

Philippians: The Surpassing Greatness of Knowing Christ Jesus

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

Prayer of Illumination



God of Courage, be in our speaking. Be also in our listening, and speak to our souls' deep understanding. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Scripture: Philippians 3:7-16 (NIV)

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, 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 on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – The Surpassing Greatness of Knowing Christ Jesus



Hi! My name is John. I'm a human being.

I also happen to be your pastor.

I'm a Peacemaker—which has its strengths and limitations.

Like many of you, I was born at a young age. I'm a cradle Presbyterian—meaning I grew up in the Presbyterian Church. But I also have an alter ego: my family of origin are simultaneously Pentecostals.



That's right—fire and ice, baby. The fire of the Pentecostals and the ice of the Presbyterians course through my veins. The frozen chosen all fired up. A further confession is in order: I went to Oral Roberts University for college. I've heard there's one other Presbyterian minister who's attended ORU. *I've got to meet that guy someday.* I used to hide that part of me—no more. It's uniquely shaped who I am—and I'm thankful for it.



Back to my childhood. I'm one of those people that can't ever remember *NOT* believing in God. My mom would read me Arch book children's bible stories every night. I ate them up. My favorites were Job, Daniel and the Lions' Den, and the shepherd who left the 99 for the lost sheep.



However, as I got older, I began sowing my wild oats, living a dissolute and unruly lifestyle of midway through—I think it was—*1st grade*. Truthfully, I pretty much stayed out of trouble.



But I was a dabbler. Not only a dribbler, but a dabbler.

You know, one of those types that deep down really wanted to sin, but was too chicken to *do it*? It was the sin of fear that kept me from sinning. I was too afraid of getting caught or disappointing my parents.



But church was a different matter—"a dab wouldn't do" with church—I was a church *animal*. Every Sunday morning I put on my blue polyester suit and clip on tie. I was a beast.

I still keep in touch with my 3rd grade Sunday school teacher Mrs. Stevens. We were forever bonded when she gave out McDonald's toys when we memorized Scripture passages!

So I was a good kid, a people pleaser, but I think over time, I got too accustomed to, too *comfortable* with Christianity—this is natural, it was all I knew. Although still so young, I became a church *professional*. *I knew the drill. I could play the part.* I was the kid who always raised his hand for every question during the children's sermon. I sang with gusto all the classics, like "Father Abraham." (sing it with congregation)



I eventually made it to high school. I loved tennis back then—and in high school I was four-year Varsity at Oak Park High. During my teen years, I also learned to become adept at *compartmentalizing*: there was “my church life” and then there was “my regular life.” Woah! This is fun! I can multi-task! You know, have my cake and eat it too—the world’s ways Monday-Saturday and Christ’s ways on Sunday. The two rarely met, so I still believed, but coasted in my faith going thru the motions on auto-pilot.

Until September 21, 1988 of my junior year of high school.

I was reading my NIV Bible (Philippians 3—our passage this morning) in my room and WHAM! The light bulb went on when I read Paul’s words, “*I consider all things loss, so that I might know the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*” Knowing Christ, suffering with Christ—not just knowing *about* Christ or *answers about* Christ—but an intimate sacrificial relationship with Christ ... that’s when things got exciting. I felt like I owned my faith—it wasn’t just a hand me down. I had a vested interest. And it was that night I sensed God’s call to be a pastor. I had no idea what I was getting into. I’m *still* just learning what I got myself into!

So I jumped into participating in my home church—First Presbyterian of River Forest, IL. My youth pastor Bill Williamson mentored me. I was also involved in the para-church organization Young Life. Brian Telzerow mentored me there. Each week I met with them and prayed and shared life together. These two men were huge for me. I’m still a huge fan of Young Life—my boys go here in Tucson.



I graduated from high school and after studying biblical literature at ORU, I continued on to graduate studies at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California for my MDiv. I interned at

Presbyterian churches in Pasadena and Philadelphia. After being ordained in the Chicago Presbytery, I served as the Associate Pastor at First Presbyterian Church, Kennewick, WA.

In July of 1998 my sister Ann introduced me to a friend—her name was Sarah. My sister has been a missionary for well over thirty years. Sarah was a volunteer nanny for my sister’s kids in Southeast Asia for nine months.

To the surprise of my family and church, in May of the next year in 1999 Sarah and I got married. Sarah was no longer a nanny, she became my niece and nephews aunt!

Sarah and I just had our 20th anniversary last Tuesday.

We celebrated it by me going to a board of elders meeting! *Sarah—don’t worry, we’re still going to have that dinner and movie date!*

Sarah and I eventually sold everything we owned in 2002 and raised funds to do mission work in the Middle East for three years. Our oldest daughter Abby was six months old by the time we left for Egypt. Luke, our second child would eventually be born there. I ended up going through some depression and the Middle East wasn’t the best fit with my giftings. But I wouldn’t exchange the experience for anything.

So the call to pastoring drew me back to the Presbyterian Church in the United States. I just couldn’t get away from it.

