

Pursuing Jesus Together

Philippians 3:12-21

Introduction

Good morning! My name is Brad and I'm one of the pastors here. Today we are continuing in our sermon series on Philippians, which we summed up from the very beginning with the phrase, "Sharing in the Joys and Sorrows of the Gospel". It's kind of a strange subtitle, right? Like, aren't we supposed to title these things in such a way that people want to come hear about them?

Well, I hope that somehow this phrase is encouraging to you, not because you particularly like sorrows or something, but because you want to learn about God in a place where you get the whole story, not just, "Hey, believe in Jesus and you can have your best life now and every day can be a Friday." No, when it comes to sharing in the gospel, the sorrows always stand alongside the joys, and we are a church who embraces both.

Our passage for today is Philippians 3:12-21 if you would like to turn there in your Bibles; that's page 981 if you're using one of the Bibles in the chairs. Today's sermon is going to build on last Sunday's sermon in many ways. Since last week's title was "Knowing Jesus Together," this week's title is "Pursuing Jesus Together". Last week we considered Paul's message of how the most important thing in life is knowing Jesus Christ as Lord. So today the main idea goes like this: If knowing Jesus Christ as Lord is the most important thing in life, then we will pursue Jesus above everything else. I think today's passage shows us four ways we pursue Jesus together: by pressing on, thinking maturely, following examples, and looking ahead.

With that said, if you are able, please stand with me to honor the reading of God's word. Hear the word of the Lord:

12 Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But 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 upward call of God in Christ Jesus. 15 Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. 16 Only let us hold true to what we have attained. 17 Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those

who walk according to the example you have in us. 18 For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.
Philippians 3:12-21

May the Word preached here today echo among the nations. And all God's people said, *Amen*. You may be seated.

Exposition

Anyone here ever played the game Would You Rather? It's a simple concept really. You're given two really terrible options and you have to answer the question, "Would you rather...?" Just to give you a little taste...

- Would you rather be forced to wear wet socks for the rest of your life or be allowed to wash your hair only once a year?
- Would you rather only be able to whisper everything or only be able to shout everything?
- Would you rather immerse yourself in a bathtub of spiders or a bathtub of tobacco spit?¹

As you can see, it's a pretty crazy game. I'm usually not very fun playing it because I just say, "I wouldn't do either of those things!" Well, Philippians 3 is kind of like a real-life, spiritual version of Would You Rather. Paul wrote in such a way that the Philippians were forced to wrestle with a decision between two really terrible spiritual realities. Last week we discussed the first option, which was seeking to be right with God by keeping the rules. We might call this "law". This week we're going to see that Paul addresses a second option, which is seeking to be right with God by disregarding the rules. We might call this "license".

Law and license are our world's best options when it comes to making ourselves right with God, getting to heaven, being a good person. But these are actually *horrible* options because neither of them can come anywhere close to making us right with God. So would you rather miss the point by keeping all rules or by disregarding the rules?

¹ Javier Moreno, "The Toughest Game of 'Would You Rather' You Will Ever Play," https://www.buzzfeed.com/javiermoreno/the-toughest-game-of-would-you-rather-you-will-ever-play?utm_term=.cc9gllkkKr#.tkDMAAnwo

My hope is that today everyone in this room will be resolved to say, “I won’t do either of those things! I’d rather go about this God’s way.”² We saw Paul describe this last week when he wrote,

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count 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 that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith Philippians 3:8-9

If you remember I illustrated this point last week by stacking up a pile of books and diplomas that represented Paul’s accomplishments before coming to Christ--things he trusted in to make him right with God--and I threw them on the floor to represent Paul trusting in Jesus alone to make him right with God. This is our good news in a world that’s working itself to death:

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. Ephesians 2:8-9

You and I contribute nothing to making ourselves right with God. If we did, we could brag about it, instead of bragging about how Jesus contributed everything for us when he died on the cross. The Bible says we were “dead in our trespasses and sins” before we came to Christ--we were corpses.³ A corpse can’t wave for help! That’s why God gets all the credit for coming to us and saving us.

