

Relationship, Not Rules, Is the Only Reliable Bridge

Sermon Outline and Summary

I. The Text:

Philippians 3:4b-14

II. The Exegesis

In Philippians 3, Paul covers all the typical bragging territory and then some as he argues against those who advocated the prerequisite of Jewishness for Gentile Christians. These Judaizers insisted that those not born Jewish must become Jews through circumcision and obedience to Torah law in order to be full members of the Christian community.

Paul's rejection of this could not have been more adamant. But he begins his attack with a litany of his own elite status within Judaism. He is a descendent of "the tribe of Benjamin." Benjamin was distinguished not only by its patriarch being the only one of Jacob's sons born in the promised land, but was also a "royal tribe," the tribe from which Israel's first king, Saul, was chosen.

Besides being Hebrew by birth, Paul identifies himself as a Pharisee. Although the image of Pharisaic Judaism presented in the gospels is far from flattering, it was the commitment of Phariseism to bring obedience to the law into every facet of daily life, which enabled Judaism to survive the destruction of the Temple and the system of Temple sacrifice.

Paul's rigorous obedience to all of the Torah led him to a final assertion. According to the way righteousness is spelled out in the Law, Paul declares himself to be "blameless" or "without fault." Now there is something to brag about!

And now the apostle turns the tables. He declares all that had been counted as "gain" is a dead loss "because of Christ." The "loss" and "gain" sheets have been exchanged by the transformative act of "knowing Christ Jesus."

KNOWING CHRIST

"Knowing" is more than an intellectual assertion. "Knowing" in both Greek and Hebrew entailed a deep, even intimate relationship. In verse 9, Paul offers a consolidated version of his "justification by faith" argument. By "knowing" Christ Paul finds he is "in him." It is the relationship that gives the apostle a new claim to righteousness. This righteousness is not made possible by adhering to the Law, but by adhering to the person of Jesus Christ.

There is some debate over whether Paul speaks here of "faith in Christ" (Paul's faith) or of the "faith of Christ" (Christ's faith) making this new right relationship possible. While both are necessary, Paul's earlier assertion that all his works are "loss" seems to suggest that it is Christ's faithfulness, the "faith of Christ", that created the miracle of "righteousness from God based on faith".

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So transformative is this new relationship that Paul now wishes to know every aspect of Christ, including “sharing in his sufferings,” even to the point of death. Paul recognizes that he is still on his own faith journey. He has not yet “reached the goal.” It is not any righteous acts of his own that keep him on this path. It is the transforming knowledge that “Christ Jesus has made me his own” (verse 12).

For Paul the only direction his life can now take is forward, in the direction of “what lies ahead.” Seeing that Paul wrote this letter from prison, awaiting a possible death sentence, this view might not seem very uplifting. But Paul sees only one achievement worth pursuing. That is the high or “heavenly” call of God.

III. The Sermon

In every action movie, at some point during a chase scene an enormous chasm appears as the hero is fleeing the bad guys. The only way across is via a narrow, rickety, mostly rotten bridge. The way forward looks terrible, but the way back is certain death.

“Cliffhangers” being appropriately named, the results are predictable. Although the hero will manage to make it, the bridge will collapse or will be cut down by the bad guys.

There is a reason that crossing a bridge strikes such fear into us. It has to do with guard rails.

I have no problem driving across a bridge that has sturdy guard rails. But take away the scaffolding, the concrete and steel side girders, the bumper barricades, and now I’m a completely different driver. Why? Because I’m on a different bridge. I hear the edges beckon, “Get closer.” And without any protection to keep my car from driving off the edge...

We need guard rails and barriers. But barriers work best when they aren’t noticed.

Paul wrote his words to the Philippian Christians to warn that they were worshiping the guard rails rather than the bridge that was carrying them across. We all need principles and propositions, doctrines and dogmas. But they are the guard rails of our faith, not the Guardian. Their function is to keep us on the path of Truth. But we can’t forget that the Way, the Truth, and the Life is Jesus. We find these only in a relationship with Christ, not in the act of brandishing propositions about Christ.

