

THE ROAD TO ZION, PHIL3:1-11

Letters from Prison #6

◆**Intro:** In the dream you see a man in line, waiting to be let into heaven by the angels at the gates. The man steps up to the gate with a large duffel strapped over his shoulder. The angel asks to see the contents of the bag. The man lowers the heavy sack and opens it to reveal dozens of bars of pure gold. The angel is shocked and looks up at the man and says, "You brought asphalt?"

◆Ok, for those who didn't get it, the Bible describes heaven as having streets paved with gold. It's an analogy. Life is so great in heaven that what is so precious to us on earth is like mere pavement there. Zion, the city of God (Heaven) is the goal so worthwhile (and costly!) that the best earth has to offer is what you walk on there. We have mistaken sources of hope in this world. In our text Paul want to lift our eyes higher, to a mountain peak that makes the gorges on the trail worth enduring. He shows us that...

◆**1. One of my major mistakes in life is to look for my joy in my accomplishments.** What we have gone through, or finished, or done -these things are easy for us to stack up as proof of our value, aren't they? It's right in line with what most all religions teach in one form or another. They teach DO religion. Do this, do that, reach this level, accomplish that, live like we live, dress like we dress, use these terms, give that up... and the gods will reward you and smile upon you. And it's what the false teachers (Paul calls them dogs!) were saying to the church in

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Philippi. Scholars refer to them as "Judaizers". They were trying to get the followers of Jesus to add the Jewish ceremonial laws to their church requirements. Sure believe in Jesus, but you also have to follow this tradition, keep that law... You have to prove you're worthy.

◆ What are some of those things we value that we think will bring us joy and make us feel worthy because we've accomplished them:

◆ **A. Ritualism:** "I've been baptized." I've had people who aren't even Christians want me to baptize their baby (It's a Christian sacrament)! Or maybe you repeat a memorized prayer before every meal. Or say the same prayer 17 times to insure it's effectiveness. That's ritualism.

◆ **B. Nationalism:** "I'm Italian. If you ain't Italian you ain't not'in! Or "I'm one of the proud Fighting Irish". Fill in your nationality...

◆ **C. Elitism:** "Not only do I belong to THIS club, but I'm a charter member, so, get to the back of the line, newby!"

◆ **D. Religiosity:** "Oh yeah, I don't go to church much, but my dad was an elder and my grandfather was a pastor, and my mom played the organ for like, ever!" (A heritage of religion that in the end actually made no difference to the lifestyle of the girl who said it.) One man I talked to asked me what the dues were at my church. I said you could come for free! "Oh", he said, "'cuz I'm

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paying dues at two other churches just to play it safe and I was wondering if I should do more.”

◆**E. Exclusivism:** We’re Spirit-baptized Christians and speak in tongues. Or, We only read from the real Bible (insert your select version) in our church. Or our church hails from this Synod, or that Reformed branch -that’s how we know we’re on the right path you know.

◆**G. Activism:** I’ve been on every mission trip. We picket and do protest marches/riots, call them what you will. I’ve volunteered with Boy Scouts, and helped fund 4H, and water all the flowers in our town. I’m on this board, and that committee, and I’m thinking of running for mayor.

◆**H. Perfectionism:** If I can just stay sober I can feel good about myself. If I mess up, I’ll hate myself (That’s perfectionism) ... I feel good about myself because I’ve never gotten a traffic ticket. Never got anything but an A in High School.”

◆Guess what, Paul... Paul, writer of much of the New Testament, Apostle of Jesus Christ... Paul had all these things!

◆**Ritualism:** *circumcised on the eighth day.* Mosaic law.

◆**Nationalism:** *of the nation of Israel,* God’s chosen people.

◆**Elitism:** *of the tribe of Benjamin* (1 or 12 tribes, 1 of 2 that remained in Caanan after 10 were overrun. The one that marched first in military parades.)

◆**Religiosity:** *Hebrew of hebrews.* Long line of God-people.

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- ◆ **Exclusivism:** *a Pharisee*, a religious sect with hundreds of rules over and above OT laws. Considered themselves the few the faithful to interpreting scripture. (Pharash = verb to interpret.)
- ◆ **Activism:** *as to zeal, persecuting the church* (Jesus followers).
- ◆ **Perfectionism:** *as to the law, faultless*. Ie, he lived the rigid life of keeping all those extra laws.
- ◆ **Now heres the kicker.** Turns out Paul says this is all trash! Worthless (The greek term is literally animal manure, "poop"). Isn't there just a little part of you that wants to go, "Well, shoot. If Paul has all that and it's worthless, what chance has my list of good accomplishments got to bring me hope?" And that's kinda the point. If you were to try and impress Paul it would go like this:
 - ◆ **You:** I'm somebody because I rose to the top sales level in my very first year.
 - ◆ **Paul:** Um cool but pretty worthless.
 - ◆ **My family** read the Bible at dinner every night.
 - ◆ **Good** but that's not what will give you joy.
 - ◆ **I go to church** pretty regular.
 - ◆ **Healthy,** but no merit there.
 - ◆ **I've been completely faithful** to my spouse for like three whole years!

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◆Waytogo, but that's just a spark, and heaven needs the fire from then surface of the sun!

◆**A.** What? Aren't these good things? Yes they are. Shouldn't I do them? Yes you should. Then why do you call them rubbish? Because that's how little they are worth in achieving the love of God, forgiveness of sin, and entrance to heaven. It's like walking into NASA with a paper airplane.