Now, the church in many centuries has been hesitant to say it like that. Why? Because people might just take advantage of God’s grace; they might use their “faith” as an excuse to do whatever they want, as a license to sin. Paul knew this, but he proclaimed the good news anyway. Only he always proclaimed the mysterious reality of God’s salvation alongside the concrete evidence of our obedience. That’s why he continued in Ephesians 2,

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:10

² A.T. Robertson, *Paul’s Joy in Christ: Studies in Philippians*, 109, 115

³ Ephesians 2:1

I. We Pursue Jesus Together By Pressing On - vv. 12-14

And that's why there's such a turn in Philippians 3: Paul moved from knowing Jesus because it all depends on him, to pursuing Jesus as though it all depends on us. It's one of those seemingly glaring contradictions that we embrace in the Christian faith. If we rest on Jesus for salvation, then let us *strive* to enter that rest.⁴

Although grace is opposed to earning, it is not opposed to effort.⁵ How do we make that effort? First, Paul said, by pressing on. He began in verse 12:

12 Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But 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 upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Philippians 3:12-14

If anyone in the history of the world could have claimed that they had “arrived” as a Christian, it was Paul. But that's actually the opposite of what we see here. There is a holy dissatisfaction, a fierce longing for more of Jesus.⁶ And that's one of the clearest signs of a person really walking with Jesus--you want *more of him!*

This stood in great contrast to another group of so-called “Christians” who were a threat to the Philippians. These were called Gnostics who believed that once the mind had been illumined and the soul redeemed with the divine knowledge of salvation, the body didn't matter anymore. In other words, you could do whatever you wanted to physically without it affecting you spiritually.⁷ A commitment to that way of thinking shows one thing very clearly: you never belonged to Jesus in the first place!

Listen to what made Paul press on instead of just give in to the urges of his body: “I press on to make it my own, *because Christ Jesus has made me his own.*” It's ‘I am not my own, Jesus bought me with a price, so I'm gonna honor him with my body!’⁸ The motivation behind how I pursue Jesus flows out of how Jesus pursues me.⁹

⁴ Hebrews 4:11

⁵ Dallas Willard via Matt Chandler, *To Live is Christ, To Die is Gain*, 126-127

⁶ R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon: The Fellowship of the Gospel and the Supremacy of Christ*, Loc 2370-2376

⁷ Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 165-166

⁸ 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

⁹ Chandler, 112

There was a famous race in 1954 known as the Miracle Mile in which Olympic runner John Landy lost focus for just an instant and gave in to the temptation to look back at his rival Roger Bannister, which slowed him down just enough to lose the race. Sometimes our struggle to press on in pursuing Jesus comes because we're looking backward instead of forward.

For many of us, this means giving in to the guilt and regret of past failures; believing the toxic lie that we'll never change. For others, this could mean looking back and resting on old milestones in your spiritual life. Often in the church we make *everything* revolve around the day of our conversion, so no wonder the church struggles to move forward--we're looking back!¹⁰ I don't know that God cares that much about the decision I made twenty years ago to walk an aisle, or the decision I made to serve as a missionary ten years ago--what am I choosing today, who am I pursuing today?!

This is the sense we get from Paul when he said he did one thing: "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on..." He wasn't going to be satisfied with being God's preeminent Apostle and missionary and theologian.¹¹ No, he was going to do one thing: *pursue Jesus*.

