

Run to Win
Philippians 3:1-14
February 3, 2013
Dan Hoffman

[Pray]

When it comes to actors I have to admit I enjoy Brad Pitt. He is easy to believe when he is on screen; and he can play almost any character well. But one thing I don't look to Pitt for are his views on God.

Recently, while filming a movie in Germany he was interviewed and asked if he believed in God at all. He smiled and replied, "No, no, no! Uhh no." He followed this up by saying "I'm probably 20 percent atheist and 80 percent agnostic. I don't think anyone really knows. You'll either find out or not when you get there, and then there's no point thinking about it."

In the meantime, Pitt claims he's found happiness in life. While he grew up in the Mid West and undoubtedly had a fair bit of Christian influence, he is happy to have left all that behind and says, "I'm on the path I want to be on." His path includes his love for motorcycles, his family, a prized Michael Jackson T-Shirt and his acting career – and that's about it – it's all about him.¹

Of course Brad Pitt is only one of many other North Americans who have thrown off the idea of God in favor of finding their meaning in other places.

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This morning we are continuing our walk through the book of Philippians. And we've come to chapter three. Please open your Bibles there with me if you haven't already.

Chapter three marks a transition to part "two" of the book. In this section Paul warns people not to seek meaning in anything other than Christ. This warning was incredibly important for the first century, and it is still relevant to us two thousand years later.

There are three sections that our text will break down into today. First Paul makes an appeal to get rid of our religion whether that religion is like Brad Pitt's – his trust in himself, or even if it is our trust in church culture.

Second Paul tells us what we should replace our religion with – namely knowing Jesus.

And finally Paul tells us what this looks like practically for him and for us.

¹ Saryn Chorney, "Brad Pitt Doesn't Believe in God," *WonderWall*, 7/24/2009: wonderwall.msn.com/movies/brad-pitt-doesnt-believe-in-god-1518637.story/?gt1=28135. (Accessed January 30, 2013)

So let's start with verse 1 and a little word of context before getting into the meat here. Paul says:

[Read Philippians 3:1]

Verse one starts with a funny word – “finally”. And this is a little strange seeing as Paul is only half way through his letter. Preachers sometimes do this, pretend to be finished when really they are only just beginning.

I heard a story once about a young boy who was listening to a sermon where the pastor said “finally” several times and eventually the boy leaned over and said: “Dad, what does the preacher mean when he says ‘finally’?” To which the dad replied “absolutely nothing at all.”

And that is close to the significance here. Really this word just marks a transition in Paul's thought rather than a conclusion and could be translated “So then.”

Either way, just know that if you ever criticize me for saying “finally” too many times, I can cite Paul for my defense.

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Anyway, Paul starts this section of his letter with the command to rejoice in the Lord, a command he isn't troubled to repeat several times.

And as we spoke of last week, Paul's call to rejoice doesn't mean “have a good attitude”, rather Paul says rejoice in the Lord – rejoice in Jesus. Don't just be happy, put your focus on being in Christ. And this is why Paul can rejoice even though he is in prison and potentially facing a death sentence. He's not having a good attitude as he talks about this, he is having a **God** attitude.

And this is directly tied to what it means to be a Christian. A Christian is someone who understands that the most valuable thing in the universe is the gift that God offers us in Christ.

If we get this then we have everything that matters, and if we miss this then regardless of what we may gain we have nothing at all.

This is the meaning of Jesus' words when He says:

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it. (Matthew 13:45-46)

Christians are people who get it – they realize that getting Jesus is worth whatever we need to sell in our lives. And even if we have to sell it all to get Him we have nothing to mourn because what we have gained is worth far more than what we have left behind.

And this is why Paul is willing to repeat this truth to the Philippians as a safeguard to them. Friends get this. Understand this because as far as your Christian walk is concerned nothing else is more important.

And from here Paul jumps into the heart of what he wants to say. First: Get rid of your religion.

Look at verses 2 and following:

[Read Philippians 3:2-6]

Webster defines “religion” as “a personal set... of attitudes beliefs or practices... held to with ardor and faith.”²

These are the things that a person places ultimate value in. In Canada hockey often takes this spot – though this year that religion has taken quite a shot! In some people’s homes food takes this spot and in Brad Pitt’s life a bunch of motorcycles and a fancy T-Shirt take this spot.

And in these verses Paul recounts all the things he used to consider ultimate assets in his life.

Let me ask you this: what are the things in your life that you are proud of? That give you meaning, that you would never leave behind?

Have you been able to land a good job? Get a college degree? Put money in the bank? Gained lots of friends? Won an award? Have good grand children? Are you someone that people esteem as having your life together?

Those are all good things, but if those things are all you have to show for yourself it’s not enough. Sooner or later death will strip each of us of everything we have gained. Our job and our money will be given to another. Our fame will fade, our families will forget us.

If we are lucky a hundred years from now someone will stumble across our grave stone and say “I wonder who that guy was.”

If we place our trust and hope in the things we have been able to achieve in life we will ultimately end up having nothing.

