

3 - I Want to Know Christ

Philippians 3:1-21

Key Verse: 3:10

"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..."

In chapter 1, we found that Paul was full of joy, even in prison. The source of his joy was his union with Christ. He did not know whether he would be released or be executed, but he did not worry about future security. He wrote, "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (1:21). In chapter 2, Paul urges believers to be one in mind and heart and spirit, and to have the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus. Jesus was humble. He expressed his humility in obedience to death. In chapter 3, Paul shares his life testimony and personal prayer topics. He warns believers not to be led astray by worldly Christians or by secular humanists. If anyone knows Christ surely Paul does, but still the key point in his testimony is, "I want to know Christ." Let's learn from Paul the basic attitude and value system of a mature Christian.

1. That I may gain Christ (1-11)

First, rejoice in the Lord. Read verse 1. "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." Paul was in prison. In chapter 2, he speaks of the real possibility of his death. But still he said, "I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me" (2:17-18). One thing we can learn here is that one can rejoice even in the worst of human circumstances. Second, we learn that, "rejoice in the Lord," is a command, and not a suggestion. We must obey this command to rejoice because it is a spiritual safeguard. Joy and thanksgiving are the best safeguards for our faith. A complaining spirit is an open door to the devil. We must learn from Paul how to rejoice always and be thankful in all circumstances (1Th 5:16-18). Third, the source of the believer's joy is Jesus. Verse 1 says, "rejoice in the Lord!" Our joy is "in the Lord." Our union with Christ makes us richer than the richest billionaire, more powerful than the president of the United States, wiser than all the faculty members of the University of Chicago, and it gives us something more valuable than all the wealth of the world--eternal life. Therefore we must rejoice in the Lord. He warns the Philippians not to rejoice in their own righteousness, and not to be tempted by the spiritual highs or by the false joy of those who try to add something to the gospel.

Second, don't put confidence in the flesh. Read verse 2. "Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh." Paul is talking about certain legalistic Jews who insisted that salvation by God's grace through repentance and simple faith in Jesus was not enough. They insisted that men--especially the Gentile believers--must be circumcised and must follow Jewish customs in order to be real Christians. There are always people around who try to add something to the gospel. They say, "You need Jesus + alpha." Such people are putting their confidence in the flesh--in their own righteousness and good works rather than in Jesus.

What did Paul say about these people? Paul did not mince words. He called them "dogs" and "men who do evil." He called them "dogs" because they were not spiritual. They trusted the flesh. Dogs are not spiritual, either. They are only interested in eating and chasing cats and running after other dogs. He called them "men who do evil" because they were hindering the work of God for political purposes. They used circumcision as a political tool to attack Paul's leadership and to discredit Gentile Christians. Men whose inner motivation is political cannot be spiritual men. They are men of the flesh. Real

circumcision must be spiritual. Paul said in verse 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." Paul condemned those who put confidence in the flesh--in outward rituals, ceremonies, organizations, or their own good works. We are not saved by works. Those who trust in Jesus alone for salvation are God's true covenant people, and real circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Holy Spirit. According to Romans 2:29, our hearts are circumcised by the Holy Spirit when we repent of our sins and accept Jesus as our Savior.

Third, "whatever was to my profit I now consider loss" (4-6). Paul's value system changed. He had many things that were to his profit. Read verses 4-6. "...though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put 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; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless."

Paul was born into a wealthy and strict Jewish home in Tarsus of Cilicia. His parents were Roman citizens. He received the best possible education, for he was sent to Jerusalem, where he was trained as a Pharisee. He kept the law and expected others to do the same. When he was a young student in Jerusalem, he became convinced that the "sect of the Nazarene" was a cult. He devoted all his energy to uprooting and destroying the weak and struggling Christian church. He stood by watching and approving as Stephen was stoned. He entered believers' homes and dragged them off to prison. His zeal made him famous. He was young and ambitious and recognized as a scholar and a leader among his people. He could have gotten a Ph.D.; he could have risen to a position of power and honor in his nation.

