

PHILIPPIANS 3:7-12, “KNOWING CHRIST”

If you're here with us this evening,
it's very likely that you've got some interest
in the ministry of the church, in Christian ministry.

You might even have agreed to *do* ministry for some reason.

For many of us, it seems,
the longer we're involved in ministry,
the more familiar with the realities of ministry we become,
the more likely we are to say, “Ministry is hard.”

Apparently there's a holiday—in fact it's this Sunday:
“Clergy Appreciation Day,”
a.k.a., “Feel Sorry for Your Pastor Day,”
because ministry is hard, and everybody should know that.

Seriously though... would that be your summary description of the experience?
“Ministry is hard”?

Is that what you think young candidates for the Gospel ministry need to know?
Is that what creates a sense of camaraderie & bonding w/ your ministry buddies?

Is the difficulty of ministry weighing heavily on you?
Is it something you're not sure you can endure?
Do you feel like you're on the brink of burnout?
Are you stressed or depressed?
Do you feel increasingly bitter & snappy?
Do you complain a lot about the hardships of ministry?
Are you becoming afraid of the pain of doing ministry?
Are you thinking about ways to get out of ministry,
or at least to get out of your current ministry setting?

Let's see if there's any Good News for people like us...

[7] But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. [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 [9] 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—[10] that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, [11] that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

[12] Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

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A lot of our discouragement and frustration about ministry
is due to the friction between our expectations and reality.

When our starry-eyed expectations
come into conflict w/ the painful reality of ministry,
this is when the difficulties are exacerbated,
when we're more likely to say, "I didn't sign up for this."

Well, what *did* you sign up for?

An uninterrupted program of revival?
An escalating series of successes?

Did you think people were going to respond favorably to the Gospel ministry?

Did you think all people were going to speak well of you & your ministry?

Did you think people were going to stop sinning when they became Christians?

Were these the unspoken assumptions of your heart?

That's okay, you're not alone,
the disciples of Jesus have always had expectations like these—
expectations that Jesus is happy to overthrow.

The reality of Jesus, the reality of his Kingdom, is:

Jesus is the greatest minister who ever lived... the best preacher / teacher...
& many people did not respond favorably to his Gospel,
many people misunderstood him,
many people did not speak well of him,
many people left his ministry,
many people attacked him,
& even his closest disciples
did not stop sinning when they started following him.

So let's get our expectations in line with the reality of Jesus & his Kingdom.

Jesus says, **“If anyone would come after me,
let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”**

Our baseline expectation for the Christian life,
our fundamental expectation for Christian ministry,
is that following Jesus means taking up a cross like his,
following Jesus means a life of painful love,
following Jesus means loving & forgiving people who are difficult to love.

Yes, ministry is hard... just look at the life of Jesus...
he is called “the Suffering Servant,” *the Suffering Minister*.

Now, this is *not* just to say, “Hey, what did you expect?”
“Pull up your big boy pants, stop whining, and do what needs to be done.”

The suffering we face in the Christian life,
the suffering we face in Christian ministry,
is not just something you have to grit your teeth & bear dutifully.

About 15 years ago, when we were first planting Ascension,
I was hanging out w/ a fellow minister,
basically complaining to him about how ministry was hard.

He asked me, “Why are you doing it, then?”

I took the “dutiful soldier” angle—
it's the right thing to do,
someone's gotta do it,
I signed up for it,
it's just part of the job,
I've got to do my faithful duty.

& my friend said something that has stuck with me,
something that God has used profoundly in my life & ministry.

He said, “If you’re not in it to get closer to Jesus,
then you might as well get out now.”

Look, sure,
we can come up with all kinds of reasons to do hard things in ministry,
and we can figure out all kinds of tricks for coping in ministry.

Pace yourself... make sure you take enough time off...
maintain a hobby & a life outside of ministry...
have a drink & unwind at the end of a hard day.

Ok... but you should *definitely* be asking yourself, “Why?”
“Why am I even doing this? Why continue, when ministry is so hard?”

& here is the *only* answer—
you do it in order to know Jesus Christ, to share in his life.

After all, *that’s what the Christian life is...*
knowing Jesus, participating in his life with God.

That’s what ministry is...
knowing Jesus, participating in his life,
proclaiming the Good News that Jesus has opened to us his own life w/ God.

This is all the Apostle Paul wanted.

He knew ministry was hard—he wrote this letter to the Philippians *from prison!*

And yet, it is *the* letter of *joy*...
the joy of the Christian life, the joy of Christian ministry,
even in the face of hardship...
because Paul is celebrating knowing Jesus, participating in his life with God.

Nothing could matter more to Paul than knowing Jesus.

In fact, he puts it even more strongly than this.

[7] Whatever *gain* I had, I counted as *loss* for the sake of Christ.

