

STAYING THE SAME IS NOT AN OPTION**Philippians 3:7-14**

INTRO: The old Ashland Junior High School building was closed for good in 2015 and torn down in 2016. What had been beautiful and new in 1914, and still relatively new when Ruth Sulcer attended in the late 1930s, was a crumbling hulk by then. Maybe it could have been restored, but by the time it was determined to remodel or build a new building, restoring would have been worth more than new construction. It had become almost dangerous because of hunks of ceiling that not only threatened to fall, but sometimes did. There was also asbestos that needed to be abated. Bricks fell off the outside. It was obvious that keeping the building had become untenable. Staying the same was not an option. It had to go.

I've told you my story to my crisis of faith at age 21 when I realized that staying the same was not an option – but you always hear about me. Let me tell you about Gary Barnett – I probably shared it before, but it fits so well here:

- Gary was a student in a class I taught a four years ago this month on the BIC Theology of Salvation. (Lori was student in that class) I asked each student in the class to share how they came to Christ. All of them were fascinating and many of them were similar. But Gary's was one of the most interesting, and it built my faith up as he told it.
- Raised a secular Jew who did all the right Jewish things (Bar Mitzvah etc.)
- One could have said he was raised in an atheistic environment and maybe he considered himself that, but deep down, he knew there was something else.
- In his high school years and his first years in college he searched for answers in philosophy, Judaism, and other religions.
- Finally he tried Christianity. He bought a Bible, tried to read it, tried to burn it, tried to throw it away. But he just couldn't
- Finally went into an empty room, in an empty building (or at least it was one he hoped was empty, and turned out the light at yelled into the darkness, "GOD! IF YOU'RE THERE, SHOW YOURSELF TO ME!"
- And immediately . . . absolutely nothing happened. He was a bit disappointed.
- But over the next period of time, I don't remember how long, God increasingly revealed himself to Gary. Until, with no help from anyone, and certainly not any Christians, he kneeled beside his bed and asked Christ into his life.
- That was probably 30 years ago and he is a dynamic Christ Follower now and active in a BIC Church in Maryland, because he was attracted by the fact that we have Wesleyan stream to our theology – which is another story.
- Gary knew there was something more and he knew staying the same was not an option.

I want to talk about another Jewish man this morning – his name was Paul. In the beginning verses of Philippians 3, Paul warns his readers about people who try to be holy apart from the Holy Spirit. That is, they strive to be holy on their own efforts. He describes how when he was a young man, he was on fire for holiness as the Jewish religion taught it – that is, by doing stuff and not doing other stuff. In Philippians 3:4-6 he shares a litany of his accomplishments as a Pharisee. He described his status as a Hebrew of Hebrews. He was a religious scholar of great attainment and pretty much the "best of the best".

Then he met Jesus. He doesn't specifically say that there, but we know his history. He had been the most committed persecutor of the Church. It's recorded in Acts 9 that he was on the trail of Christians when he met Jesus on the Damascus Road and he was transformed into follower of that very same Jesus. Suddenly everything was different. He went from thinking his righteousness came from keeping the rules to knowing righteousness came from knowing Christ in his sacrifice and resurrection. Suddenly all that work was for naught. But, he's not grieved by that. It's described in our text for this morning, listen, (Read Philippians 3:7-14)

After all that, the truth is, being like Jesus, and being set apart for his purposes, which is the description of holiness, means staying the same is NOT an option. Let's look at that, because growing in holiness is what our Lenten emphasis is for the next 6 weeks as we head up to Easter.

First, as we've pointed out . . .

