

“Conformed to His Sacrificial Love”
Philippians 3:10-11
May 10, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We continue our series this morning in Paul’s letter to the Philippians.

We’ve been working our way through chapter three.

As we’ve covered in previous sermons, in verses 5 and 6, Paul lists his own earthly achievements. Then, in verses 7 and 8, Paul contrasts his earthly achievements with the far greater blessing of knowing Christ. In verse 9 Paul speaks of the righteousness we receive from Christ as a gift in the gospel – in contrast to our own righteousness, which is insufficient.

Paul has been building to that point – that statement that the basis of our relationship is not about what we do for God, but what Christ has done for us, in the gospel.

But now, as we get to verses 10 and 11, things take what might be for some of us, an unexpected turn.

With that said, let’s turn to Philippians 3. Our focus will be on verses 10 and 11, but for context, we’ll start back in verse 7.

Please do listen carefully. This is God’s Word for us this morning.

Paul, after listing his own achievements writes:

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.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

We praise you, Lord,
and we ask you to teach us your ways and your truth.
Help us to take your Word into our hearts.
Make us to delight in your testimony more than in riches.
Help us to meditate on your precepts,
to fix our eyes on your ways,
to delight in your truth,
and to never forget your Word.
In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:12-16]

Introduction

So, Paul's words here take what can be an unexpected turn. We're talking about the blessings of the gospel – the free gifts of the gospel ... and then suddenly, without even a transition, Paul starts talking about us sharing in Jesus's sufferings, and even in his death. It can be confusing – we might even wonder if we've misunderstood what came before. But Paul here is providing important clarity on the nature of the gospel itself.

What we're reminded here, is that the blessings of the gospel are gifts, so that we can know Christ; but truly knowing Christ also means embracing and following in his footsteps of sacrificial love, while trusting in God's gospel promises.

Let me say that again: The blessings of the gospel are gifts, so that we can know Christ; but truly knowing Christ also means embracing and following in his footsteps of sacrificial love, while trusting in God's gospel promises.

Let's break that down now together.

The Blessings of the Gospel Are Gifts

First, the blessings of the gospel are gifts.

And we need to be clear about that. Paul speaks here of our calling to suffer – even to die – in a way that's like how Jesus suffered and Jesus died. And we can be tempted to hear this as an exchange –as something we need to do in order to earn or merit the blessings of the gospel. But that's not what Paul's saying here.

Paul has been making the point, pretty emphatically, that the blessings of the gospel are gifts. If you weren't here last week, you can hear the sermon on verse 9 on our website. And that's important because in verse 9 Paul makes this very point, that the gospel is not about our righteousness – it's not about our ability to keep God's law, it's not about what we can do or we

can achieve. Paul has listed his achievements in verses 5 and 6. And he had a lot of achievements – including a lot of impressive religious achievements. And then he calls those same religious achievements garbage – he calls them excrement. He says that they are worthless when it comes to what matters most, which is being right before our Maker – having a right relationship with God.

For that, we need a righteousness that is not our own, but that is a gift, given by God, through Christ. In the gospel, as we place our trust in Jesus, he shares his righteousness with us. Jesus lived the life we should have lived, and then died the death that we deserved to die, all so that we too can know God, and be right with God, as we place our trust in Jesus.

These are the blessings of the gospel. And they are all gifts. None of them are earned by us, none of them are merited by us.

That’s the first thing we see here: The blessings of the gospel are gifts.

Gifts So That We Can Know Christ

But second, along with that, Paul reminds us here that those gifts have a purpose. They have several purposes really, but one purpose that Paul keeps coming back to in this chapter is the purpose of us knowing Christ.

As we saw when we looked at verse 8, Paul here reflects on the surpassing value of knowing Christ – a blessing that far exceeds any earthly achievements he may have accrued.

A key purpose of the gospel, and its gifts and blessings, is that we are enabled to know Jesus.

And as we get to our text this morning, Paul returns to that theme – it’s the first words he speaks in verse 10 – a purpose of the gospel, of receiving the righteousness that comes from God, by faith, is that we might know Jesus, and the power of his resurrection.

The blessings of the gospel are gifts, knowing Jesus is a gift. That is true and that is a key point that Paul is making here. That is foundational.

But it’s also something we can be tempted to twist.

Because as we consider that essential truth, we can be tempted to then think of Christianity as sort of a “lazy river faith.”

There was waterpark that my family used to go to when I was a kid ... and it had a big lazy river. And you got an inflatable tube, and you sat yourself in it, and you floated out into the lazy river ... and let the current take you.

All you had to do was be passive. Just kind of lie there ... and the artificial current would carry you along ... and everything would pretty much take care of itself.

And when we hear about the free gifts of the gospel – when we hear about how it’s not about our achievements, and it’s not about our efforts, and when we hear about all that’s given to us, because we, by faith, “receive” and “rest upon” Jesus [WSC #86] ... it can start to sound like the key to being a Christian is passivity ... as if Christianity is really a “lazy river” kind of faith.

