



You Are What You Love

Philippians 3.1-11

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If you've been in Église Connexion for any length of time, you've probably heard me talk about a man named James K. A. Smith. Jamie talks about a fact which is so obvious we shouldn't have needed anyone to tell us it was a fact. (And I hope that those of you who have been here for a while would be just as able to say articulate what I'm about to say as I am.) He says that if I really want to know who you are, what makes you *you*, what makes you tick, I should *not* ask the question, "What do you know?" or "What do you believe?" If I really want to know about who you are, I rather need to ask you, "What do you *want*? What do you *desire*? What do you *love*?" And the proof that this is true is that it is possible to believe all the right things and know all the right things and not be the kind of person you should be; but it is not possible to *truly love* something and not be influenced and shaped by that love.

Given this reality, let's think of the apostle Paul. Paul is seen as *the* Christian *par excellence*. He is the super-Christian. He is the gold standard, the guy we all look to when we want to know what a Christian looks like. Why is that? Do we have any clue in the Bible as to what made Paul the gold standard for Christianity? what made him so incredibly effective? what made him the guy we all want to be like? In today's text, *we get the answer to that question*. And it's very simple: Paul was the gold standard for Christianity because *he desired and loved Christ more than anything in the world*. So in today's text he takes us through the journey that brought him to this kind of passion for Christ, and then he celebrates the Christ he is so passionate about. In his testimony we see Paul's discovery of grace; we see the wonderful disillusionment he went through once he understood grace; and then we see him celebrating two things: he celebrates Christ, whom he desires more than anything else; and he celebrates the promise that he'll be able to *keep on* enjoying Christ for all eternity. (And if you've been with us since the beginning of the letter, keep everything we've seen in the back of your mind, because this text is the center, the pivot around which everything he's said to the Philippians turns.)

1) Understanding Grace (v. 1-3)

¹ *Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.*

² *Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.* ³ *For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh...* So first of all, he mentions a group of people with whom he has a big problem. Look at the violence of his language: he calls them "dogs" and "evildoers"! Ordinarily as Christians we are called to speak kindly to others, to be gracious in our words, but for Paul there seems to be one group of people who are an exception: those who *call* themselves Christians, but who through their message, actually *attack* the gospel of grace rather than supporting it.

We know whom he's talking about when he tells the Philippians to look out for *those who mutilate the flesh* (v. 2). These were Christians who accepted some kind of Christian message, but who insisted that in order to be accepted by God, Christians had to be circumcised. Circumcision, weird as it sounds, was the ritual required by the law of Moses to demarcate Jewish men from the people around them—it was a sign

of their “set-apart-ness,” the means of proving that they were God’s people. So now, there are these so-called “Christians” who come insisting that because Jesus was Jewish, and because Christianity was seen as an offshoot of Judaism, Christians need to maintain the rites of Judaism in order to be accepted by God.

Now, this may seem like a detail to us—a kind of minor doctrinal error that is unfortunate but no more than that—but Paul would strongly disagree. This was a *very, very grave problem*. These are not just mistaken teachers, he says, these are *dogs*; they are *evildoers*. This is not to be taken lightly. The question is, why? Why does Paul feel so strongly about this? To answer that question, he comes back to the gospel.

³ *For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh...* He comes back to the very rudiments of the gospel message: he reminds the Philippians that Jesus came to *fulfill* the law. *Jesus* was circumcised on the eighth day; *Jesus* perfectly accomplished the law for us. So for those of us who are united to Christ by faith, God counts *his* righteousness as *ours*—if he was circumcised on the eighth day as a way of manifesting his belonging to God’s family, then *we* are a part of God’s family; if Christ lived a perfect life for us, then *we* are considered perfectly righteous. This is the very root of what Christianity is—without this, whatever you’re sharing or believing *is not the Christian faith*. We’ll come back to this in a minute, but first, in v. 4, Paul does something unusual. It’s as if he can hear those who are objecting to what he is saying, and it’s like he agrees to put his point on pause and play along for a bit.

