

Same Mind, Same Love, Same Joy (Part 8)

Philippians 3:1-14

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Thanksgiving is difficult this year because many of us cannot get together in person. It's hard to be thankful with all that's going on, but years from now we may look back and appreciate this unique opportunity to spend so much uninterrupted time with our immediate family. This unique situation forces us to find ways to get along. It forces us to put into practice the selfless humility that Paul talked about in Philippians 2, to set aside ourselves, to set aside our rights and preferences and accept loss for the sake of unity. This attitude of humility is just one of the ways in which Paul is trying to change our thinking and thereby find true joy in Christ, and he comes back to this idea again in 3:1. Then he addresses another related way that we need to change our perspective, which will present a challenge to most of us.

After Paul's exhortation to rejoice in Jesus, he turns his attention to the things that often prevent us from having such joy by distracting us from Jesus. In v. 2 he brings up those dogs, evildoers, and mutilators of flesh. These are the false teachers that told the Philippians that they had to be circumcised and follow the Law in order to have good standing with God. They put their confidence in works. They thought righteousness could be obtained by works rather than faith. But works will never be enough. A gospel based on works only leads to inadequacy and insecurity, which prompts self-centered boasting. Their false gospel was based on merit, on people's own work, and it resulted in boasting in themselves and pride. The true gospel that Paul preaches is instead based on free grace, on the person and work of Jesus, and it results in boasting in Christ and in selfless humility. Why would anyone choose the false gospel over the more attractive true gospel?

Paul goes on to list all the reasons that he, more than anyone else, has to boast in the flesh. He has the right innate qualities, being born a Jew in the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews. From a Jewish perspective, he also has all the right credentials in terms of his effort and works, being a Pharisee who followed the Law to the letter, blameless with regard to the Law, and zealous for the persecution of the church. Paul was the Jew that all Jewish parents wanted their kids to become. Paul's message resonates with us because this emphasis on hard work, credentials, and achievement makes Chinese culture very similar to Jewish culture. Growing up, there was a girl at my home church that was like Paul, a model daughter who

excelled in every way. The other parents wanted their kids to be just like her. How often do we put these expectations of achievement on our children? Before I continue, I would like to acknowledge that I do understand where this emphasis on achievement comes from and have increasingly come to appreciate the experience of immigrant parents. I remember when we were with my father in Chinatown and he broke down at a footbridge where he once despaired after losing his job as a busboy shortly after arriving in this country. I understand that immigrants experience a desperation that we couldn't imagine, which instills in them a drive to work hard in order to survive. These values are then instilled into their children. However, this perspective is not necessarily spiritually healthy.

In vv. 7-9 Paul says that all his accomplishments that he once boasted in are worthless now. He counts them not just as neutral, but as loss. In his ledger, they are no longer considered profit but loss. They are garbage compared to knowing Jesus. They are considered negative because they not only are worthless in comparison to Jesus, but because they detract from knowing Him. The more you reach and achieve, the harder it is to find your value in Christ. It takes effort, sacrifice, time, energy, and commitment to achieve worldly success. It's hard to prioritize Jesus when all your energy is spent on achieving for yourself. That's not to say that we shouldn't work hard. Ephesians 6 tells us that we should work as if working for the Lord. We should be the model employee or student for His glory. However, if we are truly working for Jesus and witnessing for Him, we surely cannot simultaneously sacrifice knowing Him, otherwise we become just like those of the world who live in ignorance of Him. We should prioritize Jesus and not sacrifice spiritual things for the sake of advancement. How often do we tell ourselves and our kids that it's alright to miss church a few times for these other things? We say that it's a temporary sacrifice. But do we ever miss these other events in order to go to church? Do we prioritize knowing Jesus? Let us have the proper perspective. These other things are worthless in comparison to Jesus and will not give us the joy and satisfaction that He does. Let us pray that God gives us this proper perspective that puts Jesus first.