Paul says, “The things I had invested in to create my own identity,
to *be* someone, to *belong* in God’s presence,
to establish my own righteousness,
to build my own sense of significance or worth or glory,
to make my own life with God, to make my ministry successful...
these things only *detract* from knowing Christ.”

“I tried to build my résumé,
to impress God with the faithful performance of my duties.”

“I even did things by the book,
so I could be confident acc. to *the standards of God’s own law*,
& I had more reason for confidence in myself than anyone—
circumcised on the 8th day,
of the people of Israel,
of the tribe of Benjamin,
a Hebrew of Hebrews,
as to the law, a Pharisee,
as to zeal, a persecutor of the church,
as to righteousness under the law... *blameless.*”

If anyone could feel approved,
if any minister could feel a sense of satisfaction & accomplishment
b/c of his people, his pedigree, his performance, it was Paul.

& he says, not only are these things *not gain*, they are counted as *loss*.

These are *setbacks* when it comes to the only thing that truly matters.

[8] *I count everything as loss b/c of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.*

For Paul, anything in life & ministry,
any reason for life & ministry,
aside from *knowing Christ... is deficit... garbage.*

The Christian life & the Christian ministry
is *lit. nothing other than knowing Christ.*

Earlier in Philippians, he says it in the most intriguing way:
[1:21] For me, *to live is Christ.*

True life, according to the Scriptures,
is certainly not something you attain or manufacture *apart* from Christ...
it really isn’t even something abstract you *get from* Jesus.

Life *is* Christ, acc. to Paul.

The Apostle John says the same thing:
[1 Jn 5:20] Jesus Christ... *is the true God and eternal life.*

& listen to how Jesus himself puts it in his High Priestly prayer:

[Jn 17:3] This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

The Christian life—and that must obviously include ministry—
is knowing Jesus, relationally, acc. to the Lord himself.

In the Bible, life isn't just a physiological matter
of lungs pumping air and a heart pumping blood.

In the Bible, life is a matter of relationship with the living God,
a spiritual matter of the deepest personal intimacy w/ God.

In the Bible, life is *knowing* God—not just academically, but personally,
in the same kind of way a husband and wife “know” each other.

Knowing God, *knowing* Jesus, is biblical language for *union*,
for the closest possible relationship of sharing life.

Jesus himself *is* the union of God and humanity, in one Person,
and he is *our* life as we are united to him,
as we *know* him *in union* w/ him.

This is why Paul is always talking about Jesus, using the language of union,
speaking of **[8] the surpassing worth of knowing Christ**,
saying he will give up anything & everything to **gain Christ**,
[9] to be found in Christ,
[10] to know him & the power of his resurrection...
to share / participate / have fellowship / commune in his sufferings...
even **to become like him in his death.**

The Christian life is knowing God even as the Son knows God.

The Christian life is about Jesus' relationship with God being opened up to us.

This is the great gift and privilege of the Christian life and ministry.

This is the whole gift—without this, you have nothing.

This is the privilege for which God originally made us in his own image.

What does it mean to be created in the image and likeness of God?

It means *sonship*.

That's what it means in Gen. 5,
where it says God created man in his likeness,
male & female, & named them Man...
& Adam fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image,
& him Seth...
& Seth fathered a son... & so on & so forth.

To be in the image and likeness of someone means *a relationship of sonship*.

That's what it means for God himself—
the Son relates to the Father...
the Son is the perfect image of the Father.

To be created in God's image & likeness means *relating to God as Father...*
it means receiving an inheritance of all that belongs to God...
it even means enjoying God's own place in this world.

That's the first & fundamental blessing with which God blessed us.

The first lie that we ever believed is absolutely contrary to this.

The fundamental lie that we continue to believe
is that God *does not* want us to be like him,
that God wants there to be this great distance between us & him.

But God has made us in his image to relate to him as Father,
he has set us *in his own place* in this world,
he *does* want us to be like him,
he *does* want us *to know him in the closest possible way*.

Even though we have sinned & rejected him & ruined this relationship,
he still has redeemed us & adopted us in Christ,
& given us the Spirit of Sonship.

In his grace,
God wants us to relate to him as his own Beloved Son relates to him.

We often find great comfort
in knowing that the Son of God can relate to us.

He has become one of us...
he knows what it is like to be one of us.

That Gospel truth is of great encouragement in the Christian life & ministry.

But the ultimate blessing isn't just that Jesus knows what your life is like...
he is giving you the incredible privilege of knowing what *his* life is like...
what it is like for the Son of God to be who he is,
what it is like for him to relate to the Father through the Spirit,
what it is like for the Son of God to live in this world & the next.

It's amazing to think that the Son of God can empathize with you—
but what kind of gracious privilege is it
that he gives you the gift of being able to empathize with him??