Our family was eventually called to the metropolitan Atlanta area where I was an Associate at First Presbyterian Church. Jude, our third child was born there. I unsuccessfully sought to work for racial healing in the church and community. We felt we had the green light to discern if God might be calling me to be a pastor and Head of Staff.



We were called to Immanuel in 2008—by God and all of you.

Phoebe, our youngest, was born here in 2010. And in 2013, after nearly ten years of study, I finally got my Doctorate in Ministry at George Fox University—a Quaker school, studying under Leonard Sweet, a Methodist minister, professor, author, and mentor to me. Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Quaker, Methodist—I’m a rag tag spiritual hodge podge—and *I wouldn’t have it any other way!*

And earlier this year we celebrated 11 years of life together at Immanuel—you and me. Last year was also the 20th anniversary of my ordination. It is kind of my ministry “half time.” I’ve been doing a lot of reflecting in the proverbial locker room as I gear up for the second half.

Looking back upon two decades of ordained ministry, pastoring has been rewarding, but certainly not always easy. On some occasions—gut wrenching. There have been plenty of highs and lows and ups and downs and zigs and zags along these last thirty-one years since my calling to be a pastor in my high school bedroom while reading Philippians 3.

Let me tell you this: Besides Jesus, family, friends, the church, the people we’ve met through the years, the things that really matter—*everything else is inconsequential*.

Our credentials and qualifications and kudos.

Our accomplishments and accolades.

Achievements, pedigrees, and trophies.

They all mean *nothing* in the larger scheme of things.

Earlier in chapter three of Philippians, Paul shared his story and his religious credentials—and he had plenty of them.

And he knew his righteousness by the law was nothing compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord. It was a gift of faith—not earned.



At the end of the day, for Paul, the prestige and titles were all *skubala*. The Greek word Paul uses in our passage is *skubala*—translated as garbage. But that’s the sanitized translation. Literally *skubala* is translated into English as *crap*. In fact, I could use an even more accurate English translation, but I want to keep my job, even though Paul himself used the word in the Bible!



I think of poet and minister George Herbert's poem *The Collar*, which is about his struggle with his call as a pastor:

But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild
At every word,
Me thought I heard one calling, *Child!*
And I replied *My Lord*.

So I let go of my plans to be a psychologist and returned to my calling to be a pastor—kicking and screaming. Counted "my plans" as *skubala*.

My healing was slow—it didn't happen overnight. I went to counseling—to work through my mid-life crisis. I had my presbytery pastor's group for support. I still meet with them once a month.

I had my best buddy from Oral Roberts University, Mike Lau—he's a chiropractor in Tulsa. If you ever find yourself with a bad back in Tulsa, see Dr. Lau. He and I talk every day—to this day.

Mentors gave me counsel and coaching.

I had the support of my family.

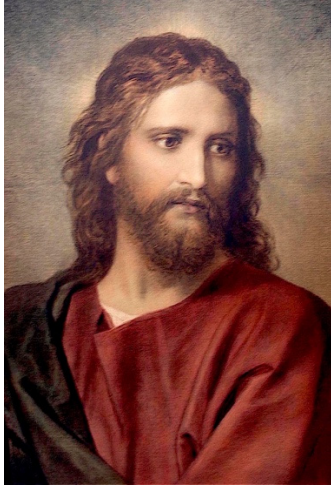
I was fortunate to go on a Sabbatical—thank you Immanuel—it saved me.

I journaled—lots.

Exercise—hours upon hours on the stair master.

I read my Bible over and over.

And I prayed. I could only pray out loud the Psalms. I couldn't speak during my prayers. I just sat in silence—no words. But lots and lots of crying.



But most importantly Jesus was there. Although I felt alone, I was never alone. The thaw was slow. At first, I was numb.

I didn't feel anything. Then I was apathetic—I didn't care about anything. My humor and normal silliness had dried up. I couldn't dance at weddings. Didn't have it in me to get out on the dance floor—like I'd done my whole life.

But then *joy ... slowly but surely, joy returned.*

By the grace and miracle of God, I survived the suffering of crucifixion and experienced resurrection again.

Philippians is called the Book of Joy. "Rejoice in the Lord always," says Paul in Philippians, "again I say rejoice!" He wrote that line from *prison*.

Paul reminds us, we can lose stuff, we can lose relationships—but we can never lose Christ. That's why we can be joyful, even in the hardest times. Joy is a safeguard—it keeps us on track, protects us from falling over the edge.

Slowly with time I realized something—I loved ministry again. It's stinking hard, but I love it. I have a deep sense of call here at Immanuel. It is a miracle for me to be able to say that honestly.

And most importantly—I want to say most unabashedly, *I love Jesus*. Let it be shouted from the rooftops. You have a pastor who loves Jesus Christ!

This is what it's all about Immanuel—whether you're male or female, white, black, or brown, Democrat or Republican, filthy rich or dirt poor, gay or straight.

It's all for Christ's sake.

Christ is for the good times, but Christ is *especially* for the hard times. Christ is our constant companion—we're forever joined at the hip and heart with Jesus. Just believe.

If you want to find out more about what it means to really know Christ, I'd love to talk and listen with you. This is why I am here.

Amen.

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