

## THE THING THAT MATTERS MOST

I was not with you all for worship on Mother's Day, but I'm happy to be here for Father's Day. Last week Connie and I were away speaking at a conference at Glen Erie, the beautiful Navigators headquarters in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The conference was for this wonderful mission agency, Training Leaders International or TLI. As many of you know, my eldest son Alex has been a partner with them. One thing that stood out in many conversations with these young mothers and fathers serving as missionary educators was a concern for their children and passing on their faith. Those conversations surfaced some memories and reflections on my experience as a father.

I will admit that sometimes I wish I could have a do-over. I am thankful for the many ways God covers and compensates for some fatherly failures. I could tell many stories where I do *not* come off as the hero but there's one story I remembered that I felt good about. I want to share it with you because it relates to our focus this morning. One time I was driving with one of my sons, and it struck me that a lot of my conversation with them had to do with how we should act as Christians. That's part of a father's role, but I distinctly remember on this day, I turned to my son and said, *"I hope you know that while we often talk about behavior, and that is important, the thing that has mattered most to me is my relationship with Christ."* I'm paraphrasing, but I said something like, *"I'm telling you as a father and as one human being to another, the best thing that has ever happened to me in my entire life is Jesus Christ. He has changed my life. I have never for even one moment regretted the day that I said to Jesus, 'I believe you died for my sins, and I'm going to trust you as my Lord and my Savior; come into my life and forgive me and begin working in my life and guiding me and helping me.' And it is not only the promise of eternal life or his teaching about life and how to live, but actually knowing him, his presence with me, and my sense of living in a relationship and even friendship with him that matters most."* I distinctly remember that

conversation because in the midst of it, I felt as if the Lord impressed upon me that this was what I needed to share with my sons, and this is what I had not stressed enough. Many things are important, even essential, but they all revolve around this crucial idea of *knowing* Christ.

Twice, in the passage that we've been looking at for several weeks now, the crucial importance of knowing Jesus is emphasized.

Last week Barry focused on **verse 9**. The only way to be right with God is to repent of all self-righteousness to receive *the righteousness of God that comes through faith in Christ*. This itself is an awesome gift of grace and yet notice it is intended to lead to something relational and personal. Look at **verses 8-11** together. Notice the spiritual and logical connections. Beginning in **verse 8**, *Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ<sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—<sup>10</sup> that (“so that,” or “in order that”) I may know him (The gift of righteousness removes the impediment of our sinfulness so that we can enter into a reconciled relationship with Christ and know him.) *and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,*<sup>11</sup> *that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.**

*There are several important truths in that sentence that we will look at next week, but this morning, we need to consider the importance of that key phrase; "I want to know Christ..." The Bible tells us that ...*

I. **THERE IS NOTHING MORE IMPORTANT THAN KNOWING JESUS CHRIST.**

Look at **verses 8 & 10**. We know Paul was highly educated and from a fairly wealthy family. He had many opportunities, and yet his life's passion is to know Christ. As he writes this letter, he is a prisoner, but he barely mentions his circumstances. He has learned that fame,

possessions and achievements don't satisfy. He had had all that, and it wasn't enough. Now he had none of that, and it didn't matter. He keeps talking about deep joy and rejoicing even in times of uncertainty and discomfort. Why? Because the source of his strength was his relationship with Christ. The passion of his life was to know him.

*God uses his example and inspired words to teach you and me that ...*

**A. Nothing in the world can substitute for knowing Christ.**

One of my all-time favorite, most influential books from my early life as a Christian, one of the books I most wholeheartedly recommend to those with a thirst for God is J.I. Packer's book *Knowing God*, and so he talks about God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but the principles in that book apply to knowing Christ. In chapter 3, titled *Knowing and Being Known*, the chapter begins like this:

What were we made for? To know God. What is the best thing in life, bringing more joy, delight, and contentment than anything else? Knowledge of God. **Jeremiah 9:23-24** *Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, <sup>24</sup> but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things, I delight, declares the LORD."* What, of all the states God ever sees men in, gives God the most pleasure? Knowledge of himself. **Hosea 6:6** *For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.*

One of the great themes of the Bible is that your soul is made for God, for the love of God, like we're made to breathe the air. We're made to live in a relationship of friendship and lordship and love with God, who made us in his image and loves us with a love that never fails us.

