

Knowing God

Part 3:

The Process of Coming to Know God

Scripture: *Philippians 3:1-14.*

Exegetical Big Idea: Our *repentance*, which results in God conferring on us His *righteousness*, initiates in our lives the process of coming to know God and living the Christian life in the *resurrection* power of Jesus Christ.

Introduction

Today is Easter Sunday when we celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because one of the main reasons for Christ's death and resurrection was so that we would come to know God, over the past two Sundays, and on this Easter Sunday, we are reflecting on the theme of *Knowing God*.

For the sake of those who have not been with us thus far, I have already explained that in both the OT and the NT the concept of knowing God refers to experiential knowing, rather than mere intellectual knowing about God. I have explained that in the first two chapters of the Bible, in **Gen. 1 & 2**, we discover that God created us with that kind of deep inner experiential knowledge of Him, not just knowing *about* Him. However, when we get to **Gen. 3**, we read the sad story of how we lost this experiential knowledge of God when our first parents disobeyed God in the Garden, and they, with all of us inside them, were banished from God's presence in the Garden of Eden. God's overriding desire for us, therefore, is for us to recover, through what Christ did for us on the cross, that lost experiential knowledge that we had of Him before the Fall.

In our first sermon two Sundays ago we looked briefly at the *profile* of those who know God by reflecting on the story of Elijah in **1 Kings 17 & 18**. For the sake of those who were not with us, this is how we summarized that sermon: (*PPT presentation*). Last Sunday our sermon examined a passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians where he showed us that God's primary *purpose* for us is to know God. Again, for the sake of those who were not with us, this is how we summarized that sermon: (*PPT presentation*).

This Easter Sunday morning, in our third and final sermon in the series, we once again turn to the Apostle Paul, and this time, from his letter to the Philippians, specifically from **Phil. 3:1-14**, we are reflecting on what initiates and continues in our lives the *process* of coming to know God.

This passage is probably the most autobiographical passage in all of Paul's letters. In it, first, Paul helps us to see that, what initiates in our lives the process of coming to know God, is what the NT refers to as *repentance*. Second, we see that as a result of our repentance, God confers on us a new spiritual status that the NT refers to as *righteousness*. Third, we discover that we then embark on the Christian journey of coming to know God by henceforth living in the *resurrection* power of Jesus Christ. These **3R's** show us what initiates and continues in our lives the *process* of coming to know God. *Read Passage.*

I. Repentance (Verses 1-8)

- 1) In **verses 1 to 8**, Paul helps us to see that what initiates in our lives the process of coming to know God involves turning our hearts and minds away from our focus on our good deeds, away from our religious credentials, and away from our social, racial, or national identity, *to* our focus on what Christ has done for us on the cross. This inner spiritual turn-around in us, in the NT, is called repentance.
- 2) As an example of this, from **verses 4 to 6**, Paul presents to us his own previous focus on his Jewish religious credentials. He declares that he had been circumcised on the eighth day, and that he had been raised as a Pharisee who had such zeal for strict adherence to the Law of Moses that he greatly persecuted the church of Jesus Christ. We know from **Acts 8:3** and **9:1-2** that indeed Paul the zealous Pharisee had wanted to stamp out the message of Christ by arresting and killing the followers of Jesus Christ. We also know from **Acts 9:3-19**, however, that God intervened in Paul's misplaced zeal when, on the road to Damascus, the resurrected and ascended Christ Jesus revealed Himself to Paul in a very dramatic way and turned this violent enemy of the church into becoming one of its most significant leaders.
- 3) As happened to Paul on the road to Damascus, NT repentance results from our heeding deep in our hearts the call of the Holy Spirit to a change of heart about our selves, about sin, and about our relationship with God. It is an inner re-orientation of our hearts, our minds, and our will away from sin, and away from our self-focus, to God and His will. In his second letter to the Corinthian Christians, in **II Cor. 7:10**, Paul refers to this deep inner spiritual experience as *godly sorrow that leads to repentance and salvation*. **Heb. 6:1**, in the **KJV**, describes this as *repentance from dead works, to faith in God*. Let me share briefly with you my own Damascus Road story.
- 4) In **verse 7** Paul explains that, as a result of his repentance, he threw away all the religious credentials that he was once so proud of and he placed his faith in Christ alone. This **verse 7**, in the **KJV**, reads like this: *But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ*. The word *counted* that Paul uses here means that he measured carefully, took stock of himself, and realized that all his religious credentials and worldly achievements were worth nothing at all before God.
- 5) The Greek words Paul uses here are very strong. The word that is translated here as *loss* is similar to the insurance word that is used when a motor vehicle is so badly damaged in an accident that it has to be written-off completely. The word translated as *rubbish* is a rude word for human excrement; this why the KJV translates this word as *dung*. This is why in **verses 1 to 3** Paul is so upset with the Jewish teachers who were insisting that the Philippian Gentile Christians could not become real Christians unless they were circumcised and kept the Law of Moses. Calling these teachers Paul dangerous dogs, Paul explains that it isn't the *cutting of our bodies* that saves us spiritually, but rather, true circumcision is *the circumcision of our sinful nature* when we realize that we are helpless to save ourselves through our religiosity and we repent and rely solely on what Christ has done on the cross for our salvation.

