

The Magnificent Obsession

Philippians 3:1- 14

David H. Roper

Today we are going to turn to the third charter of Philippians. We will pass by the closing section of chapter 2. There Paul underscores his argument by giving a number of biographical illustrations of the truth he has spelled out previously in that chapter. The principle in chapter 2 is that of unity. There is a unity within the body of Christ for which the Spirit of God is responsible. We are one with a oneness transcends racial, cultural, or environmental factors. We are one because we are one in the Spirit. That oneness is the possession of all believers. But it is a oneness which must be maintained, for which we as individuals must give away our rights.

And Paul gathers a number of illustrations from life in order to illustrate that principle -- an illustration from the life of Christ, who gave up his rights as God; an illustration from his own life, i.e., he indicates that he is willing to be poured out as a sacrifice on the Philippians' behalf; then one from the life of Timothy, who, Paul says, is one who seeks not his own interests but the interests of the people in Philippi; and lastly the example of Epaphroditus, who is willing to die on behalf of Paul and the believers back in Philippi. I leave that passage to you for your own study and application.

Now we want to move on into chapter 3 and Paul's discussion of a new subject, but one still under the general theme of the conduct of the Philippians -- their maturity. Here he is discussing the maturing of individuals in their relationship to Jesus Christ. Let's begin with verse 1:

Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you.

Paul realizes that his responsibility toward the believers in Philippi necessitates saying the same things over and over again. That is a good teaching technique because it takes us so long to get ideas through our head. We must hear them repeatedly. This is the way the Scriptures teach us: "Here a line, there a line, here a little, there a little, line upon line, precept upon precept," coming at the same truths repeatedly from different standpoints. Eventually what God is saying begins to filter into our consciousness, And this is what Paul is referring to in his teaching ministry toward the church in Philippi: "I have said this many, many times. But it is not irksome to say it again. It is just safe for you. So I am going to repeat what I have said so frequently."

What he is repeating is the command, "Rejoice in the Lord." The key phrase there is "in the Lord." "Rejoice in the Lord. Don't rejoice in anything else. Don't look to any other source of joy. Find your satisfaction and your peace and your joy in the Lord and in him alone." This, then, is the theme which he is going to develop throughout this chapter - Jesus Christ and him alone.

In verse 2 he addresses a warning to the church at Philippi:

Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision, . . .

He is referring to a group of men who were called Judaizers - Jews who followed the apostle Paul from city to city and attempted to undermine his ministry. Paul's emphasis was Christ and Christ alone. Their emphasis was Christ yes, but Christ plus something else Christ plus the law, or more specifically, Christ plus circumcision. In Acts 15 there is a statement of the basic tenet of these teachers. It was that you must be circumcised to be saved - "Yes, Christ is the way, but, there are some things you must do in addition to receiving Christ, and one of these is to be circumcised."

Now, one thing that Paul would not allow was the perversion of the gospel. Whenever he met individuals who were weak or failing, he never rebuked them. He was always tender and compassionate and encouraging. But the one thing that he would not be tolerant of was error in teaching - when the gospel is distorted and perverted and is robbed of its power -- which was essentially what these Judaizers were doing. You can't rejoice in the Lord and rejoice in the Law at the same time. The two principles are contradictory and irreconcilable. So Paul lashes out and is relentless in his defense of the gospel against these men.

He uses some very harsh terms. Note some of the figures by which he describes them. He calls them "dogs" - not exactly a term of endearment. The dogs in Palestine at that time were not the cuddly, warm little friends that we pamper in our homes. They were large, wild scavengers, mangy beasts that roamed all over Palestine at will. They were feared and hated and outcasts. And this was the term that the Jews used to describe the Gentiles. They called the Gentiles "dogs" because they were the outcasts, the pariahs of Jewish society. Paul turns this around and applies the title to these particular Jews. He says, "No, the real outcasts are not the Gentiles but you Jews who are distorting the gospel of Christ and leading people away from the true Messiah."

Then he calls them "evil workers" or, more accurately, "evil advocates of works." That was the basis of their system. It was a works system instead of a faith/grace system. He scores them for that.