*It's important to say that ...*

**B. You cannot substitute knowing about Christ, or the Christian life for knowing Christ.**

In **verse 10**, he doesn't say that he wants to the righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus, so that he can know more *about* Jesus but so that he can *know him*. It's relational and personal, and spiritual.

When Jesus gathered his disciples for the last meal with them in the Upper Room he told them something astonishing about what he wanted his relationship with them and us to be. He said he wants us to think of him as our greatest friend. **John 15:13-15** *Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. <sup>14</sup> You are my friends if you do what I command you. <sup>15</sup> No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.* Sometimes I've heard people say something like *Jesus is not your friend he's your king!* The truth is we don't have to choose between the Lordship of Christ or the friendship of Christ. Christ truly is both. He is our triumphant and exalted king and our deepest and truest friend. That doesn't mean we should treat him irreverently but it does mean we should draw near to him relationally.

Jonathan Edwards the famous preacher of early America said, *"Let it be our first love to enter into an everlasting friendship with Christ that will never be broken."* The gospel calls us to trust Jesus as our Savior, submit to him as our Lord, value him as our greatest treasure and enjoy him as our closest, most faithful friend. The New Testament book of Colossians when it speaks of Jesus says all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in him (2:3) and in him all the fullness of God and godliness dwells (1:19.) He is both the lion and the lamb! He is at the same time the most peaceful and patient and welcoming friend and the most powerful and victorious and exalted king. He is the one with the deepest compassion and also the greatest courage. He more than anyone else you will ever know or meet knows you thoroughly and loves you unconditionally. He knows how to help you and never give up on you. He wants and pursues you and your heart. And 2 Corinthians 3:8 tells us that the more you know him the more you see his glory the more you are changed progressively and deeply into his likeness. So the thing that matters most truly is to know him! Sometimes we find ourselves trying hard to live the way we think a Christian should. But if we stop and reflect and are honest, we might come to the place where

we admit that something's missing. Is something missing? *Hear the invitation of Jesus Christ your Lord. He offers himself to you and knowing him is the thing that matters most.*

*So what do we do?*

## **II. TO KNOW JESUS CHRIST PERSONALLY, YOU HAVE TO PURSUE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM FAITHFULLY.**

When Paul says, *"I want to know Christ..."* It is clear he intends to do all he can to develop and deepen this relationship with Christ. If you search the Bible for an understanding of what it takes to know Christ better, you discover at least four things.

*The First is Time.*

### **A. It Takes Time To Know Christ.**

I came across an article this week titled what matters most about being a father. And the article said a big part of it is time, what we sometimes call, "quality time." The article said, *the most important and hardest responsibility of being a father is actually being there. Showing up is part of it, just as he would show up for work, but actually being there physically, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally is the harder part. By wholeheartedly being there, you are loving your kids.*

And the same thing is true with knowing Christ loving him and building a relationship with him. You have to be present. He has promised he will be present with you. He promised I will never leave you or forsake you. One of the ways we spend time with Christ is by consciously going through our days with an awareness of His presence with us.

**Ephesians 3:17** speaks of Christ *"dwelling in our hearts by faith."* "A devotional book of the fourteenth century, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, says, *"On one level we may be ... meeting all the demands of the external affairs. But deep within, behind the scenes, at a more profound level, one may also be in prayer and adoration, song and worship, and a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings."*

In addition to being present to God, practicing his presence with us throughout our lives, we also set aside time, as Jesus did, to pull away from other activities and interests to give ourselves to our relationship with him. We do that here when we worship corporately, and we do it in our personal lives when we set aside times for prayer fellowship with Christ, whether on a long walk or in a quiet place at home.

