

PHILIPPIANS

JOY ON THE JOURNEY

Sermon-Based Study Guide
Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Philippians 3.1-11
October 27 & 28, 2012

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I. Connecting With One Another

Think for a moment or two about your favorite things – the things that bring you the most happiness in the world. If you're up for it, write them down or share them with your group.

Why do these things make you happy? How has God blessed you with these gifts?

II. Introduction to this Study

As we turn the corner into chapter 3, the great Apostle to the Gentiles describes the many good gifts in which he relished for years. Maybe we could understand them as his nationality, religious observance, ancestral line, political party, and denominational affiliation. Add to these his overwhelming zeal for life and for doing (what he thought was) God's will! Many of these things were good, and yet, Paul now considers them rubbish (which, in Greek, could be understood as either trash or, believe it or not, excrement!).

They are not rubbish on their own, however. Instead, they are rubbish in comparison to knowing Jesus and being found in Him. (Notice, Paul writes that he has *been found* in Him, not that he has somehow earned or accomplished salvation) It is for this reason that Paul tells his beloved friends to "watch out for those dogs" – those who wrongly serve as guardians to the community of faith, thereby adding religious works to the requirements of being a Christian.

III. Study the Text

- a. Read verses 1 through 6. Notice: Paul is not addressing a problem already within the community in Philippi, but rather encouraging his friends to be on the lookout for "dogs." In the first century, there were two kinds of dogs (and neither of them were like our lovable pet Fido!): One type of dog roamed the streets, rummaging for scraps wherever he could find them, while the other type of dog was trained to guard a home.

While Jews commonly referred to Gentiles as "dogs," Paul here turns the put down on his fellow countrymen, who guard the Christian community for those who had "only" accepted grace through faith, and hadn't undergone outward rituals – which, for centuries, had been hallmarks of God's chosen people. Can you imagine why it would be difficult for these "dogs" (as Paul calls them) to all of a sudden understand salvation as a free gift of God?

- b. Paul refers to his rivals as "mutilators of the flesh," declaring instead that the Philippian Christians are "the circumcision... who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh." Recall that the Philippian Christians, as Roman citizens, probably did not – and had not, ever – adhered to the Jewish customs, and yet, Paul refers to them as the people of God!

How can Paul make a claim like this? Read Galatians 3.1-14 to see his answer. See also Romans 2.17-29, to read Paul's differentiation between ritual action and its internal meaning.

- c. When Paul uses the term "flesh" in verse 4, he does not do so to address sinful behavior as elsewhere in his letters. On the contrary, in this instance "flesh" refers to human identity and accomplishment. It's been written, "Paul's problem was not that he couldn't make the grade; it was that he *did* make it, only to find out that it was the wrong standard of measurement."

If someone like Paul were writing verses 5-6 with examples from our culture today, what types of things would be included? In other words, what human identity and accomplishment – what *good things* – would be included?

- d. Read verses 7-11. Think of a ledger, your checkbook, academic degrees and material possessions – think of all the things you've gained. Paul writes of all the things he's gained, earned, profited from, and goes so far as to say he now reckons them garbage in light of now knowing Christ. Notice: He does not say that on their own they are garbage – indeed, these things are good! We need to be very clear on this: Paul is not criticizing his Jewish heritage or Judaism. No, he recognizes their inherent goodness, and still even more so the surpassing goodness of knowing Jesus.

What good things exist in our culture – in our personal and communal lives – that are good, but are garbage compared to knowing Christ? Anything from your answer to question C? Can such things ever be distractions from knowing Christ?

- e. In verse 9, Paul switches from the language of human identity and achievement to instead use a passive verb, thus speaking of "being found in Christ." Why do you think he does so?

To read how Paul was "found in Christ" check out Acts 9.1-19. What do you find interesting about this story? Where had Paul's identity and accomplishment gotten him when he was "found"?

- f. The knowledge Paul speaks of in verse 10 isn't merely an intellectual knowledge, it's an intimate kind of knowledge shared between close friends and spouses. Why do you think his desire to know Christ in this way begins and ends with resurrection?

IV. Reflect and Respond

- a. There aren't many in our culture demanding that we return to ancient Jewish rituals to secure our salvation, but what other types of things should we be on the lookout for in the church today? In other words, have you ever heard people "raise the bar" for inclusion in the Christian community?
- b. What *good things* can be given too much importance in your life? How could you increasingly "consider them garbage" in comparison to knowing Christ?
- c. How have you been "found in Christ"? Was there a specific instance like Paul, or have you "been found" over time, throughout your spiritual journey?

Spend some time reflecting on your spiritual journey, recalling how your identity and accomplishment did not achieve salvation, but how you were instead "found in Christ."

- d. How do you respond to being "found in Christ," building upon that intimate relationship of knowing Jesus? What spiritual practices help you grow in this way?
- e. Do you have family, friends, co-workers or neighbors who are rightly thankful for all the *good things* they've been blessed with but don't yet know of the *best thing* of being found in Jesus? Are there ways you could be used – like Paul – to share the good news with them?

V. Pray

Spend some time in prayer:

- a. Thank God for the many good things in your life, asking Him to help you keep them in perspective, seeking first His kingdom and righteousness;
- b. Lift up those who don't yet know of the *best thing* of being found in Jesus and that God would give you a heart for them and their salvation;
- c. Pray for the ministry of Good Shepherd, that we would continue to hold up Jesus Christ, God's ultimate gift to the world, above all else, as we connect with God, grow in faith and serve in love;
- d. Pray for our pastors and staff, as they seek to lead us in the way of Jesus.