Paul warns of a fatal flaw that lurked in the teachings of those who insisted that Gentiles must first become Jews before they could become Christians. The so-called Judaizers believed that all the tenets of the Old Covenant must be met before the gifts of the New Covenant could be received.

Jesus didn’t come to abolish what came before, but to fulfill and complete it. “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). But even the law was more about relationships than you think. The Ten Commandments are all about

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relationships. The first four deal with our relationship with God: the vertical dimension. The following six deal with our relationships with one another: the horizontal dimension. Jesus even reduced the ten to one, really a summary of them all: Love God, Love Others. And give some thought to this: love is a relationship more than a commandment.

In the Philippian church Gentile followers of Jesus were being told there were Old Testament laws to follow. Provisions and proscriptions that must be met before they could enjoy full membership in the body of Christ.

Paul would have none of such false teaching. Righteousness was a right relationship with God, and this had never been achieved through the workings of the Law. A new way of salvation had been incarnated and inaugurated in Jesus Christ, a way that put a person above propositions; a way that put personal relationship above written principles.

Paul dismissed any focus on the safety features of faith and jumped out onto what looked to others like a rickety, dangerous way across the chasm between human sinfulness and divine redemption. It wasn't scaffolding that saved him. It was Jesus on the scaffold that saved him.

Two millennia later we are still more comfortable with the safeguards than with the security of the bridge. While Paul fearlessly ran out over the apparently rickety bridge of an itinerant Galilean preacher executed by Roman authorities as a criminal, we are more comfortable hanging onto the guardrails we have built up over the centuries.

We call them the dogmas of faith. Doctrines. Propositions. Principles. They are not bad safeguards to have. But they are not the bridge. They cannot offer the Way across, or the Life once we get across. Only Jesus offers the possibility for a right relationship between our own broken lives and God.

The good news is that God did not send us a statement but a Savior. God did not send more rules and regulations but a Redeemer. God did not send a principle but a Person. And that person was Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, Son of God, Redeemer, and Friend.

The greatest moment in life comes when we say from the innermost depths of our being, "Jesus Christ, You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." When you can say that, you will have discovered the pearl of great price. You will have fulfilled your fondest hopes, your wildest dreams. You will have found the bridge that will take you safely across every challenge and problem of your life.

Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians to help them fall in love with Jesus, stay in love with Jesus, and die in love with Jesus. Jesus Love is the love that determines our destiny, both in the here and now and in the world to come.

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IV. Illustrations, Ruminations, Applications

When Mahatma Gandhi died, he had just one picture in his room, of the risen Christ, and under it the quotation: "He is our peace" (Ephesians 2:14).

Bishop John A. T. Robinson chose these words of John Donne ("Sermon to the Nativity") to be read at his memorial service: "When God loves, God loves to the end; and not to their end, and to their death, but to God's end, and God's end is that He might love them more."

Donald Miller, in his book *Searching for God Knows What*, observes that the times in his life when he has been the happiest haven't been when he's had the most money or even the most freedom, but when he's been in love or in community, or what he describes as being "right with people".

"If God's love for us bears no relationship to our own deepest longings and desires, then God cannot be a God of love, but a God of commands. If God's will for you and for me did not bear any relationship to our own deepest longings and desires, we should be obliged to ignore the longings of our hearts and to put our trust in some authority external to ourselves."

--Gerard W. Hughes, *God in All Things* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2003), 113.

Bridges with safeguards are the kind of bridges "civilized" people build, and we all know they are safe. Until they aren't.

In August 2007, during the height of rush-hour traffic in Minneapolis, the Interstate 35 West bridge collapsed. Thirteen people died, one hundred forty-five people were injured. The moment before the collapse, not one of the commuters was concerned with the idea of crossing a bridge. After all, there were steel guard rails. There were huge concrete foundations. They trusted the safety features designed around the bridge. It looked sturdy, but the structure of that bridge was fatally flawed.

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