

How many of you remember the old Star-Kist Tuna TV commercials featuring Charlie the Tuna? Boy, am I dating myself now! Charlie – an animated tuna – was cast in several commercials with a similar plot: Charlie trying valiantly and sometimes deviously to get selected by Star-Kist but always failing. Now Charlie was under the mistaken assumption that Star-Kist was after tunas with good taste. We saw Charlie at the opera, reciting Shakespeare, and acting sophisticated. But Charlie always failed in his efforts to get selected as a Star-Kist tuna. Why? Fortunately, there was always another animated tuna – an unnamed sidekick of Charlie's – who patiently and philosophically explained the problem. "Charlie," he would say with a tired sigh, "Star-Kist doesn't want tunas with good taste. They want tunas that taste good." In other words, Charlie, getting selected by Star-Kist depends on who you are not what you do.

I'm convinced that when it comes to having a relationship with God, most people have a Charlie the Tuna perspective. Most people recognize that a relationship with God is necessary if there is any hope of eternal life or getting into Heaven. So how do you get into and keep a good relationship with God? Most people – even sincere, religious people, even folk raised in Christian homes – believe that a relationship with God depends on what they do: what they believe, how moral they might be, what religious acts they perform instead of who they are. Poor Charlie wanted to be selected by Star-Kist for having good taste (what he did) rather than for tasting good (who he was). In much the same way, many people think a relationship with God is based on what they do rather than who they are. Poor Charlie! He actually needed a miracle. He needed someone to change him into a good tasting tuna. You and I need a miracle spiritually if we are to enjoy any kind of relationship with God. Someone has got to change who we are before God, because we can never do enough good things to make ourselves acceptable to God. That Someone, of course, is God Himself. He makes us good and acceptable on the basis of what Jesus did for us. Jesus died in our place on the cross paying the penalty for our sins. When we put our faith in Jesus, God makes us acceptable to Himself.

The section of Paul's letter to the Philippians we are considering today is all about this subject. Jesus is the primary theme throughout this letter, but joy is an important sub-theme that just bubbles up over and over again. Joy, despite the fact that Paul was dictating this letter from a prison in Rome. Joy, despite persecution that the Christians in Philippi were starting to experience from their neighbors. Let's read our passage now and then think about it together. **READ, p. 1163.** What we're going to see today is that joy is also the result of having confidence in Jesus rather than yourself when it comes to having a relationship with God. Let's begin by recognizing...

THE JOY OF A NEW PERSPECTIVE.

The first Christians were all Jewish people. But within 30 to 40 years of the Day of Pentecost when the Church was born, most Christians were non-Jews – Greeks, Romans and other ethnicities bordering the Mediterranean Sea. For several decades, a powerful group of Jewish Christians firmly believed and insisted that to become a Christian, every non-Jew had to become essentially Jewish. That meant adopting all the Jewish identity markers: circumcision for all male believers, the observance of Jewish holy days, and following the dietary regulations of Judaism. This group – sometimes called Judaizers – weren't happy with Paul and he wasn't happy with them. Paul, himself an ethnic Jew, had come to the conclusion that it was completely unnecessary to become a Jew in order to follow Jesus. All those Jewish identity markers were culturally OK but spiritually irrelevant. Not one of them had the power to make a person – Jew or non-Jew - acceptable to God. Only faith in Jesus had the power to do that.

Circumcision was an Old Testament ritual that signified that you were a part of God's chosen people – the nation of Israel. The real purpose was to symbolize that you had been separated unto God spiritually. Just having your flesh cut wasn't the important issue. Instead it was a constant reminder of the fact that as a Jew you'd been set apart for God. But, along the way, many Jews put more emphasis on the outward, physical ritual rather than the inward, spiritual reality to which it pointed. It's similar to what some people today convey when they talk about baptism and church membership. You get the impression they believe that's what you do to get into a relationship with God. Wrong! Baptism and church membership are only meaningful if they've been preceded by entering into a relationship with God by faith in Jesus. They point to a relationship with Jesus; they never create a relationship with Him.

Paul makes his point brutally clear here. If you insist on the need for physical circumcision to be right with God, you're just a mutilator of human flesh. Real circumcision was a spiritual issue – a heart issue. That's why he says in v. 3 (NIV) to every Christian there in Philippi - many of whom were not ethnic Jews – “For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh.” You might think that Paul was kind of harsh here – calling these Judaizers “dogs.” There might not have been any actual Judaizers there at the Philippian church, but Paul knew their influence and teaching had already arrived at Philippi in some way, shape or form. He believed they ultimately had evil intentions. Paul knew he could not compromise with Judaizer theology. By insisting that non-Jews had to become Jews to be followers of Jesus, Judaizers were teaching that Jesus' death on the cross was essentially inadequate and ineffective. If all you had to do was get circumcised to be right with God, why did Jesus have to die?

