

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

—Philippians 3:7, NRSV

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

—Philippians 3:10–11, NRSV

LEARNING GOALS

1. To understand that what the world seeks in being right before God is given and not earned.
2. To understand that living the life of Christ may also include suffering just as he suffered
3. To understand that the mission of God for the people of God is to live and tell the story of God.

REFLECTION

Before dealing with chapter three, one must comment on the *problem* of verse one. “Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is not troublesome for me, and for you it is a safeguard.” The second half of the verse seems disconnected from the first half. Some scholars suggest that it is because the first half is really the end of the original letter, and the second half of is at least a part of another letter penned to the church at Philippi. They suggest that the two letters, at some point became one document. They say that the word “finally” is a benediction, and he asks them to rejoice in the Lord, thus ending the letter. They also state, and rightly so, that chapter three is much different in tone from the first two chapters. The first two chapters are very joyful. Chapter three is not so much (for example, the three

“beware” of verse 2). The second half of verse one also states that he is reminding them of something that is not a subject of the first two chapters.

Those that claim that chapter three is a part of the original letter and that it fits with the previous two chapters contend that it is not uncommon for Paul to deal with more than one subject in a given letter (cf. Romans, I Corinthians). They also observe that while dealing with different subjects in a letter, it is not unusual for Paul to include a benedictory statement at the end of a section. Furthermore, they suggest that the reminder could have referred to something he communicated to the church when he was with them or through other means, such as a previous letter.

Fred Craddock makes a good point:

The question as to whether 3:1b begins a separate letter (Beare) or is an afterthought (Barth) is here being left open. Were a firm decision in the matter crucial to the interpretation of the passage, such openness would be inexcusable; but it is not. Of course, we would like to know if 3:1a ended a letter. ... Of course we would like to know whether Paul's repeating himself (3:1b) is a reference to a letter now lost or to teaching delivered to them orally when he was with them. ... All we can say is that the Philippians had access to discussions unavailable to us; therefore repetition to them is entirely new to us. After all, the letter was written to them, not to us. (Craddock, 54)

Beware (3:2–3)

Beginning with 3:2, we have what appears to be something fairly simple and straightforward. We have heard all of this before in other places. He has talked about the Judaizers who want to make circumcision a “test of faith” in Romans. He has made mention of his personal history as a Jew in other places, even in this letter. So it is easy to skim over this section. It is, however, far from simple. It would be easy to see in this section simply three different topics (Judaizers, personal history, and libertines). Yet it appears that there is only one topic of interest to Paul. The church in Philippi needs to understand the nature of their true mission by seeing it exemplified in Paul's own story. He says that there are those out there who advocate “Christ plus.” In other words,

there is something we must do in order to attain the righteousness of God. He goes on to say that if anyone could claim "rightness" before God, it would be him. Yet, after his encounter with Jesus, he had come to see that those things that are important to him are in reality nothing at all. Using financial terminology, he argues that those things we use to "gain" God's favor are really insignificant in comparison to what happened in Jesus. (*Reflect on this question: What does it mean to be right with God?*)

The Righteousness of God (3:4–9)

Paul says in verse 8 that he "lost" all things in order to "gain" one thing: *becoming right with God*. More importantly, his new relationship with God was not something he inherited or accomplished. The faith (and faithfulness) of Jesus Christ accomplished this relationship for him (Romans 1:16–4:25). God made right what was wrong because of Jesus' faith. It is not earned. It is a gift. Our response is to accept the gift given. Whether we accept the gift or not changes nothing in what God did and still does through his mercy.

God's gift of, in and through Jesus has many implications.

First, any attempts at self righteousness are invalid. For example, if a person tries to convince oneself or others that their position on any subject is the right one and assume, therefore, they are more right with God, then they deny what Jesus did. In a recent controversy at Glenwood, all sides thought they were right. Some promoted change while others defended longstanding beliefs and practices. A person's standing before God was not affected by the side chosen. Righteousness before God had already been established. During the congregational study, a guest speaker noted that this "is not a salvation issue." No one is more righteous than another, no matter the "issue," because God made us righteous in Jesus Christ. Our righteousness is not something we accomplish; it is Jesus' accomplishment on our behalf.

Second, we do not have to prove our worth to God. Wherever we are on the social spectrum, our worth is not determined by who we are, how we live, or with whom we associate. It is not a matter of "in vs out." With God all are "in" whether we like it or not. What gives us worth is the forgiving love and mercy of God. It is immensely

freeing to know that who I am, however I may define myself, makes no difference because God is no respecter of persons, and he loves us without the distinctions that we often make.

Third, God's gift of, in and through Jesus builds community because it breaks down all the barriers that the world erects. Rather than being an exclusive bunch, the church welcomes all, just as God in Christ welcomed each of us. We do not pass judgment on another's path. We accept the truth that they are on a path to God however different that path may appear to us.

Fourth, because God is in the business of making things right, Christ-followers are in the same business. Our mission is to receive and to bear witness to God's mission in the world. We work for justice. We work to bring about peace among all. We do not accept the way things have always been. We participate in the making-things-right mission of God with the recognition that whatever we do will not be perfect—but God will perfect it in the end.

Knowing Christ (3:10–14)

Paul wrote earlier that he regarded "everything" as loss for the sake of knowing Christ (v. 8). Now, he seems to indicate that knowing Christ is to identify with the Christ Hymn of chapter two. We like the first part of verse 10 where he wants to know the power of his resurrection. Yet we like to skip immediately to verse 11 because he suggests that knowing Christ also includes suffering with him. We do not like suffering. As Fred Craddock has said, Easter would not be Easter without Good Friday. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian who died under Adolph Hitler for resisting Naziism, wrote powerfully on this subject. Discipleship is costly. Grace is not cheap. Death precedes resurrection.