- 6) In **verse 8**, Paul writes that he now considered everything else to be worthless in comparison with the priceless gain of knowing Christ Jesus. By this expression, *knowing Jesus*, as we have already seen in our two previous sermons, Paul is not referring to merely having a mental knowledge about Christ, but rather to an intimate experiential knowledge of Christ. This **verse 8**, by the way, is what inspired Isaac Watt's famous hymn *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* that I believe we shall be singing shortly.
- 7) So, we can summarize this **first R** from our passage by saying that *repentance*, this turning away from ourselves, and away from our good thoughts and our warm feelings about our morality, and our religiosity, to completely and helplessly placing our faith in Christ's work on the cross, is what initiates in our lives the process of coming to know God.

II. Righteousness (Verse 9)

- 1) In **verse 9** Paul describes the change in our spiritual status that follows hard on the heels of our repentance by writing this: *Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith*. The word *righteousness* here is a translation of the Greek word *dikaïos*, that means *to be in right standing with God*. Paul is explaining here that God's way of bringing us into right standing with Himself depends on our faith in Christ alone.
- 2) In his letter to the Galatian Christians, this is how Paul put it in **Gal. 2:21**: *If righteousness could be gained through the Law, then Christ died for nothing!* Let me explain why Paul connects gaining God's righteousness with the death of Christ. You see, because God is completely holy and righteous, our sins spiritually separate us from Him and place us under His righteous judgment of spiritual death and separation from Him. So, in order for us not to die for our sins we need God's forgiveness of our sins. This is why, throughout the OT, and all the way to the time of Jesus' first coming into the world, the people of God had to sacrifice the blood of bulls and goats to atone for their sins.
- 3) In **Heb. 10:4**, however, we read that *it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins*. This is obviously because it is human beings like you and I who have sinned against God, not the innocent bulls and goats that were being sacrificed. So, ultimately, it requires the blood of a human being to atone for the sins of human beings. So, either we die for our sins ourselves, or we find someone who is willing to die for us who has no sin of His own to die for.
- 4) Because only God Himself has no sin, and because as our Creator, only He can represent us all, by virtue of His great love for us, God became a real human being in the form of Christ Jesus so that, on the cross, the blood of a human being who had no sin and who could represent all human beings would be shed to permanently atone for our sins. This is why in **2 Cor. 5:21**, referring to Christ, Paul wrote this: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*.

- 5) For me this is very real because, in the one sentence in Norman Anderson's book that God used to call me to repentance, Anderson had stated that if it had been possible for God to deal with the problem of man's sin and its consequences in any other way it is simply inconceivable that He would not have 'spared his own Son' the physical, mental, and spiritual agony of the cross.
- 6) When we thus place our faith in what Christ did for us on the cross, God forgives our sins, He fills us with His Holy Spirit and, as Paul affirms here in **verse 9**, God confers on us our new spiritual status of His righteousness.
- 7) So, we can summarize this **second R** from our passage by saying that as a result of our repentance, we receive the *righteousness* of God that depends not on what we do for God, but rather, on what God Himself has done for us in, and through, Christ Jesus.

III. Resurrection (Verses 10-14)

- 1) After our *repentance*, and God conferring on us a new spiritual status of His *righteousness*, we embark on our Christian journey of coming to know God in the three ways that Paul describes next from **verses 10** and **14**.
- 2) First, in **verses 10**, Paul writes that he wants *to know Christ through the power of His resurrection*. In **Rom. 6:3-6** Paul explains that when we place our faith in what Christ did for us on the cross, spiritually speaking, we experience both Christ's death and resurrection that then enables us to begin to live in newness of spiritual life. This is because, once we repent and place our faith in Christ, the part of us that loved to sin is nailed to the cross with Christ, so that now, as spiritually resurrected people, we no longer want to live as slaves to sin. This is why one of the first things a person notices when they repent of their sin, and commit their lives to Christ, is a new desire not to sin. Indeed the difference between a saved person and one who is not saved is not sinless perfection, but rather, it is the saved person's newfound remorse over sin. *Share my own experience of this.*
- 3) Second, still in **verses 10**, Paul writes that he wants *to know Christ by participating in His suffering and becoming like Him*. Suffering was very much on the mind of Paul as he wrote this epistle because he wrote it around 60-61 A.D. while he was a prisoner in Rome. In the first chapter of this epistle, in **Phil. 1:29**, this is what Paul wrote: *For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him*. Paul is reminding us here that although Christians are not exempt from suffering, we endure, and even triumph in our suffering, through the resurrection power of Christ that becomes the new dynamic of our Christian lives.
- 4) Third, in **verse 11**, Paul then writes that he wants to know Christ *by attaining to the resurrection from the dead*. Here Paul is reminding us that because Christ was resurrected from the dead and we are now spiritually connected to Him, at Christ's Second Coming, or when we leave this life go to be with Him, we shall receive renewed resurrection bodies like the resurrection body of Christ, that will never get tired, or get old, or get sick, or die! Isn't that exciting?