Any effort on our own is futile

- All of Paul's privilege and work and positioning was useless. Our privilege and positioning comes from the work of God's Son, who willingly gave himself over to be the ultimate sacrifice in our place. Anything we do is spinning our wheels. In fact, Paul tells us in another place that going on our own steam will only get so far. In fact every one of us will fall short of the glory of God. We simply do not have it in us. We do not have the goods to get to righteousness and, ultimately, holiness, apart from what Jesus did on the Cross.
- In his own words, he continues, *I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.* (v. 8a). Then he gets graphic in the second half of the verse. As he refers to all the effort and all the attainments and badges and accolades, he says, *I consider them garbage* (v. 8b). But that is what my NIV says; and it's probably similar in whatever translation you might be using. But that's not nearly as strong as what Paul actually meant since the word he used in the Greek is this.
- Yes, anything we can do is THAT in comparison to what Christ has already done. The work it takes to gain Christ and to be found in him has already been done on Good Friday and sealed on Easter morning. Righteousness comes from Christ and Christ alone.
- So, instead of trying it by the futility of our own effort, we need to realize . . .

Knowing Christ is the quest

- In verse 10 Paul uses very intimate language when he says, *I want to know Christ.* It is the language used in other places in the Bible for the sexual intimacy a husband and wife have when they "know" one another. And then, Paul clarifies that by saying, . . . *yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.* (vv 10-11).
- What does it mean to know him in his suffering? Well, I'm certain it means all Jesus went through and all that comes from being his Follower. Jac Muller says, "*Sharing in the sufferings of Christ, is, therefore, more than just suffering for the sake of Christ (in tribulation and persecution), or in imitation of Christ. It means all suffering, bodily or spiritual, which overtakes the believer by virtue of his new manner of life, his 'Christ life' in a world unbelieving and hostile to Christ. It implies all pangs and all afflictions undergone in the struggle against sin either within or without. The agony of Gethsemane, not less than the agony of Calvary, will be reproduced however faintly in the faithful servant of Christ.*" Being a Christ Follower brings struggle. Our brothers and sisters in Nigeria and other places in the world have experienced more than can be imagined. A Church of the Brethren leader was beheaded just last week. So anything that comes our way is a cakewalk. But if more does, we do it for Christ.
- What does it mean to be like him in his death? Well, I just referred to the suffering of others for their faith is Christ around the world – even to the point of death. That's one example. But also to be willing to go to our own cross. Jesus's sacrifice was death on the Cross. What is your cross?
- But God didn't leave Jesus in the tomb. Jesus rose! He came victorious from the grave. Now, we'll cover this extensively on April 12 – which is Easter Sunday, but let me just say, God doesn't leave us in the ground. We have the hope of the resurrection and we have resurrection power. That's what it means to attain to the resurrection from the dead. That's why we celebrate the life of a saint who has passed away much more than we grieve them.
- To receive him by faith is what it means to know Christ. So let's keep . . .

Pressing on the upward way

- Paul ends by assuring his readers that he's not arrived yet, but he's pressing on for the goal which is the finish line. This is Paul speaking. He knows he's not arrived but that he's much farther along than he was. So, if you are ever frustrated look to saints like Paul who have gone on before. F. B. Meyer very accurately says "*The nearer a saint comes to the perfect life, the farther he feels from it.*"
- As I wrote this, a favorite old song came to me. Let me quote the words and we'll sing the last verse together:
I'm pressing on the upward way,
New heights I'm gaining every day;
Still praying as I onward bound,

“Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.”

Lord, lift me up, and let me stand

By faith on Canaan’s tableland;

A higher plane than I have found,

Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.

My heart has no desire to stay

Where doubts arise and fears dismay;

Though some may dwell where these abound,

My prayer, my aim, is higher ground.

“Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.”

Lord, lift me up, and let me stand

By faith on Canaan’s tableland;

A higher plane than I have found,

Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.

I want to live above the world,

Though Satan’s darts at me are hurled;

For faith has caught the joyful sound,

The song of saints on higher ground.

“Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.”

Lord, lift me up, and let me stand

By faith on Canaan’s tableland;

A higher plane than I have found,

Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.

I want to scale the utmost height

And catch a gleam of glory bright;

But still I’ll pray till rest I’ve found,

“Lord, lead me on to higher ground.”

Lord, lift me up, and let me stand

By faith on Canaan’s tableland;

A higher plane than I have found,

Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.

Conclusion: Status quo is not part of the holy life. Staying the same is not an option. Keep pressing on the upward way. Amen.