II. We Pursue Jesus Together By Thinking Maturely - vv. 15-16

Although pressing on in his pursuit of knowing Jesus was the heartbeat of Paul's message here, he mentioned three more ways in which we pursue Jesus together. The next is by thinking maturely. Look with me at verse 15:

15 *Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. 16 Only let us hold true to what we have attained.*
Philippians 3:15-16

Whether or not it had crept into the church at Philippi, as we mentioned earlier there was a movement of people who felt they had "arrived" because of their divine knowledge. They claimed they had completely overcome sin and arrived at true maturity--essentially heaven on earth.¹² But Paul said, 'That's not mature thinking at all!' Maybe if the prize is just not sinning anymore--which is often how we go about growing spiritually, right? By seeking to "manage" or "control" our imperfections in our own

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 3:18, NASB

¹¹ Hughes, Loc 2426-2432

¹² Hughes, Loc 2363-2366

strength.¹³ But if the prize is Jesus himself, then we haven't arrived until we're with him face to face forever!

One of the most meaningful ways I began to learn this was when Katie and I were walking through premarital counseling with Lynn and Suzanne. They said, "Because your relationship with God can always grow from glory to glory, your relationship with your spouse can always grow from glory to glory." This way of thinking was based on 2 Corinthians 3:18, which says,

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. 2 Corinthians 3:18

Mature thinking in the Christian life is not, 'Man, I've got this all figured out.' That's why I'm so quick to share with you my ongoing struggles; it fights against the natural human tendency to assume that I've arrived because I'm the one up front. No, it's the opposite! Coming closer to Jesus means the light of his glory reveals more of your mess.

That's why in the assessment of sent ones the primary thing we look for is growing self-awareness--because growth in self-awareness is growth in maturity. It's holding "true to what we have attained" instead of trying to be something we're not. It's being honest about where we're at, but not wanting to stay there.

III. We Pursue Jesus Together By Following Examples - vv. 17-19

This is complicated stuff, almost like another contradiction. But God is committed to helping us grow, and he will reveal the places where we're not thinking maturely. He does this in part through one another--remember, we pursue Jesus *together*. A third way in which we do that is by following examples. Paul continued in verse 17,

17 Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. Philippians 3:17

I don't know about you, but when I first encountered instances of Paul telling people to imitate him, it made me think he must have been the perfect Christian (or at least thought he was). But, remember, a big reason why Paul is a mature example to follow is because he knows he hasn't arrived yet. Need a picture of what it means to pursue

¹³ Chandler, 106

Jesus above everything else? Look at people like Paul and Timothy and Epaphroditus.¹⁴ God has graciously given us the ability to observe them through the testimony of this book. But he has also graciously provided real-life examples all around us.¹⁵

A couple weeks ago I talked about the importance of having a discipler in your life, and being a discipler to others. And as important as that is, it's a lot to put on one person. That's why that kind of unique relationship must be supplemented with the examples of everyday people God has placed around you.

For me personally, for an example of pursuing Jesus with character I look to my friend Robbie Gouge. For an example of pursuing Jesus with purity I look to my wife Katie. For an example of pursuing Jesus with physical health I look to my pastor Jason Hunsucker. For an example of pursuing Jesus with faithfulness I look to my worship leader Jason Crigler. For an example of pursuing Jesus with hospitality I look to my Nepali sister Dilmya Rai. I could go on and on!

The common theme among all these people isn't just they're cool and I like to be around them; it's that they all are pursuing Jesus. And if I'm going to pursue Jesus, and help others pursue Jesus, I've got to be around people who pursue Jesus. Otherwise, I'm about one bad day away from wandering off. Paul warned all the Philippians of such danger:

18 For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. Philippians 3:18-19

It's tempting here as a preacher to characterize these people as nasty Orks bubbling up from the bowels of earth who just want to eat the man-flesh of any poor, unsuspecting Christian who comes along--but I don't think these people were "all that bad" to the physical eye. No one cries over Orks. But good people, Christian-like people, who are so close to the kingdom or who perhaps even claim to be in the kingdom, when they walk in deceit it's enough to break your heart. This is why Paul literally cried as he wrote about them.¹⁶ He describes them with five different phrases:

- First was "enemies of the cross of Christ". In living as though salvation had nothing to do with the body, they unknowingly attacked the whole reason why

¹⁴ Hughes, Loc 2519-2521

¹⁵ Martin, 163-164

¹⁶ Hughes, Loc 2546-2547

Jesus had a real body and died a real death on the cross and rose with a real resurrected body and is in heaven interceding for us with a real body.

