A Study of the Book of Philippians

The Insignificance of Credentials (Philippians 3:1-11)

“Ministry that costs nothing, accomplishes nothing.” ~ John Jowett

I. Overview

“One of the most remarkable personal confessions that the ancient world has bequeathed to us,” writes one scholar concerning Philippians 3:1-11 (P. Bonnard, L’épître de saint Paul aux Philippiens, 61). In this passage, the apostle Paul identifies what he values in life. Despite his impressive Jewish heritage and his unwavering devotion to the Law, Paul finds all of this to be a liability. In fact, he considers all of it as worthless compared to the opportunity of knowing Christ.

II. Biblical Role Models (2:19-30)

A. Opening Remarks (vv. 1-3)

v. 1 - The call to rejoice serves as a prelude to what the apostle is about to pen. Observe that their rejoicing is because of their union with Christ (“in Christ”).

Scholars debate as to the identity of Paul’s reference to “this”. Paul appears to be referring to what he previously taught them when he was with them in Philippi. It is “this” that he is about to repeat in the next several verses; that is “the condemnation of Jewish boasts of superiority, his reminiscences about his life as a devout Pharisee, and the nature of righteousness through faith in Christ as opposed to righteousness based upon the Law” (D. E. Garland, “The Composition and Unity of Philippians,” NovT 27[1985], 164-65).

vv. 2-3 - “dogs,” “evil workers,” and “mutilators of the flesh” - These three descriptors collectively describe Jewish teachers who are seeking to undermine the Gospel.

As the true “circumcised,” they worship the Lord and rest in Christ’s work. As one commentator aptly notes, “the intent of the ensuing argument is that Christian salvation, Christian conduct, and Christian progress are all the product of God’s free undeserved grace and not of human achievement, not even human spirituality” (Caird, Paul’s Letters from Prison, 134).

B. Reasons Why Paul Could Boast (vv. 4-6)

vv. 4-6 - If one could boast in one’s credentials, Paul could. The first three credentials speak of his birth and upbringing, while the last three credentials address his actions. Observe the following:

• Circumcised on the 8th day. Following Jewish regulations, Paul indicates that he was born into an observant Jewish home (Lev 12:3).
• **Ethnically a Jew, and more specifically, from the tribe of Benjamin.** Paul knew his Jewish lineage. His connection was with one of the most important Jewish tribes. This tribe stemmed from the only son of Jacob born in the Promised Land (Gen 35:16-18), provided Israel her first king (1 Sam 9:1-2), remained loyal to the house of David (1 Kgs 12:21), and protected Israel through one of their own (i.e., Mordecai in the book of Esther).

• **Hebrew of Hebrews.** This phrase indicates that despite growing up in Tarsus, Paul spoke Aramaic (see Acts 22:2). This was the mother tongue of Palestine; and was used in the first century as a means of superiority to Jews who could not speak the Hebraic language (i.e., Hellenistic Jews).

• **Lived as a Pharisee.** Elsewhere Paul mentions that he even studied with the greatest Pharisee of his time, Gamaliel, and served as a prize student (see Gal 1:14; Acts 5:34; 22:3).

• **Persecuted the Church.** The term “zeal” was used of Phinehas killing the adulterers on the steps of the Tabernacle (Num 25:6-13) and of Elijah when he killed the Baal prophets. In a similar radical behavior, Paul had previously sought to destroy the church (see Gal 1:13; 1 Cor 15:9).

• **According to the Law, blameless.** Paul’s keeping of the Law reminds us of the rich young ruler in the Gospel account (Lk 18:21) who claimed to have kept all the commandments.

C. Reasons Why Paul Boasts (vv. 7-11)

v. 7 - The prestigious credentials listed in verses 4-6 are seen as liabilities. Why would he consider many of these Jewish advantage and his “righteous” conduct to be harmful?

v. 8 - In addition to his Jewish heritage and orthodoxy, Paul views all that this world has to offer as a liability in comparison to knowing the Lord. Throughout Scripture, “knowledge” refers to a close personal relationship (see Hos 6:6).

As observed by one commentator, “the wonder of this knowledge of Christ Jesus as his Lord is so great and the relationship is so intensely personal that he focusses upon it in his testimony” (O’Brien, *Philippians*, 389).

“dung” - This vulgar word for fecal matter only highlights the futility of what the flesh produces.

“to gain Him” - This term only restates the desire to “know” Christ (see Matt 16:26).
v. 9 - The apostle Paul not only wishes to know the Lord, he also desires to have His righteousness. This righteousness is clarified in two ways:

- **The basis of this righteousness is through Christ's faithfulness.** This is not through one's actions, but through the work of Jesus. It should be noted that some English versions render this clause “faith in Christ” rather than “Christ's faithfulness”. However, typical of Pauline construction, the grammar, and the immediate context suggests the latter rendering.

- **The origin of this righteousness is from God.** This is not through some moral behavior, but from the Lord (e.g., 2 Cor 5:21).

v. 10 - Paul provides three ways in which he wishes to know the Lord:

- **The power of His resurrection.** This power is the life-giving power of the Lord. “Paul is not content merely to know Christ as a fact of history, but to know him personally as the resurrected ever-living Lord of his life” (Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 143).

- **Share in His sufferings.** Paul wishes to participate in the sufferings associated with Christ and His followers (see Rom 8:17; 1 Thess 3:3).

- **To be like Him in His death.** Only in suffering and death is the old man brought to an end (see 2 Cor 5:14-17). One scholar writes, “the life of discipleship, which involves our participation in Christ’s sufferings and our being conformed to his death, is paradoxically the process in which we are being transformed into the image of Christ from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor 3.18) and in which the resurrection life of Jesus is being manifested in our mortal bodies (2 Cor 4.10ff.; Phil 3:10)” (S. Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel*, 326).

v. 11 - Paul is not expressing doubt on his future state. Instead, he is claiming that while the way is unclear, the goal of his resurrection is certain.

### III. Intersect

A. As believers, we need be careful that the reason we do what we do for Christ is because we love Him, not so that He might love us.

   Ephesians 1:3-14 -

B. A career, a hobby, or even a ministry must not eclipse our passion for knowing Christ.

   Ephesians 3:18-19 -
C. Joy comes, not in the adversity, but in the recognition that the adversity is allowing us to grow in our knowledge of Christ.

Ecclesiastes 2:26 -

For further thought . . .

Based upon our study this morning, you may want to spend some additional time this week interacting with the following:

Take some time evaluating your own life. How can someone tell by looking at you whether Christ is preeminent? Is there anything in your life that needs to be moved to the rubbish heap? In other words, what things might you have to consider loss that you now value?

Spend some time this week reading Colossians 3:1-17.

“The object of the Christian ministry is to convert sinners and to edify the body of Christ. No faithful minister can possibly rest short of this. Applause, fame, popularity, honor, wealth – all these are vain. If souls are not won, if saints are not matured, our ministry itself is vain.” ~ Horatius Bonar