

An Epidemic of Good News #8

Welcome to the eighth instalment of, “An Epidemic of Good News,” a devotional Bible study on Paul’s letter to the Philippians. I’m Pastor Curtis Aguirre of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Penticton, British Columbia.

Let’s begin with a prayer.

Lord God, our strength, the struggle between good and evil rages within and around us, and the devil and all the forces that defy you tempt us with empty promises. Keep us steadfast in your word, and when we fall, raise us again and restore us, through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

(Evangelical Lutheran Worship p.26)

That is the Prayer of the Day for the first Sunday in Lent in cycle A, the cycle of lessons based around the Gospel According to Matthew. I chose it because it references Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness which is the assigned Gospel reading for the First Sunday in Lent. The prayer links that event to our own struggles to live faithfully. The topic I am looking at today is Paul’s struggle to live the message he proclaims; in other words, his own grappling with those things that draw him away from living in the Spirit.

In this video we have to do a lot of work with the text. Some of you have commented how it’s nice to have the pictures and maps, and now that I know how to do that, I’ll be sure to include them when it makes sense to do so. But sometimes a Bible study is just that: studying the Bible, which is what we have to do today. So fasten your seat belts and get ready to do some work.

To get into this topic, we have to do a little backtracking and look at how Paul understands the relationship between the Old Testament Law and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In Galatians 3:23-26, Pauls says this:

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the Law until faith should be revealed. Therefore, the Law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.
(Galatians 3:23-26)

For Paul, faith in Christ is everything. And by “faith” I don’t mean having an idea in your head that Jesus existed and what he did was real. I mean, putting your trust in Jesus Christ; in other words, moving beyond cognitive assent to a movement of the heart to trust in and rely on Christ. As I said back in the fifth video of this series, it’s all about falling in love with God. The lover will give all for the sake of the beloved.

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Earlier in Galatians, Paul said this:

For all who rely on works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the scroll of the Law.' Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the Law... Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law... (Galatians 3:10-11,13)

For Paul, the Law is finished—and yet it is not. If you are in Christ, the Old Testament Law has no claim on you. Only your faith or “trust from the heart” in Christ counts for anything. But if you choose to place yourself under the Law, then you condemn yourself to death.

I find it interesting that even though Paul talks about this in many places; and even though, for example, the letter to the Hebrews is even more explicit on this matter, there are still Christian teachers and denominations that insist on turning to the laws in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy to make ecclesiastical pronouncements, especially (interestingly) about topics of a sexual nature. Paul’s warning that this way of thinking leads to death is made evident in how those sorts of pronouncements often lead to hatred and unhelpful attitudes. Or is it that the attitudes are looking for divine endorsement and will take them wherever they can find them?

At any rate, in Romans, Paul also spends a lot of time on the topic of the relationship between the Old Testament Law and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Here is a sample:

Do you not know, brothers and sisters — for I am speaking to those who know the Law — that the Law is binding on a person only during that person's lifetime?... In the same way, my friends, you have died to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit to God. While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the Law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are discharged from the Law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit. (Romans 7:1,4-6)

Now all of this was my set up so that the passage from Philippians that I am about to tackle makes more sense. In Philippians 3, Paul is arguing against the same group of people who led him to write the passages we heard from Galatians and Romans: people who were trying to force the Law of Moses on anyone who wanted to be a Christian. The issue does not seem to be as prominent in Philippi as it was in Galatia and Rome, but it is there. In a way, this is understandable because most of these early Christians grew up in Judaism, and some of them probably felt a certain attachment to what they had grown up with. Others were probably worried about letting go of the thing that had run their lives for so long.

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Paul also grew up in Judaism. He was a sort of reformer in his day, trying to reform the self-understanding of Judaism. He was not trying to start a new religion—neither was Jesus, for that matter. But the ramifications of what he was saying were so revolutionary, that many just couldn't wrap their heads or hearts around it.

In Philippians 3:2-9, Paul says:

Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh [*by which he means, those who insist on physical circumcision*]. For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh—even though I too have reason for confidence in the flesh.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the Law: blameless.

Yet, whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the Law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. (Philippians 3:2-9)

So far so good. Paul has set aside the Law of Moses and its legal requirements and embraced the life based on faith in Christ. Now, here's the thing. For some people that might sound like, once you've got faith, you're good to go, no more problems. You can do whatever you want to do because the Law has no claim on you. But here Paul suddenly shifts gears and says this:

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing in his suffering by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but this 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 God's call from above in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:10-14)

Although the old life under the Law is finished, this does not mean that there is a lawlessness about the life of faith. Rather, there is a new law, but it is not imposed from the outside.

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Rather, it emerges from within us through the working of the Holy Spirit. At the end of the section from Romans that I read, Paul calls this the new life of the Spirit.

That new life of the Spirit produces a certain kind of fruit in our lives, as I mentioned on a previous video, quoting from Paul's letter to the Galatians:

...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control... (Galatians 5:22-23)

Or, we could draw in some of Paul's eloquent description of love from I Corinthians:

Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious, or boastful, or arrogant, or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable, or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (I Corinthians 13:4-7)

As you can see, it would be impossible to legislate this. We could call this "the law of love" or the "law of the Spirit" because we don't have another word for it. But it is really the expression of God's Spirit through us. Insofar as we allow the Spirit of God to work through us, these are the qualities that come out. Insofar as...

Paul understands that he is not there yet. In Romans he has that famous passage where he speaks for us all:

I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:21-25a)

When we do it on our own, we are lost. When we let the Spirit of God flow through us, we are transformed. When we try to live by the Law, we fail. When we let the Spirit produce its fruit through us, a new humanity emerges.

And so Paul finishes off the section of Philippians that we are looking at in this way:

Let those of us then who are mature [*by which he means spiritually mature*] be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only, let us hold fast to what we have attained.

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ [*note those words; I'll come back to them in a moment*]; I have often told you of them, and now I

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tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and their glory is their shame. Their minds are set on earthly things. (Philippians 3:15-19)

Remember, the central image that Paul is using in this letter is the Great Kenotic hymn in Philippians 2:5-11, where Christ is said to have emptied himself of all his sense of privilege and entitlement and become obedient to death, even death on a cross. Whenever we profess Christ, but live to ourselves, we are making ourselves enemies of the cross of Christ. Paul is not talking about non-Christians. He's just talking about us. If we claim Christ and we live contrary to fruit of the Spirit or love or the self-emptying servanthood of Christ, we become hypocrites and enemies of the cross because others will look at us and say, "well look at those hypocritical Christians! No thanks."

And yet we know that our submission to the work of the Holy Spirit is partial. We know that we fall short. Paul knows that too. That is why he talks about pressing on toward the goal. In I Corinthians he expresses this struggle using the image of an athlete:

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it! Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we to receive an imperishable one. So, I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air, but I apply harsh discipline to my body and enslave it so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified. (I Corinthians 9:24-27)

Or, to summarize: serious athletes are all in with their training, just to win a perishable prize. How much are we willing to let go of to win an eternal one?

In the next instalment of An Epidemic of Good News, I will be looking at the people whom Paul names in his letter to the Philippians to see what they can tell us about life among the early Christian community, and especially among the Christians in Philippi.

Let's close with the Lord's Prayer:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.**