

“It’s Not About You, or Your Accomplishments” based on Philippians 3:1-21 and Psalm 19
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sunday, Oct. 8, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Our two scriptures today share a message and is straightforward, or at least it should be, were it not for the influence that other philosophies and worldviews have on us.

From the Psalmist’s perspective, the love of God should be obvious to us, because all truth is spoken in the glory of the created world, and it is revealed again in the writings of the Torah, of scripture. With open minds, sometimes translated simple, we can recognize the value of this truth and be wise, even though we are sinners by our own actions, and even though we sin in ways we do not even understand. This is because God loves us, offering forgiveness and help. The Psalmist asks that all that we speak and all that we think about, will please God.

For Paul, God’s love should be obvious to us because of who Jesus is as the Messiah. He is the Son of God sharing in our flesh so that all of us, the people of every nation, might worship and hold our heads high to worship in the Spirit and rejoice in Jesus. For it is not the ethnic markers God placed on the people of Israel that save, but the faithfulness of Jesus and our faith in Jesus that justify us. So, if we count all of our accomplishments, they are a loss, because what we gain in the identity and work of Jesus is far greater, even if it means we suffer for him. This is not to glorify suffering but to say that when we are walking with Christ, we walk on a map with others – the great cloud of witnesses – and it leads to resurrection, as citizens of heaven transformed.

Indeed, both of these texts point us to the grace, the gift of God’s presence, that saves us. It is the grace of Jesus, who is the Word of God in flesh, the fulfillment of the Torah, which makes us right with God, and this justifies us. We can’t justify ourselves. There’s no excuse or action we can do to make up for our incompleteness. But just as it is the grace of this beautiful creation spoken into being by him, God’s love, seen in God’s self-giving nature, and this is what justifies.

Yet, we live in a world that centers our minds on undermining this truth because the philosophies of this world urge us to put ourselves at the center of everything. We often think “this is about me, so there is a transaction to secure God’s love, one I have to do or one someone else has to do.” Missing that love in creation, in the Torah, and in the faithfulness of God. After all, the story contained in all of scripture is of God with us, because God is always coming down to be with humanity even as time and time again, humanity turns away by elevating worship of false gods – comfort, security, popularity, power, and even ourselves. We put these over worship and service to the true God.

Beloved, if you hear nothing else in this service, hear this truth: Your salvation is not about you. No, it is about God’s love for you. That’s it.

Paul told the Philippians it wasn’t about whether they were circumcised and for us, it is not about the markers we put on being Christian today, whether it is what a Christian should be like or look like. It’s not about the sins we consider the worst of the worst. Nor is it about what good works we think are best. Your salvation comes solely from God’s love for you. This love is seen in the faithfulness of Jesus. Knowing him for who he is and what he did for us leads us to walk with him.

This does not mean our knowledge is saving, for our knowledge is often incomplete. We are not perfect. This word in Greek we can translate as incomplete or perfect. It does not mean the quality

of our walk saves us, because we will always be incomplete. Our confidence is not in our ethnicity, or our denomination, our worship practices, nor even our theology, because all of these things are far from perfect. They are far from complete. No, instead our confidence is solely in Jesus, who being one with God, came to live in unity with us, then died and rose for us. By his identity as the true temple, fully God and human, and by his death, resurrection, and ascension, we are circumcised, as Paul put it, meaning marked by the Holy Spirit, empowered to worship with our heads held high.

What I love about this text is that to make his point, Paul even resorts to ancient profanity. Just when you think, well certainly a potty mouth is not truly a Christian, Paul breaks out a word in Koine Greek that was intentionally vulgar. In our reading today, it was literally translated as “dog excrement.” It is often softened in a lot of translations to be “rubbish” or “garbage.” Yet the KJV called it “dung.” But if I were to use it in the way Paul did, with its meaning, mapping it onto a word or phrase we use today, it would have involved a bull, not a dog, and a four-letter word, I won’t say up here. Yep, that’s a bad word in the bible.

