

FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE PROCESS OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND MATURITY

Philippians 3:4b-14

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson
Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA
October 6, 2002

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

We sometimes talk about the salvation of Jesus as if it were a matter of improving our lives. But Jesus isn't interested in helping us improve our ^{lives} ~~life~~; he's dying to give ^{us} ~~you~~ a whole new life.

I grew up in a wing of the church that stressed the telling of testimonies. A testimony is a description of someone's life before and after meeting Jesus. Even as a child, it didn't take me long to figure out the basic pattern behind these stories. First, the person describes how bad he or she was. (Even if you weren't, you had it make it sound like you were.) Second, comes the part about encountering the forgiving grace of God. Third, the person talks about how much better life is now. There are some minor variations on this, but a good testimony usually follows that outline. A bad person meets Jesus and becomes a good person.

Paul's testimony is different. He begins by describing how good he was before he knew Jesus. He had a good pedigree: a circumcised member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews. He had a good resume as a Pharisee, good ambition as one who was zealous, and even good spirituality. "As to righteousness under the law, blameless." All of that was before he got to the second part of the testimony. There he describes the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord. Paul said everything good is rubbish by comparison. Then, third, he says as a result of meeting Jesus he's not an improved person but a new self. So whereas our typical testimony is about a bad person meeting Jesus to become a good person, Paul's testimony is about meeting Jesus to become like him, "like him in death, if somehow I may obtain the resurrection from the dead."

The difference here is extremely important. Paul doesn't think Jesus ^{came to give} ~~gave~~ him the chance to improve ^{all} his. This is often the way we talk about Jesus, as if the cross and resurrection were nothing more than a program for self-improvement. But that's not what Paul is telling us. Paul tells us that it doesn't matter how much you improve, you will never improve enough. That's what he was trying to do before he met Jesus. What matters is knowing Christ in his death and in his resurrection.

When Paul talks about knowing Christ, he's not telling us to know about Christ, which isn't difficult. He's telling us that it's possible to know him in relationship. The thing that is of surpassing worth in his life is not theological knowledge about God. Paul had that before he hit the Damascus road. No, the thing that makes everything else seem like rubbish is that he now knows God, relationally, in Jesus Christ. The thing that's of surpassing worth is not becoming an expert on God, but knowing him. Making progress in spiritual growth is not primarily doing more things for God, nor is it primarily knowing more things about God.

We believe that Jesus who died rose from the dead and lives – not as a resuscitated corpse but as the Lord and Source of Life. We can have a relationship to him. We make spiritual growth not through our works but through our relationship to him. Spiritual growth is not a matter of trying harder but of knowing Jesus.

Getting to know Jesus is like getting to know a stranger who becomes our best friend – but not exactly. When you talk to a stranger, the stranger may answer audibly. We can also physically touch a stranger – look into his or her face, and as we get to know and love them we can caress and kiss them. But we can't physically or literally embrace Jesus as we might with a friend. So the analogy of personal relationship leaves something to be desired.

But there are ways of knowing Jesus Christ which are like ways of knowing ^{other} humans. Most Christians do not hear Jesus talk to them audibly but we do believe he talks to us. When we read the Scriptures we conclude by saying, "this is the word of the Lord." The Lord Jesus Christ is speaking to us in some way through the Scriptures. Every preacher strives to preach the Word of God even though it's difficult to distinguish between my own human words and God's words. Nevertheless we strive to preach God's word, not our own, with the hope that you will hear the Risen Christ speak to you. So, one way we get to know Christ is by listening for him as he speaks to us in Holy Scripture.

Emile Cailliet was one of the world's leading Christian philosopher of fifty years ago and was a Princeton professor for many years. But he was not raised in a Christian home. He was raised in a completely secular home in France and educated at the most prestigious French universities in a thoroughly secular intellectual milieu. But he had the good fortune of marrying a Scots Presbyterian woman. One day his wife walked passed a little French Reformed Church in Paris. She found the door unlocked and walked in. The

pastor greeted her. "Do you have a Bible in French?" He gave her one and she took it home. When she returned home her husband asked, "What do you have there?" "A Bible?" she said. "I've never seen one before. Show it to me." He took the Bible and retired to his study where he began to read it. He read long into the night mostly in the Gospels. And he testifies, "The One of whom the Gospels spoke, the One who spoke and acted in them, became alive to me." So the Bible and preaching is a way of pressing on to make Christ our own and when we do so – we discover the good news that Christ Jesus has already made us his own.

There's another way of knowing Jesus Christ. He promises to be with us in the Breaking of the Bread. He's the host at the table. He invites us to come to him. Paul said he wanted to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death." The broken bread and poured wine remind us of the suffering of Christ. We can't know or grow in Christ without sharing in Christ's suffering for a world in pain. On World Communion Sunday, today we remember that for some followers of Jesus sharing in his suffering is a literal daily reality as they're persecuted for their faith. They're crystal clear about what it means to know Christ in his sufferings. But for all of us, going to the cross is an experience in dying – dying to some of our own dreams and hopes, perhaps even sacrificing the life we had planned on living. Some will have to die to their dreams at work. Others to their dreams for their children or their marriages. Others to their dreams about health and the future. These weren't bad dreams, and the problem with them isn't that you need better dreams. The problem is that they were your dreams. And now you need to sacrifice them in order to know the dreams of Christ.

Jesus invites us to come to know him and the power of his resurrection. Spiritual Growth and Maturity lead us to the table. Here we're not communing with a dead hero. Our communion is with the risen Savior who is not done saving our lives or the lives of those who are in anguish in this world.

Gracious God, enable us to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. We count our relationship to Christ as of surpassing value. We want to gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of our own, but one that comes through faith in Christ. We want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and we even dare to pray in fear and trembling that we might be able to share in his sufferings by becoming like him so that we might attain the resurrection from the dead. Amen.

Sources for parts of this sermon: Craig Barnes