2) Rejoicing in Disillusionment (v. 4-7)

⁴ *...though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.*

Paul was a perfect Jew. This guy was a Pharisee, a member of a branch of Judaism rigorously dedicated to fulfilling the Mosaic law; and the Pharisees saw Jesus, this Jewish carpenter from Nazareth, as a threat, because he claimed to be God himself—which was blasphemy. And blasphemy was punishable by death under the law of Moses. So after Jesus’s death, Paul made it his mission to stamp out all traces left of his impact—he became a murderer and a persecutor of Christians, under the pretense of fighting for the purity of the Mosaic law.

So if you were to look at Paul’s CV, and compare it to what was required of him under the law of Moses, he was blameless—he obeyed the law to the letter. This was his pride and his crown, his entire identity was wrapped up in his perfect Jewish-ness. The prophets had prophesied that a Messiah would come, and Paul had thought that in persecuting the Christians, he was clearing the road—he was leaving the path open for the promised Messiah by keeping Judaism pure and free from blasphemy.

But then one day, as he is on the road to Damascus, on his way to stamp out the Christian witness in that town, the resurrected Jesus supernaturally invaded his life. He appeared to him on the road, and revealed himself to Paul. And suddenly Paul understood that everything that he had believed, everything that he

had always fought for, was incorrect. He *wasn't* helping prepare the way for the Messiah's coming; he was persecuting the Messiah who *had come*; he was fighting against those who saw Jesus for who he really was: the promised Savior of the Jews.

And in realizing this, Paul underwent a profound disillusionment in what he had always believed and really, in who he was: that is, he saw that everything he had taken as fact was actually false, an illusion; and for the first time, *he saw it as an illusion*. Can you imagine what such a realization would do to a person? This kind of fundamental destruction of everything you thought was true would be extremely disconcerting. How humbling would it be to realize that everything *you* had devoted your life to was wrong, that you had been wrong all this time, and that you had been persecuting the very God you had spent your life trying to serve?

There are two possibilities following such a revelation: either you are crushed under the weight of your error, or you fall on your face in gratitude that God hadn't let you continue committing such atrocities. Paul responded in the second way: he abandoned his quest to stamp out the Christians and instead joined them, turning his considerable zeal to proclaiming to all who would listen that *the Messiah had indeed come*. Rather than being crushed by the disillusionment of knowing that everything he had believed was wrong, he *rejoiced* in it, because this disillusionment—this realization that everything he had thought was right was in fact illusory—was infinitely better than everything he had believed before. ⁷ *But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ*. Whatever gain I had, no matter how zealous and perfect I believed myself to be, is now as nothing to me—all I have and all I want is Christ, and Christ is enough.

3) Desiring Christ (v. 8-9)

So in v. 8-9 he goes on expounding on v. 7, explaining what he means. Everything he was proud of before—his zeal for the law, his near-perfect keeping of the law, his devotion to ridding Judaism of its enemies—he now sees as filth, because *the Messiah has come, and he has revealed himself to Paul, and he is a very different kind of Messiah he had imagined!* Jesus is not a warrior who needs to crush those in rebellion against him, but a servant who came to *serve* those in rebellion against him (as we saw in chapter 2). This is the most surprising thing one could imagine—that the Messiah, when he came, would come *like this*—not as a warrior who wishes to create a perfect religious army, but rather as a servant who gives his people everything freely, by grace.

And Paul's seeing Jesus as he is, seeing the way in which God manifested himself to humanity in the person with Christ, eclipses everything he once held dear. ⁸ *Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith...*

In order to get what he's saying here, we have to understand that Christ came to solve a fundamental problem, and that this problem requires two solutions. The problem, at its root, is that God requires perfection to be united to him—he cannot hold company with anyone who is not perfectly righteous.

And *none* of us is perfectly righteous. So Jesus *takes on* the imperfections of his people (like putting on a filthy coat), and is condemned and punished by God *for* all of these imperfections. That's the first solution.