- Second, Paul said, “Their end is destruction”. They were walking in a way that seemed right to them, but the end would lead to death and separation from God.¹⁷
- Third, “their god is their belly”. This wasn’t so much a reference to their value of food, but their being ruled by whatever the latest urge and whim rose within them.¹⁸
- Fourth, “they glory in their shame”. Because they saw no consequences in what they did with their bodies, they took delight in sexual thoughts and actions that should have made them ashamed.¹⁹
- Fifth, Paul concluded that their “minds [were] set on earthly things”. They were, in effect, like my childhood dog Snowball. Snowball was a beautiful, snow-white husky who we offered the thrills of dog heaven: access to the house, all the leftovers he could eat, and children who wanted to pet him constantly. But Snowball loved one thing more than anything else: rolling around in manure. Everyday he would meet us on the porch covered in it. And you know what we had to do? Get rid of him! Snowball traded the treasure of dog heaven to satisfy one weird urge--and it cost him everything!

IV. We Pursue Jesus Together By Looking Ahead - vv. 20-21

Let me get a little bit old fashioned here and just say, if you’ve been squirming inwardly at the thought that these people’s descriptions are also describing you, then let me plead with you on behalf of Christ--admit it, dear friend, and run to Jesus! What is a little embarrassment, what is a little inconvenience, what is the loss of a secret sin compared to the hand Jesus offers you both now and forever? Why pretend to be of the kingdom when you’re living of the earth? For the Christian,

our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. Philippians 3:20-21

Paul summed up chapter 3 with the powerful reminder that we pursue Jesus together by looking ahead. There are certainly things of earth that we love. Christians can enjoy the

¹⁷ Proverbs 14:12; Romans 6:21

¹⁸ Hughes, Loc 2556-2562; Martin, 165-166

¹⁹ Hughes, Loc 2562-2563; Martin, 165-166

Derby as much as anyone else! But all such things point us to the true tríflecta, the real champion, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The same was true for the Philippians, living in a world where it had been declared that the Roman caesar was officially titled the “universal savior of mankind”.²⁰ Paul said, ‘No way, we are citizens of another kingdom, and from it we await a *Savior!* And this Savior not only has the power to change our socio-political situation, but to change our whole being.’ This is where the great pursuit leads. Just as Jesus’ resurrection enables us to rise spiritually from the dead, Jesus’ resurrected life will enable us to *keep on living* with him forever.²¹ In other words,

Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. 1 Corinthians 15:49

Conclusion

Not that we have already obtained this, church, or are already perfect, but let’s press on to make it our own, because Jesus Christ has made us his own.

On the night he was betrayed, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, broke it and gave it to his disciples and said to them, “This is my body, which is broken for you; eat this in remembrance of me.” He also took a cup of wine, and after blessing it, gave it to his disciples and said, “This cup is the new covenant marked by the shedding of my blood. For as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you announce the Lord’s death until he returns.” **We are announcing that Jesus Christ is alive and pursuing us right here, right now.**

Our tradition here at Antioch is to come forward and break off a piece of bread and dip it in the juice. There will be stations here in the front; gluten-free bread will be available to my left, your right. If you’re a baptized believer, come and remember what Jesus has done for you. If you’re a believer but not yet baptized, let us know so we can help prepare you for baptism and communion. If you’re not a Christian, this sacred symbol is not for you, but rather than taking communion, we encourage you to take Christ. He has made himself available to you this very moment. There will be pastors in the back and people to pray with you on the sides. Let’s pray.

²⁰ Martin, 167-168

²¹ Hughes, Loc 2611-2614

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