

Our First Love

Philippians 3:4-11

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ September 29, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

⁴If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:4-11, NRSV)



This summer our daughter's boyfriend, a Canadian named Logan, spent a couple of weeks with us in Kenya during my sabbatical. We like Logan a lot, and we've spent time with him before. But this was by far the longest, most concentrated time we'd had with him. I immediately noticed how attentive he was to Isabel. Can I get you some coffee, Isabel? Are you cold, Isabel? Here's my sweatshirt. Is your neck sore, Isabel? Let me massage out those kinks. And not only that, for long stretches every day I'd catch them together just talking. He'd talk; she'd listen. She'd talk; he'd listen. And when she talked he always seemed completely enrapt with whatever it was she was saying, as if nothing else mattered in the world.

Now, to be honest, my first thought was, "This guy is really pouring it on to make a good impression." Nothing wrong with that; I would have done the same if I was in his shoes. But two weeks is a long time to put on a show. And still, day after day he kept up the attentiveness, the listening, the tenderness, the serving, so much so that after a while it started to be a problem because, to put it bluntly, he was making me look bad. I could see it in my wife's eyes. She's thinking, "Must be nice to have somebody who treats you like a princess all

the time." Had the trip gone on another week I might have had to pull him aside and ask him to tone it down a notch or two!

Do you remember what it's like to fall in love? Some of you do. Some of you are in love right now. When you fall in love there is only one thing that dominates the focus of your attention: the object of your affection. She's on your mind all the time. You're always looking for opportunities to spend time together. You want to know all you can about him. You'd do anything for her sake.

When Mamusha was here in August, our guest pastor from Ethiopia, I had the chance to ask him about his perspective of the church in the West, specifically in America. Though he lives in Africa, he's spent a lot of time here and I'm always eager to hear the impressions of those who come to us with fresh eyes. Specifically, I asked him what wisdom he would offer to the church in this part of the world. His answer surprised me. Mamusha said that in his view the church in the West needs to recover its first love. I knew immediately he was citing Revelation 2, where Christ says to the church in Ephesus, "**I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.**"¹ When the church is captivated by its first love, Christ, the church can't put on an act. We are attentive to Christ, seeking to be with Christ, desiring to know Christ, eager to serve Christ. He is the object of our affection, the one around whom we order everything else in life. In Mamusha's view, this is the challenge facing the American church. In his view, many of us may have lost our first love.

I've been thinking a lot about his answer to my question. My reflections have been spurred on even further by a book I finally read this summer that countless people over the years have been telling me to read. A.W. Tozer was an American pastor and author who, in 1948, wrote a little book called *The Pursuit of God*. I read it this summer. It had a profound impact on me, as it has on countless others. Essentially, Tozer, though speaking over half a century ago, identifies the same problem Mamusha identified. The American church pursues so many things in our day. We are busy, and active, and involved, and committed. But is it Christ we are pursuing above all else? To personalize

¹ Revelation 2:4 (NRSV)

it, are you pursuing Jesus in your life more than you are pursuing anything else? Is he still your first love? Is he the primary object of your affection and attention?

For the next couple months we are going to stay on this question because it is one of immense and vital importance. As we do the scriptures will be, as they always are, our guide. But I'm going to take Tozer's book a chapter a week and allow it to inform our discussion as well. In fact, it would be well worth your time and money to order *The Pursuit of God* this week and read along as we go. His words are as relevant today as they were 70 years ago.

For today, God brought to mind the text we read from Philippians as a place for us to begin this journey. To set the context, Paul is reminding the Philippian church that all of us are seeking righteousness in life. That's his way of saying that we are all striving for a right relationship with God. We know God is our creator. We know God is our judge. So we want things to be good between us and God. Right? Don't you want things to be good between you and God?

The problem is that we all are so easily tricked into thinking that the way to get right with God is by way of our own efforts and own goodness. Paul adamantly disagrees. In fact, if this were the case then Paul, as much as anybody, could boast. In his words, **"If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more..."** Then he lists all his religious credentials. It's an impressive list of accomplishments backed up by an equally impressive pedigree. Paul would have been a standout among his Jewish contemporaries, the head of the class.

