

All things as loss

Through the years I have admired many people for their hard choices, integrity, accomplishments or sacrifices.



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None of my heroes have been perfect, but they share one characteristic: each one has made a key choice that empowered them to make the world a better for someone else, often at great personal expense. What would you be willing to give up to help someone find the life-changing grace of God?

I admire and love the Apostle Paul. Yes, I understand he is no teddy bear. He can be tough, complicated, demanding, inflexible, even harsh. But Paul can also be encouraging, forgiving, compassionate, protective and consumed by the honor of helping this dark world see Christ. We struggle with some of his writings, but it is most often because we do not understand the culture of the moment or the particulars of a situation. Two thousand years from today will your letters, emails or tweets be clearly understood? Read Paul with patience, considering his personal heritage, the considerable threats to the early church and his transformation by a newfound faith in Christ.

Paul's Philippian letter is most often a favorite among believers today, probably for two reasons: 1) he is sharing the personal intensity of the freedom of faith in Christ; and 2) he strikes at the overwhelming psychological pressures common to all of us to be successful, a winner, a person of worth in a world of self-defeating expectations. Paul speaks of a completeness and hope in Christ that can be found nowhere else, and he uses himself as the example.

The intensity of these verses is shaped by the gentle foundation "be glad in the Lord" (v. 1). For instance, be careful you do not get sucked into the idea that religion and faith are synonymous. Some religious people are like attack dogs, pushing you into religious conformity, making rituals like circumcision a substitute for faith in God. We are reading strange words

coming from a Pharisee, a man who had devoted his life to studying and keeping God's laws. If anyone could fully understand the system of ritual and rule keeping, it was Paul. He was formerly known as Saul of Tarsus, circumcised the eighth day after his birth, a "Hebrew of Hebrews," born of the tribe of Benjamin, descended from King Saul and a diligent observer of the Law. Paul bought into the system of spiritual self-satisfaction by describing himself as blameless (v. 6)! But, that was before Christ!

Paul is not disavowing his spiritual roots or belittling Abraham or Moses. He studied under one of the greatest teachers in Jewish history, Gamaliel, who was described as a living picture of God's perfect Law (Acts 22:3). Paul fully understands that God used his imperfect people, the structure of a covenant promise, life-shaping laws, and worship rituals to prepare for the coming of Christ. Paul concludes his rehearsal of religious heritage with the pivotal statement: "These things were my assets, but I wrote them off as a loss for the sake of Christ" (v. 7).

The history of Judaism is a preparation for the coming of the Savior, so there is no need to go back, because we have come to God's answer for every longing heart. Paul says it took him a while to figure it all out and to stop attacking the church. But when Paul encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul's life changed direction (Acts 9:1-22)! The enemy of Christ became the Apostle to the Gentiles! He summarizes this dramatic change: "I consider everything (rituals and legalism) a loss in comparison with the superior value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have lost everything for him, but what I lost I think of as sewer trash, so that I might gain Christ" (v. 8). Powerful words for challenging times!

Paul is not denying the importance of living out the moral and spiritual laws of God or worshipping God. But the gospel was being challenged on every hand. There were "Judaizers," those who insisted you could not really be a Christian unless you submitted to circumcision and kept the Law. Others

Formations

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Scripture: Philippians 3:1-8

taught total freedom from moral laws because, in Christ, we become spiritual beings and are no longer connected to the moral restraints or sins of this physical world. But we are a very real part of this world and it is in our days here that we act out faith in Christ, minister to those in need, worship, witness and become the embodiment of faith. Because of Christ we are God's children in both this world and the next.

Paul is writing to the pioneers of our faith. They have no established denominational structures, no publishing house, no missionary sending agencies. We learn from their struggles to find a new way, to navigate a hostile culture, to figure out how to be God's people in the context of grace and without a Temple culture. We learn from their mistakes and tragedies as we find our own way in God's gracious will. Why not begin with Paul in this process of becoming and doing? What matters most: the shape of a church building, the style of music, organization and lines of authority, numbers and public recognition?

Today is the first day of a new year. God has opened a new door of opportunity. Living in the past will change nothing. In Christ we can move ahead as Paul suggests in Philippians 3:13-14: "but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (NASV). Treasure God's grace and blessings as you open your life to what is to come. We humans suffer from the malady of counting our worth and measuring success when the real joy and blessings come when we simply seek to love and live as Jesus modeled. Make this year a time to love, give and act while you trust God's Spirit to help you model and share the grace of God.

Retired after more than 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.