

## **Knowing Christ, The Heart and Soul of Faith**

### **7. Christ Before Us**

Philippians 3:12-15

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#### **The fires in southern California**

This past week has been a very painful and terrifying one for so many families in southern California. We were so grateful to hear that Bob and Julia Merson's daughter, Suzanne and her husband Amin, and their daughter Hope are safe and sound and that their home was spared.

But we grieve with the congregation of Malibu Presbyterian church, a ministry similar to our own, who lost their entire campus. I appreciate what their pastor said about Christian's being a "resurrection people." Death is never the last word for those who know Christ. Whether that death be physical death...or the death of dreams, the death of accomplishments or anything we might have held dear. Those who know Christ are in fact a resurrection people. It is to that living Christ and His living word we now turn. Will you pray with me?

#### **Prayer**

*Lord Jesus, it's during times like this when we come to grips with what's really important. Lord, help us to make some more progress on sorting that out this morning. So that when that time comes for us, as the old gospel song says, some through the waters, some through the food, some through the fire, our developed instincts, our accumulated faith, our spiritual muscle memory will carry us through. For we pray in Jesus' strong name, Amen.*

#### **I want to know Christ**

Let's now return to Philippians 3, verse 10. We've heard it read to us earlier in the service. Let's now read it aloud together.

*<sup>10</sup>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, <sup>11</sup>and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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, <sup>14</sup>I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup>All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. <sup>16</sup>Only let us live up to what we have already attained.*

#### **The surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord**

Now this passage emerges from what Paul had said just a bit earlier. What he had said is one of the most dramatic statements of faith in the whole Bible in verses 7-9

<sup>7</sup>But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup>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 <sup>9</sup>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.

### **Ken Blanchard: “When God gets second place...”**

A week ago Friday at the *Lead Like Jesus* Seminar, which about two dozen men and women from MVPC attended, Ken Blanchard was one of the key note speakers. Many people know Ken Blanchard by the best-selling management book he wrote called, “The One Minute Manager.” Ken Blanchard said something that day that immediately burned into my personal hard drive. As preacher you’d like to deliver one of these every once in a while. And he delivered it! This is what he said: “When God gets second place in your life, He usually doesn’t get much time!” A few years ago, Ken Blanchard began sharing more publicly how he had begun to move from what he might term a “one-minute Christian,” to a “24 hour Christian.” He had been a nominal Christian for most of his life. He had known about Christ. He had admired Christ. He may even have truly worshipped Christ. Now, he had established a personal relationship with Christ...and it had begun to change his life and the focus of his work.

### **Jesus is lord of all**

What knowing Christ means is that Jesus is no longer just my favorite religious figure. Jesus is no longer just the Jesus of my religion. Jesus is not just the Jesus of my church. Jesus is the Lord of my life. That means I am allowing, I am asking, I am actively seeking Jesus to begin breaking out of just my spiritual life, into the office space, on to the trading floor, into the professional suite, and right there with me on the home front of my life.

### **It doesn’t happen automatically**

Putting Jesus first in your life doesn’t happen automatically. It happens when we put Him first. He doesn’t put Himself first in our lives. We put Him first. We do that by faith, intentionality, discipline, obedience, faithfulness, prayer and a lot of help from others who are seeking to do the same. That’s what church is supposed to be about; helping one another follow Christ, with Him up front, not ourselves. Now this is not an easy thing. In fact, Paul makes reference in this passage to three things that keep us from putting Christ first in our lives. Let’s talk about these for the next few moments...

#### **1. A feeling of failure.**

“Brothers,” he admits in v. 13, “I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it.” The fact is making Christ #1 in my life, holding Christ before me is not a one-time action. And it doesn’t seem to be permanent. Why?

Paul says in Romans 12:1 that we are to offer ourselves to God as a living sacrifice. This sounds great. But, as one preacher I heard said about this passage: “The problem with a living sacrifice is that it keeps crawling off the altar!”

I love Mexico Sunday here at MVPC. It’s one of the highlights of the year. Or those Sundays when we baptize our children. In those moments we feel so close to the Lord. We promise to do everything God says, no matter *what*...then “*what*” happens! And in a heartbeat Jesus falls out of first place. Kind of like the Cal football team the past week going from #2 to #18.