Paul then launches into a devastating argument. Let me try to paraphrase what Paul says in v. 4-6. In effect, he says, “Let's suppose these Judaizers are right for a minute. Let's suppose becoming Jewish is necessary to know God. Well, if anyone could earn a relationship with God on that basis, I am that man! I was no

convert to Judaism. I was circumcised on the eighth day as commanded in the Law. I am Jewish by race – a member of the nation of Israel. Besides, I know my genealogy. I'm from the honored tribe of Benjamin. I know how to speak our ancestral, mother tongue of Hebrew fluently. My family is of Palestinian origin. Those are the privileges I was born with. But let me also tell you about my achievements from a Jewish perspective. I was a Pharisee – the most rigorous and fanatical keepers of the Jewish Law among Jewish people. I was so zealous for God and His reputation from a Jewish perspective that I persecuted Christians by helping to get them arrested, tried and executed. When it came to observable, outward behavior consistent with the Law, no one was able to point a finger of fault or blame at me about anything. But do you know what I discovered? Imagine my shock when I realized that all of those privileges and achievements were worthless in getting or keeping a relationship with God. In fact, they became an obstacle to a relationship with God because I put my confidence in them. In other words, I put my confidence in myself – my privileges and my achievements. I had to face the fact that in a spiritual sense, they were like some really foul smelling garbage keeping me from a relationship with God.”

If you ask the average person – your neighbor, a friend at school, someone who works in the next office – what he or she believes about having a relationship with God, you get the most interesting answers. It reminds me of Charlie the Tuna! “Oh, I was baptized when I was a baby” or “I got baptized at a church camp when I was 12 years old.” So what? Water doesn't create a relationship with God. “Oh, well, my grandfather was a Baptist minister.” So what? Many will say, “Oh, I believe in God. I believe Jesus is God's Son.” So what? So does the Devil. “Well, I am a moral person. I'm honest. I'm kind. I'm a good provider. I take good care of my family. I help others in need.” Good for you. You really think that makes you right with God? “Well, I grew up in church and went to Sunday School every Sunday.” So what? “Oh, I've been a member of Karl Road Baptist Church for fifty years; I give money to the church; I serve in three different ministries.” So what? All of those privileges and achievements are good in and of themselves. But not one of them has the power to make you right with God. None of them get you into Heaven. None of them result in eternal life. And if you think they can, they have become a terrible, awful barrier between you and God.

Here's the irony. On the one hand, nothing is more humbling than to realize you are unable to reach God on your own. On the other hand, nothing is more joyful than realizing you can't reach God by yourself. You have to throw yourself on Jesus – who He is and what He did for you on the cross. That's the joy of a new perspective. A London warehouse property was up for sale. The building had been empty for months and needed repairs. Vandals had damaged the doors, smashed windows, and left garbage inside and out. When the owner of the property was showing a prospective buyer around, he promised to replace any broken windows, correct any structural damage and clean out the garbage. But the buyer said, “Forget about the repairs. When I buy this place, I'm going to build something completely different. I don't want the building; I want the site.”

When God “purchases” your life He wants complete renovation and transformation. He’s not particularly concerned about your own trivial efforts at self-improvement. All He wants is the site – your life - and permission to build what He wants to build. The joy of a new perspective leads to...

THE JOY OF A NEW POSITION.

Paul was a stark pessimist when it came to anyone earning or deserving acceptance with God based on their own privileges or achievements. But he was a raging optimist when it comes to what Jesus can do in your life. Only Jesus can make you acceptable to God. It all goes back to the cross where Jesus paid the full penalty for your sin and mine. In exchange for your sinfulness, Jesus gives you His perfect goodness or rightness with God. We are put into that new relationship of acceptance with God. God considers us right with Him. And it’s not quasi or “kind of” righteousness. We are truly righteous in God’s eyes. That kind of goodness can’t be achieved or acquired by personal effort. It can only be given. Jesus gives you a new position with God – a new status – the moment you put your faith in Jesus and what He did for you on the cross. That’s what Paul is getting at when he speaks of “... not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.” (Ph 3:9 NIV)

I’ve discovered over the years as a pastor that many Christians just never get a good grasp of this all essential truth. What happens if you don’t? You’re doomed to a life of spiritual infancy. You will live most of your life riddled with guilt and never have a proper sense of security or assurance in your relationship with God. Thoughts about God will cause your spirit to get heavy and burdened. He becomes someone you obey out of a sense of duty rather than Someone whose will you choose out of love. You put your trust and confidence in your own sincerity, your past conversion experience, your performance at church, or what seems like a lack of known sin in your life. Worship is dull... prayer is a chore... serving is a burden. Above all, you miss the joy of a life with God!

