

Who Am I?

Philippians 3:7-11

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In this study we are looking at Philippians 3 which is Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. In this particular passage Paul is no longer taking an overhead look. In chapter one and two Paul has been kind of like a camera in a press box at a football game where he has been overlooking the field and talking about some broad subjects. Beginning in chapter three it's like he has moved down field to a sidelines camera or that camera that swings across the top of the field nowadays. He is really trying to enter into the spiritual battle and what's going on in the church at Philippi. I suggest to you that he is entering into where you and I live in terms of our relationship with Christ. The Apostle Paul writes in Philippians 3:7-11,

[7] But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. [8] Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. 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— [10] that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, [11] that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Here ends the reading of God's Word. The grass withers, the flower fades but the Word of our God stands forever.

I remember the story of a little girl who was attending her first wedding. She was sitting in the pew beside her mother taking it all in and she tugged on her mother's dress and asked "Why is that lady up there wearing white?" Her mother said, "Honey, that's the bride and she's wearing white because that's the color of happiness because this is the happiest day of her life." The little girl looked and watched for a minute and finally tugged again at her mother's dress and said "Mommy, then why is that man standing next to her wearing black?" She obviously picked up on a very strong contrast in the service and wondered what it meant and wanted to understand it.

I would say that is precisely what the Apostle Paul does in his passage because he's picking up on a strong contrast between what he is seeing occur in the church in Philippi and what needs to be occurring. It is something that is very wrong and he is going to speak to it. It will be a message that will have to be very strong and authoritative. It's like this young police officer who was in training and his instructor said to him "Son, what would you do if you ever had to arrest your mother?" The young man thought for a minute and said "I'd call in back up." That's probably what I would need to do too if ever I tried to arrest my mother.

Once there was a woman who was teaching Sunday school to five and six year olds and she was teaching them about the Ten Commandments. She came to the fifth commandment which is to honor your father and mother. After discussing that commandment with them she asked them "Do you know where in the Bible it talks about how you should treat your brother and sister?" One of the little boys in the back raised his hand and said "Thou shall not kill." Yes, he had a problem relating to his siblings and he needed something that was strong and authoritative to keep him on the right track, as did that police officer.

In this study we're looking at a passage where Paul is speaking very strong and authoritatively. He is very serious because he is facing a serious problem because the people in Philippi, as is in our churches today, there is this real temptation for people to trust in their own assets, their own merits, their own accomplishments, their own abilities, or their gains in life – things that have to do with their appearances, nationalities, where they live, their educational level. They wanted to count up those gains in life that in a sense helped to form their own identity, who they were as people which is why I titled the sermon "Who Am I?" We have that same tendency to want to see our lives as the sum total of our accomplishments, our blessings of what we've done. That can be especially dangerous in the area of salvation.

The first word in Philippians 3:7 is "but" and it's a very strong aversive to what Paul has been saying in verses 1 to 6. In this passage he sets up a strong contrast and he wants to speak with strong authority as he is talking to his friends in the city of Philippi. The Philippians were being harassed by a group of teachers called Judaizers. The Judaizers were members of the church professing a belief in Christ but they also believed to really please God you would have to be circumcised, engaging in other Jewish rituals. The Apostle Paul was alarmed because many people were buying into this perspective.

I remember when I was in college I was attending a seminar that was dealing with the issues of salvation and a Campus Crusade staff member who was only a few years older than me made a statement that still sticks with me because I think he was really right. He said "All of us deeply want to help God with our salvation." We want to prove ourselves. We want to take credit and perhaps know that we really weren't quite as bad as others are. We want to help God with

our salvation and the problem is when we seek to help God with our salvation we are undermining the sufficiency of God's grace.

In fact in Galatians 5:4 Paul uses the phrase "you have fallen from grace" and what he means is you by adding works to salvation have fallen from the grace principle. No longer is grace sufficient because you want to add your works to it. Paul's concern is so great that if you look back in Philippians 3 he speaks very provocatively and strongly about this. In Philippians 3:2 he calls these Judaizers "dogs" and in Jewish culture to call professing Christians dogs was very offensive. They weren't referring to the dogs you have at home as a pet. He was referring to the savage dogs that roam the street in early Palestine in the first century. It is a very graphic image. You dogs, you evil doers, you mutilators of the flesh are what Paul calls them. How do you get more graphic than that when he is speaking about circumcision? He really wanted to rattle the cages of these Philippian Christians to help them understand how serious this was.

