

Can you believe that it's almost Thanksgiving? In less than two weeks we're all going to find ourselves seated around a table somewhere- hopefully surrounded by family and friends- and we're going to be eating some good food!

We're in the middle of a series of messages from the book of Philippians called *To Live Is Christ*. For the last few weeks we've been asking questions about how we can sustain a healthy life in Christ. As it turns out, Living Fully, Loving Deeply and Giving Freely are not the default positions of our hearts. Reflecting the heart of Jesus requires perseverance, endurance, and humility like John spoke about last week. Throughout our time together we've been learning how to sustain a vibrant faith, but this week Paul shifts our focus.

In chapter three of this letter to a church in northern Greece, Paul is going to share, through his own life-story, the foundational thing upon which our faith is built. He gives us the source of our life to the full. So today, whether you are a follower of Christ or not; whether you consider yourself religious or irreligious; there is good news for you here in Philippians chapter three.

*1 Whatever happens, my dear brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. I never get tired of telling you these things, and I do it to safeguard your faith.*

*2 Watch out for those dogs, those people who do evil, those mutilators who say you must be circumcised to be saved. 3 For we who worship by the Spirit of God are the ones who are truly circumcised. We rely on what Christ Jesus has done for us. We put no confidence in human effort, 4 though I could have confidence in my own effort if anyone could. Indeed, if others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more!*

*5 I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. 6 I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault.*

*7 I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. 8 Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ 9 and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith. 10 I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, 11 so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!*

The key to living a joy-filled, vibrant life of faith, Paul says here in verse one, is finding your life in Christ. If, as believers or as a church, we have lost our joy, it's possible that we have forgotten or lost sight of the Good News of Christ. In fact, in verse two, as Paul writes, there is a group that has managed to slip into the church and they are teaching a message *other* than Christ. They were teaching the necessity of circumcision for a right relationship with God.

For anyone of Jewish heritage, circumcision is significant because it was an external mark of the covenant that God established with Israel going all the way back to Abraham. For centuries, Jewish families circumcised young boys as a sign of their commitment to God and to show that they belong to him and were obedient to all that He had established. But for Paul, who was Jewish, his problem wasn't with circumcision, but that in requiring circumcision these false teachers were saying, "Jesus by himself isn't enough!" "What you need is Jesus, plus something else." "You need Jesus, plus an external mark."

Unfortunately a similar message plays its way out in the church today. It's not circumcision

(thankfully- so we can take a deep breath), but there remains a tendency in the church today to say, 'not only do you need Jesus, but you need to look a certain way, or talk a certain way. You've got to walk a certain way, and you've got to keep it together. You shouldn't struggle, and there shouldn't be a hint of sin in your life- and if you happen to sin or struggle, by all means, keep it to yourself.

This isn't a message that has been preached, necessarily, it's simply the operating principle in many of our lives. This false message is caught, not taught. So what you have in the church is people who are tied up in bitterness or anger or resentment, but they aren't honest for fear they'll be criticized or looked down upon for emotional weakness. We'll have marriages that are unraveling, but neither spouse is willing to speak up and ask for help. And there are men and women who are tied up in lust or pornography or an addiction but they're too riddled with shame to share their struggle honestly. There are people who are hurting and lonely and depressed and yet there's an unwillingness to open up and reveal what's really going on for fear of how others will respond.

For many, this leads to a dreaded sense of being alone in this world, and we are overcome with fatigue from trying to maintain an outward façade that says 'everything's ok' while inside we are in despair. So we pose for others and we put on a happy face, but internally we feel empty.

Paul explains why this happens to us. He says we end up this way when we forget the Good News about what Jesus has done for us to bring us freedom from the power of sin guilt and shame. We forget that God's approval in our lives is not based upon how hard we work, but upon Jesus' perfect work on the cross for us.

Any time we add to the Gospel of Christ, it dilutes the effectiveness and power of the Good News in our lives. That's what happens, but we need to understand *why* we have this tendency to add conditions to our faith, instead of simply wrapping our arms around Jesus and Him alone. Why do we have a tendency to add things on and what must change so that we can stand firmly in Christ?