But that's not enough: it's not enough to simply be declared *not sinful*. To be reconciled to God, we have to be *actively righteous*. And again, none of us are. So when Christ came, in addition from taking away our sin, *he gave us his righteousness*. He takes our sin; we take his perfection. He is punished for our sin; we are rewarded for his perfect keeping of the law. And because he is a perfect man, the punishment of death that he suffers for us *cannot hold him*—God accepts his sacrifice and proves it by raising him from the dead, so Jesus can now present himself to God for approval after living a perfect life, and when he does this, he brings *all of his people* along with them, and says to God, "I've given them my perfect righteousness. I've obeyed the law, and given them my obedience." So we can now be accepted by God and united to him.

Now, let's come back to Paul. After Christ revealed himself to Paul on the road to Damascus, Paul realized that all of his "perfection," all of his blamelessness, was an illusion. That's a terrifying idea. So can you imagine Paul's relief to learn that his salvation no longer depends on his perfect keeping of the law, because Christ actually fulfilled the law *for* him? Can you imagine his relief to learn that all of the *effort* he had put into being *good enough* to be accepted by God was no longer necessary? to know that the work has *already been done*? to know that by faith, he has been declared perfectly righteous before God, because Christ was righteous *for* him? His righteousness was no longer *a righteousness of [his] own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith*. Can you imagine how *restful* such knowledge would be to such a man?

But there is a *but*. That faith which God gives comes at a cost. We often say that salvation costs a great deal, because it comes at the cost of Christ's life. But that's not all salvation costs. Paul's salvation also came at the cost of Paul's *pride*. In order to put his faith in Christ, he had to put *no faith in himself*—he could no longer count on his own righteousness, his own perfection, his own achievements (which were prodigious). From that day forward, he had to trust completely and totally and *only* in the saving work of Christ for him. *For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.*

I hope you can see that once you've understood just how precious the gift of Jesus Christ is, your achievements no longer mean anything—your CV is worthless compared to his. So here's the question: once you have realized that your achievements can never make you right to God, why would you want to hang on to them? Paul didn't—he counted all of his amazing achievements as a near-perfect Jew as *rubbish*. "Is that what it costs to gain Christ? I'm in! God, you're saying you want me to no longer be proud of the things I've done (which are worthless to you anyway, since they only served to swell my own ego)? You're saying you want me to think nothing of how good I am? No problem! You've given me Christ! Why would I *want* to hold on to anything else?" From that moment forward, Paul no longer desires to affirm his own goodness in order to feel better about himself; he no longer trusts in his own goodness to make him more likable to God. From this day forward, he trusts in Christ and only Christ; he desires Christ and only Christ.

And here's what's amazing: if all he got was Christ for this life, that would be enough. That would be *more* than sufficient to make it worthwhile. But there is more—Paul knows the promises of the prophets. He knows what is coming! And so he grasps onto Christ in the *fullness* of his mission, knowing that his mission is not only for this life, but for all eternity!

4) Looking Forward to Eternal Life (v. 10-11)

So Paul's sentence in v. 10 is actually a continuation of the idea he started in v. 8: For his sake I count all my achievements as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ... ¹⁰ *that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,* ¹¹ *that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

Now, this may seem strange to many of us—Paul's desire to *share in Christ's sufferings, becoming like him in his death*. But he's merely restating what he's already said: he has *already* considered his life, and everything else that was worthwhile to him before, as rubbish. The man he was before is gone—he is dead—and now he is a new man, living united with Christ. So if Paul has already undergone such a fundamental transformation—dying to the person he was before—he's merely following it to its conclusion. All he wants is to be like Christ! Christ lived for the Father's glory; Paul wants to live for the Father's glory! Christ was willing to suffer so that others might know him; so Paul is willing to suffer so that others might know him! Christ was willing to die to open the way for God's kingdom; so Paul is willing to die, if necessary, to see God's kingdom advance!