To those who were requiring circumcision Paul goes on to say something even more provocative. He says "We are the circumcision" hint, you're not because we trust Christ alone. We worship the true God. We glory in Christ. We put no confidence in the flesh. We are the circumcision. It is very strong language because the Apostle Paul refused to stand on his own merit and boast of his assets before his heavenly Father, not because he didn't have them. The Apostle Paul had the assets, the rituals, the relatives so to speak, the regulations, the religious fervor (zeal), the righteousness, at least humanly speaking he had sufficient righteousness. He had assets out of the window in terms of what might commend him before God but he refused to boast of those.

What Paul says in Philippians 3:7 is quite startling. It says *[7] But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.* The word counted is a past perfect word and refers to some event in the past and almost assuredly he is talking about his conversion. In Acts 9 it is recorded that Paul was on the road to Damascus going to Jerusalem to persecute Christians when Jesus showed up and struck with a blazing light that knocked him to the ground and blinded him temporarily. At that moment he heard Jesus speaking saying "Saul, Saul who do you persecute? You persecute Me!" From that point on Paul's life was dramatically changed because rather than thinking in terms of his assets, suddenly those gains (assets) he had proved useless. He realized a Hebrew of Hebrews didn't mean much before the Lord of Lords. He found out that his own righteousness was absolutely woeful when standing next to Divine Perfection.

Jesus said "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees you'll no wise enter into the Kingdom of heaven." That's a colloquial way of saying unless you're perfect because that's who was considered perfect although they really weren't. So to exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees was way beyond what a human could reasonably do. In Isaiah 6 we see a similar picture of a prophet seeing a vision of God. Isaiah 6:1 and 5 it says

[1] In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. (And when Isaiah was touched by the holiness of God, he says...) [5] And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

Certainly, the Apostle Paul would agree with the third stanza of the song Rock of Ages that says "Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to the cross I cling; Naked, come to Thee for dress; Helpless look to Thee for grace..." The Apostle Paul understood that all he brought in terms of his human righteousness proved useless but even more they proved detrimental. Paul says "I count everything as loss" and he gives a vivid picture. That word loss is really interesting. It comes from the Greek word *zēmian* and that's the only place the Apostle Paul ever uses the word loss. This word is used one other time in the New Testament.

Luke uses this word loss in Acts 27 when he is describing the Apostle Paul's ship ride to Rome. It was when Paul was sailing to Rome when a storm hit and it was a catastrophic storm that went on for days and days. The crew on his ship grew hopeless thinking that they were going to drown and the ship would be destroyed. Luke uses the word loss in Acts to describe the cargo because in that occasion the cargo was eventually thrown overboard, but to keep the cargo on board would have been disaster. If they had kept the cargo on board it would have dragged the ship down and caused it to be destroyed so they jettison the cargo. That was the picture of loss. It wasn't merely useless it was detrimental.

In other words, Paul would say my assets, my pluses don't just become zeros but they become minuses. My gains aren't just useless they are actually liabilities. Why does Paul say that? Look at it this way. If you were to stand before God today and He were to ask you "Why should I let you in heaven?" what would be your response. Many of us probably originally would have responded "I'm a pretty good person. I've been faithful to my church, my spouse and family. I've worked hard. I'm a pretty good person." Paul says that response is disastrous because you're essentially telling God to forget Jesus and for Him to evaluate you based on your works. We may not say that arrogantly but we're basically saying that we want to be judged based on what we have done. We learn quickly in the Bible that none of us even live up to our own standards, much less God's perfect standards.

For me to say when presented with the Gospel "I'm a pretty good guy when it comes to salvation" is really a disaster. It's a loss, a liability. It's me taking a test I can never pass or entering a playing field I should never enter when I say my good deeds are probably going to be enough. We are asking God to judge by a standard we can't possibly meet and that's what the Apostle Paul understood. He understood the inadequacies of ourselves and he didn't want these Philippians to be lured into thinking we could believe in Jesus and still trust in our own record

because salvation would never come that way. He learned the remedy in the Gospel.