- 5) This is why, in the final two verses of our passage, in **verses 12 to 14**, Paul reminds us that until then, because we are not yet perfect, we must keep working toward that day when we will finally be all that Christ saved us to be. Paul declares here that, for this reason, forgetting the past, he strains to reach the end of the race and to receive the prize for which God is calling him up to heaven because of what Christ Jesus did for us on the cross.
- 6) The reason Paul places so much emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus Christ in these verses is that if Christ had not been resurrected from the dead it would mean that He died for His own sins and He was therefore not the sinless God the Son. It would also mean, as Paul reminds us in **1 Cor. 15:17**, that we would all still be in our sins, that our Christian faith is futile, and that we are still spiritually lost and separate from God. This is why, today, Easter Sunday, is supremely about celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- 7) And this is why our **third R** from this passage, therefore, is that, after our repentance initiates in our lives the life-long process of coming to know God, that process continues in our lives as we learn to live in the new Christian dynamic of victory over sin and victory in suffering in the resurrection power of Jesus Christ, even as we look forward to one day inheriting our eternal resurrection bodies.

Conclusion

So, these are our **3R's** from this seminal Philippians passage that unfold to us what initiates and continues in our lives the *process* of coming to know God.

As I have already noted, Paul wrote this letter to the Philippian Christians from prison. And yet Bible scholars often refer to this letter as Paul's *epistle of joy*. This is because in this epistle, Paul mentions the words *joy* and *rejoice*, fifteen times! In **verse 1** of our passage, for example, we read this: *My brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord!* Towards the end of the epistle, in **Phil. 4:7**, Paul wrote this: *Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice!* When we look at this, we have to ask this question: How could a man who is unjustly suffering in prison have been so joyful as he wrote this letter?

I believe it is because when Paul wrote in **verse 8** of this passage that for the sake of Christ he had lost all things, he was personally identifying with what Christ did for us on the cross. I say this because, earlier in this epistle, in **Phil. 2:5-11**, Paul had written that although Christ was God the Son, in great humility, He gave up all His divine wealth and glory in heaven by taking on human likeness to come to die on the cross for us poor sinners. In **2 Cor. 8:9**, this is how Paul put it: *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you, through his poverty, might become rich.*

On the cross, you see, Christ lost everything, so that you and I can embark on the life journey of coming to know God. From Paul's testimony in this epistle, as well as from his testimony in his other epistles, I believe we can say that it was this understanding of Christ's love and work for us on the cross that was the basis of Paul's abiding Christian joy that shines out so brightly in this epistle.

In **1 Cor. 15:1-5**, Paul refers to this message of what Christ did for us on cross as *the gospel*; the good news of salvation that comes to us through faith in Christ's work on the cross for us.

Let me tell you why we should take very seriously this message about knowing God. In **Matt. 7:21-22** Jesus said that not everyone who says to me, *Lord, Lord*, will enter the kingdom of heaven. He then went on to say that when at His Second Coming, or when we leave this world to go to meet with God, if we have not come to know God the way God wants us to know Him, this is what God will tell us: *Away from me, you evildoers! I never knew you.*

Why should you suffer this fate, when on the cross, at such great cost to Himself, Christ paid for you the price you could never have paid yourself? This is the glorious truth we celebrate here today on Easter Sunday.

I'll end now by telling you the three things anyone needs to do to personalize in their life the amazing work of Christ on the cross for you.

First, you tell God from your heart that you are *sorry* for your sins. Second, you say *thank you* to God that He sent Jesus Christ to take the place of punishment for your sins on the cross. Third, you ask God to *please* send His Holy Spirit to live in you so that from now on, you can live as God wants you to live.

Sorry, thank you, please. I am here to announce to you this morning that these three simple words can change your life this Easter Sunday morning.

Let us pray.

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