And then he describes them as representatives of the false circumcision. The Greek word at Paul uses here for "circumcision" - "mutilators of the body" in the Revised Standard Version - is not the term which is normally translated circumcision." That is the word "peritome" - it means "to cut around". This is the word "katatome" which means to "chop up in little pieces". He is not mincing any words! You can see the figure that he is trying to evoke in their minds. These are mutilators, not members of the true circumcision, They are people who, figuratively, want to mutilate the bodies of believers with a false circumcision. And this is his attitude toward anyone who would try to pervert the gospel and lead believers away from the purity which is in Christ. Paul wants the Philippian Christians to rejoice in the Lord and nothing else, and anyone who would try to derail them from that is the object of his scorn.

In verse 3 he contrasts with this false circumcision the true circumcision:

... for we [those of us who acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord] are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh
...

We need to realize that the rite of circumcision was a symbol given to the nation of Israel as a sign of their covenant relationship to God. God had said to Abraham, "I will make of you a great nation. That has been fulfilled, of course in the nation of Israel. I will bless you and make your name great. I am going to give you a land, the land of Palestine. And I will be God to you." That is the sum and substance of the covenant, as it was later reiterated to Moses: "I will be your God and you will be my people." As a sign of that relationship the rite of circumcision was given.

Now Paul says that we are the true circumcision." The counter part of that symbol is seen as something else in our lives - not as outward marks on the body but as the inward reality of which circumcision in the flesh was a symbol. Those of us who acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord are now the people of God, just as the nation of Israel was then. And we bear in our life the marks of that relationship. But the marks are not physical; they are inward.

Paul says first, "We worship in the Spirit of God." That is, we worship in the inner man. We are not tied to a temple nor a mountain nor a priesthood nor a particular type of sacrifice. We can respond to God anywhere through the Spirit of God. That mark, worship, basically conveys the idea of the presentation of our life. It is not an emotional response; it is an act of the will. In his letter to the Romans Paul says that we are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice unto God, which is a reasonable act of worship. That presentation is worship. It is rendering up to God what is rightfully his. Paul says that we can do that any place, anytime, by means of the Spirit of God, because of what God has accomplished in our lives, internally.

Secondly, he says that we glory in Christ Jesus. He is our life. He is the one we rejoice in. He is everything to us. It is Christ and him alone, Christ and nothing else. We rejoice and glory in Christ Jesus.

"And," Paul says, "we put no confidence in the flesh." We don't trust the flesh. We don't act out of the flesh. It is not a resource to us. We have repudiated the flesh utterly and completely.

These are the marks of true circumcision. These are the characteristics which ought to be true of all of us because we are the people of God. If we acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord, then we worship him in the inner man, our lives are offered up to him, we glory in Christ Jesus. We have no confidence in what we are in the flesh, i.e., in our basic humanity, in our physical strength or in the strength of our mind, emotions, and will. We simply do not trust those things. We glory in Christ Jesus;

Paul goes on from this point to say "If anyone could have confidence in the flesh, I could." Verses 4 through 6.

. . . although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

What Paul is doing is gathering together all of his supposed assets. "These are my credits. These are the things which gave me a sense of worthwhileness. These satisfied me in times of stress. These are what I appealed to. This is where my confidence was - in all of these things." And one by one he enumerates the things which were of comfort and were a source of strength, things to which he could constantly relate in order to have a sense of adequacy.

He first describes his pride in his ancestry. He says, "I was circumcised on the eighth day." That is, "I wasn't a Gentile who became a Jew late in life. I was born a Jew and I was circumcised according to the Mosaic regulations on the eighth day. I am not a Johnny come lately. I am a Jew in good standing. I have been one from infancy."

Secondly he says, "I am of the nation of Israel." Israel is the name which was given to Jacob. It was Jacob's twelve sons who were the true sons of Israel, the genuine Israelites. There were other men who could trace their line back to Abraham. The Edomites could, and many other individuals who were not descended from the true sons of Israel. But Paul says, "My tribe originated with one of the true sons of Israel."

Then he tells us what his tribe was. It was Benjamin, a little tribe which to the end was loyal to the house of David, which never went off into apostasy and defected as the northern ten tribes had. It was from Benjamin that the first king came. It was a sturdy little tribe, and Paul says, "There was great pride when I remembered that I came from that tribe."

And he says, "I am a Hebrew of the Hebrews. I had Hebrew parents, with all the tradition and the deep, lasting heritage that they conveyed to me. All these things," Paul says, "gave me a sense of worth."