The remedy of the Gospel was that on that road to Damascus when Paul saw that he must do two things. First he saw his need to reject his own righteousness as a ground for pleasing God. That can be hard for us because some of us are pretty good. Some of us believe that we're okay but Paul knew he wasn't. He must decide with conviction, he thought that his gains and assets were a loss. He was to count it as rubbish. The King James Version actually uses the word dung. It was fit only to be thrown away. He needed to leave the ship of his own assets, jump into the water and swim into the arms of Jesus. He was to turn from sin and embrace Jesus alone as his Lord and Savior. He was to trust in Jesus' atoning death who took the penalty for his sin and paved the way to coming to Christ and coming to heaven. That is what he needed to do to jettison his own righteousness as grounds for pleasing God.

Secondly, he needed to rely on the righteousness of Someone Else. A wonderful verse is that in Philippians 3:9 when Paul says *[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—* After the storm cleared and Paul is lying on the beach in the arms of Jesus he wanted to realize the righteousness he needed to get to heaven he would find in the Lord Jesus Himself. It was the righteousness that Jesus had achieved on earth as He had lived a perfect life and in an astonishing way God would credit that righteousness to Paul's account. Theologians speak of that righteousness being imputed to us so that when I stand before that door in heaven and God asks me why He should let me in, my first answer is You shouldn't but because I have trusted in Christ, clothed with His righteousness then that would be my only grounds of entry into heaven. Paul understood how crucial this was that the Philippians not water it down by their highly moralistic religions and highly moralistic denominations. It was that they needed to trust in their need for Christ.

A couple of verses point to this. The first is I Corinthians 1:30 which says *[30] And because of him (God) you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.* He is our righteousness. II Corinthians 5:21 says *[21] For our sake he made him (Christ) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* That is an astonishing blessing. It's unbelievable and Paul insisted that his friends at Philippi not miss this crucial point. Paul was interested in the Gospel and interested in their salvation. If you look on into this passage we see that Paul was also interested in their hearts and lives as well by what he said.

So this is not only Paul speaking to a danger to salvation but a danger to spiritual life. The Judaizers were perhaps inadvertently tempting their listeners to misplace their priorities, to center their lives in all the wrong places. Paul challenges his readers not to just think about salvation but what happens after

that – the days, months, years. What will be our priority then? The Apostle Paul wants us to think carefully because all of us are moving on in life and this truth has gripped me more and more as the years have passed me. For my wife and I are children are all married and off making families of their own. The years are pushing by and I suddenly realize there are more years behind me than in front of me unless I live to 117 and I don't intend to live that long. It gives us cause to think.

I've also had the privilege in the pastoral care area to work with some wonderful, more seasoned members of our church. I heard that we're not getting older we're just adding years to our lives but as all of us grow older and more seasoned we begin to think more and more about where we are and what the past has held in our lives. This is a passage that is really applicable to those who are at the beginning of life, like the teenagers here who are starting to make crucial decisions. All this has helped me come to realize this truth; the passing years provide increasing danger for our spiritual lives.

Most of us when we're younger and have children to feed and other responsibilities, it's hard to always fulfill the obligations but we pray because we don't know what's around the corner. There is a lot of energy, intensity but as we grow older and years pass it can become increasingly dangerous for our spiritual life as believers. The Bible is filled with stories of heroes. Dr. Robert Clinton wrote a book on leadership when he analyzed a thousand Biblical characters and he estimates that only about thirty percent of them ended well. Many started off well like Gideon but crashed at the end. We think of King Saul, King Solomon, King Jehoshaphat, King Asa, Uzziah and others who allowed at the end of their lives idolatry or immorality or other things to come in after they had been used wonderfully by God. They didn't finish well.

The key is that the longer we live the more tempting it is for two things to happen. One is to be distracted by our assets. By this I don't mean great wealth or lots of money but just all the accomplishments and the achievements of life. It's so easy that if we're not careful those will become our identity. They can eventually define who we are and that may be tragic. It may be an award we received for a job well done or promotions that have come on our job. It may have been the successes of our career or the successes of our children or things that are noteworthy that we look back on. We look at them as part of the assets that we contributed and they can become our identity.

We have been watching the 2012 Olympics this week like many of you. We enjoyed watching some of the incredible exploits of many very young athletes. Some are sophomores and seniors in high school who are at the top of their form and who are the best athletes in their sport in the whole world. There have been young people in their early college years who are carrying home gold, silver and bronze medals. I can tell you with almost a certainty that with that kind of accomplishment at a young age will certainly mark their life forever. It will

probably become their identity and in a way that is very sad. It's kind of pitiful when you have hit your peak at age 17, 19 or 23 and that temptation is there really for most of us. Somewhere in our life when we have reached a pinnacle or hallmark that, that becomes our identity and we take pride in that. It's easy for these things to define us, for our lives to be seen as the sum total of all that we have done. That's very sad.

