

Making It Worthwhile

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Phil. 3:13-4:1

We know what the title phrase means in terms of occasions. Since we know how to do this that way, let's also do it with Christ. That's what this sermon is about, making the most of him.

Our friendship pads have pictures of elders in them. When they first got passed with those photos and we saw them for the first time I know what I did and what the other elders did, we first looked at ourselves. That self that looks at self and evaluates life in terms of self can be so tiring. The cure for it, so we can go from pride to joy, is to stand next to someone arrestingly beautiful and fascinating. Then when you look into the photo, you look at them! That's who Jesus and what rejoicing in the Lord is. That's what Paul does and says to do. That was last week's passage. I sound better when I sing next to someone with a good voice. But when I stand next to someone beautiful, I don't even care how I look. I'm just looking at them. And that's wonderful.

I was once given a gift certificate to a nice men's store. They had a 50% off sale and I used the certificate to buy a pair of pants that cost a lot more than I had ever spent on a pair of trousers. But as the years went by and I considered how great they looked, how great they felt, how many times I wore them because of that, and how with all the years they kept their shape, I became truly convinced that they were a good value, even a better value than what I had bought before. I'm still convinced of that today. I'll buy that brand whenever I can. That also is what Paul said last week about Jesus. He's a good value.

Actually, Paul has found in Christ something better than anything else he has ever heard of or experienced. In terms of men's trousers? No. Better for what? For something that has to

do with the deepest issues of life. Christ is THE real deal as a power and teacher for being truly good and having a shot at eternal living.

Christ, he insists, is the find of a lifetime.

If I said to Paul, “Ferrari sports car or Jesus Christ,” he’d say, “Jesus Christ.” Penthouse on Fifth Avenue or Jesus Christ? Jesus Christ. Front of Time Magazine as Man of the Year or Jesus Christ? Powerball lottery win or Jesus Christ? Jesus Christ. Winning *Dancing With the Stars* or Jesus Christ? Your cancer cured or Jesus Christ? Jesus Christ.

Christ, he insists, is the find of a lifetime because he can address the deepest hungers of the human soul – and what these are you have to think about but Paul and countless others have said that it comes down to goodness and eternal living. Jesus is the most marvelous, good, beautiful, smart, relaxed, kind, bright, intriguing, creative, insightful, motivating, encouraging person ever. And he can be known, not as a figure in a book or someone across the street to wave to, but as the master or the maestro of superb life who wants you as an apprentice. He wants you as a personal friend, the kind where you knock at their front door and then walk on in. And this Christ, furthermore, has a power that swallows up sin and death. It operated for Jesus in the resurrection and it can operate in you, giving you the upper hand over sin and moving you from mortality to immortality.¹

So here’s my question – Do we really think and feel this about Christ (that he is the offer of a lifetime) and if not, why not? And if not, how can we?

¹ Paul in Romans 7 asks who will deliver him from this body of death. He answers, “Jesus.” He goes on in 8:9 to speak of how the Spirit enters us and gives us a power such that we can direct/focus our minds and a power such that mortal selves will be raised to life (8:11). We might also consider I Cor. 15 where Paul says that unless Christ is truly transformative unto everlasting living, we are to be pitied. The crux of the matter with Christ is if he is a true generative power.

I think there is one big reason we don't. It is that we, absorbed in the here and now, haven't taken the time or made the effort to be clear about what the deepest needs of life are and who Jesus is and what he is offering us.²

Cancer for all its dread can bring a powerful clarity. When my once wife, Karen, was diagnosed with cancer the oncologist said, "Your treatment must be your priority. If you let your work distract you from that, you'll die and won't be here for your work. If you let your family distract you from that, you'll die and won't be here for your family. You do not have three or four shots at this. You have one. Make it your best shot." That's clarity – the treatment is the one and only.

If you could have life that actually overcomes the cancer of sin and death, would you? If you could have a life that actually connects you to God, would you? Maybe we think these are non-questions, that such a thing isn't possible. Maybe like a colony of alcoholics in a stupor that do not believe such a thing as sobriety exists. But Jesus as a case study says it actually is. So, if overcoming death is a real possibility, death as we experience in day to day living and death as we experience it at the end of days, then realizing that possibility is THE greatest task of life.³ If communing with God is a possibility, then realizing that possibility is THE greatest task of life. You have one lifetime and one shot at it. Who will you listen to and what will you do? Who has offered the best answers and results in these departments? Who themselves has overcome sin and death?

² In Phil 3:19 Paul says that there are people who are heading to a dead end because of their thinking. Their minds are limited to earthly things. I suppose you could say to shallow things, to not thinking about larger issues, to just dealing with the material and the here and now.

³ Paul comments in 1 Cor. 15 that if only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied. In other words, if he is just a sage to teach us and not a power to enable us to live forever, forget it. The end of Phil 3 tells us that Paul is trusting Christ for actual transformation of the body.

