, when we are passed up for a promotion, or even physically harmed, it's really painful. It hurts. But not only does God give us an opportunity to love others unconditionally, his Spirit is at work in our hearts to change our priorities, our affection, and our desires by reminding us what Christ suffered in our place (our suffering is but a small taste); by teaching us that this world cannot satisfy—only Jesus is sufficient; all else is loss; and by redirecting our hope from this life to the resurrection to come.

Suffering is never easy. But God in his grace never wastes it. He is at work in every difficulty, and as Paul describes here, he's at work in the difficulties that come from knowing and serving Christ. Sometimes it takes a little suffering to truly convince us of what Paul's talking about in v. 8 when he says that no earthly gain can compare to the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus. Sometimes it takes a lot. But it's worth it if it means letting go of things that will disappoint or even destroy us in order to take hold of Christ.

And sometimes it takes a little suffering to remind us that this life is not the end of the story. Becoming like Jesus in his death reminds us that this present world is not our home and forces us to hope in the resurrection to come. This is Paul's point at the end of v. 11: "becoming like him in his death, *and so somehow to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*" Now when Paul says "somehow" here, or "by any means possible" as other translations put it, he's not expressing an uncertainty as to whether he will share in the resurrection on the last day—the resurrection that he speaks of at the end of the chapter in vv. 20-21. As I understand it, he's using the language of "somehow" to direct any attention away from his own achievement and make sure all the credit goes to God. Not unlike the way we say "by God's grace" when we talk about something we've done for God—we want to make sure he gets the glory and credit. But his point here is huge—sharing in Christ's sufferings keeps our eyes on the real prize—not the joy of health, wealth, power, and recognition in this present world, but the joy of God's presence for all eternity in the new heaven and new earth. The joy of the resurrection to come.

Sharing in Jesus' suffering and following the pattern of the cross prepares us to delight in the resurrection when Jesus returns and brings God's redemptive plan to completion. Paul expresses it this way in 2 Corinthians 4:

Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.¹⁷

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all

comparison,¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Cor. 4:16-18)

May our hearts be fixed on that which is eternal. May we follow Paul's desire to know Christ personally by the Spirit, and may our fellowship with him bear fruit for the gospel as we follow the pattern of his cross in the power of the resurrection.