*It takes time to know Christ. Then also,*

### **B. It Takes Talk To Know Christ.**

You talk to Him through prayer. He talks to you through the Bible and through His Spirit within you. When the Bible speaks of Christ dwelling within us through the Holy Spirit, it's not telling us that he lives within us as a mute or silent observer. The purpose of his indwelling presence is to communicate with us. He surfaces issues that need to be addressed and brings to mind the wisdom of his revealed word in Scripture. He assures you of forgiveness and of the Father's goodness. He'll show you something to be grateful for and point out a wrong attitude or sin that you need to address. He will reveal himself and his desires. If you are going to know Christ, you have to listen to what he says to you.

*Time, Talk, then Trust...*

### **C. It Takes Trust To Know Christ.**

There are certain things you cannot learn about a person until you trust them and let them prove themselves. Some people never learn of Christ's faithfulness because they never put themselves in a position where they are dependent on him. They never experience the might of His power because their lives are run on the basis of their own ability to do whatever needs doing. They don't need much evidence of the supernatural because they live exclusively in the arena of the natural. In **John 14:21** Jesus gave us a promise. He said, "*Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.*" What Jesus is promising you here is that when we trust Him enough to take daily steps of obedience in response to each step of faith and obedience to His commands, he will, in some way, perhaps

unique to you and your season of life, manifest or reveal, himself more fully and deeply to you. In the great theologian John Calvin's commentary on this verse, he says, This (failure to trust and obey) is why many people fall back, and why we hardly see one person in ten proceed in the right course; for the majority of people do not deserve (or do what is necessary) for him to manifest himself to them.

*To know Christ takes time, talk, and trust; the fourth thing is thirst.*

#### **D. It Takes Thirst To Know Christ.**

Paul's words in **verse 10** are really an echo of a desire that you find voiced throughout the Bible. David stands out in the Old Testament as a leader, a warrior, a poet, a king, and most of all, a man of great spiritual depth. In **Psalm 63:1-2** David wrote, "*Oh God, you are my God; Earnestly I seek you; My soul thirst for you.*"

### **CONCLUSION**

In the book I mentioned earlier by J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, he tells of taking a walk with a man who had effectively forfeited his prospects for career advancement because of conflicts that originated from his Christian convictions. Packer said at one point, the man said, "*But it doesn't matter, for I have known God, and they haven't.*" Think about that. God in Jesus Christ offers you a relationship with himself that is so valuable, so life-giving, and so full of purpose it makes everything else fade into insignificance in comparison. The mystery and beauty of the gospel tells us our sins deserve judgement and condemnation, but Jesus gave himself for us. He died on the cross to pay for our sins. He rose again to be a living Lord and Savior for all who turn to him in faith. Turn to him and trust in him and he gives you what was described in this passage *as the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith*. But the gift of grace is given so that you not only receive eternal life but also begin a relationship, a friendship with him in this life. ***Knowing Christ, growing in the knowledge of him is what matters most.***

**Amen**

## **A Prayer for Receiving Christ**

Almighty God, thank you for offering me, in Christ, a perfect righteousness that I could never earn that leads to reconciliation with you my creator and Savior. I confess my sins and my need for your saving grace. I turn to Christ, and trust in him for my redemption. I believe he died on the cross to pay for my sins and rose again as Lord and Savior. I receive and rest on him alone for my salvation. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## **A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal**

Lord Jesus, May I grow to increasingly realize the supreme importance of know you. Deliver me from foolish diversions that I might faithfully pursue my relationship with you as the very center of my life and my ultimate ambition. Reveal to me any impediment that obstructs my knowledge of you and help me to continually deepen my relationship with you and this astonishing gift that you would call a Sinner like me your friend. Amen