

January 10, 2021

KNOWING CHRIST AND HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS

Philippians 3:1-11

(8 of 12 in a series through Philippians)

I think one of the most precious truths in all the world is that we are justified—that is, declared righteous before God—by faith alone. That is, it's not our good works that justify us before God but simply our faith in one who has done everything for us—living, dying, and being raised. But this also is a truth that Satan seems always to be attacking relentlessly. My guess is that you have felt this attack personally. It's there when you go to spend time before the Lord in prayer, and the enemy whispers to you, "Do you really think you're good enough for God to want to listen to you?" And it's there when you've recognized sin and your instant thought is that you need to beat yourself up a good bit before you can really feel forgiven. In those moments what you're experiencing is the enemy's attack against the precious truth that we're justified by faith in the finished work of Christ alone.

But this attack by the enemy should not be surprising. He is, after all, known in Scripture as the "accuser" (Rev 12:10), and so he hates the idea that you and I can stand before God resting in the fact that we are declared righteous and our sins are forgiven solely because of the work of Jesus for us. Nor should we think that when he attacks and accuses that he is using a new strategy. Actually, we see this attack continually directed at the apostle Paul and his ministry to the Gentiles as we read the Scripture. It seems that every time Paul went to an area and preached the gospel, people believed, and a church was planted, the enemy soon came with an attack against this truth that we're justified by faith alone. And in many of those cases the attack came in the form of false teachers, called "Judaizers." And what these false teachers would say is that it's good that you're trusting in Jesus for your salvation, but you need to do more than place your faith in him. You also need to adhere to the commands of the law of Moses in the Old Testament. What they would say to these new Gentile believers is that if they really want to be accepted by God they need to, in essence, first become Jews. They need to be circumcised (the mark that showed one belonged to the people of Israel in the OT) and start obeying the OT commands that showed how Jews were distinct as God's people.

And so what would happen in Paul's ministry is that he would minister to a people, he would leave, things would seem good, but shortly after his departure these Judaizers would come in and begin teaching this false gospel—that is no gospel of all—saying that these new Gentile believers still had more to do in order to be in right standing before God. So Paul would have to write letters back to these churches, telling them not to give in to this false teaching and not to turn away from what he'd taught them. We see this, for example, when Paul writes to the Galatians, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. . . . As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be

accursed" (Gal 1:6-9). And we see the same kind of thing in Paul's letter to the Romans and Colossians and others.

Well, apparently, when Paul had been with the Philippians, preaching the gospel there, he'd anticipated these false teachers coming in after him, and so he'd taught explicitly against their false teaching. He probably said to the Philippian believers something like, "There will be some come in after me who'll say that it is only those who are circumcised and keep the law of Moses who are really God's people. They'll refer to themselves as 'the circumcision' and to you as Gentile 'dogs,' suggesting you don't really belong to the Lord, haven't been accepted by him, and aren't his true people. But listen to me, the people of God is made up anyone—Jew and Gentile, circumcised and uncircumcised—who is trusting by faith in the crucified and risen Lord because no one is justified by doing the works of the law but simply by faith in Christ alone." In fact, he'd probably said something like that to them again and again and again.

And now, after getting halfway through his letter to the Philippians Paul decides that he should warn them about these people again. That's what we see in our text this morning: Philippians 3:1-11. He begins the text with "finally," which would better be translated as "so then" or "as for the rest" or the like because that's the sense Paul is communicating. In other words, Paul is moving on to address this topic, and so after exhorting them to rejoice in the Lord again, echoing the last thing he'd said in 2:18, he begins by telling them that he's about to write to them again what they had heard from him while present, noting that it is "no trouble to me and is safe for you" (v. 1). That leads to him launching into this warning against these false teachers as he says, "Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh" (v. 2). In other words, look out for these false teachers known as the Judaizers. But what I want to note for us this morning is the argument Paul gives after this initial warning to look out for these men in verse 2. Because what we see in Paul's argument can be life-changing for us if we grasp the weight of what Paul is saying. So, let's take his argument a point at a time. The first is this:

Those who belong to the Lord are those who hope in Christ's righteousness alone

Paul starts his argument against those who claim that they are God's people because they practice the law of Moses by saying, in essence, "No, actually we are God's people." They may call themselves, the circumcision, but Paul says, "We are the circumcision." And what Paul means by that is not that the cutting of the flesh marks believers but that the cutting of the flesh—the act of circumcision—for every Jewish male in the OT was simply pointing to a reality when God would circumcise the hearts of his people, cutting out our hearts of stone and giving us new hearts that love him. So, what Paul is saying is that if our faith is in Christ, then we are the people who have new hearts, and since that is what circumcision was always meant to point to, then we—believers—are the true circumcision. We are the manifestation of what circumcision always pointed to—people with changed hearts. This reference to a new heart, then, leads Paul to note the Spirit as well. He continues, identifying believers as those "who worship by the Spirit of God" (v. 3). Again, I think the reason he mentions the Spirit as an identity marker of God's people is because the prophets foretold that God would give his people

new hearts and put his Spirit within them. Now, Paul is saying that we have new hearts and have his Spirit, and we worship accordingly.