*“It knocks the Holy Spirit right out of you!”*

A few years ago the driveway out on Idlewood Court from our church had a very harsh bump just as you were leaving church. One of our most delightful older members at that time, Margaret Ashbrook, said to me one time, "We've got to get that thing fixed. You come to church and when you hit that bump it just knocks the Holy Spirit out of you!"

Life tends to knock the Holy Spirit out of you. And when that happens, you feel like a spiritual failure. That's why I'm so grateful for Paul's honesty in verse 12: *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.* If even the apostle Paul gets the Holy Spirit knocked out of him, it can happen to anybody! And it does, which leads us to the next thing that can keep me from putting Christ first in my life. And that is The Tyranny of the Past.

## **2. The tyranny of the past.**

The past can become a tyrant. The past can replay tapes of our failure. The past can accuse us. The past can contain unforgiven sin. The past can contain stuff we haven't forgiven in others. The past can contain regrets. The past can also contain faded glories. The past can be a virtual Antiques Road Show, with all kinds of stuff whose value doesn't really matter. It's just the fact that it's all there. And because it often takes up so much space on our hard drive, it makes it harder and harder to find any free space for Jesus. You wonder why Jesus isn't first in your life? You wonder why you don't sense his presence or feel him close? It's usually because there's no more room in your life. We're not main frames...we're lap tops! And we can only hold so much. And a lot of it is stuff from the past.

What does the Bible say about this tyranny of the past? Look at Philippians 3:14-15. It's one of the best single passages in the Bible and it speaks to both our feeling of failure as well as the tyranny of the past; both of which keep Christ from being #1 in our lives. *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 past can be the biggest obstacle to keeping Christ before you, keeping Him in the #1 place. Begin to drop it. In fact, I challenge you this morning, in prayer and in faith and with serious intention, with God's help, to drop something! Drop something you've been carrying. Drop it. And see if that doesn't free up some space in your heart. And then don't begin filling it with something random. Invite Christ to move into that little space where you forgave that sin, where you released that anger; where you let go of that regret. Invite Him to occupy that space, and invite Him help you press on for the prize of the upward... not the backward, not the sideways, not the downward, not even the inward...but the *upward* call of God in Christ Jesus! The third obstacle Paul refers to in making Christ first, in keeping Christ before me is Criticism of Others.

## **3. The criticism of others**

Look at verses 15-16. <sup>15</sup>*All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.* <sup>16</sup>*Only let us live up to what we have already attained.*

One of the most toxic waste products of intentional discipleship in the church is criticism of others. Jesus said in John 13:35 "*By this shall all (people) know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*"

Do we love one another enough to allow one another to be where they are in their journey with Christ?

Do we love one another enough to put differences aside, differences in how we express the faith, differences in how spiritual we seem to be; differences in our taste in worship music, so that all may know we all belong to Jesus?

In some ways these words are some of the most incisive, corrective and mission essential in the whole Bible. *“All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make known. Circle that word “God.” It will remind you who makes it clear. God will make it clear...! Now let’s wrap this with some personal application and some action...*

### **Applying this personally**

**Perhaps you feel like a failure.** You’ve tried and failed. You feel you just can’t trust the Lord just now. Life is too hard. Things are too difficult. You’ve prayed and no answers seem to come. You wonder if you’re doing it wrong. Just know this morning there are a lot of people in this room wrestling with the same thing. Let’s all say it in unison: *<sup>12</sup>Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect.*

**Perhaps you’re feeling tyrannized by the past.** The gentler term is baggage. But tyranny is probably more accurate. Because it dares us to just try moving forward, then says, “Hey buddy, hey girl, not so fast...!” From my own experience I have to say that in most cases you can’t just drop the past with a single gesture. But this morning, you can begin by loosening your grip on it. Take this moment, right now, to try easing your grip on something you’re holding onto from the past that you know is keeping you from moving forward in Christ. You know what it is. Ease that grip!!

**Perhaps you’re feeling criticized, or judged.** As your pastor, I’m always concerned what people may be relating to one another in this faith community called MVPC. By the grace and mercy of God I want to call us as a church this morning to a new level of grace and patience with one another; to a new level of acceptance of where people are in their faith journeys. Let’s keep Christ first, His love, His patience, His gentleness, His process, His timing, in each life, in each heart!