And then he appeals to his orthodoxy. "As to the Law, I was a Pharisee." The Pharisees were the custodians of the Scriptures. They were the ones who held to the authority of the word of God against the Sadducees, who were the rationalists of their day, who denied supernatural phenomena, who denied the authority of the Scriptures, who denied the resurrection. Against this the Pharisees stood 23 the guardians of the Old Testament scripture. They loved it and preserved it. Not all were hypocrites. There were many who were genuine in their desire to follow the Lord, and Paul says, "This was the particular group of which I was a member. I was proud of the fact that I was a Pharisee."

"As to zeal, I was a persecutor of the church." This is the pride of activity. He was involved in what he thought was the most worthwhile activity he could pursue, which was defending the "true faith" against heretics. He felt that Christians were a false sect which he was obligated to persecute. And so with good

conscience, he says in Acts, he persecuted them to the death.

And finally, "As to the righteousness which is in the Law, I was found blameless." That is pride in his morality. He kept the law. Whenever he failed to do so, he went through the prescribed sacrifices which guaranteed freedom from guilt. He was blameless in regard to the Law. Thus he adds all of these things up as assets to which he could legitimately refer in time of need. These are what made him feel worthwhile.

We do the same sort of thing. What do we consider to be of credit to us? Is it pride in our ancestry, the fact that our forebears came over on the Mayflower? Or is it that we were Harvard men, or Stanford men, or that we attended Chiggerville Junior College? Is it pride in the activities we are involved in, the worthwhile projects, our service to the community? Do we take pride in our morality, in the fact that we do the right things, and that we don't do other things, that we are correct and proper and socially adroit?

Paul says that after he adds all these assets up, they total absolutely nothing! They amount to zero! He has no credits at all, Notice what he says in verses 7 and 8:

But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ . . .

The Revised Standard Version renders the word translated "rubbish" as "refuse". But the translators are trying to be a little too delicate here. The Greek term means "dung" - or any other term you might want to insert there which would be more meaningful to you! Paul says, "That is exactly what the flesh meant to me. That is how much value I gained from all that I had in myself. It was worth absolutely nothing." And he says, "I gave all of that up in order to have the surpassing, inestimable value which comes from knowing Jesus Christ."

I have a friend who is interning with us here at PBC. He was raised on the East Coast in a very fine family, graduated with high honors from perhaps the best prep school in New York City, went on to graduate with high honors from Harvard, was in the best clubs there, rowed in the Harvard eight in the Pan-American Games, succeeded in every way, secured a scholarship to Cambridge, and spent some years there doing graduate work, excelling academically. But he came to the conclusion that all of this was empty, so he gave himself to open profligacy and drug use, and raced all over Europe on his motorcycle.

He came here to the West Coast and took a job as the freshman crew coach at Stanford just so that he could lie out in the sun. He felt that the only thing worth doing was "catching the rays". And then he joined an eastern religious cult. About the same time a non-Christian English professor at Stanford introduced him to Jesus Christ, in a way. He told him that perhaps he would find some help in Jesus. And so he began to read the Scriptures.

One night, as he tells it, the cult members were gathered in a room, chanting in some sort of ritual, and preparing to initiate him into this group. Suddenly it dawned on him that all of this was empty and meaningless too. That Jesus Christ was the only one who could give a sense of satisfaction and meaning and purpose to life. He stood up, and in his own words, which I will retranslate, said, "This is all a bunch of dung!" He turned around and walked out. And he marks the time that Jesus Christ became Lord in his life at that point. He gave it all up. It didn't matter. It didn't add up to anything in his life. All of his assets, all of the things which he had counted on, everything which was of credit to him, though much of it was good and worthwhile, in the ultimate analysis added up to nothing. He gave it all up and put it all aside because of the value of knowing Jesus Christ as Lord.

There are two stages which Paul envisions in verses 7 and 8. In verse 7 he says, "Those things I have counted as loss" He uses a past-tense verb, referring back to the moment of his conversion when, on the road to Damascus, he clearly saw that all he had been counting on was valueless, and so he turned and made Jesus Christ Lord.