While Paul frames suffering in light of the resurrection, he does not shy away from it. He suggests that to be like Christ is to embrace the whole life of Christ, including the painful aspects of it. Michael J. Gorman uses the word "cruciformity" to describe the "concept commonly believed to be central to Paul's theology and ethics: conformity to the crucified Christ" (Gorman, 4). We are living the Good Friday part and waiting for

the Easter part. To live a life that strives to “know Christ” and the “power of his resurrection” involves living a life sharing in all aspects of his life and death. To live like Christ means to live as he did with all that comes with it.

To live as Christ, embracing all that this signifies, has many implications. The main implication is that it radically changes how the individual Christian and the church relates to the world. We are not a club that meets occasionally. In his classic book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer insisted that “cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our church” (Bonhoeffer, 45). Cheap grace, he explained, is the “preaching of forgiveness without repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession ... without discipleship, without the cross, without Jesus Christ, living incarnate” (Bonhoeffer, 47). So the question is how to live a life of “cruciformity.” Gorman suggests that it requires the renunciation of any basis for justification other than the gift of Jesus on the cross. It is being free from anything, any power about which one may boast apart from Christ. It involves a “narrative posture of faithful obedience and trust before God, actively promotes a restored covenant relationship with God, and like Jesus’ faithfulness, it can be costly”(p. 153). It does not seek suffering but instead identifies with those who suffer; it rejects any power that is oppressive; it rejects violence rather than endorsing it; and it is self-giving. Gorman quotes Luke Timothy Johnson: “nowhere in the New Testament [do we find] an understanding of Christian discipleship compatible with a life devoted to one’s own success, pleasure, comfort, freedom from suffering, or power at the expense of others. ... The basic pattern of faithful obedience to God and loving service to others is the image of Christ that replicates in the freedom of those who belong to Christ” (Gorman, 379). It breaks down walls instead of erecting them: walls of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. It declares that our worth comes not from society but from the loving mercy of God. In other words, without the cross, there is no gospel to preach. When we preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and in the power of his Spirit break down walls of enmity, hatred, and injustice, the world may not like it. It did not like it when Jesus and the early church did these things, and it probably will not like it when today’s church joins Christ in the same mission for our contemporary context.

The cruciform life looks for ways to embody the story of the cross. It challenges every practice and norm that is not aligned with this story, even though it will likely be

unpopular. It pursues community because it can not be lived in isolation, and it lives to tell the story of Jesus in word and action. It is in that sense that Paul asks the Philippian church to “imitate me” (v. 17). It is then that we experience Easter, the resurrection of life in Christ. By becoming like him we have the assured hope of the resurrection that we seek.

Paul suggests that it is like a long, life-time race. We run every minute of every day until the finish line. There may be alternate paths and detours, but we keep our eyes focused. Like the advertisement on the mentally challenged Special Olympics racers, we may have to stop, go back, and help a fellow racer who has fallen. But we keep on running. What we do not do is stop and get comfortable. Any time we get comfortable, we have been in that place too long. In a recent survey at Glenwood, one of the questions asked how “comfortable” we would be if changes were made in our traditional worship practices on Sunday morning. Comfort is not our goal. Our goal—both individually and collectively—is to honor Christ. It is to honor his life by seeking to live it faithfully.

Being Mature (3:15–16)

Paul asks that the church be “mature in Christ” much the same way he asked them to be of the same mind (2:5). He is asking that when there are differences, they are still to be unified and to let God do the work of revelation. Difficult choices have been made at Glenwood in recent times. Choices to make changes or not; to stay or go. These choices were made out of an attempt to honor Christ. In all of this, we need to understand that unity is more important than uniformity. What we do is to accept that there are differences and not allow them to be divisive. Those differences may even be enriching. We must not allow these sorts of issues to take our eyes off the race before us so that we can “hold fast to what we have attained” (v. 16).

Waiting Expectantly (3:17–4:1)

Paul starts this section with warning about those who want to run the race in their own way and to do so without sweating. Paul says not to worry too much about them. Our focus is elsewhere. Our focus is on looking forward to our Savior’s return to make all

things like he wants them (v. 21), while doing his work until he does return. Now all we do is run. We do not try to get ahead of him, but instead follow. We wait for him while standing firm. It is not easy to wait; we are often very impatient people. We have seen generations and millennia come and go while waiting. However, it is hope, centered in Christ, that through him all things will be reconciled and creation will be as God always intended it to be.

LESSON PLAN

1. Engage

- a. Fred Craddock tells a story about a church that had Easter lilies at the front of the church every Easter service. One member became incensed when she discovered that they were plastic. She spoke to the leaders about it. Their explanation was that they, being plastic, are like the resurrection and thus always “alive”—they won’t wilt, turn brown, and die. Her response was that they can never be like the resurrection *because they never die*. Likewise, Craddock explains that there can be no Easter without Good Friday.
- b. Why is it important to keep the two together?

2. Involve

- a. What does Paul mean when he writes that he wants to “know Christ”?
- b. How does knowing Christ change things?
- c. If God’s mission in the world is to make things right (which is the meaning of justification and righteousness), and our purpose is to participate in what God is doing, how does that make us different from the world?
- d. Michael Gorman says that Paul wants the church to be a “cruciformed narrative.” What do you think he means by this?
- e. How does your story change if it involves suffering?

3. Challenge

- a. Brainstorm about ways in which we can bring about justice—to participate with God in making things right—in our community.

- b. What are some ways in which we can minister to the creation of which we were made stewards?
- c. Think of some of the social distinctions in Tyler and how we can help to break them down.
- d. Pray daily that we become more and more conformed to the Christ who showed us how to live.

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