



## CUTTING THROUGH TO JOY

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September 18, 2016

The parents' instructional tape for Driver's Ed. that I had to use in teaching my son, Aaron, how to drive suggested saying, when you are approaching a car parked on the side of your road, "Spy the way forward up to the light" rather than, "Don't hit that car!" Do you know why? Because the student focuses on what you tell them to and eyes riveted on the car they aren't supposed to hit isn't as good as eyes riveted on the way forward.

In the passage we come to this morning - Paul, I think, doesn't strictly follow that advice. He says both. He says, "Spy the way forward," and "Don't hit that car!" In the process he makes some very cutting remarks. But in the end his cutting remarks, I would suggest, are more about cutting a swathe or a trail from fatigue and criticism in life to true joy and strength. I know I'd like to cut out fatigue and criticism from my life and move into joy and strength. Maybe you do, too, so let's look at what Paul has to say in Philippians 3:1-11. Let's pray.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit then, these words: Philip 3:1-11

*Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.*

*<sup>2</sup>Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. <sup>3</sup>For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the*

*flesh<sup>1</sup>-- <sup>4</sup>though I myself have reasons for such confidence.*

*If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.*

*<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. <sup>10</sup>I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings,<sup>2</sup> becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup>and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth and from his fullness have we all received grace upon grace.

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<sup>1</sup> Notice the juxtaposition of reliance upon flesh (or self without God) and reliance upon Christ (or self with God). That is the key contrast in this passage. See that flesh is more than bodily appetites. It is life in one's own power alone.

<sup>2</sup> This is perhaps confusing. Imagine, as a help in understanding, admiring a great President for his insight and character. You'd like to be with him ... even when he has to bend under enormous loads for the nation and people, so enormous as to cause him huge duress. You want to be there so that you can help, yes, but also so that you can be schooled in his example and become like him.

Malcolm Muggeridge, the British journalist, once wrote of yearning to get self off his hands. I pictured Briar Rabbit and the tar baby of self.

There was a lady with fifteen children and her life was cooking, washing, mending, minding, herding, refereeing, etc. There was a lot of tired and a lot of sigh. They lived near a tar factory and one day some of the kids ended up there. As she tried to round them up, she found one had fallen into a barrel of tar and was covered with it from head to toe. She held him up out of it, looked at him, and then dropped him back in saying, "It'd be easier to have another than get you cleaned up."

Getting self off our hands is not very easy. We think ourselves better than others, and worse. We are self-conscious about our foibles, and our accomplishments. We are always angling for how something will affect us; angling with anxiety, angling for advantage. When the photos are passed around, we try to see ourselves and how we look. It can lead, quite easily, to a life exhausted, a life struggling with others. Another fellow said that even when he tries to practice self-denial he finds he wants others to notice it. So how can we get out of such a hall of mirrors and fatigue and comparison to a place of strength?

Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord," and that, I believe, is his answer to the matter. It isn't just "rejoice" as in put on music and dance around the living room all crazy like. It is rejoice *in the Lord*. You know how a husband rejoices in his wife? That's it. Proverbs 31 is that. The bridegroom is that. Take delight in Jesus. Paul's in prison and he's doing it – I'm confident that *he* who began a good work in you will complete it, since he's given you the comfort of his love, do this and this ... at his name every knee will bow. He is rejoicing in the Lord.

Notice that this is a message that Paul is happy to reiterate. Important messages are like that. When one of my kids comes and asks, “That important matter on handling the lawnmower safely ... would you go over that again?” I say, “No problem.” Did you know that “Rejoice in the Lord” is an important message? It is.

Notice that he says this message is a safeguard. That’s interesting – a safeguard about what? I put in a new fire and carbon monoxide alarm last Saturday up near the kids’ bedrooms. That’s a safeguard. Keeps us safe from, guards us from, fire and carbon monoxide. What does rejoicing in the Lord keep us safe from? What does it stave off? And how??

Paul seems to flip out in the next line. This is where the cutting remarks come. He spouts off something about Jewishness – about being dogs, evildoers, and mutilators. A lot of ink has been spilled about why this invective *suddenly* appears. But here’s why I think it is there – this is the frustrating life orientation that rejoicing is a safeguard against.

See, we have deep needs to be validated by God, self, and others. The sin state is being out of sorts, out of alignment with God, self, and others. And we, therefore, in ways known and understood by us and in ways not known or understood by us, try to make up for the deficiencies in these three arenas. We try and try to impress and please God, self, and others. That’s what this Jewishness is all about. A life of trying, trying, trying, trying, trying. Trying. It isn’t really Jewishness as much as it is humanness. It is in the routine. It is in the religious.