Paul will say in verses three and four that it has everything to do with where we place our confidence. Let's read those verses again. Paul writes, *"For we who worship by the Spirit of God are the ones who are truly circumcised. We rely on what Christ Jesus has done for us. We put no confidence in human effort, though I could have confidence in my own effort if anyone could. Indeed, if others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more!"*

If you follow on there in the text Paul is going to go through the list of his pedigree and achievements and credentials. He's going to say, "I was circumcised on the appropriate day. I'm a pureblooded son of Israel (meaning he's not a convert, nor was he ever influenced by Greek culture). He's from the tribe of Benjamin, one of the two tribes that remained true to the house of David. He says, 'I was a Pharisee,' meaning he was zealous in keeping the Old Testament law- he was faultless and above reproach.

As Paul writes this, do you understand what he's doing for us? He's building a resume. We know what resumes are for, right? A resume is a list of a person's education, skills and experience compiled for the purpose of getting a job. "Here's my list of merits. These are the reasons you should give me the job." We're familiar with the function of resumes and most of us have had to write one at some point or another. It can be an agonizing process to write a resume? What can I put on there that will make me stand out over the other applicants? How can I describe myself in the most palatable way? But Paul isn't writing this list so that the Philippians will hire him.

Paul is pointing out the tendency in us to want to create qualifications for acceptance by God. Paul's list doesn't make him imminently hireable, it was his case for being welcomed in by God. These were

Paul's reasons why God should be happy to have him on His team. And it was an impressive list to be sure. Paul had the right heritage, blood-lines, education, and rigorous adherence to the law. These were the things that Paul took confidence in. In the Greek, what Paul literally says is, 'these were the things that I once *boasted* about.'

I have to ask, today what do *you* take confidence in? What do *you* 'boast' in? What are you standing on today that gives you confidence to face God, to face the world, to face this life? What are you clinging to? What do you 'boast' in?

If you go back to the beginning- the very beginning, in Genesis, in the Garden- you'll learn there that we were created to stand secure on the foundation of our heavenly Father's love and goodness. We were made to enjoy Him, to know Him, to love Him, to fulfill His purposes for our lives- this is what we were made for. But back in the Garden, when we turned from God, all the stability from which we once able to build our lives- when we turn from Him, it crumbled out from under us. Left to ourselves, it is impossible to find true footing in this life.

There's a powerful image that we see in the beginning of Scripture that's carried throughout which describes this for us. Think back with me to when Adam and Eve walked away from God in Genesis three. In the text we learn that they became aware of their own nakedness. Now, this goes much deeper than just their lack of clothing. They were not only naked physically, perhaps even more so they were naked spiritually. They were vulnerable. Prone. Where once they had lacked nothing, now they sensed there was something missing- something more than just clothes- they were naked and they were ashamed. So they covered themselves.

We do this too. Of course we do, we're all clothed here this morning, thankfully. But you know that's not what I'm talking about, right? Today, we attempt to cover over our insecurity, our sense of vulnerability, a sense of emptiness- that something is missing- and we cover ourselves the best we can. Each of us knows what it's like to try to compensate for our feelings of emptiness and vulnerability.

There are a number of ways that we do this, but ultimately you can lump our methods into one of two categories.

Some of us attempt to compensate for what's missing in our lives by trying to do everything right. We're probably a lot like Paul. We build resumes that include good and appropriate pursuits and behavior. In order to cover over the sense that something is missing in our hearts we attempt to become 'good people.' We follow the rules. We fill our lives with all sorts of things that project, to ourselves and to those around us, an image of someone who has it all together, because we do it the 'right way.'

That's one end of the spectrum (and of course you may fall somewhere between), but on the other side, for some us, it has nothing to do with trying to do everything right. For those of us on this end of the spectrum, we choose to live for ourselves. When we recognize a sense of emptiness inside we compensate by filling our lives with whatever can give us a sense of happiness or fulfillment. It doesn't matter if someone else thinks it's wrong, or if it appears selfish, or if others are impacted negatively- ultimately that doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is how I feel.

Now, regardless of which end of the spectrum you think applies best to you, fundamentally, all of us are trying to cover ourselves. Everyone does it.

Paul defines it for us like this, he uses the phrase, “through our own efforts.” By our own initiative or striving, we try to build a resume for our lives that will give us confidence to face this life. This is how you and I give significance to our lives, “through our own effort”- and Paul did the same thing, but in verse seven he exposes the charade.