What happens, though, if you start every day knowing that you’re accepted and loved by God fully and nothing can change that? What happens when you realize that God’s love will never be withdrawn from your life regardless of what you do or do not do? What happens to you when you know you’re accepted by God because of what Jesus did for you yesterday not because what you try to do for God today or tomorrow? No guilt. No condemnation. No insecurity. You can relax and fully enjoy your relationship with God. You’re freed up to grow in His love, grow in your trust of Him and grow in your knowledge of Him. Obeying and serving Him will become the natural expression of your heart. That’s joy!

Very few children have ever developed into emotionally mature, productive adults by lacking security in the family they grew up in. A home where Mom and Dad loved and accepted them regardless is necessary. Oh, Mom and Dad disciplined

those children from time to time, but the parents' love and the children's position in the family were never questioned. It's the same with God. You can only grow to become a mature, productive child of God when you realize you are accepted and loved by God regardless, because it's based on what Jesus accomplished. Certainly God can and will be displeased with and saddened by you at times. He may well punish you at times just like a loving parent. But He will never question or withdraw your position in His family. There's joy in realizing that truth.

Babe Ruth had hit 714 home runs in his baseball career. He was playing one of his last major league games. He was no longer as agile as he'd once been. He fumbled the ball and threw badly. In one inning alone, his errors were responsible for five runs for the opposing team. As the Babe walked off the field after the third out, booing and catcalls cascaded down on him from the stands. Just then a young boy jumped over the railing onto the playing field. With tears streaking down his cheeks, he threw his arms around the legs of his hero. Ruth didn't hesitate. He picked up the boy, hugged him and then set him down on his feet with a playful pat on the head. Suddenly, the booing stopped. In fact, a hush fell over the entire ballpark. In those brief moments, the crowd saw a different kind of hero: a man who in spite of a dismal day on the field could still care about a little boy. Babe Ruth was no longer being judged by his past accomplishments – or lack thereof – but by a completely different standard. Suddenly, it wasn't his words that mattered, but a relationship. It's always about a relationship. The joy of a new perspective, the joy of a new position, and also...

THE JOY OF A NEW PURPOSE.

A little boy once fell out of bed and his mother asked him how it had happened. He explained, "I stayed too long where I got in." That can happen to you and me spiritually speaking. In other words, we just refuse to grow up spiritually. We settle for spiritual immaturity. We stay too long where we got in. But when you get a new perspective and a new position, it will lead you to a new purpose for every aspect of your life. That's the remedy for spiritual immaturity, spiritual boredom and spiritual ineffectiveness.

So much of your life and mine can get dominated by trying to measure up to different sets of expectations. Those expectations and trying to fulfill them can become your purpose for living sort of unconsciously. Your family has expectations. Your employer has expectations. Your school has expectations. Your friends at church have expectations. Life can become a joyless effort to measure up to all those expectations in the hope that then you will feel good about yourself.

Before Paul came into a personal relationship with Jesus, he was governed by some incredibly rigorous expectations. He tried to measure up to what it meant to be a Jew and to be a Pharisee. That was the purpose of his life. But when he met Jesus, he was given a completely new purpose which he articulates there in

v. 8 (NIV). “... I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him...” If Paul were here today, he might enlarge on that statement by saying something like this: “Knowing Jesus as my Lord and Savior has been the greatest thrill of my life. My life has been absolutely revolutionized by Jesus. What absorbs most of my time and energy now is not trying to make myself acceptable to God or trying to measure up to all those human expectations. My purpose is simply to develop this marvelous relationship with Jesus. Everything else in comparison is just like so much foul smelling garbage. I have a new purpose and it brings me joy.”

What does Paul mean by knowing Jesus? There are some strong similarities to a very close, loving marriage. This is knowing Jesus on a personal level not just knowing some facts about who He is and what He did here on Earth. When you love another person, you discover a place of intimacy and connection. You want to be identified with that person in every way. You even want to share that person’s struggles and sufferings to some degree. You share life in every way imaginable. That’s possible with Jesus. As you read and study the Bible, as you learn how to make prayer a conversation with Jesus throughout the day, as you worship Him, as you serve with others who know and love Him, as you even suffer persecution and rejection because of your loyalty to Jesus, as you gradually get more and more committed to the things Jesus cares about, you come to know Jesus. Gradually a wonderful transformation takes place. The more you know Him, the more you become like Him. His power becomes your power. His attitudes become your attitudes. His purpose becomes your purpose. His life becomes your life. And in that holy place, you begin to experience a joy unspeakable and full of glory!

I’ve not had the opportunity to visit the Alamo in San Antonio. I understand that near the main entrance is a portrait of a man with the following inscription under it. “James Butler Bonham – no picture of him exists. This portrait is of his nephew, Major James Bonham, deceased, who greatly resembled his uncle. It is placed here by the family that people may know the appearance of the man who died for freedom.” We don’t possess a literal portrait of Jesus either, do we? But the likeness of Jesus – the One who makes us free – can be seen in your life, in my life, and in the lives of all of His true followers. To reflect His likeness every day in every situation is your new purpose and mine. And when by God’s Spirit we can pull that off, there is joy!