And yet, none of this matters to Paul any more. As he puts it, (verse 7) **"Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ."** Later on, in verse 8, he declares that he regards his former credentials as 'rubbish'. The word in the original Greek is a little more raw. It's literally translated, 'that which is thrown to the dogs', and some scholars translate the word to 'dung' or 'excrement'. So to make sure you understand, Paul is saying here that compared to what he now has which has made him right with God, he considers his birth right, his church membership, his attention to God's law, his good works for God's sake, all to be rubbish by comparison. As far as making him right with God, they now mean less than nothing to him.

Compared to what? Compared to *knowing* Christ. Not obeying Christ. Not following Christ. Not imitating Christ. Not serving Christ. And certainly not just knowing *about* Christ. As he puts it, **"I regard**

everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ."² The word here implies intimate knowledge, and we all know the difference. Everybody here knows who Oprah Winfrey is, right? But does anybody here know Oprah personally? I'm sure Oprah does personally know hundreds, if not thousands, of people. But even then, how many of those people *really* know her, intimately, transparently, the inside as well as the outside. Not many. How many people do you know in this way? Not many.

Paul is saying here that he knows Jesus in this way. Everybody knows *about* Jesus. He *knows* Jesus. Which reminds us that God is not just some ethereal force in the universe. God is a person. God wills, and thinks, and enjoys, and loves, and feels, and desires, and suffers, just like any person. In Christ, God even took on a body. He is present in real time and in real space. You can know me. You can know Oprah. You can also *know* Jesus. Paul did know Jesus, and he says here that knowledge made everything else in life pale in comparison.

So let me state aloud the obvious question. Do you know Jesus? I understand that you know about him. But do you *know* him? Do you know his mind, what he thinks about, and his heart, what he cares about? Do you know him in the personal way you know your spouse or your best friend? Don't dodge the question; it's of paramount importance. Jeremiah 9:23 declares, **"Let people not boast in themselves but in knowing God."** Peter urges, **"May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord."**³ Jesus himself was crystal clear when he prayed to his Father about us: **"And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."**⁴ If a person does not know God in Christ, what does that person have in life? The Bible says they have nothing worth keeping.

Why is that? Why is knowing Jesus of such surpassing value?

I heard somebody say recently that if you spend enough time around anybody you will eventually see some good in them, something to admire, even something to love. I think I agree. That's probably true. Even the most undesirable person in the world, if you really spent the time to get to know that person intimately, I have no doubt that you would eventually find some good buried in there, something worth praising.

² Emphasis mine.

³ II Peter 1:2

⁴ John 17:3.

Think how much more true this is of Jesus! As we get to know Christ we will never cease being amazed at the good we find in him. *Everything* in Christ is praiseworthy. Every good and beautiful human quality we can name is perfected beyond imagination in Christ.

Paul gives a great example here. In verse 10 he declares, **“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection...”** Now, lots of people know *about* the power of Jesus’ resurrection. We can read about it right in this book. But if we know Christ personally we come to actually *know and experience* that power in real time and real space. And in this knowledge, life changes. When you know Christ and the power of his resurrected life, you now can live with the guarantee that life does actually matter, that it doesn’t just end in infinite meaninglessness, but in new creation. You also live with the assurance that the risen Lord himself is present with us, just as he was with his first disciples.

Of course, the most beautiful things we experience when we come to know Jesus personally are his love and grace. You come to know Jesus and you experience that he loves *you* unconditionally, just as you are. He loves you on your worst day as much as on your best day. In fact, his love actually has very little to do with you. He loves you because he is love and can do no other. That’s grace. And this is what makes us right with God. Not our own efforts or goodness, which are never enough. When Paul was confident in the flesh he was working from the premise that he was favored by God because of who *he* was. That’s legalism, and it kills. The gospel of grace declares that we are favored by God because of who *God* is. Specifically, because of what Christ has done, giving his life on the cross and then rising again from the grave, we are made right with God. When we come to know Jesus we experience this first hand. He really does love us beyond what we could ever imagine.