And he knows that being like Christ in life will also mean being like Christ in death. If he is united to Christ in life, he will be united to Christ in death. And what happened after Christ died? *He came back to life*. By his sacrifice on the cross, he *conquered* death—for himself and for all those who are united to him by faith! If Paul is united Christ in life, he will be united to him in death—that is, *death will not be able to hold him*. If God raised Christ by his power, he will raise Paul by his power as well. This glorious, beautiful, wonderful Christ is now Paul's treasure and crown—and since death will not be able to hold Paul, he will be able to enjoy Christ and worship him and love him *forever*—for all eternity. Grace upon grace upon grace.

5) Living in the Light of Grace

So far this morning, I have only spoken of Paul—this is what *he* went through, this is how *he* felt. This is why Paul was the incredible Christian, the gold standard for Christianity, that we know him to be. And sometimes texts like these, while beautiful, can be hard for us, because we are task-oriented people. We want to know what to *do*. When faced with texts like these, our gut reaction is to say, “Thank you, Paul, but *what do I do?*” I hope you can see that this is not the right question. It's not the right question, fundamentally because what God is calling us to in this text is not to *do* anything, but to *see*.

He's calling us to see our *achievements* as Paul does. Most of us have achievements or character traits that we look at and which cause us to say, “God should take notice of this.” If God were standing physically present in this room, how would you defend yourself before him? If he were physically here, and we were

to try defending ourselves before him by talking about our achievements, we would immediately recognize how *woefully* inadequate our achievements are to impress him. Why? Because *God himself, in the person of Christ, already accomplished everything for us*. We no longer have anything to prove! *You have nothing to prove!* So through the words of the apostle Paul, God is calling us to see and to recognize this fact: the only thing we can present to God is faith in Christ, who fulfilled the law for us and who paid our penalty for us.

He's calling us to see the *future* as Paul does. Human beings have a chronic fear of death, but as Christians, should we? Of course not! Paul already said earlier in the letter (1.21) that *to live is Christ and to die is gain*. If I die, I get to be with him! If I am united to him in my life, I will also be united to him in my death! Our hope is not in only this life, but in *eternal* life! My hope isn't that Christ will make my life comfortable for the next fifty years (he probably won't—remember that Paul's in prison when he writes this!). My hope is that he will be my glory and my crown and my treasure for all of eternity!

Finally, God is calling us to *desire Christ* as Paul does. Remember what we saw at the very beginning? If I really want to get to the bottom of who you are, the question I need to ask is, "What do you want? What do you desire? What do you love?" Brothers and sisters, we are what we love. Now, most of us can see the logic in that and agree with it. But here's the problem. We are what we love...but we might not love what we should. Our culture is constantly putting in front of our eyes alternative images of what "the good life" looks like, of what is *really* desirable, of what is *really* worthwhile. And because it's flashy, and immediate, and stylish, there's a part of us that wants to look, and wants to believe those things are actually worth desiring. But they're not—they are false faces, masks put on dead bodies.

So God is calling us all to believe that what Paul is saying is *true*: that *Christ* is the good life, that *Christ* is the only worthwhile treasure, that *Christ* is the only treasure we'll ever be able to hold on to. *Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*. This should be true for *all* of us, because if we have faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit has opened our eyes to his glory and his beauty, and placed Christ in front of our eyes as the only deserving object of our love. And most of us spend all of our time looking anywhere *but* at him, contemplating everything *but* him. So God is calling us all to *look*—to look upon Christ and meditate on his glory and trust that no matter how attractive what the culture presents us is, Jesus is better.

In every struggle, Jesus is better. In all of our weakness, Jesus is better. Jesus is better than all of our accomplishments. Jesus is better than all of our talents. Jesus is better than all of our loves. Jesus is better than everything we think we need. And so God is calling us to *look* upon Jesus and say, "My soul sings aloud that Jesus, you are better! My eternal song will be, 'Jesus, you are better!'" He calls us to see Jesus as he is and believe what Paul believed: that far beyond anything we could love or desire, Jesus is better.