

“Do I Know Jesus?”
 Philippians 3:1-14
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There are few things in life more consistently humbling than preaching or teaching the Bible.

It's true there is great joy in proclaiming the love of God but there is a constant conviction of personal shortcoming in proclaiming the high calling of God on our lives to be like Christ.

Preachers and teachers get to stand before people and say what God calls us to be, knowing full well that we fall as short of the ideal as any others.

It's self-incriminating to tell your kid not to smoke with a cigarette dangling from your lips or to tell him to share when you've just bullied him in some way.

And public self-incrimination is not enjoyable.

I didn't tell you that so you'd take pity on me, though I wouldn't mind. I tell you that because I want to admit that I am out of my league in the text before us today.

What is it in the text that makes me admit such insecurity?

It is the Apostle Paul's statement of what he lives for.

- Earlier in the letter to the Philippians he said it this way: Philippians 1:21 “For me, to live, is Christ...”
- In the part of the letter we think about today, he says it this way, Philippians 3:10-11 “I want to know Christ; the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings...”

For Paul, everything in his life revolved around his relationship with Jesus Christ.

He “ate, breathed and slept” that relationship!

Early in a young man's career, a wise friend said to him, “You're a very ambitious young man! I only pray that you will be ambitious for something that's worth achieving.” (Ogilvie, Let God Love You, 105)

What's the ultimate ambition of a human being?

There are many lesser ambitions (power, wealth, fame), some of which you have to sell your soul to the devil to achieve.

But what is the highest achievement of a human being?

- Jesus said it this way: John 17:3 “Now this is eternal life (that is, the highest quality of life): that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”
- In our text for today Paul says it this way, “I want to know Christ”.

Paul is not saying he wants to **become** a Christian; he already **is** a Christian.

He is speaking of something beyond converting to the Christian faith, beyond having sins forgiven, and beyond doing the right things as a Christian; he’s speaking of a relationship with Jesus around which revolves every other part of life.

For most of us there are several times in life when we ask the big questions:

- What is life all about?
- What are we here for?
- What are we really trying to accomplish?
- What is all our effort and worry really achieving?

I know it has been cited many times in the last 13 years, but the words of Billy Crystal in one of his movies capture both how quickly life passes and implicitly the angst we experience in the midst of it.

The movie character Mitch is talking to a group of children but he is really reflecting his own anxiety about life’s purpose when he says so humorously:

“Life goes by so quickly:

- When you're a teenager you think you can do anything, and you do.
- Your twenties are a blur.
- Your thirties, you raise your family, you make a little money and you think to yourself, "What happened to my twenties?"

- Your forties, you grow a little potbelly and another chin.
The music starts to get too loud and one of your old girlfriends from high school becomes a grandmother.
- Your fifties you have minor surgery. You'll call it a procedure, but it's surgery.
- Your sixties you have major surgery, the music is still loud but it doesn't matter because you can't hear it anyway.
- In your seventies, you and the wife retire to Fort Lauderdale, you start eating dinner at two, lunch around ten, breakfast the night before.
- By your eighties, you've had a major stroke, and you end up babbling to some Jamaican nurse whom your wife can't stand but who you call mama. Any questions? (From the 1991 movie, "City Slickers")

It does seem that each stage of life brings new challenges and renews the question – What is life all about?

In our college years there's a combination of anticipation and anxiety.

Somewhere in our 30s after the "highs" of graduations, new careers, marriage, and childbirth, life begins to be routine – when the constant demands of kids, jobs, house, civic and church responsibilities keep us perpetually busy if not also tired.

Certainly in the middle-adult years of the 40s and 50s the early advances in career and rise in income evolve into the reality of limitations; when our job and income plateau, when the "empty nest" looms, and when the cracks in the marriage become more obvious and troublesome.

We look around and wonder is this it; is this all there is for the rest of our lives.

It happens again when we anticipate the great changes in life we often associate with retirement.

Our visions of leisure and travel get interrupted by illness, trouble with our kids, and a gnawing sense of aimlessness.

And certainly later if not sooner we face the inevitable thoughts of death – of others we care about, and ourselves.