That is the wonder of the Christian life & Christian ministry—
Jesus gives you the gift of being able to relate to him,
of knowing what his life is,
of knowing the life of the Son of God *from the inside*,
of *sharing*, of *participating* in his own eternal life with God.

What was his life like when the Son of God came into this world?

His life was hard... his ministry was hard.

When *your* life is hard, when *your* ministry is hard,
this is an opportunity for knowing Jesus,
this is the blessing of being able to relate to the Son of God himself.

This is the gracious gift and the glorious privilege
for which Jesus Christ has laid hold of us & made us his own.

He says that we belong to him, and he belongs to us,
that we are bone of his bones & flesh of his flesh,
so that we share his life,
so that we can know God the way he knows God,
in the most intimate way possible.

We can live with his own Spirit in us,
with the very life of the God of love in us,
knowing the life of God from the inside.

For the Son of God, life & ministry in this world means suffering love.

It means forgiveness & sacrificial service...
it means faithfully relating to his Father
by loving people who are so difficult to love that it kills him.

This is the glorious life of God, lived out in this world.

This is the life that has been opened up for you to share.

As it has gone with Jesus, so it shall go with us—
this is the whole gift of the Christian life and ministry.

Whatever is true of Jesus in his rel. w/ God
will also be true of us in our union with him.

That's the very nature of the blessing of his Kingdom—
to *know* Jesus, to participate in the life of the Son of God.

It's a blessing you'd never want...
unless you wanted to know Jesus more than anything.

It's the blessing that God gave to Hosea—
the blessing of being able to relate to God himself,
to reveal God's life to others through his ministry.

How did God bless Hosea?

He gave him a faithless bride,
so that Hosea could *know*
what it's like for God to be who he is,
what it's like for God to have a faithless bride in his sinful people.

God wasn't being cruel to Hosea to make his life & ministry hard.

God was making it so that Hosea could relate to him, even empathize with him.

Hosea was blessed to know God's rel. w/ his people *from God's side of the rel.*

That's the kind of blessing we usually can't even *recognize* as a blessing.

But it *is* a blessing—
God was giving Hosea the privilege of *truly knowing* him in a life like his,
so that Hosea could call others,
“Come, let us *know*; let us *press on to know the LORD.*”

& this is what Paul is saying is the privilege of the Christian life & ministry
as we *share* in sufferings & death & resurrection like Christ's.

When he says he wants to *share* his sufferings,
that word means *have fellowship / communion.*

It is worth remembering the first Words of the Institution
of the Sacrament of our *Communion* with Jesus...

“On the night when he was betrayed...”

That is when Jesus gave us the gift of communion with himself—
on the night of his deepest sorrow,
when he would be betrayed by one of his closest companions,
someone for whom he had poured himself out in ministry.

When *we* face betrayal or abandonment or suffering in our ministry,
these can be the closest moments for our communion with Jesus,
knowing him in his sufferings.

We're here to follow Jesus, to go with him into the places he has gone,
to know his rel. w/ God & his relationships with others
from his own place in those relationships.

It is the most miraculous & glorious & gracious condescension on his part,
to make it possible for us to relate to him in these ways.

When you weep with those who weep,
you know what it was like for Jesus to be who he is.

When you are self-sacrificial in your generosity,
you know what it was like for Jesus.

When you proclaim the Gospel, and it falls on deaf ears,
you know what it was like for Jesus.

When people oppose your ministry,
you know what it was like for Jesus.

When people ask you to do ministry somewhere else,
you know what it was like for Jesus.

When sinners keep on sinning & it breaks your heart,
you know what it was like for Jesus.

When your love is rejected,
you know what it was like for Jesus.

When people slander you, mock you, falsely accuse you,
you know what it was like for Jesus.

When it hurts to forgive & pray for those who sin against you,
you know what it was like for Jesus.

When you are sold out, thrown under the bus, betrayed,
you have real communion with Jesus,
you know what life was like for Jesus in this world.

In fact, there is no true knowledge of Jesus
apart from knowing him in his sufferings.

He *is* the one who has wept in grief, who has suffered, who has died.

How can you know him as the Risen Lord
unless you know him as the one who was crucified?

When ministry is hard,
it's an opportunity for sharing in the life of the Son of God.

Let *that* blessing be your baseline expectation for ministry.

If it isn't that, it's nothing—
if you're not in it to get closer to Jesus, you might as well get out now.

Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth
to arrange everything in your life & ministry,
to bring about these opportunities for sharing in his life,
to make his life to be your life,
to make you to know him, intimately, which is eternal life.

If he gives you the gift of knowing him in sufferings like his,
he will also give you the gift of knowing him in a resurrection like his.

As it has gone with Jesus, so it shall go with us.

This is joy that no one can take away,
because Christ Jesus has made us his own.

[Hos 6:3] Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD. AMEN.