*7 I once thought these things were valuable, (he’s referencing his resume) but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done.*

Paul is saying that the resumes that we concoct are worthless. If you keep reading he describes them as “garbage.” But when Paul uses the term ‘garbage,’ that word is toned down by translation quite a bit. In the Greek, the word means excrement. Paul is saying, ‘my resume of merit and achievement used to mean everything to me, but now I realize it’s all just a pile of crap.’

When we clothe ourselves in our own effort and attempt to stand confident in the face of this life, at some point we will be forced to recognize how hollow that approach actually is. Maybe that hasn’t happened yet for you, but trust me, one day it will. Because one day each of us will stand before our Creator- our holy and perfect God, and He will see right through our lists of achievements and goodness. Paul says, ‘I recognize that my efforts amount to nothing- they’re all a pile of garbage.’

So where does that leave us? If Paul, a man with such a flawless religious pedigree and a seemingly perfect resume, thinks that it all counts for nothing- what does that mean for you and me?

Thankfully Paul has discovered the one thing that does matter. Paul reveals to us the one thing that truly covers his sense of emptiness and insignificance- the one thing that can completely satisfy the longings of our hearts.

In comparison to this one thing, all of Paul’s earthly achievements and status and efforts appear (appear) meaningless, but then we read verses eight and nine. Paul writes:

*8 Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ 9 and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God’s way of making us right with himself depends on faith.*

Do you know the beautiful thing about what Paul is saying here? Do you know why this is such good news that brings unspeakable joy? Scripture tells us that when we stand apart from God we stand naked. Our sins have separated us from our Creator and have stripped us from the glory for which we were created and we can do nothing to cover ourselves in order to stand confident before God and the world- but there is one who is not only able to cover us, but offers to do so, and His name is Jesus.

Paul came to realize that his ability to stand confidently before God did not depend on his own effort or obedience, but upon what God had already done for him through Christ.

Why is this important, because many of us think that our salvation hinges around becoming a good person. We think that if we can just stop doing the wrong things and start doing the right things that God will accept us. But Paul is saying that we’re equally lost in our good works as we are in our sin, because in the presence of a holy God we all stand naked and need.

Salvation comes to us when we repent (when we turn from) both our sinfulness and our self-righteousness- from anything that we are leaning on to make us right before God- and in faith put our trust in the one (Jesus Christ) who has covered us (clothed us) in His perfect righteousness.

A Christian is not a person with a resume that demands God's attention and acceptance, but a person who has come to realize that the only resume they'll ever need is the one God has given us in Jesus. He didn't owe us anything, but He offers us everything.

That's what Paul means in verse nine when he writes, *"I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ."*

When we put our faith in Christ, He clothes us in His righteousness. That's incredibly good news. When we are clothed with Christ, God no longer sees our mistakes, our failures, our waywardness- instead He sees the flawless perfection of Jesus. And even though our resumes are flawed and we don't act perfectly all the time, when God views us He sees the flawless resume of Christ, and it's on that basis that we are accepted and welcomed into His presence.

Paul says all this comes to us through faith. What is faith?

I'll say it simply like this: Faith is leaning on Jesus. It's not in trying hard, but ceasing to try hard. Faith is leaning on and resting completely upon Jesus.

Some of us are working hard, we're striving and struggling and our hearts remain restless. It's possible that we've been looking to Jesus as a teacher but not as a savior and Lord. Only when you lean on Jesus and repent, not only of the bad things you've done, but also the good things that you've been relying on as a justification before God, will you find true rest.

Does this mean that we shouldn't work and serve or that our lives shouldn't demonstrate or reflect the change in our hearts. (Yes. Just don't tell the Kid's Harbor workers.) No! Absolutely not. Paul didn't say that all effort was worthless, he said that it was worthless in comparison to knowing Christ. Paul's life was nothing if not marked by concerted effort and service. In fact we're going to be talking a lot about that next week.

Paul's life was filled with the fruit of the Holy Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control). But the fruit didn't prove that he deserved to be accepted by God, the fruit was produced because of his faith- from knowing Christ- an infinitely better motivation.

When we know Christ, when we understand the depths of His love for us, the more we realize what He's done for us, the easier it is set Him apart in our lives as leader as Savior. Our worship deepens because the songs we sing are genuine expressions of gratitude to the God who made a way for us in Christ. We begin to see our passion for this life return when we acknowledge that we're new creations in Christ, and He has placed His Spirit inside of us and it's transforming us and renewing us.