But his next two identification notes really launch us into Paul's argument. He describes believers as those who "glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh" (v. 3). Here's what I think Paul means. When a person becomes a believer, he does so with a recognition that he can't offer anything to God as sufficient righteousness. God demands perfect righteousness, and none of us is even close to that. Not only have we rebelled against God, but our good works are filled with mixed motives, selfish desires, and not sufficiently driven by love for God and neighbor. In other words, even if our lives were filled with good works, our good works wouldn't be good enough. And so what you do when you come to Christ is you're saying, "God, I'm not looking to anything that I can offer in order to stand before you as righteous. I'm bringing nothing to the table to try to be approved by you. I'm contributing nothing to my hope to stand justified. Instead, I'm simply saying, 'I think Jesus lived a perfect life for me, died for my sins, rose from the dead, and he is enough. I'm banking on Christ alone. My only plea is Jesus, or—as we sang earlier, 'All I have is Christ,' and I'm trusting that is enough.'" And the glory is that Jesus is not only enough, he is the only thing that is enough. Because the point at which you place your faith in Christ, God unites you with Jesus so that you gain him. What's his is yours. His righteousness counts as your righteousness, by faith. And as we respond this way, we are glorying in Christ Jesus and putting no confidence in the flesh."

That's what Paul is wanting the Philippians to see. It's what he's saying when he says later, "For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him [see this language of union with Christ], not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on him" (vv. 8b-9).

Now, Paul anticipates what these false teachers are going to say. They're going to say, "Of course Paul claims that we don't contribute anything to our righteous standing before God, and it's all Jesus, because maybe Paul feels insecure and senses he has nothing to point to or nothing to boast of to show that he is enough or has done enough to belong to God." So Paul cuts that argument off before it gets going. He says, "I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless" (vv. 4-6).

In other words, Paul is saying to these Judaizers, "If you think you are enough or have done enough to stand in righteousness before God, then I am and have done more." His parents didn't delay his circumcision, but did it on the eighth day—as they were commanded by God. Paul is an Israelite, but not just any Israelite. He's from one of only two tribes that didn't rebel against the Davidic dynasty. Even in exile, his parents taught and instructed him to behave as a Jew. He belonged to the strictest group in terms of obeying the law. In fact, he defended God's glory so zealously that when he thought Jesus Christ claiming to be God the Son was blasphemy,

he persecuted Jesus' followers. And in terms of trying to obey the law and offering sacrifices when you failed, Paul did it. If anyone could claim to be enough or have done enough to earn God's approval, Paul qualified.

Then he says, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ" (v. 7). But at the end of the day, Paul says that none of that is enough to earn him anything before God. He must have Christ. He must be united with Christ by faith. Christ alone is his claim to righteousness. But because he is not depending on himself or his heritage or his obedience to the law but instead is looking to Christ in faith, he is indeed united with Christ. He has gained Christ, and Christ's righteousness is his, Christ's obedience is his, Christ's perfection is his. Everything Christ has merited has been credited to Paul, and indeed it is credited to all who trust in Christ alone for our salvation. That is what everyone must do to be saved. We turn our back on every other plea or claim and rest and trust in Christ alone as sufficient for us.

This is how we battle Satan's lies when he says, "Do you really think you've done enough for God to listen to you as you pray this morning?" We answer, "Of course not. I could never do enough. But I believe that Jesus has done enough for me. He *is* enough for me. So, as I pray I'm praying 'in Jesus' name,' meaning by the authority that he has merited for me." And Satan has no answer for that. We are justified by faith alone, gaining Christ by faith as our sufficient righteousness. That's Paul's first point: those who belong to the Lord are those who hope in Christ's righteousness alone.

Here's a second truth:

Nothing is more valuable than knowing Jesus

As I noted, this is an implication of the first point. If gaining Christ (i.e. being united with him by faith) is the only means of standing in righteousness before God, then Jesus Christ is the most glorious of treasures. Nothing is more valuable than knowing him. This is why Paul writes, "Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (v. 8).