It's even deeper than that for the second thing that can happen is we can be discouraged by our losses. As we grow older invariably things begin to happen in three areas of life. In three areas of life we can be defined. One is by our expectations. It's easy as years pass to start them out with great expectations about what would happen but as life matures and things move on suddenly we realize many of our expectations are not being met. You know those things that didn't work out the way we had hoped. Perhaps marriage wasn't as happy as we had hoped or our children weren't as successful as we thought they would be. Perhaps that job that had so much promise became routine and humdrum and we never got much satisfaction there. We had dreams of a glorious retirement but that hasn't worked out. Maybe our health has caused problems along the way and those expectations haven't turned out the way we had hoped. That can become our identity or what marks us and that's very sad.

Perhaps it might not be expectations but pain. This is another area that can be very crippling. Our physical decline naturally comes as we grow older. Aches and pains begin to come and suddenly we realize we may be experiencing things that won't go away. Perhaps the medical problems become quite serious and can very much become our identity and that's very sad. Perhaps it's not physical pain but emotional pain. A few years ago I was speaking with a man in this area of emotional pain who had lost a child when his child was 12 in an accident. As I talked with him you could still see the bitterness, anger and the frustration of losing his son. I found it interesting to find out that this happened to him 20 years before and yet it still marked this man. It was his identity. He was forever seeing himself as a bereaved parent and that was sad. I don't want to in any way diminish the tragedy of losing a child. It's something that I hope will never happen to me and I know it's happened to some of you in our congregation but after 20 years this man was still angry with God for what had happened in his life and his whole life was marked by that moment when his son had drowned. It was very sad.

So it may be expectations or pain that becomes our identity but thirdly it may be fears. This is a third big area of our lives. There are fears about the change in culture, of living alone, not having enough financial resources to live on or fears for ourselves and our families. My brother in law is a pastor in Virginia and one day he was counseling a lady who had suddenly started experiencing panic attacks. He couldn't figure out what was going on because she was happily married, her children were fairly well adjusted and he told her to get a physical with a doctor. There were no medical problems and then during a conversation

with her he realized that she was addicted to watching the news. She had it on her TV all day long at home and during that particular time there was a lot of tragedy going on where many Americans were overseas who had been killed or persecuted and a lot of suffering. Some days when you watch the news it's very graphic and this lady had developed panic attacks. My brother in law said to her "Stop watching the TV." That was his remedy because these fears were beginning to define her. They were becoming her identity. They were the fears of the unknown, about the future, of what might happen to herself or her family.

These losses, like gains, can do much to distract us from what Paul wants us focused on. We see this in Philippians 3:10 when Paul says *[10] that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.* Here Paul is modeling for you and me, lifetime goals that should define our identity as we walk and live among our friends, fellow students, co-workers or in our families especially as we grow older in the faith and are tempted to wander away. He proclaims that we should increasingly be obsessed, not with our assets, liabilities or losses, but with Christ. It's fascinating that the Apostle Paul who once was a proud, self-righteous, brilliant, confident scholar, who applauded Stephen's stoning and sought to destroy the church but now was obsessed with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul challenges us to come to know Christ, not just to know about Him but to know Him in an intimate, personal way that grows and to have an intimate knowledge with Him. He wants us to remember that this little life that we live is just the first few letters of the preface of an infinitely long book that will describe our relationship with Christ. We will walk with Him, talk with Him, share with Him and worship Him for all eternity. If that is true in eternity why not let it mark our lives in what James calls a vapor. Our life will come and go so quickly as most of us who are beginning to grow older, realize. May we seek above all else to know Christ.

Secondly may we seek to know His power, not for our benefit but that the power of God might be manifested through us and our prayer life, our witnessing and in our ability to turn away from temptation, in our sharing with others, our leadership, our service. May it not be something I just do on my own but that God would work through me because I will need His power especially toward the end. My powers decrease and may His powers increase so that if some day I'm ever limited to a bed in a nursing home but have a clear enough mind to keep praying that I can still have a powerful impact on the Kingdom because I'm dedicated to Christ. I'm praying for the Kingdom and for those that might come through my room that I might be a powerful blessing to them, even though I may not be able to go to church any more. I may not be able to get up and move around but the power of God is in me because I know Christ and His power. Paul would spend much of his latter ministry restrained, in jail cells, under the watch of guards and yet he was still changing the world by his letters and his witness. Why? It was because of the power of God in him.

