

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

What difference does it make? This is the cry of apathy and indifference. These are the words of those who have faded in their faith and find it difficult to go on. That's one way of looking at it.

What difference does it make? This question can also be asked of those who have experienced a great moment in their lives and wonder what happens next.

Let's apply it to ourselves this morning. Last Sunday you heard the most amazing truth that humankind could ever know: Jesus, who was in every way God, humbled himself and became a flesh and blood man, became a servant, and died a slave's death on the cross. God died, and what's more we find that he did this for you and me.

So, what difference does it make?

Some time ago, it may have been yesterday or it may have been 50 years ago, you bowed your head and prayed a sinner's prayer. You accepted the free gift of forgiveness for your sins and promised to love Jesus. Did that decision make a difference in your life? Are you a different person today compared to the person you were before you made that decision? Are you still changing and growing in Christ?

If we follow the progress of Paul's thoughts in the letter to the Philippian church we will see that these questions are valid. Paul said, "**Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...**" (1:27). That flowed into "**...make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose**" (2:2). Then we have this: "**Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus**" (2:5). And the flow of these thoughts suggests, actually demands, that there is a difference in your life, if you say you believe and follow Jesus Christ.

You see, after this magnificent hymn telling of Christ's humiliation and exaltation, there is a "therefore." What is it there for? To tell us what difference it makes.

1. The Difference in our Salvation

Salvation can mean different things to different people in different situations. A woman could be saved from drowning, a baby could be saved from a house fire, or a man could be saved from making a terrible mistake on the stock market. In each situation the person involved may make a drastic change in their lives, or simply go on living as before.

Some Christians view their salvation in Christ that way. It was enough for them that their sins are forgiven and their place in heaven is assured. But it doesn't change their lives.

Paul speaks of a different salvation here. This kind of salvation makes a difference.

a) When no one's looking – This kind of salvation is one of integrity and unchanging character regardless if anyone is watching or not. "**Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence...**" (2:12a).

Paul implies that the Philippians obedience is actually increased in his absence. It is not obedience to the person of Paul that he speaks to here, but obedience to the message of Christ. With Paul gone for some time, it seems that these believers actually grew in obedience. This is so unlike grade school when the teacher leaves the room.

There is integrity in this kind of faith. There is an old story that says that if you are truly saved even your dog and cat will know it. See, when no one is looking, if we are sincere in our faith, we will be committed to holy living. Does your dog know that you are a Christian? Do you spread a different kind of manure on your flower beds?

b) Work out your salvation - More important than what you don't do is what you do to work out your salvation. "**...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling...**" (2:12b).

This may sound odd at first. Are we trying to earn our salvation here? Why do we have to work for our salvation?

Well it's not working for our salvation; it's working out our salvation. "Your salvation" in this context is not to be understood as something yet to be reached, not as something to be worked for, but as something to be explored and enjoyed to the maximum. If you believe it you will live it.

The word "work" in this verse means to "work fully to the point of finishing the job." It was used by the Romans for "working a mine completely" and getting out every ounce of ore. In the same way with salvation, we are to mine the depths of our salvation and discover everything we can about it.

Another analogy is marriage. A newlywed couple does not have to worry about attaining the lofty status of being married – they are married, they made it. They have their whole lives ahead of them together. They possess marriage till death do them part but they still have to work on their marriage, discover each other, develop their love and explore the depths of their relationship. You have salvation in this way but it needs to be explored so that you may fully enjoy it.

Work it out with fear and trembling? This does not sound positive but it really is. This is not the fear of a lost sinner before a holy God, but the fear of a genuine child of God before the most loving of all fathers. It is not a fear of what he might do to us, but a fear of the hurt we might do to him.

Moses told the children of Israel "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning" (Ex 20:20). First he says to not be afraid and then says that fear will protect them. Which is it? It's a proper fear, a holy fear and respect for our Father who has given us an incredible gift: Adoption.

Jesus also said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Mt 7:21). Salvation is in one sense a one time event, and in another sense it is a one time event that moves you and grows with in you. It is not to be left stagnant like an insurance policy in the desk, but to be lived because it is itself living and active.

c) God's work in you – It is only possible for us to work out our salvation because of the work God has done and is doing in our lives. "...for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (13).

God works in our will to move our desires so that they match his. God works in our actions having changed our motives and gives us the power to do what is right. In other words, He alone makes us willing and able to choose Christ and live for him.

When we put the two verses together we see that we are responsible to do what we can do, but that we can only *do* because of what God has done in our lives. We can work out because God has worked in.

This kind of salvation does not allow us to say a sinners prayer, mark it on the calendar, and live however we please. This kind of salvation makes a difference.

2. The Difference in our Testimony

If we have this kind of salvation at work in our lives then there will be a different kind of testimony. It works itself out in three ways:

a) Live without complaining – This may seem a strange place to start but what speaks louder about us than our words? Paul said, "Do everything without complaining or arguing..." (14).

The word "complaining" literally means "a secret displeasure in the heart, and a sullen discontent that leads to criticism." We could also call it "grumbling."

It seems that this was a problem in the church at Philippi. That's so foreign to us isn't it? But what does this have to do with our testimony?