But one thing that Paul makes clear is that knowing the Lord isn't *simply* another way of saying coming to faith. Now, it is that. The Bible sometimes speaks of our salvation as "knowing the Lord" or "knowing Christ." So Paul, for example, will speak to the Galatians, saying, "But now that you have come to know God" (Gal 4:9), meaning "now that you've been saved" or "now that you've been united with Christ by faith and are credited with his righteousness" or the like. And I think there is a parallel here with "knowing Christ" and "gaining Christ" and "being found in Christ" that we see sprinkled throughout these verses. So "knowing Christ" is a way of speaking of coming to faith. But it's not *simply* that.

Paul also holds out knowing Christ as his lifelong pursuit. In verses 10-11, he is looking forward, to the future. And yet he speaks of wanting to know Christ more. He writes (starting back up in verse 8), "I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may

gain Christ and be found in him . . . that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and may share his sufferings, become like him in his death that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

Paul was united with Christ when he saw that gaining Jesus was of surpassing worth and, indeed, worth losing all else, but that didn't mark the end of Paul's pursuit of knowing his Lord. He tells us that he presently wants to know him. He wants to know the power of his resurrection. He shares in Christ's sufferings in hope of becoming more like him.

In other words, Paul's justification is a picture of how he lives the entire Christian life. If it was worth losing everything he could boast in, in order to gain Christ and be found in him—possessing him as the sole hope of righteousness—when he was justified, then it is equally reasonable (Paul seems to be saying) to be willing to lose everything now if only we might know more of Jesus now. If suffering comes into his life, Paul sees it as a means of experiencing a deeper understanding of the Lord and his closeness in loss. If there is cause for great blessing, then he sees it as an opportunity to grow deeper in knowing the kind and gracious heart of his Lord. He wants to know his fellowship in greater depth and his power in greater degree. Nothing is more important to Paul than knowing his Lord. Again, as he counted everything as loss when compared to knowing Christ in his justification, so everything takes a back seat to knowing Christ for him now. The terms of his justification have shaped the entirety of his life—there is nothing worth more than knowing Christ.

Let's see if we can think of this in practical terms. I don't know what tomorrow holds. It may be one of great loss. We see in the Bible that Job lost health and loved ones in one, painful moment. But by the end of Job, Job declares, “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you” (Job 42:5). In other words, Job knew his Lord more. He had lost everything, but he knew his God more deeply and more truly. And Paul would tell us that the gain of knowing the Lord is more valuable than anything else in all the world. So, let's apply this two ways. On the one hand, don't chase after everything the world chases after as if that's more valuable than knowing Christ. It isn't. Orient your life around wanting to know and savor Jesus Christ more and more. Let knowing of Jesus be to you of surpassing worth. And, second, when we encounter tragedy, let's run to the Lord and through our pain and through our loss believe this is a moment when we might know more of who our Lord is. Run to him and let him reveal himself to us in a way that we simply might not be able to see when all is well. Whether we choose loss (by not chasing after the gain of the world) or receive loss (through pain and tragedy), let us see knowing more of Christ as the greatest gift imaginable. Paul says, “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord” (v. 8). Rest in the reality that we are accepted by God because of Jesus alone, and let us pursue knowing Christ as that which is of greatest worth.

And the reality is that these two points are connected in more practical ways as well. At the most basic level, unless you realize that you are justified on the basis of the finished work of Christ alone and quit looking to yourself to be worthy of God's approval, then you'll never see the value of Christ as you should. You'll never look at knowing Christ in suffering and think that

knowing Christ is a superior treasure to the loss that you've experienced. The only platform from which you can pursue a life of treasuring knowing Jesus above all else is a platform where you know that he has already done everything to make you acceptable to God.

In the Belgic Confession on "The Sanctification of Sinners," the document speaks of justification by faith alone and then says, "Far from making people cold toward living in a pious and holy way, this justifying faith, quite to the contrary, so works within them that apart from it they will never do a thing out of love for God but only out of love for themselves and fear of being condemned."¹

I think this is right. And so I want to plead with you this morning to believe the freedom from condemnation that is yours in Christ, and then live your life in pursuit of the great treasure of knowing more and more the God who has saved you not because of what you have to offer but because of the work of Christ alone. And let's pursue knowing him now and giving him thanks as we come to the table. Amen.

¹ The Belgic Confession, Article 24, in *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988), 101. Quoted by Dennis Johnson in *Philippians*, REC (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 202.