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A Letter from Paul – Philippians
III. To Live Is Christ, To Die Is Gain
Philippians 1:19-26

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Martin Luther, the great Reformer, famously described the nature of our basic, original, capital letter “S” Sin with the words, “*Incurvatus in se*”, which means “curved inward upon the self”. The basic thing which has gone wrong in every human being, the basic capital letter “S” Sin which gives rise to every form of little letter “s” sins and sinning, is that we are curved inward upon ourselves. Curved inward upon ourselves instead of what God intended for us to be, what God created us to be, which is the self curved outward towards our God and towards our neighbor – those two great commandments for human existence, to love God with all our being and to love our neighbor as ourselves.¹ Instead, we curve all things inward upon ourselves, putting the self at the center of all things, living for self in place of God, serving our own self-interest above and before the concerns and needs of others. “*Incurvatus in se.*”

William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury during the middle part of the last century, describes the nature and danger of this basic, original, capital letter “S” Sin of ours in a remarkably simple and understandable way. This is a long quote, but worth hearing:

When we open our eyes as babies we see the world stretching out around us; we are in the middle of it; all proportions and perspectives in what we see are determined by the relation – distance, height, and so forth – of the various visible objects to ourselves. This will remain true of our bodily vision as long as we live. I am the centre of the world I see; where the horizon is depends on where I stand.

Now just the same thing is true at first of our mental and spiritual vision. Some things hurt us; we hope they will not happen again; we call them bad. Some things please us; we hope they will happen again; we call them good. Our standard of value is the way things affect ourselves. So each of us takes his place in the centre of his own world.

But I am not the centre of the world, or the standard of reference as between good and bad; I am not, and God is. In other words, from the very beginning I put myself in God’s place. This is my original sin. I was doing it before I could speak, and everyone else has been doing it from early infancy. I am not “guilty” on this account because I could not help it. But I am in a state, from birth,

*in which I shall bring disaster on myself and everyone affected by my conduct unless I can escape from it. Education may make my self-centeredness less disastrous by widening my horizon of interest . . . But complete deliverance can be effected only by the winning of my whole heart's devotion, the total allegiance of my will – and this only the Divine Love disclosed by Christ in His Life and Death can do.*²

Let me repeat just a little bit of that: *“From the beginning I put myself in God's place . . . I am in a state, from birth, in which I shall bring disaster on myself and everyone affected by my conduct unless I can escape it . . . But complete deliverance can be effected only by the winning of my whole heart's devotion, the total allegiance of my will – and this only the Divine Love disclosed by Christ in His Life and Death can do.”*

Which brings us to Paul, sitting in his prison cell in Rome pondering the two possible outcomes of his upcoming trial: either he shall be found guilty and put to death for the cause of Christ; or somehow he will be set free and so resume his proclaiming of Christ. These are the two possible outcomes – and, in pondering them, Paul is not doing anything particularly profound or even profoundly Christian. Prisoners have been pondering such things since the beginning of prisons. What makes Paul's soliloquy on the outcome of his case profound and profoundly Christian is the attitude Paul takes towards these two options – he honestly does not care which option should come to pass. He is equally at peace with either outcome: *“For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”* Where does this indifference to these widely different outcomes come from? How can Paul truly not care if he lives or dies – wouldn't we, wouldn't any other human being desire the one outcome far more than the other? *“Incurvatus in se”* – and I sure know which outcome my “se” would prefer! So how can Paul say it does not matter to him, that to live is Christ and to die is gain?

Because something has happened in Paul along the way of his earthly sojourn which has utterly changed his perception on all things, even something as big as a choice between life and death. Something has happened in Paul that has completely altered the standpoint, the reference point, from which he measures the relative merits of these different outcomes. Something has happened in Paul which has flipped the script on what we would think of as “normal” human thought and behavior. What has happened is this: Paul has met Jesus Christ. And, as William Temple put it, Christ has won Paul's whole heart devotion; Christ has won the total allegiance of Paul's will. Paul possesses a self no longer curved inward upon itself – but now centered, rightly centered, on that which is our true center in all things, centered upon God in Christ. Because of Jesus Christ, Paul is a man completely, and rightly, realigned in how he sees all things, how he measures all things, how he hopes all things. He is a man who loves God above and before all else.