And the questions comes, "Was that it? Was that life?"

Is there any overarching purpose greater than the immediate opportunities and demands of each of those periods of life?

Is there anything that supersedes the peaks and valleys of each stage?

The American way has been acquisition!

We keep ourselves busy acquiring money or position or hobbies.

But the new car smell is gone so quickly and we look for the next acquisition.

And sooner or later we wonder, "Is this all there is?"

The writer of Ecclesiastes knew something of the emptiness of acquisition when he wrote, 2:21 "For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it" and it all becomes pointless.

Now with all of that mind, listen again to Paul:

Philippians 3:1-14

"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. Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. 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--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. But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, 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. 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. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

The situation in the church in Philippi that caused Paul to respond with these words is implied in the words themselves.

Apparently there were in the church, then as now, people, even Christian people, who taught that grace wasn't enough.

If you are going to be a real Christian then you must do certain things.

In that day it was Jewish Christians who tried to convince Gentile believers that in order to be true Christian the Gentiles had to observe the OT Jewish customs – in other words they had to become proselytes to a kind of Jewish Christianity.

The one OT Law most often required was that all Christian men be circumcised.

It was not that Paul now considered circumcision wrong but that when something else was required in order to become a true Christian, that something else (be it circumcision or baptism or church membership or giving money or not drinking alcohol or whatever) that something else contradicts grace.

And so Paul makes the point again: Either our relationship with God is all of grace or it is not grace at all.

Paul used very strong, even earthy, language to describe his disdain for those who would even suggest that salvation is by any additional means than God's unconditional grace.

Paul goes on to say that **if** being a true Christian were because of anything in addition to grace then he would be the truest Christian.

If they want a contest about who really is a Christian based on how well one lives up to the OT requirements, then Paul wins hands down.

Philippians 3:4-6 “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 says he could boast of family (he is a circumcised Benjamite of Israel), orthodoxy (he was a leading Pharisee), activity (he actively fought against Christians) and morality (he kept the law perfectly, outwardly). (Rees, The Adequate Man, 68)

But, in verses 8 and 9 Paul says, “I consider them rubbish, 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.”

He says, I had it all and I did it all but those things are in no way the basis of my relationship with God.

I didn't earn a relationship with God; I received it by grace through faith.

I had tried being good enough for God and it failed me.

Instead I accepted Jesus' goodness for me.

And so Paul trumpets the message he carries everywhere:

Salvation, a right relationship with God, is by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus alone.

As basic and important as that message is, Paul goes beyond that message in what he writes here.

Again as in other places, he describes what that right relationship with God looks like.

And it is this that brings us back to where we began; what is life about anyway.

What is the ultimate ambition of a human being?

Do you remember the quote from earlier: “You're a very ambitious young man! I only pray that you will be ambitious for something that's worth achieving.”

Paul described his proud heritage and accomplishments and then he summed up what he had learned about the essence of life this way:

Philippians 3:8-11 “I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him... I want to know Christ; 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.”

How does Paul describe the great ambition of life?

- “Knowing Christ Jesus my Lord”
- “That I may gain Christ and be found in him”
- “I want to know Christ”

Again I remind you that Paul is not saying he wants to **become** a Christian; He already **is** a Christian.

He is describing the goal of his life; what he lives for.

In fact, in the verses that immediately follow, he describes the energy he puts into that ambition:

Philippians 3:12-14 “I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me... I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

For Paul Christianity is not just about salvation and ethics, not just about getting saved and doing the right things, but is about a personal relationship with Jesus.

It is intensely personal (not private, but personal).

I can correctly say that I have a relationship with the President of the United States **and** I have a relationship with my wife, but only one of those is personal.

It is that and more that Paul is describing in his relationship with Jesus and that he says is the essence of real life, life worth living.

Do you remember being “in love” the first time?

Such love is not usually mature but it is uncluttered so that we can more easily recall **how all of life revolved around the one we loved.**

Paul is not suggesting a simplistic relationship but it is a focused one.