But then in verse 8 he says, "More than that *I am counting* all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value

of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." This is a present-tense verb. Here he is talking about the ongoing process of life - "I am now, daily, counting all things as loss," because there is a very subtle temptation to revert back to confidence in the flesh. We keep wanting to go back and build our lives again on the old foundations. When we are threatened, when we are attacked, when we feel insecure, we want to go back to the things which used to give us meaning and a sense of balance and strength. So Paul says, "I have to keep on counting those things as loss. They keep encroaching on my life. They keep coming back. And I have to keep turning away from them again and turning to Christ."

Now, let me ask you, what do you turn to when you are threatened, when you feel insecure, when you feel lonely or unloved or unwanted or rejected? It is so easy, isn't it, to turn back to the old things in which we used to have confidence, instead of turning to Jesus Christ. But we have discovered that when we turn to Christ, when we glory in Christ Jesus, when we rejoice in the Lord alone and put away all these other things, there comes a sense of peace and quietness of heart, of strength and the capacity to cope with whatever we must face. Haven't you discovered that?

So often people come to me and say, "It just doesn't work. I have tried, but it doesn't work." Well, my feeling then is that they are not really doing this properly, because it does work. I know that in my own life when it doesn't work it is because I am trying to cling to Jesus Christ with one hand and to something else with the other. I am glorying in Christ Jesus but I am also glorying in some other strength I think I have, and so I never have that sense of release which comes from rejoicing in Jesus Christ and in him alone.

Jesus met the woman at the well. Her problem was insecurity and loneliness and lack of worth. This was demonstrated by her life. She had been through a whole boatload of marriages. None of them had produced anything worthwhile, so finally she gave up legitimizing the affair and she was simply living with some man, Jesus recognized this as symptomatic of her deep hunger. She was trying to place confidence in the flesh, but she couldn't find anything there which gave her confidence. And so the Lord said, "If you will come to me, if you come to me, I will be in you a well of water springing up to eternal life. I will satisfy you." If she were to continue digging other wells and drinking from them and then running to Christ, He could never satisfy her. But as long as she drank from his well and his alone, as long as she rejoiced in him and gloried in Christ Jesus, then she would be satisfied.

That is what Paul is saying. "I rejoice in Christ. I glory in him, not in anything else. Everything else is dung, worthless, valueless - when I view it against the inestimable worth of knowing Jesus Christ."

In verses 9, 10, and 11 Paul goes on to describe what it means to have gained Christ. Two verbs summarize his argument. The first is in verse 9: "that I may be found in him", and the second in verse 10: "that I may know him". Paul says, "I want to be found in him. I want to be secure in Him." That is where security and strength come from. When we come to Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God takes us out of the old life. We are transferred, or "transplanted", Paul says in Colossians, out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of his beloved Son. And all of Christ's life, all of his resources, all that he is, is available to us. Therefore nothing can threaten our security, because of what we have in Christ.

A number of years back I was going to pick up a new baby sitter. I had never been to this particular house. There was enormous dog lying on the front porch. I had one of my little boys with me. He was about five at the time and had on short pants and no shoes, The dog hadn't growled or in any way indicated that he was hostile, But the minute I rang the doorbell he lunged for my boy, who jumped four feet through the air, shinned up my leg, and climbed right up into my arms, and there he was, all snug and secure while the dog was gnawing on my shin! I was jumping around on one foot, trying to kick him with the other. Finally a lady came to the door and called the dog off. As I was limping back out to the car, my boy, still clinging around my head, said to me, "Daddy, I will go anywhere with you!" I have thought back to that so many times. That is what it means to be found in Christ. "I'll go anywhere with him. Nothing ultimately is a threat when I am in him."

That is why Paul says, "That is the kind of righteousness I long for -- not the righteousness which is from the Law but the righteousness which comes through faith Christ." You see, the Jews looked for a righteousness which was according to the "right" standard. And having the "right" standard, therefore, determined their

rightness. We do the same thing. We come from the right family, from the right side of the tracks, or we are of the right race, or whatever. Then, for a while, we have a sense of worthwhileness. But it never really works. We never feel right. We are never right in an objective sense, in that we are pleasing to God, and we never feel right in the subjective sense. We never feel that we are what we ought to be, with only our own standards as a foundation. But Paul says that when we are in Christ, then we have a righteousness which comes from God. We are declared righteous, and so there is that inner sense of peace and quietness which sustains us and gives us comfort and strength in time of need.

