

Straining Forward

Philippians 3:8-14

Introduction

When we talk about the Christian life, we must always make the distinction between justification and sanctification. We must keep them separate and not emphasize one over the other. We see this confusion in the church. Holiness churches, like the one I was raised in, emphasize the importance of living a holy, Spirit-led life to the point where we accuse them of preaching works righteousness. We Lutherans tend to emphasize justification by grace through faith over sanctification so much, we have been charged with preaching a cheap grace that says there is no room for good works. Neither of those charges is true. St. Paul is giving a balanced view of the Christian life in our epistle reading today. A view we must maintain. As with Law and Gospel, both must be taught; both must be distinguished; neither should be emphasized over the other. Both have their place.

Justification (v. 8-10a)

Through the first part of **verse 10**, Paul is talking about justification. This is what it means to be saved. Any discussion of the Christian life must begin with how one becomes a Christian.

Count everything as loss

Paul says that he *counts everything as loss* (v. 8). This doesn't mean he misses his old life. Quite the reverse. He calls it *rubbish*. What has he lost? (Read **Philippians 3:4-6**). For Jesus Christ, Paul gave up trying to earn his salvation by living up to a moral code. This is what he calls 'rubbish' when he compares it with the *surpassing worth of knowing Christ*. Like rubbish, all our efforts at being "good enough" are worthless. We could never be good enough. Even if one could keep the Law perfectly, he would have to sustain that until the time of his death. If he slips up just once, all his good works are for naught. That's why **Isaiah** says *all our righteousness is like a polluted garment* (**Isaiah 64:6**). The fact is, we can't keep the Law. And anything we do apart from faith is a polluted garment or a filthy rag, for *without faith it is impossible to please God* (**Hebrews 11:6**).

Knowing Christ

What does it mean to *know Christ* (v. 10)? Knowing Christ is not the same as knowing the answers to the test. Biblical knowledge involves three parts. First, there is head knowledge, as being acquainted with someone or something. Second, there is practice. You don't really know something unless you can put it into practice. This is about following Jesus. Third, knowing someone is being intimate with them, experiencing them on a deeply personal level. Adam *knew Eve* (**Genesis 4:1**). This is more than a euphemism for sexual intercourse; it is the intimacy of the *two becoming one flesh* (**Genesis 2:24**). To know Christ is to have a head knowledge about Him, do what He says, and have an intimate relationship with Him. These all develop over time, with our devotion and Bible study.

Righteousness that comes from God

Knowing Christ in this way is having the *righteousness that comes from God* (v. 9). And this is the only righteousness that counts because it's the only one He accepts. It's a gift, given by grace and received through faith. It is *dependent upon faith* (v. 9), as Paul says.

For the sake of Christ

All this takes place for Christ's sake. As we say in the service of Confession and Absolution, "Almighty God, in His mercy has given His Son to die for you, and for His sake, forgives you all your sins." For the sake of Christ, on account of what He did on the cross, because of His suffering and death, salvation is freely offered to all people. And it is freely received by anyone who has faith in Christ. This is what it means to be justified.

Sanctification

Then Paul talks about what it means to be a Christian, what the Christian life looks like. He's speaking in the first person, but he is using himself as an example. This is for all Christians. This is Sanctification.

Apprehend

Paul says about this life of faith in Christ, *I make it my own (v. 12)* or "I apprehend it." We apprehend or grab hold of this life God has set before us because Jesus has grabbed hold of us.

Forgetting what lies behind

In what sense are we to *forget what lies behind (v. 13)*? We don't want to forget the lessons we learned from our mistakes. We don't want to forget people. We want to forget the guilt and regrets that weigh us down. "Satan" means "accuser." One of his favorite games to play with us is "Remember when?" He reminds us of all our sins and uses them against us to keep us living in defeat and fear. But these have all been forgiven by Jesus Christ, washed in His blood. Through Christ's forgiveness and the power of the Holy Spirit, we leave the guilt and condemnation behind.

Straining, pressing

Using words like 'strain' and 'press,' Paul shows us that the Christian life isn't a cakewalk. Last week we talked about the Prodigal Son, who was covered with pig filth, how his father embraced him and kissed him. However, he didn't leave him in his filth; he put on him a clean new robe. Clothed in Christ's righteousness, we are righteous before God. We also have the Ten Commandments, the teachings of Jesus, and the words of the apostles to tell us how we are to live as Christians. While we will never be perfect this side of the grave, we keep straining for it, keep pressing on.

The goal

The goal is eternal life with God in heaven. But until we get there, He has given us Word and Sacrament to get us through this life. When we receive the body and blood of our Lord, He strengthens our faith to walk as He would have us to walk, to press on toward the goal; we are **STRAINING FORWARD** for Him.

*And the peace of God,
Which surpasses all understanding,
Will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*
