

“Knowing Christ” – by Jeff McClain

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Phil 3:1-11

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Boone UMC

Jer 31:31 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 32 It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. 33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

This is the word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God!**

We're in the midst of a series in the book of Philippians (not to be confused with the Philippines, as the typo on your bulletin cover says). The title of our series is "Arriving" and it's about how following Jesus is a process of continually learning and growing in the Christian faith. Last week Jason preached about working out our salvation. We're saved by grace alone through faith, no question about that. But God's free gift of salvation compels us to respond with lives of service, and that's something to work at.

Today as we move into Philippians 3, Paul talks about confidence. He warns us: don't be confident in who you are, be confident in who you are in Christ. And throw yourself into knowing him completely. Hear this word.

Phil 3

1 Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard. 2 Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! 3 For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh— 4 even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. 7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

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With the Olympics kicking off a couple days ago, I got to thinking back to when I used to be an athlete. When I was in grade school, one the highlights of my year was the annual track meet. I was fairly athletic, and I went to a small school, so I was always registered for a few different events. One year, just days before the meet, one of my classmates got hurt and couldn't run the 440, so my teacher asked if I could run it for him. 440 – that's one time around the track, right? No problem, I said, supremely

confident I could finish in the top three despite the fact that I'd never actually completed an entire lap around the track. It's just one lap, how hard could it be? I don't even need to practice for this.

By the time the 440 came around I'd already collected medals for the dash and the long jump. I was ready for one more. When the gun went off I shot out like a cannon ball, leaving all the other runners in the dust for the first half a lap. Unfortunately, the race required another half lap, and in that last stretch I was passed by every single one of the other runners. I finished dead last, and it wasn't even close. In less than two minutes I went from thinking I'd arrived to realizing I was lucky to even finish at all.

In our scripture today Paul warns the Philippians to beware of those who think they've arrived. The warnings are a bit cryptic and ironic. Verse 2:¹ Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh. Every time I hear "beware of the dog" I flash back to when I was a 10 year old paperboy being chased off the porch by a 150 pound German Shepherd named Spike. Not exactly what Paul had in mind, though.

Rather, "dog" was a derogatory term that certain Jews used for Gentiles back in Jesus' day. It was an ethnic slur for people who weren't among God's chosen ones, the Israelites. But in this case, Paul was turning it around and using it on Jews themselves. In the early church there was a group of Jewish-Christians who were demanding that Gentiles fully adopt Jewish cultural identity and follow all the Mosaic laws in order to be fully Christian and thus fully accepted as God's chosen people.

Paul says they're wrong – watch out for them. They think they've arrived just because of who they are and what they do. They're Jews who are following Jesus but also clinging to their ethnic heritage and thinking that is the way to salvation. By telling Gentile Christians they need to follow Jewish law – dietary customs, cleanliness rituals, sacrifices, etc – they're actually doing evil works. By commanding that Gentile Christians be circumcised, they're actually flesh mutilators.

Circumcision was a sign of God's covenant with Israel, a sign that Jews belonged to God. But Christ brought a new covenant, a new relationship between God and humanity. Now baptism is the new circumcision, where God through the Holy Spirit writes his law on our hearts and we know him intimately. In this new covenant, there are no restrictions about who gets to be God's chosen people. All are welcome regardless of ethnic heritage. And inclusion is not about following laws, it's about accepting God's free gift of salvation in Christ.

But Paul's opponents are preaching a different gospel. Beware of the dogs, evil workers, and flesh mutilators, Paul says. Beware of those who think they've arrived because of who they are and what they've done. He goes on to say if anyone had reason to be confident in the flesh, it'd be him. By "confident in the flesh" Paul means being sure of his situation in life or his standing with God. If anyone should be confident it'd be Paul. Listen to how he describes his resume:

Circumcised? Yeah, on the 8th day, just like we were supposed to be. Israelite? Yup, one of God's chosen, from the tribe of Benjamin no less – a small but significant tribe. Born of Hebrew parents – pure heritage for me. You wanna talk about the law? I was a Pharisee! That was a badge of honor among Jews. Pharisees were meticulous and earnest about following God's law to the letter. Zealous? Oh yeah. When I thought impure doctrine was trying to penetrate Judaism, I persecuted those Christians! I

¹ On screen please

had a heart for protecting God's law and keeping God's people pure. So, given all that, was I righteous under the law? Absolutely. Blameless, in fact.

Paul is not bragging. He's setting up his point. He's showing that his resume, by the old way of doing things, the culturally accepted Jewish way, was impeccable. It was perfect. According to everything he'd been taught, Paul had every reason to be confident in his standing with God. Paul wasn't just arriving, he'd arrived!

And then he met Jesus. And Paul realized that his confidence in himself was completely misplaced.

Verse 7² Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ...

All those credentials Paul mentioned earlier about how qualified he was to be in good standing with God, all of them meaningless, as the writer of Ecclesiastes might say. My richest gain I count but loss, as the hymn says. Paul says he considers everything rubbish compared to knowing Jesus.

The word translated "rubbish" in Greek is skubala – say that with me – skubala. Kind of fun to say, isn't it? Well, that's about as close as some of you will ever come to swearing in church! Unfair, I know, I coerced you into saying it, sorry. Listen to what that word means: unspeakable filth, as in (1) "dung," "muck," both as excrement and as food gone bad; (2) "scraps," i.e., "what is left after a meal"; or (3) "refuse," "trash". It is also used to describe a pitiful and horrible thing, like a half-eaten corpse, or "filth," such as lumps of manure.³

Paul considers all his prior human accomplishments and qualifications as skubala, lumps of manure, compared to knowing Christ. The righteousness he thought he had attained on his own by meticulously following the law? Unspeakable filth compared to the righteousness he inherited through faith in Christ. Nothing of our own doing makes us righteous. Not our heritage, our offerings, our good works, our status, our bank account or anything else. We're God's people, saved by grace alone through faith.

