

Series: "Valuable Wisdom for a Church 'on the Move'"

Sermon "Process"

Text: Philippians 3:12-21

RGJR/FBCCS/11-1-20 *UNEDITED*

- John Milton, who was considered no "intellectual slouch" once said of his contemporary John Seldon, an English Jurist and scholar, "*He is THE chief of learned men reputed in the land!*"
- This, evidently *very* smart guy, John Seldon purportedly said something about preachers that has been passed down even unto our day. Seldon observed, "*Preachers say, Do as I say, not as I do. But if a physician had the same disease upon him that I have, and he should bid me do one thing and he do quite another, could I believe him?*"
- I've been a preacher most of my life. I started preaching sermons when I was 6 or 7 out of the bathtub using our wicker clothes hamper pulled alongside as a pulpit.
- One thing you learn quickly as a preacher or teacher of God's Word is, that designation—that title—brings with it NO super-powers to fight against one's own sin. Preachers struggle with sin just like everyone else in the church struggles.
- One thing that makes being a preacher or teacher of God's Word internally difficult, if a preacher or teacher has even an ounce of self-awareness and internal honesty, is that the preacher will sometimes find himself saying one thing while being aware he is doing another.
- This is why I sometimes *overshare* with you. So, for example, I tried to tell you last week that, as God's Word was teaching all of us to be joyful in tough circumstances and not to be anxious, I was struggling with being joyful and not be anxious.
- Many preachers I know believe it would be better for you if I acted as if I never struggled with such things—never faced the same issues you face with sin. They believe the Apostle Paul, in his preaching, modeled absolute certainty and absolute success in living the Christian life even if he knew these were not personally true.

- He did this so that people could believe they too could do it. He did this so that people could build their confidence based on his personal success in living the Christian life.
- Paul certainly was willing to suggest his life as a *model* to follow. However, was he saying that his life was the modeling perfection in living the Christian life biblically? Or, was he modeling something else?
- I believe the latter, "something else" is the case and the passage in Philippians we will look at today should help us see this different nuance. To say it up front: ***The Apostle Paul was not modeling personal, behavioral perfection as a Christian but rather he was modeling a lifelong process of becoming Christ-like.***
- He did not model perfection. He modeled a perfecting process that should always be pointing forward and never backward.
- If we get that nuance wrong, we will be mistaken about the nature of living the Christian life together. If we make this mistake, we will very likely have wrong *personal* expectations and goals and wrong expectations and goals for other believers in Jesus' church.
- If we have wrong expectations and goals for one another, we will often be disappointed in one another.
- If we have wrong expectations and goals for one another, we will often make wrong conclusions about each other's *motives*—about each other's *hearts*.
- Concluding wrong motives or bad hearts ought to be left up to people such as the politicians and pundits who are so certain the "other guy" must not simply disagree but must actually be evil-hearted.

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- You can easily see why deciding a person's heart is evil, based on false expectations for them, might not help God's mission in a church on the move.
- It will not, just for an example, aid in the mission if people conclude all preachers are lying hypocrites with dark hearted motives trying always to cover-up that they don't always do what they say.
- I continue with this example, not because I think you treat me this way. I do it because this is where we find the preacher, Paul, in the letter to the *Philippians* in chapter 3, beginning where we finished last week, in verse 12.
- However, once again, before we look at those verses, I have found it helpful to consider the contrast with another church—the Corinthian church.
- Some of the folks in the church in Corinth had expectations for Paul as an apostle and a preacher. He had missed meeting their expectations. They concluded from this his heart was defective—maybe even evil. His motives were wrong, and they knew it!
- This conclusion then resulted in these Corinthian believers then looking at all Paul did through the lens that saw him as a man with wrong motives. When they looked at him this way, even small things like changes in travel plans became great personal offenses that must be indicators Paul was lying to them. "See, they said, *he doesn't really love us like he claims to love us!*"
- In the letter, we call *2 Corinthians*, Paul has tried to explain that we can't judge people's hearts the way the Corinthians are based on a failure to meet their externally visible expectations or metrics for the Christian life.

