

Moving On

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Philippians 3:4 b-3:14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

MOVING ON

There comes a time for all of us when we have to move on. Perhaps we have to move on from a failed relationship. Perhaps we have to move on to a new job. Perhaps we have to move on from a personal loss.

This is also true from a spiritual standpoint.

Sometimes we must move on from our spiritual past in order to embrace God's vision for the future. We talked about this in one of our Bible studies this past week, and quite a few folks, including me talked about how moving on from what we once believed in the past was an important part of our spiritual journey.

Someone once told me that we Presbyterians are the world's largest second denomination. In other words, many people who have left their old religious tradition have become Presbyterians. If I were to ask for a show of hands this morning, I suspect up to 80 percent of the people here today originally came from a different Christian denomination or even a different religion.

But, it is not always easy to move on to a new way of thinking about faith and the kingdom of God. We have a tendency to retain some of the old ways. We have expectations of ourselves and others based upon the traditions of the past.

And sometimes these expectations from our past can keep us from fully embracing God's plan for the future.

This was certainly true in the early church. Those in the early church held on to the old ways of worshipping and being a community of faith.

JEWISH CHRISTIANS

In fact the first Jewish Christians did not think that they were part of a new religion. They thought that they had a new understanding of the old religion.

They were Jews who knew the power of the cross and the resurrection. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. They thought that God was in Christ.

But this did not mean they rejected their Jewish traditions. On the contrary they insisted upon retaining those traditions. And they insisted that anyone who converted to the Christian faith also would need to keep those traditions.

But, there was a problem.

By the power of the Spirit, the message about Jesus had spread beyond the confines of the Jewish world.

There were some Jews in the Greek town of Philippi. But, most of people in that place were Gentiles. And these Gentiles had grown up with a religious tradition that was quite different from the Jewish understanding of God.

The meat they bought in the marketplace was not kosher. It was meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

The men had not been circumcised at birth and dedicated to the service of God in the temple. Most people had grown up in a world filled with idolatrous “gods” and a variety of views about life and religion.

But, when Paul preached the gospel many of the men and women of Philippi left the old way of life behind and became followers of Christ. The Spirit changed their hearts, and they were born again.

And yet despite the fact that they were filled with the Spirit; they were still not Jews. Their men had not been circumcised and dedicated in the temple. They still ate meat that had been offered to idols. (That was the only meat available where they lived.)

What hoops, if any, would these new converts have to jump through in order to say that they were followers of Christ?

CONTROVERSY IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Paul said that the important stuff had already happened. They had accepted the good news about Jesus. They believed in the power of the cross and the resurrection.

Indeed, they were baptized not only with water but also with the power of the Spirit. Many of these new converts had impressive spiritual gifts. It was obvious that God was at work in them.

And yet some of the Jewish Christians said that they needed something more. They needed to become Jews before they could really be Christians.

Paul said that wasn't true.

No religious ritual could add anything to what these new believers had experienced. By the power of the Spirit they already had a change of heart, and that was what really mattered.

This was a big controversy in the early church.

In the book of Acts we read that leaders in the ancient church came together in Jerusalem to discuss this issue. Did these new Gentile converts have to become Jews in order to become followers of Christ?

Paul persuaded them to say “no.”

Adding the traditions of the Jewish faith, as a requirement would not further the advancement of God's kingdom.

In fact it would slow it down.

But, the old ways die hard, and there were still those in the ancient church who continued to say that it was necessary to become Jew in order to be a real Christian.

CLEARING OUT THE RUBBISH

So, Paul said in our lesson for today answers these so called "Judiazers" in this way,

"Look, I'm a Jew's Jew. I am a Hebrew of the Hebrews. I am more Jewish than anyone. I was circumcised on the 8th day and dedicated to God in the temple.

I studied under all the best rabbis. I was a Pharisee for heaven's sake. I not only knew the law. I practiced the law. And when I saw others deviating from the straight and narrow (like those Christians) I lowered the boom."

"But," says Paul, "things have changed in my life."

These things that I thought were so important are not important to me any more. In fact compared to knowing Christ these religious accomplishments are nothing more than rubbish.

Why did Paul change his religious practice?

It was because now he was focused solely on following Christ. And everything else ... even things that were good paled in comparison to that task.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF FAITH

Paul said that he no longer sought a righteousness of his own that came from the law. He now sought a righteousness that came from faith in Christ, a righteousness that came from above and not from below.

What does this mean?

Seeking our own righteousness through obeying the law means following God's rules so perfectly that we can stand blameless before God.

There's a big problem with that idea of course. We can't do it.

And sometimes the laws we choose are not even God's laws in the first place but laws made by people who want to retain their power.

And, ironically, sometimes the harder we try to attain righteousness on our own the more hypocritical we become.

We often become self-righteous instead of truly righteous.

THE GOAL OF GRACE

But, if we are saved by grace through faith, then out of *gratitude* we serve God and seek the will of God for our lives. And this process of serving out of gratitude is an ongoing process.

Listen to how Paul talks about it. He uses the language of aspiration. He says,

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection." "I want to share in his sufferings" and "somehow attain the resurrection from the dead."

Paul insists over and over again that we are saved by grace through faith. But, this faith did not cause him to lie down and become comfortable with his life.

This faith energized him and caused him to strive more than ever. Paul was always looking over the horizon, trying to see where God was leading him.

