

I WANT TO KNOW CHRIST

I want to know Christ. To say this is to commit ourselves to a monumental task that would involve the rest of our lives and would never find its completion.

When Jesus comes back, He will have a name that only He knows (Rev. 19:12). This reveals to us that all there is to know about Jesus has not been revealed. The more we get to know Him, the more we realize there is more to get to know. This title - an unknown title - reveals His lack of containment to our imagination and theology – He has a mystery to Him that indicates we will never be able to know Him completely.

There are some things that you can know just about everything about. In the movie "Forrest Gump," Bubba Blue, Forrest's "best good friend" lists all the ways there are to prepare shrimp. He tells Forrest, "Shrimp is the fruit of the sea. You can barbecue it, boil it, broil it, bake it, sauté it. There's, um, shrimp kebabs, shrimp Creole, shrimp gumbo, pan fried, deep fried, stir fried. There's pineapple shrimp and lemon shrimp, coconut shrimp, pepper shrimp, shrimp soup, shrimp stew, shrimp salad, shrimp and potatoes, shrimp burger, shrimp sandwich.... That's, that's about it."

Ironically, we have some people who think they know everything there is to know about Jesus Christ, "Bubba" Christians. And they will tell you, "I know everything there is to know about Jesus" – and they quote the Apostles' Creed – "He was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He arose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, when He shall come to judge the living and the dead." This is a good place to start, but it does not begin to describe Jesus Christ. And knowing Christ is something that we will require an eternity to discover (Rob Willis).

If you and I want to truly know Christ it's going to cost us. Knowing Jesus requires that you and I take stock of our gains, our prestige, our very personages and like Paul, consider their worth in light of Christ. What does it mean to know Christ? What will it cost us? What will we gain?

Let's look at our passage (3:1-11) and find out.

1. Beware: Our Joy is threatened

a) "Rejoice in the Lord" – We begin our study with a warning. It doesn't sound like a warning at first, because Paul says, "**Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord!**" But then he concludes this verse with "**...it is a safeguard for you.**" In short, rejoicing in the Lord is a good defense for the church. How does rejoicing in Jesus protect the church?

For Paul, rejoicing in the Lord is everything that the church is about. Earlier in ch. 1 he said that when Christ was preached, for whatever reason, he rejoiced. Of course, he meant "this is what brings joy to me." To rejoice for Paul was to say, "It is in this that I find my joy," and to exhort others to rejoice he meant "Let the Lord be the one who makes you happy." Find your joy in him and him alone.

We could recount again the fact that Paul faced prison and possibly death resulting in despair for any normal person. But he sat in the midst of these trials with a smile because he had Jesus. Jesus was his one reason for living, or for dying.

So for the church this is a safeguard. How? Because if the church finds its reason for being in Jesus then nothing that external forces can do to it will bring it down. If the church finds its joy in Jesus nothing can stop it from growing. Jesus is the life of the church and we should rejoice in him.

b) Dogs, Pigs and other Monikers – The trouble, however, is not always outside forces. Sometimes there are internal troubles that threaten to steal our joy. If we take our eyes off of Jesus as a church, we are in serious trouble. And sad to say, there are those within the church, any church, who are doing just that.

Paul uses strong language here to describe those people. He says, “**Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh**” (v. 2). We are not used to such language. Paul called another human being a dog. How Christlike is that? Very much in fact. Jesus himself did the same when he said, “**Do not give to dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs**” (Mt 7:6). Jesus called some people dogs, he called them pigs. Our 21st century tolerance and political correctness would never allow such a thing, yet it seems that a spade needs to be called a spade. When you think “dog” you must not think cuddly pet, but rather think of the worst insult you can give. Think of the dog who smells the wrong things and barks about it.

Who are these dogs and pigs? The best clue is in Paul’s description of mutilating the flesh. We know that he is referring to Jewish Christians who tried to convince all believers to be circumcised to be truly Christian. Their message essentially is that Christ is not enough, that the law is still needed to please God. Paul’s frustration with this group is expressed elsewhere, “**As for these agitators, I wish they would go all the way and emasculate themselves**” (Gal 5:12).

No one today is advocating for circumcision in the church. Yet we still have those who distract the body from the centrality of Jesus Christ. They take our eyes off of Jesus and make us look at the issues like dogs sniffing vomit. They corrupt the mission of the church by taking Jesus out of the picture.

In my brother’s church there has been much hurt and division. The church split over an issue and now meets in different parts of the church. As the latest chapter in this saga was shared at a gathering, the fact that the core church is planning to dissolve its membership and start again, it occurred to me finally that this division was not about the issue. I have watched my brother agonize over the fact that most of his friends have gone to the other party and they can no longer socialize. Hearing all of this I came to the conclusion that there was division, hurt and even hatred in that church long before the issue ever raised its head. The issue gave them the excuse to bust apart. And that is what happens when we take our eyes off of Jesus and his people and just see the issue.

c) The People of God – Paul responds to the circumcision party and uses their terminology, “**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...**” (v.3). Circumcision in the OT was what marked out the covenant people of God. Now, with the coming of Christ, circumcision is no longer an external mark, it is an internal designation of the heart that we belong to God. You could say we have been cut to the heart with the glory of Jesus.

Those who want to wreck the church and steer it according to their own purposes and ambitions, put Christ aside and profess to know better. They are confident in themselves. Paul says, the true people of God, the true worshipers have no such confidence in mere man or woman.

2. What have you got to lose?

a) Why are you so confident? In place of confidence let us say “pride.” Or shall we say position? What makes you so confident in yourself?

Paul said, “**...I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more...**” (v. 4). Look at Paul’s list:

He had the right ritual: circumcised at eight days old.