Tozer writes that as we come to know Christ personally “we will find that for which we have all our lives been secretly longing.”⁵ Some of you know how true this is. But not only will we be satisfied, we will be changed. I John 4:8 declares, **“Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”** Turned around, whoever does love, truly love, does so because they have come to know God, who is love. Once you come to personally know Jesus’ love, you will begin to love in return, him and those he loves. Once you come to personally know his forgiveness – not just know *about* it, but truly know you are forgiven – you will then become a person who forgives. His kindness will make

you kind. His generosity will open your hands. His patience will slow you down. His power will embolden you.

Brothers and sisters, we were made for this. Part of what it means to be created in the image of God is that we are made to be relational. Nothing else in creation is relational in this way. Humans alone. We were made to fully know and fully love one another and God. The problem, of course, is that sin got in the way. And sin makes us cover ourselves up. It brings shame. It hardens the heart. It turns us against one another and God. Read Genesis 3 again if you’ve forgotten what sin does to us.

To restore things God had to act. This is very important, so pay close attention. We are powerless, on our own, to make things right between us, one to another, or between us and God. We can’t know God on our own. Sin destroyed that ability. But that did not stop God. God came to us. In the church we call this prevenient grace, prevenient love. That’s just a fancy way of saying God loves us first, God knows us first, God chooses us first. As somebody once said, “God is always previous.” I think of Jeremiah 1:5: **“Before you were in the womb I knew you.”** That’s pretty early! It gets better. Ephesians 1:4: **“...he chose us in him before the foundations of the world, that we should be holy and blameless in him.”** Any part we play in our relationship to Christ is always a *response* to what he has already done.

And this is not just true once. God takes the initiative over and over and over again. God is *always* previous. I found this beautifully articulated in a short piece I came across this week written by the Danish theologian, Søren Kierkegaard. Listen to these words:

You have loved us first, O God, alas!
We speak of it in terms of history
as if You loved us first but a single time,
rather than that without ceasing.

You have loved us first many times
and every day and our whole life through.
When we wake up in the morning
and turn our soul toward You –
You were there first – You have loved us first;
if I rise at dawn and at that same second
turn my soul toward You in prayer,
You are there ahead of me, You have loved me first.

When I withdraw from the distractions of the day
and turn my soul toward You,
You are there first and thus forever.
And we speak ungratefully as if

⁵ A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Christian Publications Inc, 1948), 18.

You have loved us first only once.⁶

Imagine a husband on his wedding day. He is being united to his first love. It's the best day of his life. The couple met two years ago and the romance took off right away. The two have spent ceaseless hours together since that first date. Last spring his proposal was eagerly accepted. Now the rings are both in place; they are husband and wife. And yet, if you asked him he would tell you he is satisfied with where the relationship is now. He knows his wife well enough, enough to have made vows to be her husband for life. But he's not actually interested in getting to know her any more deeply. They will live together in the years to come, yes, but their relationship, their knowledge of one another, will be, at best, stuck in time.

That's no good, right! I know people in this church who have been married for over 60 years and who still talk about the joy of getting to know one another more deeply. Will any man ever come to know and understand everything about his wife? Not a chance. There will always be mystery worth exploring. How much more true this is of Christ! He is not just our first love; he is *perpetually* our first love!

At a wedding a couple often makes vows to one another that sound like this: "I, John, take you, Michelle, to be my lawful wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, forsaking all others as long as we both shall live." *Forsaking all others*. That's what Paul is teaching us here. When we come to Christ and come to truly know him, the most natural thing for us to do is to forsake all other affections, all other devotions, all other loyalties. In fact, I would say to you that if Jesus is not your first love in this way, not just back then when you came to trust him all those years ago, but today, day by day by day in the present, then the problem is likely that you do not know him anymore. Or maybe you never did. And so the question stands: Do you know Jesus? Not just know *about* Jesus, but truly know him?

