

WPC
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Gaining Christ
Acts 15:1-11; Philippians 3:1-11

We're now on the fifth in our series of sermons on the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul starts C. 3 with the word, "Finally," as if he's going to conclude the letter, and then he remembers something that he wants to address - the issue of legalism.

In regard to legalism, Paul's aware of a problem caused either by Jews or by Jewish Christians who've come into the Philippian church, which is mainly composed of Greek Christians; these folks are insisting that everyone needs to obey the law of Moses in order to be saved. In other words, they're teaching that in order to truly be in right relationship with God, one must first become a Jew by being circumcised –at least that's the case for males!

Acts 15 (which Julie read for us this morning) tells us the early church led by Paul, Peter, and James had already debated this question in Jerusalem. They finally came to the conclusion that faith in Jesus Christ makes us children of Abraham without needing to be circumcised. But clearly this issue persisted in the church.

This passage begins with very strong and stern language from Paul. Paul warns the Philippians about the false teachers who oppose them, even calling them dogs, a term Jews used for Gentiles, unclean animals, prowlers and scavengers. Because they were insisting that all the Christians needed to be circumcised, Paul views them as "evil workers who mutilate the flesh." Paul did not see circumcision in itself as a bad thing (obviously, he himself was circumcised as a faithful Jew), but while circumcision is a sign of God's covenant with Israel (which began with Abraham), Paul reminds the Philippians that there's now a new covenant through Jesus Christ.

Paul then speaks autobiographically; he anticipates the response of these Jewish enemies: "You say all this Paul, because you're a Christian and not an authentic Jew." Paul lays out his substantial credentials as a Jew; there's no question that he has a high pedigree. He draws upon his experience to illustrate that were he so minded he could preach his opponents' sermon better than they.

Fred Craddock says, "Paul's claim that he has more reason for confidence in the flesh, implies 'more than they do.' This could mean that while he was born and bred a Jew, the opponents were Gentile converts to Judaism. If it were the case that they had moved from paganism to Judaism

to Christianity, that would help explain their insistence that the Philippians include all the same stops on their religious pilgrimage." (Craddock, 57).

So Paul decides to play their game for awhile, as he lays out his list of credentials as a Jew: circumcised the eight day (not as an adult), of the people of Israel (not just a Jew religiously), of the tribe of Benjamin (a family genealogy, not just a certificate of circumcision), a Hebrew born of Hebrews (a possible reference to his family speaking the Hebrew language in their home), as to the law a Pharisee (the Jewish party which was committed to full obedience to the whole law, not just to selected rules such as circumcision), as to zeal, a persecutor of the church (he actively participated in the stoning of Stephen), as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

If any of the Philippians were impressed by the false teachers, they certainly should now be more impressed by Paul. What he says next now carries more weight. It's the difference between learning how to act from the local high school drama club teacher and learning from Robert DeNiro or Meryl Streep: because of their Academy Awards, the words of DeNiro and Streep will carry more weight.

But then comes a surprise...Paul now points out that all of his accomplishments, all of his special Jewish credentials, he counts as trash when it comes to obtaining the favor of God.

Let me point out an important distinction at this point. Paul does not say that Judaism is worthless, he does not say the Jewish faith is garbage, that intrinsically that way of life is of no value. Paul is not attacking the Jews here. On the contrary, he's proud of his Jewish heritage. As we see in his letter to the Romans, Paul regards the law of Moses as good and holy and of God, serving to put boundaries around human behavior and show us our sinfulness.

But the law is not the means by which we are made right with God. The law acts as a mirror - it works great to show the dirt on our faces, but you can't wash your face with the mirror. If you try, all you'll do is bloody yourself.

Far from disdaining his past, Paul shows how valuable it was to him. However, as Craddock points out, for Paul, "his consuming desire was to know Jesus Christ, to be in Jesus Christ, to have that righteousness which is God's gift to the one who believes (v. 8-9); and for the surpassing worth of that, he counts gain as loss. It is not the law that is dead; Paul is dead to the law. Paul does not toss away junk to gain Christ; he tosses away that which

was of tremendous value to him. Therein lies the extraordinary impact of his testimony and the high commendation of faith in Jesus Christ. What Paul is saying is that Christ surpasses everything of worth to me."

(Craddock, 58)

I've said this before: often the good things in life keep us from the best things in life. Are there good things in our lives that crowd out the best thing, Jesus Christ himself? For some, it may be family. God meant for our families to be good things. God wants for us to enjoy and care for our families. But if our families come between us and God, then our families are keeping us from the best thing. Money is a good thing. We can do a great deal of good with our money, and in fact we need money to survive, to care for our loved ones and ourselves. But if our money is coming between us and God, then money is keeping us from the best thing. Our jobs, our skills, our hobbies, anything that prevents us from putting God first in our lives, we're called to put in a subordinate position.

What can happen when people put Jesus Christ first, when they focus on the best thing in life? As many of you know, while in seminary, I had the opportunity to work at Young Nak Presbyterian Church in Seoul, Korea. Young Nak is the largest Presbyterian Church in the world, with around 50,000 members. But in 1954, right after the Korean War ended, Young

Nak Church, which had originally been established in North Korea, was in the process of rebuilding itself in the South. Many Korean Christians who had lost everything in the war, including their churches and homes, made a commitment to come together and build a new church as quickly as possible.

Robert Boyd Munger, who at one point was the pastor at UPC, visited Young Nak Church at that time, and he was amazed to see thousands of people come to worship in a freezing building that had no heat. He asked the pastor of Young Nak, Dr. Han, why so many people had come to worship in such harsh conditions. Dr. Han replied that many of these people had given money to build the church before they had even built their homes. He then turned to Bob Munger and said, "Even though we do not have much, we have Jesus Christ, and he is enough."

These people had lost just about everything in the war. What little money they had was of immense value, since they were trying to get their lives back together. But whatever gains they had, they regarded as loss because of Christ. As we strive each day to keep our focus on Christ and gradually to rid ourselves of both good and bad things which distract us from true discipleship, the good news is that we do have Jesus Christ, and he is enough. Amen.