When Paul says in verse 10 "that I may know him" he is not simply talking about acquiring facts about Jesus Christ but, rather, an intimate knowledge of him, a deep-down, personal union with Jesus Christ, which he describes here, as he does in Romans 6, as a union in his death, burial, and resurrection. "I have been crucified with Christ," Paul says in Galatians, "nevertheless I live. Yet not I, but Christ lives in me, and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

"I do not put any confidence in the flesh," Paul says, "I just don't. That is dead. I went to Christ on the cross. I died with him. That old life was pinned to that cross, and it died. Now I have a new life, a resurrection life, and," he says, "I want to know that in my own experience. I want to know that existentially. I want the power of his resurrection life in my life."

There is all sorts of power available, but there is no scientist today who has the power to raise someone from the dead, in a physical sense. Nor does any scientist have the power to raise a man, in a moral sense, so that he becomes the kind of man he wants to be. Only Jesus Christ has that kind of power. And Paul says, "That is the kind of power I want to know. I am united with him in his death and resurrection, and I want to enter into that power in a personal way, so that everywhere I go I exhibit the resurrection power of Jesus Christ. That is my obsession," he says, "that is my goal. I want to know him in that sense - in the power of his resurrection, in the fellowship of his suffering, and in being made conformable unto his death."

Verse 11 has confused many people, because it appears to state that our physical resurrection is somehow conditioned upon our performance here:

. . . in order that I may attain to the resurrection from among the dead.

That might seem to say, "If I am that kind of man, then I will be raised from the dead." But that is not what Paul is saying. That couldn't possibly be the case, because the resurrection is clearly stated in other Scriptures to be the heritage of all true believers. It is not conditioned upon our obedience. It is something which is ours by God's grace. No, Paul is using resurrection here in a metaphorical sense. The Greek term which is translated "resurrection" here is never used anywhere else in the New Testament. It means, literally "to stand up out of," i.e., an "out-resurrection." He is referring in a symbolic way to his own life as he has been identified with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. He pictures his new life as rising up out of the dust of his old life and being exhibited in resurrection power wherever he goes. "That is what I want," he says, "I want to be able to face any situation in resurrection power. I want to attain unto that.

Then, in verses 12 through 14, Paul goes onto say,

Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect, but I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid to rest by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet . . .

"I have not yet attained. I have not arrived. I have failed. There are times when I am not what God intends me to be." We can all identify with that. "Neither am I mature nor perfect. I don't do what is right every time."

. . . but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

He uses an analogy here from the realm of athletics, of track and field. He says, "I don't look back. I might stumble and fall. I might see what is about to catch up with me. I look on ahead. I stretch out toward the goal

like a runner straining toward the tape. That is the one thing I do. I cannot honestly say," Paul says, that I have already obtained this resurrection from the dead so that in every situation I exhibit the resurrection life of Christ. I am cranky and hostile at this. I hold resentment. I get irritable. These things come flooding into my life, as they come into yours."

"But I will tell you one thing that I am doing. I want God to take me to that place. That is what he has apprehended me for, and that is what he is going to produce." And so Paul says, "I am straining toward that one goal." That is Paul's magnificent obsession - "that I may know him and the fellowship of his sufferings, and be made conformable unto his death, so that I might live in resurrection power. That is the one thing I do."

Mary and Martha, as you know the story, were having a bit of a problem. They had invited the Lord to dinner. Martha was bustling about the kitchen preparing the meal. She was frantic and upset and worried and anxious. She had burned the biscuits. Mary was in the other room listening to the Lord, seated at his feet. Martha came in to the Lord and said, "Lord, don't you understand, I'm all uptight with Mary. Can't you tell her to help me?" And the Lord said, "Martha, you are troubled about many things. Very few things are important. In fact, only one. And Mary has chosen the best part."

Are you troubled about many things? Are you attacked on every side? Do you feel threatened and insecure, worried and anxious? There are a lot of things to get anxious about these days. There is only one thing that is important. That is the part which Mary chose - sitting at the feet of the Lord, glorying in Christ Jesus, putting no confidence in the flesh.

David prayed in Psalm 86, "Lord, unite my heart that I may fear your name." That is a prayer that we ought to pray - that we will have united hearts. I so frequently have a distracted heart. It is going in ninety-nine different directions at once, and I have to pray, often, "Lord, unite my heart so that I glory in you and in you alone."

Father, we would echo David's request for you to unite our hearts so that we might glory in your name. We ask this in Christ's name, Amen.

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