Then one day, Paul left on a journey to Damascus in Syria. His purpose was to search out and arrest Christians. There, on the road to Damascus, he met the Risen Jesus. Jesus embraced this enemy of God with redeeming love and forgave all his dirty sins. He called him to be a missionary to the Gentile world. Paul's spiritual eyes were opened. He saw who Jesus really was and, for the first time, he saw himself as the worst of sinners. He realized that his righteousness was filthy rags. He accepted Jesus' unconditional love and the grace of forgiveness (Ac 9:1-6). His life was turned around 180°. He was changed from a zealous and angry murderer into an apostle of love. He accepted God's calling to be an apostle to the Gentiles, even though this meant breaking many of the rules he had once regarded as sacred. The things he once considered so valuable and precious, he gladly gave up. His value system changed.

Fourth, "that I may gain Christ" (7-8). Paul had no regrets. Read verse 7. "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ." Paul lost everything and he gained everything. Read verses 8-9.

Paul had wanted peace. He had wanted freedom from guilt. He had wanted to live a meaningful life. He worked hard to keep the law; he served God in his own way. He could discipline himself and superficially keep most of the laws of Judaism. But he knew that his heart was corrupt. He was full of pride and ambition and hatred and covetous desires. He had no peace. What good is it for a man to achieve worldly success if it brings him no peace, only deeper despair. He once wrote, "We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do...What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Ro 7:14-16,24) When he met Jesus, he could answer this question. "Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Ro 7:25). Jesus saved him from his "body of death." He later wrote: "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ro 5:1).

He not only found personal peace, but he found that the peace that Jesus gives is God's blessing to be shared with all people of the world. He wrote in 2 Co 5:19-20: "...God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."

When we see wars of revenge breaking out like a terrible disease all over the world, we are troubled. We hear words like "ethnic cleansing." We see pointless hatred spilling over to destroy the innocent and we know that revenge breeds more revenge. We feel frightened and helpless. What can we do in a world where people are driven by a spirit of revenge to hate and kill even helpless women and children? The answer is not in guns and soldiers and nuclear bombs. Only Jesus who changed the hate-filled murderer Saul into Paul, a man filled with the love of God, can change men's hearts. God has called us to share the gospel of peace and healing with the sinsick world. There is no other answer. We must go as missionaries and shepherds and Bible teachers, not send soldiers and guns.

Fifth, not having a righteousness of my own" (9). Verse 8b,9 say, "...that I may gain Christ 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." Paul had struggled to live as a righteous man by keeping the law. He was a Pharisee and he knew the law. But he found that his knowledge of the law and disciplined life as a Pharisee did not make him righteous--only proud. Paul tried to keep the law; he tried to serve God. Even though he seemed to succeed, he knew that his heart was corrupt. He was proud; he had no love for others. When he met Jesus, he also met himself. He wept over the corruption of his own heart. He knew that he was a sinner. He repented and received forgiveness through faith by God's grace. He was clothed in Jesus' righteousness and could begin to grow in Jesus' character. He had no grounds for pride. He said, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst..." (1Ti 1:15) He also said, "For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am...." (1Co 15:9,10)

Paul knew that having the law was a blessing, for he could diagnose his sin problem and struggle with sin. But we live in lawless times. Many people try to avoid struggle and find an easy way. They do not understand why their inner lives are so dead and meaningless, and why they become slaves of all kinds of sinful habits that make them miserable. Secular humanists tell us that people are miserable because religion has given them a guilt complex. This is a lie. It shows their lack of understanding of our human problem. Our sinful human nature is the problem. Slavery to sin is the problem. Sin is a cruel taskmaster. Everyone needs Jesus because everyone is a sinner. Our own righteousness can't save us--even if it comes from good laws and good intentions; only the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ can bring forgiveness of sin and peace.