Paul talks about gaining Christ and being found in him. It's clear from the Greek that this is an ongoing process, not just a one-time thing. There's a sense of a future, a sense that Paul has both gained Christ and is yet to gain Christ. As one scholar puts it, the road from self to Christ is a long one.⁴ Our salvation is accomplished, but we continue to work it out until Jesus returns. We're in a process of arriving.

I wonder if there are any accolades or accomplishments that you need to let go of today in order to gain Christ more fully. Have you been relying on your own efforts to please God? Skubala, Paul says, compared to knowing Christ. There's nothing you can do to make God love you any more. And there's nothing you can do to make God love you any less either. God loves you because he's a gracious and compassionate God who knit you together in your mother's womb. God loves you because you're his child. It's not about what you've done. It's about everything that God has done. And here's how we should respond to God's mercy and grace:

² On screen please Phil 3:7-8

³ Word Biblical Commentary, vol 43: Philippians.

⁴ WBC, vol 43.

Verse 10 is the pinnacle of Paul's letter, and it's the focus of this series on Arriving. Here's what Paul says matters more than anything else in the world.⁵

10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.

At least half of that verse sounds pretty good – I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. Yes! Amen! Sign me up for that! We'll talk about the second half of that verse in a minute. The way Paul talks about knowing Christ here gets lost a little in the English translation. It's more than head knowledge about who Jesus is. Paul knew about who Jesus was back when he was persecuting the church. Paul is talking about an experiential knowledge, a personal and intimate encounter with the risen Lord Jesus – the kind Paul had when he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. That encounter transformed Paul from church persecutor to church planter, from self-reliant and self-righteous to completely dependent and confident in Christ alone. When Paul says he wants to know Christ, that's the kind of knowledge he's talking about.

All of us have parts of our lives that cry out to encounter Jesus like Paul did. The dark and wounded parts of our bodies and souls that desperately need to experience the healing, transforming, life-giving, resurrection power of Jesus. And the good news is, that's ours through faith in Christ. Free gift. No credentials required. No special heritage necessary. No long list of laws to obey. Just faith in Jesus and we inherit the transformative power of his resurrection. Thanks be to God!

But what about the second half of that verse?⁶ It's one thing to want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. But Paul also says he wants to know the sharing in his sufferings by becoming like Jesus in his death. That one's a little harder to amen, isn't it? Why would anyone want to share in suffering?

Because that's exactly what Jesus did for us.

We read earlier about how Paul thought he had righteous credentials. Jesus had them for real! Christ **IS** righteousness, and he had heavenly credentials. Yet he didn't hold on to them. Instead, he gave up his power, his rightful place of authority, his seat at the right hand of God. Christ left the glory of heaven to become human and enter fully into all our brokenness and suffering. He did so to redeem it and make something beautiful out of all the mess. And he asks us to be willing to do the same. He asks us to forgo whatever status we have in this world, whatever power, whatever privilege, whatever advantages in life we have. All of those things are rubbish, skubala, compared to the joy of identifying with Christ so strongly that we're willing to suffer on his behalf so that his name may be glorified.

As followers of Jesus, we can't know Christ without suffering. Let me say that again – we can't truly know Christ without suffering. We can't experience the power of resurrection without first knowing the agony of the cross. We can't get to Easter Sunday without first going through Good Friday. Even if we're not experiencing suffering in our own lives, we're still called to enter into the suffering of the world for the sake of the gospel. That's what Jesus did, and if we're to follow him we must do the same.

So how do we go about entering into suffering? That's a bit of a daunting task, isn't it? There's suffering all around us. Where do we even start? We enter suffering the same way Jesus did – by forming

⁵ On screen please

⁶ On screen again please Phil 3:10

personal relationships. We offer ourselves in friendship to those who are hurting. We offer the gift of our presence. And we rely on Jesus being present with us as we're there with others.

The gift of presence is one of the first things we teach our Stephen Ministers. Stephen Ministers are trained lay people who have been equipped to care for people in difficult life situations. We teach them not to worry about what to say or what to do, just be there. Be there, be dependable, be present week in and week out. Your presence, grounded in Christ's presence, is the most tangible response we can give to the suffering of this world.

When I was 18 years old one of my best friends lost his dad to a heart attack at age 50. I had no idea how to respond. Neither did he, of course. I ended up going over to his house and we just sat and did what we'd always done together. We played video games. I didn't say anything about his dad, other than *I'm sorry, buddy*. But we played video games all weekend and that was one way for him to cope, to get through an otherwise unbearable situation. Sometimes our presence is the best gift we can offer.

If you'd like to know more about how to be present with people in suffering, our Stephen Ministry team would like to invite you to join us in a book study we'll be doing in March and April. The book is called "Don't Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart." It's written by the founder of Stephen Ministry, who lost his wife to cancer. It's a reflection on how we all have a tendency to rush to say things we think will be comforting to people when in reality those things can actually end up doing more harm than good. We'd do better to offer our presence with them in their suffering. I'm really looking forward to this study and I hope you'll consider joining us. Talk to me after the service or sign up at the table in the back.

Paul says I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death. Knowing Christ is experiencing Christ. Seek to experience Christ not only in his glory but also in his suffering. Experiencing Christ cost Paul everything he had. Ultimately, it cost him his life. But that's what it means to be a Christian – dying to self and living in Christ. It's a process of arriving, becoming more and more like Jesus who gave up everything so that we might truly live. May you know Christ more and more each day. Amen.