It's all there, a whole lifetime of experiences in Christ, in that one hope, that one concern which Paul does express about his upcoming trial. That one hope, that one desire, that one outcome is what he expresses in verse 20: *“It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.”* The only thing that truly matters to Paul is not even whether he lives or whether

he dies, but only that whether in living or dying he should do so in a way that will bring honor to Christ, bring glory to Christ. Paul could care less about himself – his survival is simply no longer of central concern to him. He cares only that, having been given an opportunity to bring glory to Christ, he should prove able to do so.

We Presbyterians have long cherished and recited the opening question and answer from the Westminster Shorter Catechism: “*What is the chief end of man? Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.*” We may love those words – but Paul, in his prison cell in Rome, is living them. All Paul wants, all Paul cares about, is for Christ to be honored, glorified, through either his life if it is spared, or through his death if not – and he cares not which, only that Christ be honored and glorified through him. And that, as a byproduct, the Philippians should be encouraged in their own faith by his example. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself. Paul possesses a heart, a soul, a mind, and a body no longer curved inward upon itself. Paul has stepped down from the throne – and Jesus now reigns within, as it always should have been. Paul is a man who lives for Jesus first, others second, and himself last.

So, how to explain it? How to explain how an ordinary human being like Paul can become so filled with the way and the truth and the life of Jesus? Jesus told a story, a parable, which might help us understand. A parable Jesus told about a treasure hidden in a field. A treasure of such surpassing value and worth that when, one day, a man is out walking across that field and stumbles upon that treasure, he immediately goes and sells everything else that he has in order to buy that field and so to possess that treasure.³ No, that’s not all of it – Jesus actually said that “*with joy*” this man goes and sells all that he has in order to buy that field and so to possess that treasure. With joy! And then Jesus told a second story right after that first one – a story about a merchant searching high and low for fine pearls, who one day finds a pearl of unequalled beauty and of unimaginable worth. And he, too, immediately goes and sells everything that he has in order to possess that pearl.⁴

Paul is that man walking through that field; Paul is that merchant who has sold everything in order to buy that pearl. It is something he reveals about himself again and again in his letters – oftentimes not even intentionally – that in Jesus, he has found that treasure, that pearl, which joyfully he has sacrificed all else to possess. Like in his letter to the Romans, where he breaks off in the middle of long argument and basically begins singing: “*Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! . . . For from him and through him and to him are all things! To him be glory forever. Amen!*”⁵ The picture gradually emerges from his letters of just exactly what really did happen to him on that day when Jesus knocked him off his horse on the road to Damascus.⁶ When Paul looked up, what he beheld in the heavens above him was not an enemy, but his heart’s deepest longing looking down upon him in love. What he heard was not merely a divine rebuke, but his soul’s true liberation. What he grasped was not merely that he was on the wrong path, but that from now on the only path that mattered, and the only path that was right and good and true, and the only path that from now on that he would follow, was the path which brought him closer and closer to that treasure hidden in a field, that pearl of surpassing beauty and worth – that path which would bring him closer and closer to the Jesus who loved him and died for him in order to set him free.

In finding Jesus that day, in his being found by Jesus that day, for the first time the scales fell from his eyes and he saw the truth about this world, the truth about himself and what he was to live for, the truth which is the grace and love and peace of Christ which surpasses any and all lesser treasures this world can offer us. And Paul had been living for Jesus, not for self, ever since. Paul had died so that Christ could live in him.⁷ And, with Christ now at the center of his being, his life now rightly aligned, rightly reorganized according to the real truth of our existence. Paul living – or even dying if need be – living or dying to glorify God above and beyond and before all else. Loving God and loving neighbor above and beyond and before all else. Paul, in other words, had become a Christian. The real thing – not the sort of thing which too often passes for Christian in this world, but the real thing – a Christian.