Sixth, "I want to know Christ" (10-11). Read verse 10-11. "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, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead." Being a Christian is having a personal relationship with Jesus. Paul describes this as union with Christ. Paul wanted to be united with Jesus in his death, united with him in his resurrection. It is from this union with Christ that life and love and transforming power flow. Paul loved Jesus. He knew that Jesus loved him even when he had lived as an enemy of God (Ro 5:8). He was a man in Christ. But he wanted to know Christ better; he wanted to grow in his knowledge and love of Christ. So Paul wanted to share in the fellowship of his sufferings, and become like him in his death. These days, an easy-going, pleasure-seeking, suffering-free life style is the

goal of many people. "Suffering" is not a good word. But people suffer for their sins anyway. How much better it is to suffer for Jesus and for others than to suffer because of our sins.

How can we share in Jesus' sufferings and come to know him? First, through repenting of our sins. Jesus suffered and died on the cross for the sins of the world. We can share in his suffering on the cross when we nail our own passion and pride to the cross. When we repent and accept his love, and his death for our sins, we receive his grace and share in his suffering.

Second, we also share in his sufferings when we accept his mission. He said, "Feed my sheep" (Jn 21), and "Love one another" (Jn 13), and "Preach the gospel to the whole world" (Mk 16). Jesus once wept over Jerusalem. God was grieved and his heart was full of pain when he saw that the thoughts and imaginations of people's hearts was only evil (Ge 6:5). When we pray for others and seek to give the gospel with those who need Jesus, we can begin to know the fellowship of sharing in Jesus' sufferings. When we experience rejection or misunderstanding or persecution, we can share in Jesus' suffering just a little.

But Paul didn't seek suffering just to suffer. Paul wanted to know the power of the resurrection in his life and ministry, and then someday, when his work in this world was finished, he wanted to attain to the resurrection from the dead. He had a glorious hope in the kingdom of God. The resurrection of Christ meant victory over sin and death. It is the source of the believer's hope, and the focal point of our faith (Ro 10:9,10).

2. I press on (12-16)

Read verses 12-14. To Paul, Christian life was like a marathon race. It was not over until it was finished. Just before his death he wrote Timothy, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me a crown of righteousness..." (2Ti 4:7,8) What can we learn from him about how to run the race and win?

First, have a basic attitude (13,14). "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize" (13,14). Paul did not rest on past achievements. He did not compare himself with others; his standard and goal was Jesus. He must continue to die daily and continue to let Jesus rule in him. Some people think that Christians shouldn't struggle. These people must take another look at Paul. The life of struggle was a sign that he was alive and growing; he was not a dead fish floating downstream in the world.

Second, have a destination--"God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (14). We must press on toward the goal. It is important that we not lose sight of the goal or get side-tracked. We must keep our eyes on Jesus, and have the hope of heaven in our hearts.

Third, live up to what you have attained (15,16). Read verses 15-16. "All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained." The mature Christian is not one who is ready to retire from the race and take it easy. He is one who knows that he must keep running and growing. If we don't go forward, we go backward, so we must live up to what we have attained.

3. An example to follow (17-21)

Read verse 17. "Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you." Paul set an example of how a Christian should live. This means that there is a Christian lifestyle, a pattern to follow in the Christian life. Christians must love the cross of Jesus. Those whose motto is "find the easy way," or "take the short-cut," or "Avoid suffering," or "if it feels good, do it," are enemies of the cross. The real reason why a person becomes a secular humanist is that he hates the cross of Jesus. Paul says, "For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things." Paul did not leave much room for a middle way of easy-going Christianity. Our citizenship is either in heaven or in hell. There is no dual citizenship when it comes to the spiritual realm. Those whose home is in heaven eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ (20). He is the one who is working in us as we press on in the life of faith. "(Jesus Christ)...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." Therefore, we must stand firm in the Lord.

In this chapter, we learn that as Christians we must love the cross of Jesus and live as citizens of the kingdom of heaven. When we know God's grace and have a heart's desire to know Jesus--to share in the fellowship of his sufferings and in the power and glory of his resurrection, we can press on and finish the race and win the crown of life.