Tozer's writes this in his first chapter: "The shallowness of our inner experience, the hollowness of our worship, and [our passive] imitation of the world...all testify that we, in this day, know God only imperfectly, and the peace of God scarcely at all."⁷ We rush about. Our agendas are full. We work hard, even in the church. We come to worship. We try to live good lives. We do our best. But do we know Christ?

Have we responded to his initiative of love and grace in our lives and turned to pursue the one who has long been pursuing us?

We are going to spend the next couple months asking these questions. Along the way we are certainly going to learn how it is that we can come to pursue and know Christ if, in fact, that is something we desire to do. But the first question is not one of method but of motivation. And so I have to ask you to be honest with yourself as I am trying to be honest with myself. Do you know Jesus? Do you *want* to know Jesus? Do you want to pursue him your whole life?

To be honest, I don't assume that all of us do. Many of us do, I'm certain. But others of us do not. Lots of people don't, even lots of people who show up in church every Sunday morning. For many, knowing *about* Jesus is enough. And I get it, because Jesus, if you let him, will wreck your life. He will turn it upside down. He'll come in and remodel the whole thing, give you different priorities, different dreams, different passions. He will take back possession of things you mistakenly thought belonged to you. If you pursue Jesus first, your life will never be the same, and lots of people want their life to stay the same.

At least Jesus is up front about this. Remember his words: "**If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.**"⁸ Yes, he will ruin the life you have. But when you come to know Jesus, the new life you receive in return will make your old life seem like garbage by comparison. Whatever you now consider gain you will then regard as loss because of the surpassing knowledge of knowing and loving the one who has always known you and, in spite of what he knows, loves you with a love that is stronger than death.

Here's what I'd like you to do. In the *Next Step* I've included a prayer on the second page. It's a prayer from the end of the first chapter of *The Pursuit of God*. I want you to take this prayer home this week and I want you to pray it every morning. Pray it slowly. Pay attention to the words. Leave time for silence. See if these are words you can pray from your heart. If you can't, if you just can't own them, that may be an indication to you that none of this is what you are after. Okay. Have the guts to be honest about that. Pretending with yourself or with God is a waste of time.

⁶ I heard these words quoted in a podcast from Park Hill Church in San Diego. *Vision: God Loved Us First* (September 22, 2019).

Listen at <https://www.parkhillsd.church/teachings>

⁷ Tozer, 17-18.

⁸ Luke 9:23-24 (NRSV)

And yet, as you pray these words, even if you don't quite yet mean them but there is something deep in you that desperately *wants* to mean them, then keeping praying them, as empty as they may seem at first. You are praying to a God who loves you, who has already forgiven you, who is pursuing you, and who desires that you come to know him personally so that he can set you free.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read through Philippians 3:4-11. What stands out to you from this passage?
2. Paul says here he has every reason to be "confident in the flesh". What does he mean by this? In what ways do we also put our confidence in the "flesh"?
3. How does a person get right with God? What does Paul teach us here about that?
4. Paul says that everything else in life pales in comparison to knowing Christ, that it's all 'rubbish' by comparison. What does he mean by this? What is so valuable about *knowing* Jesus?
5. Are we in the church danger of losing our first love (i.e. Christ)? How does such a thing happen?
6. How do you respond to this assessment by A.W. Tozer: "The shallowness of our inner experience, the hollowness of our worship, and [our passive] imitation of the world...all testify that we, in this day, know God only imperfectly, and the peace of God scarcely at all." Is he right? Is this true of us? Of you?
7. Do you know Jesus? (Not know *about* Jesus, but *know* Jesus.)
 - If so, how have you come to know him?
 - If not, do you want to know him?
8. What specific thing is Christ saying to you through this message? How will you respond?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

We know about Jesus. Is it possible for us to also know Jesus personally, in the way we know a friend or a parent?