

## **Because Christ Jesus has made me his own**

Philippians 3:4b-14

A Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

In Philippians 3:13-14 Paul writes:

“I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

In the Bible there is the frequent use of the image of a contest, such as a race, a boxing contest, a battle in war, of someone striving to reach the goal and the prize. One that isn't so well known is in 1 Cor 9:24-27, where Paul writes:

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize. So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.”

We're familiar with that image in other places. The one that is often memorized is in 2 Timothy 4:7: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” Elsewhere there are such statements as: “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:20). What comes after that in James 2:21-24 about Abraham is even more critical: “You see that faith was active along with his works . . . .” Most of all in verse 24: “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.” That's the only place in the New Testament where “faith alone” is mentioned, and it's rejected!

We find this also, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:13-16 it states that we are the salt of the earth, and if the salt has lost its taste, what good is it? We are the to be the light of the world, and we should not put our light under a bushel but let it shine. In the Orthodox-Lutheran Dialogue a fine Orthodox New Testament scholar chastised the Lutherans: “What's wrong with you? Don't you know your Greek!? The texts are clear. Faith without works is dead.”

What do we do with all this? There are two basic ways. The first one is found in popular evangelical programs like *The Purpose-Driven Life* by Rick Warren (2013). The basic message of the program is that God gives you a kickstart toward salvation, but you have to do your part to make it work. A similar message is found at the

beginning of the Gospel of Mark 1:15: "The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

As we look at the four Gospels, it seems at first glance that the Lord does 99% of what it takes to save us, but we have to do 1%, that something that makes it all work. We at least have to accept it.

On the other hand, we have a very different message in Philippians 3:12: "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, **because Christ Jesus has made me his own.**"

This is not an isolated passage. Philippians 2:12-13 states: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." He is doing it.

That is similar to Colossians 3:3-4: "For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you will also appear with him in glory." And perhaps the most startling of all is Paul in Gal 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

We have noted before how a devout Baptist asked a Lutheran to tell him more about Luther and the Lutheran way of using the Bible. The Lutheran took up the Book of Romans and in the process looked at Romans 9:11 where Paul writes about Isaac: "who was not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that **God's purpose of election** might continue, not because of works but because of his call." Paul continues in Romans 9:16: "So it depends not on man's will or exertion but on God's mercy." Not our works, not our will, not our faith, but his call and his mercy.

Then, so that we don't say to ourselves: "That's just in Paul," we can go to the Gospel of John: 1:13: ". . . who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God"; John 15:16: "You did not choose me, but I chose you"; John 6:44: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him"; John 6:65: "No one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father." This is a very different kind of thing than God does 99% and we do 1%.

Baptists take Scripture seriously. They actually go to church Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening. But the devout Baptist said to the Lutheran: "I've never heard those passages. They are skipped over in our studies."

How do we solve this? On the one hand, there is the message about works: "Fight the good fight, run the race, strive for the prize." We are supposed to do something and we have to do it to make salvation work. On the other hand, the Lord does it. How do we sort this out? This also raises the question about using one passage of the Bible over against another.

The question that helps sort this out is: What is the total Paul? How do we sort out the whole of the New Testament? The key is not counting passages so that we have seven passages that say one thing and eight that say another. It is not an arithmetic problem. Nor is it a help to say that we are to weigh them, not count them.

Rather, the key to what we believe is the cross. We ask ourselves: Whatever we say and however we use Scripture, we sort it out by asking: Is the cross all-sufficient? Or are we, when we are using Scripture and theology, diminishing the cross?

We have noted what Paul writes in Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Right after this Paul continues: "If justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose" (Galatians 2:21).

That really asks the question: Is the cross to no purpose, just a kickstart, or is it enough? Do you still have to do something? This brings up a passage less well known but just as critical: Gal 4:8-9: "Formerly, when you did not know God, you were in bondage to beings that by nature are no gods; but now that you have come to know God, **or rather be known by God.**" One sees in this passage, as well as in Philippians 2:12-13, 3:14, and Galatians 2:20, that the opposite of "not knowing God" is not "knowing God," but being "known by God." The opposite of "not choosing God" is not "to choose God" but it is being "chosen by him." And the opposite of "not believing" is not "to believe," but being "called by him." And the opposite of "not repenting," is not saying "repent," but being forgiven.

What happens to free will? How can this be? The whole question of free will raises the 1% question. Is there something in me, a 1%, that is not caught up in sin? What does Paul do in the face of this problem? Paul takes this up in Romans 9-11 and then in chapter 11 as he comes to the end of it all, he writes:

“O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen.”

It’s not our calculation, but it’s the way he does it, and it’s far different from our thinking. That’s why we return to Luther’s explanation to the Third Article of the Creed in the Small Catechism. His explanation is not something extra, but rather it is a way of putting together what the New Testament with its center in the cross is saying:

“I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.”

This is what is meant by being “centered on the cross” and having that certainty which doesn’t say: “Have I believed enough? Have I believed rightly? How can I know?” I have that which is outside of me, in spite of me, that promise and that certainty, and then I can in freedom go ahead and live in confidence in him because it is in him and his cross that it is done. Amen