Some missionaries in China when it fell to communists were being hastily and forcibly expelled under threat of death. The soldiers that came to their home said they had one hour to take 100 pounds of their stuff with them. So the missionaries grabbed heirlooms and project notes and clothes and ... put them on the scales. A few minutes before the hour was up the soldiers arrived and saw their stuff gathered and then asked, "Did you weigh your two small children?" The missionaries stammered, "No, the children?" The soldiers said, "Weigh the children."

Clarity. And once the realization about the children is there suppose the soldiers asked, "Here's a bowling ball," and the missionaries would think to themselves, "Bowling ball or kids? Kids!" Then, "Here's your Cuisinart," and the missionaries would think, "Kitchen appliance or kids? Kids! Then, "Here's your computer," and the missionaries would think, "Computer or kids? Kids!" Now for certain there are days in raising kids where it might come across as a hard choice. But we get, in the clarity of such a situation, what is important. Have you weighed Jesus? Do you really want to exit without him?

THE issue in life is not bowling balls, or Cuisinarts, or computers. It's how to be good, to really live ... how to have the plaguing experience of sin and death reversed. How to know the heart of God. Bowling balls don't help us with that. Nor appliances. Nor computers. Only Jesus.⁴

So that's a reason we don't glory in Christ or rejoice over Christ the way Paul did. We haven't thought about the raw and elemental issue of life and that there actually is a best answer.⁵ But let's say we wanted to be possessed by the incredible value of Christ, convinced of it to the core. How could we? Well, do what

⁴ Paul tells us in I Cor. 15 that death is swallowed up in victory. So this is more than death is stale-mated or neutralized. It is eaten (swallowed) and put to the service of life. Swallow enough food and you'll get large. So sin and death is conquered and life is enlarged.

⁵ People ask Dr. Dallas Willard why he follows Jesus Christ. He asks in return, "Who else did you have in mind?"

we just said. Think about who Christ is and what he offers. But then there are also three words he gives: Forget v. 13, Focus v. 14, and Follow v. 17. And, if you like, add directional glances – backward, upward, onward.

Forget. v. 13, “Forgetting what lies behind.” This is not forget painful memories but jettison ineffectual behaviors. I once made a lunch appointment with a vice president of my college and then missed it. I’d like to forget this and certainly blushing about it still doesn’t help me. So put it behind you. But this is not what Paul is saying.

I, when I lose something seriously will go about hunting for it, say my keys, well, frankly, irrationally. I’ll look in my pants, in my drawers, in the cushions of the couch ... but, I’ll get so desperate that I look in the freezer. Then I start to cycle through all the places I looked, again including the freezer! I am, just in case you’re thinking I’m crazy, embellishing this a little. But just a little. When I cycle through again and start for the freezer, I have to say, “Forget the freezer. That’s a stupid place to look.”

There’s that which hasn’t worked in our lives. Don’t keep doing it. Paul’s being a Pharisee, a Benjamite, circumcised ... wasn’t conquering his sin and bringing about resurrection in him. As occupying as looking in the freezer may be, as much as it gives you a sense of doing something, anything, whether it makes sense or not, stop.⁶ Being active isn’t the point. Being productive is. Forget what isn’t productive and especially what is counter-productive. Have you inventoried your life regarding what really

⁶ This isn’t as easy as it sounds. Forgetting can actually mean unlearning. Getting oneself retrained. Jim Collins was in the top 20% of all rock climbers but he wanted to be in the top 5%. So he got a coach who was in the top 2%. That man told him in order to progress he’d have to unlearn a few habits and that this would be hard. Not relying on those old ways would leave him feeling unsettled, the way it is when we try to write left handed if we are right handed. But in time, the new way would give him better results than the old way.

matters and what works and doesn't work in that which truly matters?⁷

Focus. v. 14, "I press on toward the goal that God has for me." (Or in v. 19, "Their minds are on ... but ours are on.") See and remember this point – having sin and death in us now, and then, swallowed up by love and life via connection with God. Jesus became a human and died and rose again to give us *that*. Reach out for that. Strain and press on to this. Jesus has something to give us but it is gotten by focus. If you seek me with all your heart, you will find me. There's an "if," a focus.

Karen's youngest brother, Stan, is President of Hon Industries. When he was a young executive there, they took him aside and told him their plan for him – VP here, VP there, VP over there, and then President. Do you think he cooperated with that? Did he lose focus on cooperating with that? No. Not us either. God's got a plan for us and it takes us focusing.

Generally things of value are gotten by focus. A doctor and a medical degree. An architect and a big building. A coach and a championship.

On a day when I have a flight to say, Texas, I may pack my bag, wash the car, empty the trash bag, visit with the neighbors ... and do many good things. But if I miss the flight, I've missed the key item of the day.

We all drift. But the oncologist to Karen nixed that. Can't afford to drift.

I remember the best run I ever had. It was with Tim Malone in Minneapolis. He lived in the duplex downstairs. We ran six miles in 36 minutes. Every time in the run that I felt a lull in me, I reached down for traction. Each time one of us lulled in the run, the other reached for traction to keep the pace up. Focus. Do. Overcome. Traction. Race course.

⁷ See Romans 12:2. Is not this topic of evaluate what is non-productive or counter-productive and jettison it what Paul means by transformation by the renewing of your mind?