We need to know Christ, know His power and then we're to share in His sufferings. You might be thinking, "I like the knowing Christ part and knowing His power part but I don't know about this sharing in sufferings." I can promise you that the Apostle Paul was not a masochist. The Apostle Paul did not get his jollies anticipating the time he would get a flogging from the Jews or the next time he'd be locked between two Roman guards. That's not Paul at all but he is making a very profound statement because I'm convinced that his focus is not the sufferings but is the sharing. He knows that as he walks along with Christ, as with us, there will be times that he will not get his way because he is following Christ. There will be times he'll have to turn away from temptation. He would really like to do this over here but he knows because of Christ he needs to turn away. He knows there will be times when he must love the unlovable, when he must forgive the unforgiveable. There will be times when he faces the loss of friends. He'll experience ridicule because of his testimony for Christ and eventually he'll experience martyrdom.

That may not be our experience here but Paul knew that he would suffer for Christ. His focus isn't so much on the suffering as in the sharing of the sufferings. That suffering is what brings the greatest pleasure, fulfillment, camaraderie and companionship with Christ. We have a wonderful example of that in our congregation because we have a bonafide WWII hero. I asked him if I could use this illustration. Ken Faulkner is one of our members who fought during WWII. He landed on Normandy about a month after D-Day. He together with his squad battled back through the hedgerows of Northern France until finally they reached Paris. In the midst of this all the leaders over him were killed and he ended up leading his outfit to Paris.

I ate lunch with him last year and he said he remembers that precise moment when they were walking between two hedgerows and encountered their first enemy fire. He said it was a machine gun nest that was behind a building and remembered diving into this ditch. What was profound to me was he told me the name of the guy in front of him in the ditch and the guy behind him in the ditch. He knew exactly those circumstances and he told me how he called in some mortar fire, taking out the machine gun nest and being able to move on. Three or four years ago I had the chance to be at Ken's 90th birthday and there were several gentlemen sitting around that I didn't know. As I was introduced I realized these were the men that fought with him in the hedgerows of Northern France, sixty years earlier and they are still his best friends. They commune on a level that few people reach. They don't come from the same backgrounds but they shared in suffering together and that forged a profound friendship.

Some of you have perhaps tasted that through an athletic team that has done battle together and you've made lifelong friends. It's not necessarily because you have shared together but you suffered together. That's Paul's point in this passage. It's when we have the privilege of beginning to suffer for Christ at

whatever level, we have the privilege of coming to know Christ and be intimate with Him in a way that few others will ever experience. Some of you know that already from your own background. Paul knows that when we share in His sufferings we'll have the kind of intimacy with Him that is impossible any other way.

Just as Paul wants us to walk closely with Christ knowing both the joys and sufferings of Christ, so he would challenge us to make sure that our focus and identity doesn't come from our assets, as wonderful as they are. There is nothing wrong with the assets but we need to allow Him to be our identity. So that I won't be discouraged when my retirement savings begins to plummet or when politicians are elected in Washington that I don't like or when my spouse eventually leaves through death or when my health begins to break. As bad as that is in a way it doesn't really matter because I am sharing with Christ and walking with Him and that's when, my friends, life really begins. I dare say that many of us have never reached that place yet. Life has never really begun the way it can in your relationship with Christ.

I challenge you as you're contemplating these words in this passage that you say "Lord, have I really taken a stand for You so that I really might share in a relationship with You because that's what I will have for all eternity." May that mark my identity now. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus I thank You so much for the privilege of knowing that You care so much about us. You not only give us the opportunity of coming to Christ in salvation but You walk with us closely every day and allow us to share not only in glorious blessings but You walk with us through difficult times, trials and tribulation. Lord, I pray that none of that would mark our identity or eventually define who we are but as the Apostle Paul, we would thrive and be obsessed with knowing You, Your power and even perhaps sharing in sufferings for Christ, knowing then fellowship with You as really begun. I rejoice in the privilege of serving alongside Your people and I pray that You would continue to mature us as Your people and use us Lord for Your glory. We thank You and pray in Jesus' Name and for His Sake, Amen.

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