- In one place he writes about the fading glory—the fading external glow—on Moses' face that was there from being in the presence of God's glory but now externally was going away.
- Paul was trying to say that, comparably, the Law, with all its externally visible expectations—it's humanly measurable metrics—produced this sort of external impact. A fading glory.
- But, now the Christian life of grace in Christ lived by the Spirit in us, is different. It is a transformational life that is meant to produce more and more from the inside out—from the heart to the earth suits in which we still exist in this life.
- He doesn't call them "earth suits." Instead, Paul says we have this glory to glory process at work in clay pots—*cracked* clay pots. This reality of infinite glory being worked out inside us while we look like clay pots from the outside can be confusing. It is especially confusing to those who think the Christian life is about creating and maintaining a pretty pot appearance.
- Paul doesn't take the metaphor nearly this far but I have always pictured that, from time to time, some of that infinite glory transforming us from the inside out becomes visible through a crack in the pot. What is an apparent weakness, externally, a blemish visible to human eyes, a metric we humans can measure and find wanting, is instead the very means by which the glory of God taking us over shines out a bit.
- Paul makes the point that measuring the Christian life with this sort of metric—and I suspect it is a valid metric for churches as much as individuals—measuring by this sort of not very humanly measurable metric is considered by most humans in Corinth, even in the church, to be utter foolishness. Paul is out of his mind to suggest this is how God works—this is how God measures his work.

- But, Paul says, this is how God will measure and he will ultimately do it at what Paul calls "the Judgment seat of Christ." If a Christian who sort of believes in works salvation happened to scan what Paul says about this judgment seat, they might assume he is talking about eternal destiny with such seriousness.
- He is not. He is talking about what God will really judge versus the externals many Corinthians are judging in each other and in Paul. And here is what he solemnly warns and says...
- ***READ 2 Corinthians 5:11-6:1¹¹ Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. ¹² We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. ¹³ If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. ¹⁴ For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. ¹⁶ So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God***

made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 6:1 As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain.

- What would make the Corinthian church a waste of space? What would mean they have received God's grace in Jesus and had been born again in vain? Would it be not going to heaven? Would it be eternal separation from God? No, that's already settled.
- It would be having been reconciled to God by grace that they would not then become ministers of reconciliation as ambassadors of Christ—all of them not just those officially called apostles, evangelists or missionaries—all of them.
- It would be a waste if they were not ambassadors who realized they ***"no longer lived for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again."***
- In other words, their salvation would be in vain if they didn't recognize they were alive for the reconciling mission of God and that would require them no longer living for their own needs and desires but sacrificing those as Christ had done on the cross.
- Can you sense the same thoughts going through the Apostle's thinking that have been there in *Philippians*? Let this attitude be in you that was in Christ Jesus...that humble self-sacrificing attitude of putting others first for the sake of God's reconciling mission
- This is how the infinite glory that is transforming us leaks out of cracked pots—putting others first for the sake of God's mission.
- With this struggle the Corinthians were having in mind, please now turn to the Philippians. This is a different church. They understand their purpose is the mission of God. However, it is still a church made up of human cracked pots and the glory remains hidden when pots are focused on externals of pots.

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- Listen to the wisdom for handling this in a "good" church on the move on God's mission...
- **READ Philippians 3:12-14**
- Lest the Philippians make the same, wrong external evaluation of Paul some Corinthians made, the Apostle sets them straight. "*Do as I say not as I did.*" I am not already a perfected clay pot. Ultimately, this won't even be my pot. I am not claiming I am better than you guys are by saying what I just said.
- Remember he told them he is a man living by faith and not sight who is focused on knowing Jesus better and better so that he becomes more and more like him so that he will shine like a star in the dark night and be like one plucked out from the masses of the living dead.
- Remember, he also told them that all that used to matter to him—some of it perfectly good stuff—like the tribe he was part of and being a Jew—all of it now looked like "skubala" to him—dung to him—compared to this new source of confidence for his life—trusting Jesus Christ for everything.
- Saul went through a reset of his life when he saw Jesus on the Damascus road and became Paul. Paul has now gone through another reset of his life in deciding the mission is worth more than all this world can offer.
- And get this, he continues to go through daily resets—a process of transformation. He is still not perfected. However, he wakes up each day in a "**take-hold**" mindset and process for the day.
- Do you see he repeats that idea of taking hold three times in these verses? Two times he is the one making the effort to grab on—that's what it means to take hold—make the effort to grab on to something.

- Do you see that he can do this and is motivated to do this because Jesus Christ "grabbed-on" Jesus Christ took hold of him for the purpose of him grabbing on and taking hold of the mission.
- I believe so much of the Christian life comes down to this—grabbing on—taking hold each day of that for which Jesus grabbed us.
- I fear many believers today, like the Corinthians, are not even aware that Jesus grabbed them for his redemptive mission as reconciling ambassadors and not for their mission of having a great Corinthian life.
- Many grab on to the wrong purpose or to no purpose for the Christian life and then wonder why they sense no purpose to life at all.
- Of all the things Paul might have said about this transformational process that only operates when we grab hold of the mission for which we were grabbed hold of—of all the things he focuses on what amounts to just one.
- He forgets what is behind to press hard—to strain for what is coming ahead. He calls what is ahead a goal to receive a *prize*—a *reward* might be better in our English. This could be rewards at the judgement seat of Christ he raised while thinking about the same things with the Corinthians.
- It could be the prize of Christ-likeness when the cracked pot is no longer what is seen but only the absolute glory of God that has been growing and growing inside that cracked pot.
- It could be both and in Paul's thinking I doubt they are ever separated from each other because God never designed them to be separated.
- The big idea is that Paul used to live for all the earthly, humanly measurable things mentioned in the verses above—some of them ok