The Psalmist wrote in Psalm 27:4

“One thing I ask of the LORD,
this is what I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to seek him in his temple.”

Is that my highest goal in life?

Does all else revolve around my relationship with Jesus?

Thinking of the Psalmist’s words, I sometimes wonder, “Will there be a lot of bored people in heaven?”

We spent our lives chasing other objectives most of all and when we get to heaven we won’t know what to do.

Think of sitting with Jesus just to be with him; we wouldn’t know what to do or say because we had no practice.

One man wrote, “For many of us Christ is added (to our busy lives) as a side loyalty. We want Christ to help us achieve our (self-) determined goals. He becomes a very necessary ingredient in success. We (want) him for strength, guidance and daily peace.” But do we want **him**? (Ogilvie, 106)

Paul says he wants to know Christ. Do I? Do you?

What does it mean to “know” Jesus?

Many have made the distinction between knowing “about” Jesus and actually knowing him.

“Knowing” him obviously includes knowing “about” him, but goes much further.

I know about President Bush but I know my wife.

So what does it mean to know Jesus?

I think Paul tells us.

Philippians 3:10 “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings...”

In other words, by **experiencing** the power of his resurrection and **sharing** in his sufferings we know Jesus himself better.

First of all, everything we know about and experience of Jesus as God is predicated (based) on the fact of his resurrection.

1. The historical documents called the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John give believable evidence for the actual physical resurrection of Jesus.
2. In turn, the resurrection of Jesus gives credibility to his claim that he is God and that the Scriptures are the Word of God.
3. And in the Scriptures I learn that Jesus is the creator of the universe.
4. I learn that everything that exists is not the product of chance and time but is the product of a loving Jesus who desires a relationship with us.

I experience that Jesus in all that he has created and all that I enjoy day after day.

Some people experience difficulties and ask “Why?”

Should we not equally ask “Why?” when we experience beauty and love and pleasure?

- Why do I have the enjoyment of friends and new experiences, the thrill of seeing a majestic mountain range or the awe at seeing the beauty of a flower unfolding?
- Why do I get to experience the marvel of a baby being born or of another human being looking into my eyes and saying, “I love you?”
- Why do I enjoy more health than sickness, more pleasure than pain?

Because of a benevolent Creator Jesus who loves me!

In the power of his resurrection I both learn more about him and I experience him.

Earl Palmer wrote, “A personal relationship with Jesus Christ means that our existence, and the universe itself, rests, not on impersonal laws or on inexorable principles, but on a person. The gospel does not say merely that in the final analysis the universe is friendly toward us; it says that the God of the universe loves us... Our trust is not in theological principles, which all too often fail us when we are in real trouble, or in an intellectually coherent Christian worldview, which can prove to be very brittle when the going gets tough. We trust in the One who upholds us even when we are too worried or depressed or excited to trust him. The ultimate foundation of our existence is personal.” (Earl Palmer, Integrity in a World of Pretense, 132)

And by his resurrection power Jesus reached into my life and brought me back to himself.

- I have experienced his forgiveness.
- He has promised that he will love me forever and I believe him.
- He has given me his Holy Spirit who bears witness with my spirit that I belong to God.

He answers my prayers.

I grant you that I could explain such answers as “coincidence.”
But the specificity of the prayers and their answers is so particular that “coincidence” is harder to believe than God’s loving intervention.

I experience Jesus in the lives of others.

Week after week I have the privilege of being in this place with otherwise sane, normal, believable men and women like you who give testimony to the same presence and power of Jesus in your lives.

Sure we struggle with doubts but we still see evidence all around us.

I know Jesus like I know anyone else – by hearing about him, by being with him and by observing his actions in the world in others and in me – by my own experience with him.

But Paul also says we know Jesus by sharing in his sufferings.

Philippians 3:10-11 “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings...”

Oh, this gets more difficult – it’s where I am truly out of my league.
But let me share some observations.

To know Christ by sharing in his sufferings is very different than speaking of the Muslim who is promised Paradise and 70 perpetual virgins if he will blow himself up in Jihad.

Paul doesn’t claim that we know Christ in martyrdom but in suffering.