God takes grumbling personally! The people of Israel were great complainers. God could never do enough for them and so they grumbled. The outcome was disastrous: "They grumbled in their tents and did not obey the Lord" (Ps 106:25). Paul summarized the history of Israel this way, "We should not test the Lord, as some of them did and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did

– and were killed by the destroying angel. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us” (1 Cor 10:9-11).

Complainers are not pleasant to be around. They find something wrong with everything. They exhaust you in conversation telling you what they would do to fix things but never do. They always know better yet never know contentment. But worst of all, a grumbling person is at heart a person who resists what God has given. God wants us to receive his gifts with joy. The complainer can't do this. Complainers kill the joy.

How we talk at the coffee shop or in the church foyer speaks to our testimony. Complaining denies the sovereignty of God. Complaining disrupts unity. Complaining discredits our testimony.

b) Become a star – The purpose for watching our words is expanded in this next verse “...so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe...” (15).

We could dissect the words “crooked and depraved” and illustrate how corrupt our world is, but this is more about people turning from the Lord, straying, and finding other gods. This generation has found fault with God and therefore they are complainers. That's why our testimony is to be different. We must proclaim, not complain, and then we will stand out.

Our neighbors are living in darkness; our coworkers cannot navigate the pitch black in front of them. What they need to see is our personal holiness, our commitment to live and act differently. They need to see people who are blameless and pure. We may be unjustly criticized, we can't stop that, but we certainly do not need to give them just cause to criticize us.

We could avoid unholy people in our workplaces; we could indulge in their activities and assimilate so that we don't seem out of touch; we could just judge them...but none of this would convince them of the joy of knowing Jesus. We need to shine beside them.

Do you know when stars shine the brightest? When it's really dark. Living in the city was frustrating for a stargazer like me. The city lights would literally eliminate the stars from view. Likewise on a full moon night, the stars have trouble shining through. It is when it is really, really dark, that the stars are brilliant.

c) Be the Word to others – I like how Alec Motyer wrote about this next section, “...the light of Christian character is an uninterpreted parable if we do not speak about Christ. Equally, speaking about Christ is futile if our lives do not back up what we say” (BST Philippians). So with our blameless and pure lives we must also “hold out the word of life” (16).

There's a story of four scholars who were arguing over Bible translations. One said he preferred the King James Version because of its beautiful, eloquent old English. Another said he preferred the American Standard Bible for its literalism, the way it moves the reader from passage to passage with confident feelings of accuracy from the original text. A third man preferred Moffatt because of its quaint, penetrating use of words, the turn of a phrase that captures the attention of the reader. After giving the issue further thought, the fourth scholar admitted, "I have personally preferred my mother's translation." When the other scholars chuckled, he responded, "Yes she translated it. She translated each page of the Bible into life. It is the most convincing translation I ever saw."

Be the Word and speak the Word. That in itself will be a different testimony in our circles.

3. The Difference in our Joy

We have already talked about how happiness and joy are not the same thing. Our understanding of joy must also be interpreted through the life of Jesus. As we heard last week, up is down and down is up in the kingdom of God. If you want to be great you must be the servant of all.

Following Jesus' lead, Paul wrote, “But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me” (17-18). Paul's illustration of pouring himself out for the sake of the

Philippians is simply imitation of Christ himself. Remember in 2:7 Jesus “made himself nothing”? Other translations say he “emptied himself” of his divine privilege. He was still God but poured himself into human form (miracle: it’s like pouring the Pacific into a thimble). This was Christ’s joy; this was Paul’s joy; this is our joy. Pouring ourselves out for others knowing that on the day of Christ it will all be worth it.

This kind of joy speaks of sacrifice. Paul made that reference when he referred to the drink offering. Regardless of the OT understanding, we get the picture of a cup being tilted slowly over until the contents are all poured out. Then there is nothing left to give. But it’s okay because we are poured out for God.

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – which is your spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1). When was the last time we sacrificed ourselves, or our possessions or money, in the name of Christ, for someone else? If we do this we will know a different kind of joy based on a different kind of salvation and have a different testimony.

Conclusion

Now what difference does it make when there is nothing to be different for?

My friends we live in a saltshaker here in Southeastern Manitoba. This is the Bible Belt of Manitoba, or so we like to think. Living in the saltshaker is comfortable and secure. Sure there are a few specks of something else in the shaker. At the lake, because of the moisture, restaurants and cottage owners will put rice in the shakers to keep the salt from clumping together. We have some rice in our Kleefeld shaker. The problem is that salt was meant to be spread out from the shaker.

So who are different for? It’s true we have some neighbors who need to know Jesus. But we have so many believers living around us that we let our guard down and we relax our shine. If you wonder why we aren’t so different from everybody else, it’s because of the saltshaker syndrome. If you wonder why your spiritual life is a little stagnant it’s because there is nothing to challenge you in the saltshaker.

Do you need to move? I leave that up to the Holy Spirit and you. Pray about it. And be aware that if you don’t move that there is darkness all around us. Ask the Lord how you can shine in those places.

Martin Luther said, “A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing.” Are we willing to spend something on our faith? Does having Jesus as our Lord and Savior make a difference?

AMEN