◆*"Therefore no-one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin." Romans 3:20, NIV.*

◆We all need to get a clue. We are not good enough for God's attention. You aren't. I'm not. We can't be. Only complete and total holiness can enter God's presence. Which means we don't come to worship, or study the Bible to chalk up points in hopes of tipping the scales to our favor with God. We come to worship because we want to know Christ, to rejoice that Jesus made us a way/path/road to find forgiveness and eternal life! It's all in the way you see what do and how you behave. The reality is that my good accomplishments can never earn me God's favor. That's not why we do them!

◆*"All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away." Isaiah 64:6, NIV.*

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◆ In fact Isaiah says all our good deeds are soiled menstruation rags (another shocking image lest we fail to get the point).

◆ **B.** Why else doesn't achievement fill us with joy? And why do so many church people look so unhappy? Why are some of the most bitter people you run into also some of the most religious people? Maybe a lot of times it's because they see their faith as a list of things to measure up to. The more you concentrate on measuring up, the more you realize down deep that you really don't. That turns them into people of critique, always looking for what's out of place, in themselves and in others as well. It's like just reading the news all the time; it makes you a crabby person!

◆ A false sense of spiritual accomplishment will keep you from joy. Why? Because all the pressure is always on only you. You have to perform. You have to make the grade, or else. ~~But you don't know for sure how well you're doing. You only find out at the final exam, so you live all semester in anxiety wondering if you know the right things or not.~~

◆ Don't do the right thing to make up for doing the wrong thing. It can't be done. Ask for forgiveness. God will give it.

◆ Don't be kind in hopes that God will send a little more notice your way. That's ritualism. SO not meritorious.

◆ Don't stay home from worship because you feel guilty about something this week. That's religiosity. That's rubbish too.

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◆ Don't avoid God, or prayer, or the Lord's Supper because you've done something terribly immoral lately. That's perfectionism. Smells like garbage.

◆ Here's how salvation works. Do you see your wrong? Does your heart wish it wasn't so? Would you like Jesus to forgive it? Then ask, and he'll wipe it off your record. Your browser history is erased. There's nothing to find. That means he chooses to see you as righteous by the merit he earned for you in his death on the cross. All you do is the AAA: admit, ask, accept.

◆ HC 81 Q. Who are to come to the Lord's table?

A. Those who are displeased with themselves
because of their sins,
but who nevertheless trust
that their sins are pardoned
and that their continuing weakness is covered
by the suffering and death of Christ,
and who also desire more and more
to strengthen their faith
and to lead a better life.

Hypocrites and those who are unrepentant, however,
eat and drink judgment on themselves.

◆ I will never find joy, or God for that matter, if I base it on my achievement, accomplishment, or performance. But I will if I admit my need and accept pardon. If you've won tournaments, or received awards, gotten a plaque to hang on your wall, I dare say that you might also have noticed what little difference it made. You go home, put it on the shelf, or you pin it on your jacket and that's that. It doesn't last. It doesn't make people who didn't like you before, like you now. It doesn't make your

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car run better or your asthma go away. It doesn't make getting along with your brother-in-law any different. It's pretty lonely in the winners circle. Only one gets to stand there.

◆[Now don't misunderstand. Achievement is not a bad thing. It's just not the real thing when it comes to finding real joy or salvation. If you look for joy in the medals, awards, and records you'll not find it.]

◆The song Road to Zion by Petra puts it like this:

"Sometimes it's good to look back down/
We've come so far -
we've gained such ground/
But joy is not in where we've been/
Joy is who's waiting at the end."

◆**2.** But there is a source of joy more reliable than achievement.

If I know Christ, I have an eternal source of joy.

◆**A.** Why might that be? Because Christ's path leads to glory.

Christ's path leads to life after death. Christ's path leads to God. Christ's path (and by that I mean "how he lived and what he did") leads to forgiveness. You know what that's like? [It's like waging a war at sea, being sunk by the enemy, and then floundering in the ocean, only to be hauled aboard by the hands of those you were trying to kill. Then being sat down in dry clothes, to a piping hot, several course meal, along with everyone else.] If I could keep Christ and all that comes with him daily before my eyes, I could live in much more peace and joy.

◆**B.** Now, you might not balk at knowing the power of rising from the dead. But why does Paul want to share in Christ's sufferings?

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Doesn't that feel a bit sadistic? Understand this: The "power of resurrection". The "fellowship of sharing in his sufferings". "Becoming like him in his death." –These are not three different things. These are the path of "knowing Christ."

◆What was Jesus like in his **death**? He was self-denying love paying the price of sin for other people.

◆What were the **sufferings** of Jesus? They were love, putting self (and heaven) aside to absorb evil in a fallen world.

◆What was the power of **resurrection**? It was God honoring love in his perfect Son and raising him to real physical life.

◆Knowing Christ is saying, "I'm through with DO religion, with living to make myself look great! I'm tired of chasing myself. I just go around in circles. That path doesn't give me joy! I chose the DONE religion where Christ did it for me. I want to chase Christ on that path. The path of love that ventures into valleys with shadows of death. But the path that comes out on the mountain peak, in glorious sunlight where I can sit in the company of God himself!

◆To know Christ is to say I'm OK with living a life of dying like Jesus, because that leads to living with Jesus. On that path, a person can have joy even when they hurt. On that path, a person can find life even when they die. On that path "surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

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◆ Friend, is there accomplishment you're still trying to ride the crest of? Is there a failure you're still trying to hold your breath under? Come to Jesus. Let him accomplish for you. Let him forgive your failures. Then follow his path.