Now, this is not to endorse foul language, because as much as I believe words are just words, I think Paul would agree with me that a lot of foul words is ineffective communication. But in this case, Paul wants to show how little he thinks of his accomplishments. His birthright as an Israelite in the tribe of Benjamin, his circumcision, his study of the law under Gamaliel and his life as a Pharisee, and his adherence to living by Israel’s identity in the Torah, are all just “BLEEP” compared to knowing Jesus,

The Messiah whose faithfulness is our justification, on the basis of faith, or allegiance to him. You see, our reading today, and what I just said again, was “the faithfulness of the Messiah.” The phrase in Greek in newer translations is often translated as “faith in Christ,” but a more literal translation, is the faithfulness of the Messiah, or “faith of Christ,” as the King James had it. This saves us. Indeed, it is not our faith first, but our faith in response to Jesus’s faith. This is the same faithfulness we see throughout Hebrew Scripture, where God remains faithful, even when the people are not. So, your justification and mine, is not by our doing, not in any way, shape, or form, but it is by Christ.

Does that mean we can do whatever we want? Well, Paul goes on to say that if there is any means by which he might attain resurrection, then it is by conforming to the cross – living like Jesus wherever it may lead. You see, Paul knows and wants them to know resurrection is Jesus’s gift, but nonetheless, he is not willing to say he has been made perfect. He is not complete.

He does not consider, or count, or rationalize that he has already obtained resurrection, and this is Paul. He says this because he knows this gift has been given to him, and he will not chance to squander it, not by looking back to remember what is behind. Instead, he reaches forward. He puts his beliefs and his sins of the past behind him, knowing he is forgiven, and chooses to reach forward, to be more like Christ in his life, pursuing with haste to seize or grab hold of that gift for which the Messiah has already seized him.

So, he tells the people that if they are perfected, or mature, already, something he said he was not yet, then they should imitate him still, pressing toward, or pursuing with haste, the prize. He assures them that he and the others he has commended to them are all walking on the right path, trying to be humble like Christ. They are trying to live in a way that reflects their belief that they

are saved, by not sinning because they worship their own appetites. They are not the ones whose god is in their belly. Paul says he and these others are an example, or offer a type, a pattern, a map to follow.

Indeed, he touches on the pride of citizenship that the people of Philippi had, as a colony of the great city of Rome with all of its special benefits from Caesar, who proclaimed himself to be a god. Caesar proclaimed himself to be the savior. Caesar proclaimed himself to be lord of the Roman people. Paul instead says that our citizenship as Christians is in heaven, by which he means the dwelling place of God, from which the Savior, the Messiah or Christ, the Lord will come, and he has true power, which enables him to make not just a worldly empire, but power to make all things subject to himself. This is the one who went to the cross.

Beloved, we are saved by Jesus on the basis of our allegiance, our faith, in him, not our allegiance to this world. Paul weeps for the enemies of the cross, whose worldly glory is but their shame. This is not to condemn the good creation to say that all the stuff around us is evil. No, the Psalmist today praised creation, saying that it reveals God. What this condemns are the structures of human culture and society that tell us we are not enough. The systems that say we are not good enough to be loved and need things to measure up.

These are the false gods, the faith we put in material things, the accumulation of wealth, But the orders and structures of human culture and society, the accumulation of wealth, power and honors, rather than the love of God, the faithfulness of Jesus, and the presence of the Holy Spirit in and among us. That's what we should prioritize first and foremost. Those other things can be good, but they are not by our having them, a measure of our salvation.

As we leave this church, remember that God loves all the world, even if we turn from him. So, let us work out our salvation, pressing on toward the goal, pursuing with haste the prize, by seeking to love God and love others as God loves us This is to seek concord with one another, and urge peace in the world around us, so that all people might discover, that they too are redeemed and loved by God. So they know the Spirit remains in and among us, not as a reward, but to empower us to do those things God has ordained for us to do – the good works.

God longs for division among us to end. It ends only through humility, just as the Messiah, being the eternal and equal Son humbly became one of us, uniting humanity with God, suffering what the world calls shame, to make it the glory of God.