So, what of us? The one thing one must not do here is treat Paul as though he were somehow different from us, made of different stuff. He is not and was not. The difference between Paul and us is not anything in Paul himself or in us. Or maybe, it is – but only in a very specific way: the difference being the amount of Jesus we have been thus far willing to let into our hearts and minds and souls and bodies, as compared to Paul. The extent to which we have welcomed God's grace and given it full and free range within the whole of our being. I fear that the difference between us and Paul is that while we and Paul alike have found that great treasure, that perfect pearl, in Jesus – we, unlike Paul, have not yet become willing to sell everything that we might fully possess that treasure, that pearl, that grace of Jesus, above and beyond all else we hold dear. We are, as Jesus once put it, still trying to serve both God and that which is not God on an equal billing.

Bob Buford was the CEO of a very successful company. He had made a lot of money and he possessed a lot of great stuff – and not just the usual stuff like fancy cars, nice homes, and all the other toys success in this world can buy, but also a lot of really good things like a strong marriage and fine children and a good name, he was deeply involved in his church. But as he hit middle-age, he found he could no longer fight off a nagging feeling that his life, while filled with so many good things, was nonetheless somewhat empty of meaning and purpose and genuine satisfaction. So, being a CEO, he did what CEO's often do – he hired a consultant to help him figure this out. The consultant interviewed both Buford and his wife several times, until he was able to get a good feel for who they were and what they were about.

And then came the day for the consultant to present his report. The consultant sat down in front of them with no binder full of graphs and diagrams, there was no Power Point presentation keyed into a laptop. Rather all he had with him was a single blank sheet of paper, which he placed on the table in front of the Bufords. And then, on that blank sheet of paper, he drew for them a box. And turning to them, he said, *“What's in the box for you? You need to become real clear on the central purpose of your life . . . real clear on this. I've talked with you long enough to know that that it's one of two things: it's either money (he drew a dollar sign), or it's Jesus Christ (he drew a cross).”* And then he posed the question again: *“What's in the box?”* Buford later wrote, *“No one had ever put such a significant question to me so directly.”*⁸ And the answer changed his life. Just as it had changed Paul's life: *“For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”*

Do we want that to happen in us? Do we? Or, at the very least, can we at least say that we want to want that to happen in us? Deeper faith, real faith, can only begin in us somewhere like

that. So, can we, this morning, at least want to want for Jesus Christ to become all in all for us – to become our treasure, our pearl – so that we should be no longer curved inward upon ourselves, but centered upon Christ and upon our love for those whom Christ also loves? Can we at least want to say with Paul: “*For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain*”?

*In life or death, Lord Jesus Christ,
be all in all, I pray;
your life, your death make known in me
on earth, till heaven’s day.*

*In sun or shadow be my help;
your voice shall guide my feet:
teach me by your incisive word;
your work in me complete.
In calm or crisis, be my hope
and take my mind in hand;
so shall I trust you, even where
I cannot understand.*

*In loss or profit, be my joy;
my hours for you be spent:
I can do all things in your strength;
so shall I be content.*

*In risk or safety, be my friend;
I place my hand in yours,
with you to rest, or wait, or walk,
or run with all my powers.*

*O Christ, my help, my hope, my joy,
my all-enduring Friend,
all that I am belongs to you
who loved me to the end.⁹*

¹ Mark 12:29-31.

² William Temple, Christianity and Social Order (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1950), pp. 49-50.

³ Matthew 13:44.

⁴ Matthew 13:45-46.

⁵ Romans 11:33-36.

⁶ Acts 9:1-19.

⁷ Galatians 2:20.

⁸ Bob Buford, Halftime, quoted in a sermon by John Ortberg, “Why Am I Here?”, found on-line at http://www.mppc.org/esermons.html?mode=sermon_view&esermon_id=153.

⁹ Christopher M. Idle, “In Life or Death, Lord Jesus Christ,” in Dwelling with Philipians, eds. Elizabeth Steele Halstead, Paul Detterman, et. al. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), p. 52.