Like an athlete seeking to finish the race of faith, Paul had a goal. He was single minded. He was focused on the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. He was always ready to move in a new direction.

ALWAYS REFORMING

We have a way of talking about this in the Presbyterian Church and other Reformed Churches. We say that we are always reforming. We are always changing our priorities according to the Word of God by the power of the Spirit.

We are never satisfied to just repeat what our forefathers and foremothers have said about the faith. We have to learn what it means to be faithful to Christ today.

The grace of God in Christ compels us to ask, “What are our blind spots? In what situations do we need ears to hear the call of Christ?”

William Stacey Johnson tells a story about a church conference.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches was meeting in Ghana. During the conference delegates visited Elmina and Cape Coast castles.

In the seventeenth century these castles were places where captured Africans were shackled and kept before being shipped away and sold into slavery.

When the delegates climbed up the steps of Elmina’s women’s dungeon, they emerged to discover a Reformed chapel. And over the entrance to that chapel were written these words, “The Lord has chosen Zion.” (Psalm 132:13)

The delegates couldn’t believe it. For two centuries people who considered themselves to be the Lord’s chosen had worshipped in this space while directly beneath them human beings were chained in misery.

How could they have done that? How could these Reformed Christians been so spiritually and morally blind?

Their spiritual and moral blindness of the past should serve as a warning to us. It is easy for us to pass judgment on the sins of the past.

But, it is more difficult for us to see the log in our own eye. Make no mistake about it. We too are blind and deaf to what really matters in life. We, like Paul must always be striving to grow up to the grace that is ours in Christ Jesus.

The complete motto of the Reformed Church reads, “the church reformed and *always being reformed* in accordance with the Word of God.” (Italics mine)

Johnson points out that the phrasing of the motto is instructive “It is not that the church decides for itself what reform entails; rather, the church is always

in the process of being reformed as it responds to the dynamic voice of God's Word."

Paul realized that God hadn't finished with him yet. He was still being reformed by the power of the gospel. And the same is true for us as well.

NEW CHALLENGES

In every age the church is confronted with new challenges, and new controversies. And we have to discover how the gospel applies to those particular situations.

None of us say today that a person needs to become a Jew in order to become a Christian. That's not even an issue in our day. But, we do have other pressing issues.

Race relations, questions about human sexuality, the stewardship of the planet, violence against women, and questions of war and peace are just some of the issues that we are struggling with in the church and world today.

Some tell me that these issues are too political, that we shouldn't be talking about these things. But, history teaches us that if the church does not look at the issues of the day through the spectacles of Scripture, we sometimes become part of the problem instead of part of the solution.

More than that God in Christ is not just saving individuals. The Bible tells us that God in Christ is bringing in a new creation. God is in the process of remaking the world, and we get to help.

Like Paul we may not have all the answers. We don't know the mind of Christ. We haven't attained the perfection of the resurrection. But, that doesn't keep us from striving to learn. Indeed the grace of God in Jesus Christ compels us to learn.

A while back there was a campaign that asked a seemingly simple question, "What would Jesus do?"

I wonder how the Jewish Christians of Paul's day would have answered that question. Perhaps they would they have said, "Well, Jesus was a Jew. It just stands to reason that you have to become a Jew in order to be a follower of Jesus."

This was a question that Jesus hadn't asked or answered directly, and so early on the church had to answer this question.

What did it mean to be a follower of Christ? Should it be based on ritual and law or should it be based on faith and grace.

THE GOAL OF GRACE

The church chose faith and grace, and that made all the difference.

In answering the questions of our day we shouldn't try to put words in Jesus' mouth and make him say something that he didn't say. We shouldn't use Scripture as a club to try and beat our opponents into submission.

But, we should struggle to do God's will as revealed in Jesus Christ. That is our goal.

And whatever our answers may be to the questions of the day, one thing is certain. Our answers should be light on judgment and heavy on grace.

We should remember first and foremost that we have been saved by grace through faith, not by works and therefore we should be gracious toward others. When we run life's race it should always be toward the goal of grace. As the hymn puts it, "grace that is greater than all our sins."

I did an internship on the coast of North Carolina. And for exercise sometimes I would run on the beach.

Now whenever I ran, I always had a goal. I ran toward the pier in the distance.

Some of you know that on the beach distances are a little deceptive. That large pier in the distance may look close, but in reality it may be very far away. But, I found that if I kept my eyes on that pier, that goal I could run farther and faster.

My thought process went something like this,

"Just keep running Frank. That pier in the distance is getting closer. Just keep your eyes on the prize."

And most of the time I made it to my goal. It felt good.

But, sometimes I would make the mistake of looking back to see how far I had come. When I saw all the ground I would have to cover in order to make it back to my car, I became discouraged.

And I would say, "I've gone far enough for today. Maybe tomorrow I'll make it to the pier."

And then I would turn around and walk back without reaching my goal.

You might say that Christianity is a target-oriented game. And our target, what calls us upward and onward; the thing that encourages us to press on toward the mark is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

And that's why we have the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Sometimes in the middle of life's struggle we take our eyes off the goal.

We look back instead of looking up. We get discouraged. We want to quit.

In the sacrament Jesus calls us to once again to look up toward our heavenly calling. He gives us a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, a passion that calls us forward and gives us hope.

Body broken and blood shed are transformed by the power and grace of God into a hope that is eternal.

Let us once again share that hope together.

And let us run with perseverance the race that God has called us to run.

Amen.