² <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/religion>

And this is where the error in Brad Pitt's logic becomes evident. Even if we have gained everything the world has to offer 85 years is a short time to enjoy that in light of eternity. And this is why Jesus tells us:

What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul (Mark 8:36)

And so Paul urges the Philippians and us to get rid of our religion. Get rid of those things in our lives that hold ultimate importance for us – those things that otherwise we think we could never live without because they have no ultimate worth. Get rid of your religion.

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Interestingly it isn't worldly things or even sinful things that had the potential to hold ultimate value for Paul. I used to think that the most dangerous things for me as a Christian were those areas where I sinned outright. For me the first area that always jumped into my mind was my struggles with lust and pornography. As I've mentioned before this was something I fought for many years.

Certainly sins need to be left behind in our pursuit of Christ, but that isn't what Paul is talking about here. Instead he is talking about leaving behind his religious resume – the good things he has done for God. These were the things Paul used to esteem as ultimate things. And this is surprising because these are things and achievements that are talked about in Scripture and even things the Jews were commanded to do.

In my youth years I was hit dozens of times with the question "what are you doing for God?" And I lived under the sence that God wanted me to accomplish something great for Him.

It wasn't until much later that I realized I have nothing that God needs! In Psalms God says:

"O my people, listen as I speak.

Here are my charges against you, O Israel:

I am God, your God!...

I do not need the bulls from your barns
or the goats from your pens.

For all the animals of the forest are mine,
and I own the cattle on a thousand hills...

If I were hungry, I would not tell you,
for all the world is mine and everything in it. (Psalms 50:7-12)

God has never needed anything from His people. But in the first century there was a group of church attending people called Judaizers who argued that God would not accept us unless we did certain things for Him. And primarily the practices they wanted people to adopt were the practices the Jews undertook to show they were set apart for God as a nation.

These were good things, but Paul was out right enraged at them because they were distorting the Gospel by emphasizing these good things. And so in a very non-politically correct, un-Canadian way he lashed out at them in verse 2 calling them dogs, men who do evil and mutilators of the flesh.

Now nobody likes to be called a dog, but in the first century this was a real shot because dogs weren't carried around in people's purses, they were coyote-like scavengers who fed on road kill, [human] filth and garbage – they were the very picture of the unclean.

Second, Paul calls the Judaizers “evil workers.” The term “worker” was usually a positive word, but here it describes someone who was intentionally perverting God's purposes with a spirit of treachery.

Finally, he calls them “mutilators of the flesh.” This of course is a reference to the Jewish practice of circumcision, but Paul refuses to dignify this false teaching by giving it a biblical name. And instead says what they have done is mutilated the flesh of new believers.³

Why was Paul so down on these people: Because they had distorted the Gospel by saying God required something more than faith in Jesus for salvation.

And Paul responds in verse 5 by saying “oh yeah?” If your human standards of holiness are what constitutes a Christian then I am twice the Christian any of you are.

[Read Philippians 3:5]

And if you're not impressed by his list of spiritual achievements it's because you aren't a Jew. In Jewish culture what religious rituals you had experienced, how you obeyed the Law and especially your ability to trace your lineage were the proof that you were part of God's people.

Today we don't care about lineage like the Jews did, but we still care about our abilities to accomplish certain things for God. North America likes to accomplish things. But Paul would still have us beat there. In Corinthians he says:

³ These three paragraphs are adapted from Keith Krell's “Lose your Religion” study. http://bible.org/seriespage/lose-your-religion-philippians-31-11#P77_34174 (accessed Feb 1, 2013)

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked... I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:23-28)

Nobody has done more for God and the Gospel than Paul, but doing things for God is about religion and Paul says the best of this is worthless.

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Now here Paul is going to get me in trouble. In the bottom of verse 8 he describes just how worthless it is to attempt to gain God's favor through work. He says "I consider them [all these things, even the good things – his missions trips, his letters] rubbish, that I may gain Christ."

Now this word "rubbish" is actually a very vulgar word in the Greek – the NIV didn't have the stomach to translate it. It is the expletive form of the word "poop". I will leave that to your imaginations.

Now imagine how this hit Paul's audience because all the things he has described in verses 5 and 6 are good things, and yet Paul says when it comes to gaining salvation they are only worth flushing away!

Are you ever tempted to think that you have actually become a pretty good person? That compared to the people around you God must be pretty impressed? Sure you still sin, but you do that less than most and you pile on all sorts of good virtues to make up for it?

Paul says the best we have to offer is spelled with asterixes and exclamation points.

Friends we need to leave our religion behind. Whether it is based in this world or even in the good things we have done for God. Religion is about earning God's acceptance and it is impossible to do near enough.

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So if it isn't good deeds that God wants from us what are we supposed to shoot for?

Here we get to the second of our three sections: Knowing Christ.

Look with me at verses 7 and 8.

[Read Philippians 3:7-8]

Instead of trusting in our natural abilities or our religious resumes, Paul calls us to know Christ.

And here Paul does a bit of simple math. He uses this word “consider” three times in these verses to describe the intellectual process of adding everything up and finding out which is more important.