things. They shaped his purpose in life. Now Paul lives for something else. His purpose and way of life coming out of that purpose have been **reset**.

- His goal then was earthly. His goal now is heavenly. The former purpose and goal look like skubala compared to the new life of Jesus' sacrificial mission of redemption he tries to take hold of every day.
- Years ago when I taught the passage, I focused on the idea that what was "behind" for Paul were all his sins and failures. That was what he was forgetting every day after his rest and for daily rests. That's not wrong theology. There are places where Paul tells us we can have freedom from our guilty past. But is that what the focus is here?
- Maybe some of the forgetting is about sin and failure but most of the focus is on forgetting the things that mattered as metrics for "success"—that mattered for the evaluation by others—in this world.
- Paul has reset his reason for living and he is not going back. Each day he is transformed more and more by forgetting what seemed to matter and grabbing on to Jesus' mission for which he was grabbed by Jesus.
- Is this my mindset? Is it yours? Is this my purpose when I wake up each day? Is it yours?
- Well don't worry. If it isn't your purpose or if you think I'm emphasizing the wrong thing here, God will show you I am right and you are wrong because you are immature.....**says Paul**. Look at verses 15 & 16.
- **READ Philippians 3:15-16**
- You may not have reached this point yet in your transformation, says Paul. But, don't ever go back! If you understand the need for

different priorities because of a different purpose don't lose what the Spirit has taught you so far. Keep taking hold! Keep grabbing!

- There is a pattern here that can help you but make sure you are looking at the right pattern. Look at the last verses in the chapter, verses 17-21. **READ Philippians 3:17-21**
- What is the pattern? Paul follows which the Philippians can also follow? Let this attitude be your attitude—the pattern is the humble sacrificial love Christ showed for others. Follow this example as you are on the mission of God—which you now know was why he grabbed hold of you.
- This is the example Paul showed them in Timothy and Epaphroditus as well. It is sadly not the example of two women who bump right up against this admonition but we will save for another time.
- Paul has explained that even many believers end up living like enemies of the mission of the cross of Jesus rather than Ambassadors.
- How, by living for their stomach—their earthly desires rather than sacrificing those for the mission. They are focused on the earthly things that they think give purpose. Ultimately, what they think is a quest for glory will be rewarded with only shame for having wasted their lives.
- I suspect this is true for churches as much as it is for individuals. What is our purpose? Is it "stomachy"—earthly? Any glory a church might think is theirs will be their shame when they realize the skubala they've worked so hard to acquire and called it "church."
- You see, says Paul, don't build monuments from skubala in this world. This isn't even your homeland. Your monuments of earthly skubala won't mean anything—they won't even make sense in your real home country.

- And of course, that is Jesus' homeland. That is the homeland of the one who has the power to make the rest in your life possible every single day until you see him and he gives you a different sort of "pot" that has no cracks but from the inside out only shows his perfect glory without any obstruction.
- Today's word for a *church on the move* is either "transformation" or "process." As I write this, I think I'll pick "**process**" but either works.
- As believers, we are called to be—in fact we are "grabbed by Christ" to be involved in a process of transformation for the sake of God's redemptive mission.
- We are not being transformed to be more successful by earthly standards. We are not being transformed to be nicer people by even cultural Christian standards.
- We are not being transformed to meet any human's expectations. That is what the Corinthians wanted from Paul and then they judged his heart when the external metrics they used were not met.
- We are being transformed to be like the pattern of humble, sacrificial Jesus Christ on God's redemptive mission.
- This process of transformation, of which Paul tells us to take hold of actively because we were taken hold of for it, requires that we let go our hold of things that may have seemed valuable in the past—forgetting what was behind at least some things that used to matter.
- As I have hinted all along this morning, what is true for an individual believer is also true for a community of believers—a church.
- If God uses a process of resetting believers, might he also reset churches in the same way? That is by grabbing the mission going forward but inevitably having to let go of what may have seemed so valuable in the past.

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- Are we willing to follow the pattern of sacrifice and grab on to God's reset in whatever way he chooses for us?