Here’s what it’s like. *Read ... (from Laugh Again) ...*

*In college, I seemed to have the energy to withstand the pressure. I remember times at Stanford when I wouldn’t*

*even go home at night. Instead, I would push a table up near the door of the cafeteria at 3 a.m. and sleep on it, using my books as a pillow. And then in the morning, when I had to be at work, the first person to open the door would knock me off the table, and I'd wake up and start the day. I convinced myself that I was sleeping "faster" than anyone else. . .*

*During the years when I was a coach and an area director for Young Life<sup>3</sup>, I would work twelve, fourteen, even fifteen hours a day, six or seven days a week. And I would come home feeling that I hadn't worked enough. So I tried to cram even more into my schedule. I spent more time promoting living than I did living. . . . My life wasn't abundant; it was a frantic sprint from one hour to the next.*

*I can remember times when fatigue left me feeling isolated and alienated – feelings that previously had been foreigners to me. Unprepared for such parasites on my energy, I became frustrated, and laughter, which had always been my most treasured companion, had silently slipped away. . . .*

*I was dominated by "shoulds" and "ought to's," and "musts." I would awaken unrefreshed in the morning, with a tired kind of resentment, and hurry through the day trying to uncover and meet the demands of others. Days were not lived but endured. I was exhausted trying to be a hope constantly rekindled for others, straining to live up to their images of me. I had worked hard to develop a reputation as one who was concerned, available, and involved – now I was being tyrannized by it.*

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<sup>3</sup> A Christian ministry with teenagers.

It's subtle. It can even be religious ... working hard for God to feel good about ourselves. Wanting to be recognized for our self-denial. We have our reward and it is exhaustion, a messed up life, a mutilated one.

Paul himself had been down that road and played that game. "You want to compare resumes?" he says. Mine is sterling – from the start I've been on cue. 8<sup>th</sup> day circumcised. Benjamin, best tribe ... the one that leads into battle. You've heard of a man's man? Well, I'm a Hebrew's Hebrew. In the Hebrew Marine Corp, and in the elite corps of Pharisees, I was a leader. In terms of shoulds and oughts, I was perfect. And I want you to know that all this didn't do a thing for anything but raise the testosterone levels on my pride. It didn't make me saner or better-hearted.

Paul now starts using accounting language ... you have profit and loss columns. All *his stuff* is in the loss column. You have things that make money and things that take money. All his effort stuff, his pride stuff didn't produce or generate income but consumed.

I have an oncologist friend who gets upset when he hears about people selling cancer patients peach pits in Mexico. He says that it isn't only a completely false hope, false security, but it gives the disease time to advance. On the surface it promises but underneath it is taking, taking, taking. My oncologist friend would get upset about this and so does Paul.

But Paul is upset, I believe, about something else. We had a dog once. His name was Pilgrim because he was black and was given to us by someone who had found this dog lost and wandering. Not only did he like to wander but he was terrible about snitching food. The kids seem to have a better memory of the particulars than I do. They'll say, "Remember when he ate the whole meatloaf from off the dinner table when we went to answer the door?" I don't. I have blocked it from my

mind. But this dog did that. Toddlers go by with a peanut butter sandwich and then they're crying because the dog got it. I still get mad thinking about it... that's Paul. This approach steals ... from us and from God.

Life is two yoked ... as with a team of oxen pulling. We're made with a space for God beside us and life is made for God to be in it. The two yokes gives the older ox a chance to train and calm the younger. The two yokes gives the younger a chance to have help in shouldering the load and God a chance to show his strength. A one yoke way of life steals from God, showing us the way and showing us his strength and us getting some good help for a good life.

I have liked, as a boyfriend or husband, having my gal say, "You're the best boyfriend or best husband in the world." If she were living independently, caught up in her own life and thoughts, no room for a boyfriend or husband, and even though I was helping and would help even more, I don't get the "You are the best boyfriend husband comments." That's a stealing.

The desire to feel good about ourselves, the need for recognition and the pleasure that it brings, the subtle ways we are narcissistic, or simply believe we have to go it alone ... it's all so deep and a really good way truly to counteract those debilitating, joy killing ways is to rejoice in Jesus.

The desire to check oneself in the mirror and feel good or bad about ourselves, to look at ourselves in the group photographs and feel good or bad about ourselves is so strong that the best way to handle it is to look at Jesus. Think of it this way; a husband looks at a photo of him and his wife and he doesn't look at himself because he just pours over the details of his wife's features, savoring how beautiful she is. His study of himself is eclipsed by his study of her. That's a beautiful place to be and that is where Paul is calling us to be – studying Jesus,

rejoicing in the Lord. Jesus is our bridegroom, rejoice in him.

By the way, that's a command, a verb ... something we can do.

Since Ronald Reagan died, I have heard one aspect of his life more than any other and that is the relationship he and Nancy had. Time and again I have heard reference to her looking at him with smiling and admiring eyes, her getting excited as she saw him exiting Air Force One and coming down the stairs, her deep loyalty to him. She didn't make herself big and look at herself, or ask why doesn't *he* make more of *me*, or any of that stuff. She rejoiced in him, celebrated that he loved her. She cut out the consuming thoughts and cut a swathe into the productive ones.

Homer has Odysseus dealing with the deadly Sirens by having all the sailors plug their ears and lashing him to the mast. That's one way of dealing with the sounds of self that sound good but leaves us ultimately not in joy but in the misery of shipwreck.

But there's another version of the story by Apollonius where the hero Jason calls forth a musician. As the Sirens sing, the nearer musician grows louder and his beautiful song drowns out all the other music. The sailors sail enraptured and safely on. Get Jesus in your life's boat and ask him to sing. That's what Rejoice in the Lord means.

*If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call.*

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