On one side of his equation are everything good he has ever done, all the people he has ministered to, all his scripture memory from childhood and his obedience to the Old Testament Law. And on the other side he has only his knowing Jesus. And to “know” someone in the Greek means to have an intimate relationship with them. It’s more than just believing He exists.

And when the tallies are drawn the conclusion is obvious. Knowing Jesus is the only thing that matters.

Friends, without knowing Jesus, nobody, not even God cares that you’ve done the good work of crawling out of bed this morning and coming to church, or that you put some money in the plate. Without knowing Jesus none of the rest of this has any importance at all.

And the reason why comes in verse 9.

[Read Philippians 3:9]

Righteousness is the thing God will look for to see who gets into Heaven and who goes to Hell. And verse 9 tells us that the only way it is gained is through faith in Christ. Because righteousness is not something we can get on our own, it only comes from God through knowing Jesus.

And verse 10 gives us three pictures of this.

[Read Philippians 3:10-11]

First knowing Jesus is connected to the power of His resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus is the linchpin of Christianity. It is the proof that Jesus is God and that everything He said about Himself and salvation is actually true. If the resurrection didn’t happen, or only happened symbolically as something people think, then faith in Jesus is meaningless. But if the resurrection did happen then Jesus is God Himself. So I want to know about the resurrection – there is nothing more important.

The second thing knowing Jesus means for Paul is being connected with His sufferings. In chapter one Paul said:

For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for Him. (Philippians 1:29)

Here it is clear that knowing Jesus is much more than just an intellectual activity – suffering for Jesus means putting our beliefs into action. If we follow Christ it will get us into places where we must stand up for our faith. And when we do, we will suffer. But this suffering is the evidence that our faith is real and we have been saved.

Finally knowing Jesus means becoming like Him in His death. And this happens when we put the Father's will before our own and seek His glory and His kingdom before anything else. It is dying every day to our own preferences, our plans and our desires and this happens long before our physical life may ever be threatened.

The story is told that when James Calvert went as a missionary to the cannibals of the Fiji Islands, the captain of the ship that dropped him off sought to dissuade him by saying “you will lose your life and the lives of those with you if you go among such savages.” Calvert's reply demonstrates the meaning of this verse as he said: “We died before we came here.”⁴

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It was because Calvert and his men, like Paul, had put their faith and hope for salvation in Christ alone that physical death only meant a bridge to draw them closer to Him. Knowing Christ was the only thing that mattered which was why they were there – they had no back up plan.

Friends I don't know where you have placed your hope, but I urge you today throw off everything else that seems important and know Christ.

And this brings us to the final section today – and unlike Paul in verse 1 I do mean final. Here Paul talks about what this looks like on a daily basis.

Look with me at verses 12-14.

[Read Philippians 3:12-14]

For years I was told that becoming a Christian meant praying the “Jesus come into my heart” prayer, and that was supposed to give you assurance of salvation. I was understandably nervous that I might have the words wrong and so remember praying this prayer virtually every night.

⁴ Cited from Keith Krell http://bible.org/seriespage/lose-your-religion-philippians-31-11#P67_29889 (accessed January 31st, 2013)

But Christianity isn't about saying some magic words or about doing specific things for God. It is about knowing Christ which Paul describes as a race that isn't finished until we die. And it is only won if it is run to completion. Even Paul here says he hasn't obtained it yet! Paul still had to keep running in order to lay hold of the ultimate treasure.

So what is this running? Paul says it is forgetting. He forgets all those things that he thought were important – all his works for God as well as his Jewish virtues. Those things are left behind and he focuses simply on what lies ahead.

Ahead lays perfect union with Christ. Notice Paul doesn't say I reach toward heaven. Heaven isn't the goal, as though we could use our relationship with Christ to get somewhere where it is all about us and our comfort. No, Christ is the goal, Knowing Christ is the prize. And Heaven for the Christian will be being with Christ.

If you want assurance of your salvation today this is the text for you. You will have assurance if you have no back up plans but have put all you hope for salvation in knowing Christ. And you will know this has happened if the thought of knowing Christ causes you to seek Him more each day like a runner who sees the finish line and exhausts himself to get there with the greatest speed.

Where are you at today? Have you grown apathetic like Brad Pitt and said "we will either find out or not when we get there, and there's no point in thinking about it now" – hopefully I'll be good enough? Or perhaps have you fallen into thinking that you will impress God with your heritage or your church attendance records or your ability to argue theology?

None of this is worth more than a pile of smelly brown snow when compared to knowing Christ. That's what it all comes down to. Friends, know Jesus, know His resurrection, and choose to join Him in His suffering and death.

This is what it means to be a Christian, and it is only here that we have any hope of attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Not that we earn this by our good behaviour, but that we show ourselves to have obtained it by the way we run.

Brothers and sisters we live in a world that esteems people like Pitt. And even the church admires people who do great things for God.

But in the face of both of these God calls us to know Christ.

Friends choose to press on towards the goal of knowing Christ regardless of what anyone in the world or in the church says. Run that race. And when all else comes against you run to win.