He had the right race: he was an Israelite.

He had the right family: he was of the tribe of Benjamin.

He had the right religion: he was a Hebrew of Hebrews.

This was just his pedigree. Add to that his personal additions made through his own effort:

He had the right attitude: he was a Pharisee.

He had the right activity: he zealously persecuted the church.

He had the right achievement: he was legalistically righteous, in fact, faultless.

This doesn't impress us much because we're not Jews living in the first century. But back then in that context, Paul was peerless; he was number one draft pick for perfection. If anyone could be saved from sin and death by their own merits, the Jews would have picked Paul.

Take a look at your spiritual resume. Be honest: don't you think there are some things in your spiritual life you could boast about? You only miss church three times a year, if that. You are a member after all – that's got to count for something. You taught SS for ten years twenty years ago. Tell the truth, these things and whatever education and achievements make you feel somewhat confident that your salvation is certain. What's more, you do the best you can...right?

A recently fired NFL coach spoke to the media and said, "I did the best I could." This is basically an admission of failure. What have we got to lose? Confidence...get rid of it.

b) A Crude Comparison – Let me explain this ridding of confidence with Paul's words: **"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"** (7-8).

A comparison immediately pops out with the words "profit" and "loss." Whatever was formerly considered "profit" before is now stamped as "loss." The word "loss" is used in Acts 27 of the cargo that was thrown overboard in a storm. The passengers and crew of the ship had to get rid of stuff in order to save their lives. What was once valuable suddenly became a detriment to life if it was hung on to.

The comparison is intensified when Paul describes his losses as "rubbish" in v. 8. Most translations are too proper to translate the word as its true meaning: feces. He counted all his profits, all that gave him confidence in his pedigree and accomplishments, as dung compared to knowing Jesus.

I know the tension you are feeling here. Church membership is not enough; teaching a class or leading a committee is not enough; church attendance is not enough. Nothing we can do is enough to satisfy God's requirements. The tension we feel is being caught between grace and not doing enough. We know that only Christ is enough but we still hang on to that which is "not enough" as a means to salvation. You see, all our righteous acts are like filthy rags that we clutch on to as still having some kind of saving virtue.

Paul likens it to hanging on to dung. Drop it. No one walks around with dung in their hands. We come to God with nothing in our hands. Knowing Christ is all we have and he is enough. And we come to know Christ by admitting that all our gains are really loss. Christ does not become ours by our effort but by the rejection of our efforts.

3. What we gain by losing all

a) Our new confidence – It goes against our nature to lose everything in order to gain something. Our pride, our pedigree, our position through education or experience are precious to us. They have been built up in such a way that others ought to take note and respect our opinions. So it takes great humility to let them go. Or it takes realizing that the loss means greater gain.

By losing all to gain Christ, Paul says we may **"...be found in him not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law (effort), but that which through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith"** (v. 9).

My brother's church, our church, our very faith can be rescued by giving up our own self-righteousness and by faith receiving God's. What is righteousness? It is God saying "Paul is all that I require him to be"; it is being in the right with God. And the only way that it is possible is to lose ourselves in Christ. It is like that illustration which says to be in Christ is like taking a piece of paper and inserting it into a book. The paper is your life and the book is Christ. As the paper is enclosed by the book it is completely in Christ. When God looks at you, He sees Jesus because you are so "in Him". Christ's righteousness is ours in that way.

b) Becoming like Him – If you have found joy in Jesus then being in him is your desire. And if you are in him and know him, then being like him is a no-brainer. You have found that no one compares to Jesus and you want to be like him. That’s what Paul said, **“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...”** (v. 10).

In biblical language to know someone is to enter into the deepest personal intimacy and union. To know Christ is to enter into his experiences, to actually go down the path of the Crucified. It means very literally “dying to self every day.” We read several weeks ago how Jesus **“...did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant...he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross”** (2:6-8). This is the life of Jesus. This is the very life we profess to live if we are in Jesus.

Do you see how the church can become what it is supposed to be by dying to self? If we would all lose ourselves and be in Christ, the issues would no longer be burning or theological. All that matters is Christ; all that matters to us is what matters to Christ. We would have humility; we would be forgiving each other; we would have repentance; we would even have revival....if we lost ourselves to gain Christ.

c) Personal Resurrection – We are so afraid of losing ourselves we cannot see what we would gain. Paul says if die in Christ, if we die for each other so that others are lifted up, we gain the resurrection. But Jesus lost himself and God exalted him to the highest place and gave him a name above all names.

Paul said he wanted to share Christ’s life, sufferings and death **“...and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead”** (v. 11). Paul wasn’t uncertain about the resurrection as the text implies; it was the events in his life leading up to the resurrection that were uncertain.

Resurrection for you and me seems like a millennium away unless you consider that this could possibly mean a daily resurrection like dying daily to self. This is the promise: if you put yourself last like Jesus did and die to self so that others will be esteemed, God will raise you up in due time.

The Greek word for resurrection literally means “to stand up.” In the Greek world, living people were seen as standing up while dead people were lying down. Paul wanted to be a person who was standing up in a world where everyone was lying down. He wanted to show others that he was living a new life among the walking dead. This is the power of the resurrection for you every day. Do you want to stand up?

Conclusion

I want to know Christ. I want to be lost in him. And I am not satisfied with how much I know - I want to know more of him. How about you?

Would you be willing to pray the Psalmist’s prayer? **“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting”** (Ps 139:23-24). And with this prayer ask, “Lord, what do I need to lose yet, to gain Christ and know him more.”

If we are losing our joy as a church it is because we are navel-gazing, looking after our own stuff instead of the stuff of Christ. Rejoice in the Lord instead – Jesus is good

AMEN