

“More Than a Checklist”

April 7, 2019

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Philippians 3: 4b-14

This morning’s Scripture marks a subtle yet monumental change in how Paul lived out his relationship with God when he came to know Jesus. Before coming to know Jesus, Paul was known by who he was and what he did for God. If you were looking for a picture of what a faithful Jew looked like, it was Paul. He checked every box of the checklist. Personal background and heritage? Check. He was born to Jewish parents and was consecrated in the faith when he was 8 days old. Education and training? Check. A trained and confirmed Pharisee –follower and teacher of the law. Religious and political convictions with activism? Check. He took on the job of weeding out those in the faith who were not following God’s law. Not a fun job but a necessary one if you were to keep Israel pure and away from God’s wrath. Personal lifestyle? Check. Paul claims to be a righteous man, blameless under the law. Paul was the poster child for God’s people: heritage, education, conviction, lifestyle: check, check, check, check. All these are good things that increased and maintained his status in the eyes of himself and others.

Then in verse 7 he writes, “But whatever gain I had, I count as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss”. He goes on to call those great accomplishments refuse or trash in comparison to “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” I have always appreciated the concept of the verse, but never really understood it on an experiential level until Amy. I don’t know what it was like for you, but for many of us, when preparing to enter the dating scene, whether on a conscious or unconscious level, we develop a checklist. A checklist of what we are looking for and not looking for. We have this parameter of looks that they must fit into, socio-economic class, education level, interests, an understanding of faith, what school’s basketball team they root for, you know – the important stuff. We have this initial checklist of what is acceptable and not-acceptable. But then along the way, something happens. We move beyond a checklist and into a relationship, and if things are good, the strength and power of that relationship completely surpasses the old checklist. I went to a wedding of two people who knew they were going to have some challenges. The checklists didn’t quite matchup. She was a minister and he was a member of the army’s special forces division of the 101st Airborne. They knew going into the marriage that it was going to be hard at times. Special forces get the phone call and have to be on the plane to leave the country in 2 hours. They do not know where they are going until they are in the air which means they cannot tell their spouse. It is a protection for the spouse so bad guys cannot kidnap or use spouses as informants, but talk about worry. And she was a planner and a worrier. On other hand, he might come home from a 6-week mission and she might well be gone to a youth lock-in or attending someone’s surgery or performing a wedding and couldn’t be there to welcome him home and such. They knew there would be challenges. On paper it was not a good idea, but their love and affirmation of each other overcame all. In the wedding service itself, they recited vows to each other including their promises of how they were going to deal with the challenges. They are still doing well.

It is much better to have someone who loves you enough to overcome those differences and challenges than to always have to fit perfectly into the other's ever-changing checklist. For the checklist relationship is filled with fear. What if I gain weight and no longer fit in their parameters of how good looking I need to be? What if I lose my job or develop other interests or am somehow unable to root for their team anymore? Is the relationship over? Fear can enslave us to this checklist list of expectations, but once you move beyond the checklist and into a real relationship, fear no longer enslaves. My Grandma Dykhuizen was attacked by Multiple Sclerosis in her 30's and could no longer chase after the kids or go on nice long walks with grandpa. She couldn't fix him dinner or pack his lunch or go to the grocery store or even go out to eat with him. She was paralyzed from neck down. It took a while for her to realize it, but grandpa's love was not built on what she did, but who she was. They continued to grow closer to one another as the years went by. More of their marriage was spent when grandma could not walk than when she could.

I think that is the righteousness Paul is talking about when he says, "whatever gain I had" from checkmarks on the list, "I count as rubbish for the sake of Christ... not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith." It is a commitment to each other that is bigger and stronger than abiding by a checklist of rules. Paul gave up his checklist. He gave up taking pride in his heritage, his education, his convictions and his lifestyle in order to sink into the beauty of the arms of Christ. To be devoted. He to Jesus and Jesus to him. Yes, there would be disappointments along the way. There were times Paul failed Jesus and let Him down. Times Paul was quiet when he should have spoken up, or spoke up when he should have been quiet. There were times Paul stood firm when he should have bent, and other times he bent when he should have stood firm. But Jesus would never leave him. Like he says in Romans 8, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." In the same way, Paul was not going to leave Jesus. When the storm blew and caused Paul to be shipwrecked a third and perhaps 4th time. When God called him to go to a specific town and they beat him within an inch of his life. When God broke Paul out of jail just to send him into another situation that landed him back in jail again. When Jesus didn't heal his eyesight or his "thorn in the flesh". Through it all, Paul was not leaving Jesus. That devotion is the righteousness that allows us to throw away the checklists.

I said at the beginning that it was a subtle yet monumental change. It is subtle because Paul's behavior, his actions and words do not change much. He was still doing the things the law required. But the motivation is completely different. He was no longer completing a checklist but fulfilling a relationship.

And so it is with us. As we mature in our walk with Jesus we go beyond the checklist of what we expect Jesus to do for us and Jesus gets beyond the checklist of what He expects us to do for

Him. For there are too many times when Jesus doesn't meet our checklist and we don't meet His. Yet we come together in a mutual devotion that is stronger than any number of checks could define. Like in our devoted relationships to a spouse or a child, we go beyond a duty and find great joy in making them smile. We go to great lengths just to make them smile because it changes both them and us. Joy changes things. Joy motivates. Joy endears. Joy cements. It cements a devotion set for eternity.

Mike Van Heyningen