Indeed, it's not about you. It's not about me. It's not about our accomplishments. It's not about anything we can hold up to say we have already obtained salvation. No, it's about what Jesus did, and knowing how much we are loved, then trying to walk with him together, knowing that when we stumble, we can stand again in accepting forgiveness and reaching forward. We are called to be faithful to God's faithfulness to us, following the map given which we have received from a great cloud of witnesses, a community of the church made up of believers in every age, who walked in humility and love, working for God's justice, which is reconciliation. Amen.

Psalm 19

The heavens declare the glory of God and the expanse of the skies makes known God's hand.

Day unto day speech pours out and night unto night show knowledge.

There is no speech and no words where their voice is not heard.

Through all the land their measuring line has gone out and to the end of inhabited world.

In their discourse he has set a tabernacle tent for the sun,

which is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber and rejoices like a mighty one to run its race.

From one end of the heavens, its source and its circuit to the other end, there is nothing hidden from its heat.

The revealed law of the Lord is perfect, converting the whole soul and being.

The testimony of the Lord is sure, by which the open-minded are made wise.

The precepts of the Lord are upright, causing the heart to rejoice.

The Lord's commandment is pure, making light come to the eyes.

The fear of the Lord is pure, abiding forever.

The judgments of the Lord are true and together justify.

They are more to be desired than gold, even refined gold,

and much sweeter than honey, even honey flowing from the honeycomb.

Indeed, your servant is instructed by them, and observing them is of great consequence.

Who can understand their errors?

Hold me innocent from what sins are concealed.

Indeed, restrain your servant from prideful sins.

Do not let them have dominion over me.

At that time, I shall be perfected, and I shall be innocent of great rebellion.

Let the speech of my mouth and the meditation of my heart

be acceptable in your sight O Lord, my rock and redeemer.

Philippians 3:1-21

Hereafter, my siblings, rejoice in the Lord. Indeed, to write these same things to you, it is not troublesome for me, but for you it is safe. Watch out for the scavenging dogs. Watch out for people who do morally rotten works. Watch out for the mutilation. For we are the circumcision, those in God's Spirit, worshiping and holding our heads high in the Messiah Jesus and without having put our confidence in the flesh, even if I have confidence also in the flesh.

If anyone else seems to have confidence in the flesh, I have more: I was circumcised on the eighth day, coming from Israel of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews. According to the law, I was a Pharisee. According to Zeal, I was persecuting the church. According to the justification in the law, I had become faultless. But whatever things were to me gain, these I have put forward, on account of Christ, as loss. But therefore indeed, I also count all things to be loss on account of the superior knowledge of the Messiah Jesus my Lord, on account of whom all things I have lost and put forward as dog excrement.

This is in order that I may gain the Messiah and be found in him, not having my own justification, which is of Torah observance. Rather justification is through the Messiah's faith. That is God's justification on the basis of our faith. This means knowing him, knowing the power of his resurrection, and the common life of his suffering.

For it is being conformed to his death, if by any means I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

This is not because I have already obtained resurrection or have already been made complete, but I am pursuing this with haste so I may also seize that for which I was seized by the Messiah Jesus. Siblings, I, myself, do not rationalize that I have taken hold of it. But forgetting those things which are behind and now reaching toward the things ahead, one thing I do is I pursue with haste to enter the prize of God's upward calling in the Messiah Jesus.

Therefore, as many of you who are perfected, this might be your mindset, and if in anything you are of a different mindset, even this God will reveal to you. Nonetheless, into that which we have arrived at by the same walk. Let that regulate the same mindset. Become imitators together of me and observe those walking this way, as you have us as a pattern. For many are walking, whom many times I told you about. But now, even weeping as I say, those enemies of the cross of the Messiah, whose end is destruction, whose god is the belly and glory is their shame, are minding what is worldly.

For of us, the citizenship in heaven begins from where also we are awaiting a Savior, the Lord Jesus the Messiah, who will transform our body of humiliation conforming it to the body of his.