“Sharing in his sufferings” must mean that we suffer like he did for some of the same reasons he did.

Most of the time we think of suffering for Jesus as being about persecution – as Jesus suffered persecution so we will.

And that is true but it is more than that.

I think the book of Hebrews gives us some help in understanding this:

- Hebrews 2:18 “Because he (Jesus) himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.
- Hebrews 4:15 “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin.
- Hebrews 5:8 “Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered.

Yes, there may be times when we suffer persecution for being a Christian, but more common will be the suffering of self-denial in withstanding the temptation of self-indulgence.

It may be in the struggle against lust in all its forms.

If you’ve ever been there you know how painful self-denial is.

Suffering may be in the day-to-day battle against selfishness wherein we learn what it means to be a servant of others.

One man wrote: “To share in Christ’s sufferings means that we become involved with people to care for them even at the cost of our own convenience or comfort.” (Ogilvie, Let God Love You, 107)

Denying ourselves for the sake of others is no easy matter.

Suffering may be in the struggle against pride where sometimes it physically hurts to humble ourselves.

The Bible says that in that struggle, in that suffering, is where we meet Jesus – thinking and living and acting as he did.

We share the obedience learned through suffering that he did and he is with us all the way through it – that’s his promise and it is true whether we feel it or not.

Let me speak of it another way.

We learn more about Jesus in our suffering than probably any other way.

Think of how Paul describes Jesus in 2:5-8 “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God... (took) the form of a bond-servant... And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

We will never know a person as well as when we experience what they have experienced.

We begin to know and understand the very selfless, loving, heart of Jesus – we know Jesus better when we take the same road he did - when we humbly deny ourselves to serve others.

So in summary: I get to know Jesus better every day through the benefits to me of his resurrection and through suffering as he did.

I said as I began that this passage is intimidating because I know how easily I am sidetracked into pursuing other things as more important in life than pursuing a relationship with Jesus.

There are days when my relationship with Jesus seems academic and distant and I grow discouraged and even doubtful.

Then I read Paul's final words on this issue and I take heart. Paul also recognized that he hadn't achieved that full knowing yet – he too needed to grow in his relationship with Jesus.

Listen to him in verses 12-14:

Philippians 3:12-14 “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

What is the “this” and “that” of v12, the “it” of verse 13 and the “goal” of v14?

It is to know Christ.

And Paul makes it clear that his great aim in life is to know Jesus better and better.

And in all of that he knows the best is yet to be.

1 Corinthians 13:12 “Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

Every stage of life has new opportunities, challenges, joys and sorrows.

But one objective is consistent through all and puts all else in proper perspective – That I may know Christ!

Several years ago Dr. Lloyd John Ogilvie, who was until last year the Chaplain of the US Senate, wrote the following (and with this I close):

“I started the day reading these verses from Philippians. It has been at the edge of my consciousness all day. At times it has haunted me and challenged my priorities.

“The question has persisted all day. Now tonight I can avoid it no longer. Can I say what Paul has said? Could I really throw away everything that has meant so much to me, consider it as garbage so that I might gain Christ? Just how important to me is an experiential knowledge of Jesus my Lord?

“I love my work, my church, my people, very much. I have had more than my share of public, professional, and personal affirmation. Education and background mean a great deal to me.

“Is anything I am doing for him more important than him? Nothing belongs to me! It’s all his gift. But would I give it all up for him? Is the Lord more crucial to me than what I do in my ministry for him?

“Our work can become so much an extension of our egos that we can lose the One for whom our work exists. Unless we allow Christ to minister to us we will use our ministries to minister to us.

“I now realize that I am not alone. The one who never sleeps is here with me... The question he asked Simon Peter beside the sea is the question he asks me right now, “Do you love me more than anyone else? Do you love me more than your work for me, your words for me, and the praise you receive for your efforts for my cause?”

“Suddenly the issues are painfully and poignantly clear. With Christ we have everything, without him, nothing we do, however spectacular, has meaning. Now I know again what I must rediscover every day: **Jesus** must be all or he is nothing at all.” (Ogilvie, 103-4)