The truth is that the disciple life is a focused life. If you think you can do algebra without knowing decimals and fractions, you can't. It's just the way it is. And you can't do discipleship without routine, persisting traction. Knowing and prizing a spouse takes focus. Knowing and prizing Christ takes focus.

Follow. V. 17, "Join with others to follow my example living according to the pattern we gave you." Prizing Jesus and experiencing him as a power in your life comes about by effort ... *applied to certain practices.*

When a baby is born, there is a growth that is automatic. He gets taller. That just happens. But it doesn't just happen that he plays the piano. The power for that comes through following a teacher in the doing of certain exercises. Playing the piano is a wonderful power but it isn't instantaneous or automatic.

Hear this loud and clear. Knowing resurrection power in one's life is a seed of life the way a baby has a seed of life, but the rest is not something instantaneous or automatic. It takes time and it takes effort. And there are activities that Jesus took time for and put effort in. If we will follow his example, we will experience his power.

Did you notice that this following is with others? Join with others to follow the pattern. Some people used to think that there was no victory over alcoholism. But then there were some who found a pattern ... 12 Steps. When they are followed, freedom comes. Have you noticed there are no one-person AA groups? It's a pattern together.

Here's a sentence about this third point in the sermon: I make a sustained effort over the long haul with others at taking Christ in as a person with generative resurrection power and I do so through practices he engaged. Through this I experience now a new life and it will become full resurrection life. Can't have the

life without the Christ. Can't have the life without the patterns Christ used to have his life.⁸

What is this pattern? What are the practices? I would point you to two books. Pick either one. They describe what the church has seen in Jesus and the practices through which they have experienced Jesus. *The Spirit of the Disciplines* by Dallas Willard. Or *The Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster.

In essence the pattern, the elements of it, all have us bring our hearts and minds into the presence of God. That we cannot change ourselves truly does not mean there is nothing we can do. We can by will power generate a suntan. It is something we receive. But we can take ourselves into the sun. The disciplines are our ways of bringing ourselves into the presence of God with his rays. And just as we don't learn the piano by being in the presence of a teacher one time, so we bring ourselves again and again into the presence of God.

I wonder right now, to end this sermon, if we would not together take some moments to ask the God of supreme worth, the one whom because we have him, we have all we need and there flows joy and full peace, to be present quietly to our souls. Let's just close our eyes and be silent praying and being simply with him.

Maybe you'd like this hymn:

*Jesus, the very thought of Thee
With sweetness fills the breast;
But sweeter far Thy face to see,
And in Thy presence rest.*

⁸ Certainly in Jesus is raw power. But in his life he communed with power, developed power, recharged power. We so readily consider the Christian life as one of making mental assent and then making the cut for heaven thereby. That then is, supposedly, how to have joy. But Jesus is a power and a teacher about power. The Christian life is a training life and therefore we get power initially but then go on to understand, develop, train, grow power to being free and good, and do good.

*Nor voice can sing, nor heart can frame,
Nor can the memory find
A sweeter sound than Thy blest Name,
O Savior of mankind!*

*O hope of every contrite heart,
O joy of all the meek,
To those who fall, how kind Thou art!
How good to those who seek!*

*But what to those who find? Ah, this
Nor tongue nor pen can show;
The love of Jesus, what it is,
None but His loved ones know.*

*Jesus, our only joy be Thou,
As Thou our prize will be;
Jesus be Thou our glory now,
And through eternity.*

*O Jesus, King most wonderful
Thou Conqueror renowned,
Thou sweetness most ineffable
In Whom all joys are found!*

*When once Thou visitest the heart,
Then truth begins to shine,
Then earthly vanities depart,
Then kindles love divine.*

*O Jesus, light of all below,
Thou fount of living fire,
Surpassing all the joys we know,
And all we can desire.*

*Jesus, may all confess Thy Name,
Thy wondrous love adore,
And, seeking Thee, themselves inflame
To seek Thee more and more.*

*Thee, Jesus, may our voices bless,
Thee may we love alone,
And ever in our lives express
The image of Thine own.*

*O Jesus, Thou the beauty art
Of angel worlds above;
Thy Name is music to the heart,
Inflaming it with love.*

*Celestial Sweetness unalloyed,
Who eat Thee hunger still;
Who drink of Thee still feel a void
Which only Thou canst fill.*

*O most sweet Jesus, hear the sighs
Which unto Thee we send;
To Thee our inmost spirit cries;
To Thee our prayers ascend.*

*Abide with us, and let Thy light
Shine, Lord, on every heart;
Dispel the darkness of our night;
And joy to all impart.*

*Jesus, our love and joy to Thee,
The virgin's holy Son,
All might and praise and glory be,
While endless ages run.*

P.S. We can put the message of this sermon with the prayer of confession. Metanoia is the Greek word for repentance. “Turn mind” is the literal construction of the word. Notice where your mind is and what is counterproductive and forget that. Turn your mind from it. Turn your mind and focus on something else. What else? The pattern of Jesus. Seeing that pattern, follow it. This is repentance – forget, focus, follow.

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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