And then we come to the second half of verse 10. Which, if we hear it rightly, can act like a sort of unexpected rapid, to knock us off our lazy-river inner tube, and give us a surprise splash of water in the face.

Truly Knowing Christ Also Means Embracing & Following in His Footsteps of Sacrificial Love

Because in verse 10 Paul speaks about a goal of the gospel being “that I may know him [that is, Jesus] and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,”

Sufferings? Death?

Everything was going so nicely – we were receiving righteousness from Jesus, we were experiencing the power of his new life ... and then Paul throws in for us “sharing in Jesus’s suffering” and “becoming like Jesus in his death.”

What does that mean? Does it mean we have to earn our salvation and earn our place before God after all? Were we confused and mistaken to think that salvation is a gift in the gospel? Is it really an exchange – something we earn?

Well, no. Paul isn’t cancelling out everything he’s said so far. The Christian life is not an exchange – it’s not a salvation that’s earned. But it’s also not a lazy river. We’re not called to earn our salvation. But we’re also not called to a passive kind of faith.

And that’s because at its heart, Christianity is neither a work program in which we earn something, nor is it a handout program in which we just receive something ... Christianity at its heart is about a relationship.

We miss this, but Paul keeps making the point. In verse one he calls them to rejoice in knowing the Lord, in verse 8 he talks about knowing Christ, and gaining Christ, in verse ten he returns again to the theme of knowing Jesus. Knowing Jesus, having a relationship with him, keeps coming up.

And that can help us better understand what Paul’s getting at here. Because relationships – real relationships, meaningful relationships, the most important relationships in our lives – they are not earned. We don’t receive a relationship in exchange for a bunch of tasks we accomplish. Relationships are not earned. But also, relationships cannot just be passively received. They take work – work not to earn them, but to truly know, and truly love, and truly relate to the other person. And that’s true of our relationship with Jesus too.

And what we see in verse 10 is that truly knowing Jesus Christ also means embracing and following in his footsteps of sacrificial love.

Jesus – who is both fully God and fully man – Jesus is characterized by his sacrificial love. He saved us because of his sacrificial love. He saves and cares for other people because of that same sacrificial love. His life, as it plays out in the gospels, is a life of sacrificial love. Even now, as we read throughout the Bible, God’s heart – Jesus’s heart – is for those who are in need.

Jesus is a man – he is a God – who is characterized by sacrificial love for others.

And so ... if we are going to truly know him ... that will require us to embrace that aspect of who he is ... and not just to embrace it from a distance ... but to stand by his side in that work ... to join him in his life of sacrificial love for others.

That’s what Paul’s getting at in verse 10. Look at that verse. Paul doesn’t just call us here to suffering in general, or death in general. He calls us to “share in his sufferings” – to share in Jesus’s sufferings ... and to become “like him in his death” – to become like Jesus in Jesus’s death.

Jesus’s suffering wasn’t just generic suffering. It was always suffering for the sake of others – suffering to love others well, and to love God the Father well.

And Jesus’s death wasn’t just a generic death. It was a very specific kind of death. It was a sacrificial death, which he bore voluntarily, in order to love others, and to be faithful to God the father.

And that’s what Paul calls us to here: to share, specifically, in Jesus’s kind of suffering, and to become like him in his specific kind of death. And Jesus’s suffering and Jesus’s death were all about Jesus’s loving sacrifice for others and for God . And so Paul here is calling us to follow in Jesus’s footsteps of sacrificial love. [Fee, 334]

Now ... it’s true, as we covered last week, that we will not earn our right standing before God by how well we love him or love other people – our salvation is a gift.

But once we receive that gift, God doesn’t tell us to give up on loving others. Instead, he calls us to lives of loving sacrifice for new reasons. And one of those new reasons is so that we would more truly know Jesus, our Savior, our Lord, and our God.

If you want to truly know Jesus Christ, then you need to embrace and follow in his footsteps of sacrificial love.

It reminds me of a common dynamic you see in some kinds of movies.

In these movies, there’s a main character who usually has some kind of trait that someone close to them doesn’t really know about. So maybe the main character is secretly a spy, or they’re secretly a superhero, or they’re secretly really into chasing and researching tornadoes – they have some

sort of unusual and important trait that someone else in their life – their spouse, their love interest, their close friend or family member – something that that other person doesn't really know about.

And even though the main character with this hidden trait has a real relationship with that significant person in their life ... that other person doesn't really know them, so long as they're distant from this other aspect of their life.

Peter Parker knows and loves Mary Jane ... but he realizes she will never truly know him unless she also knows and embraces and even joins him in his identity as Spiderman. The spy realizes his wife may love him at home ... but she will never truly know who he really is unless she knows what he does at work, and embraces and maybe even supports him in that aspect of his life too. The tornado chaser realizes that his fiancée may know him and care about him in some ways ... but if she hates tornadoes, they're going to have some problems down the road.

I'm sure you can think of other books and movies with this dynamic – but the main character, who has some extraordinary, but hidden, aspect of their lives, realizes that to be truly known – to be in a true relationship with this significant person in their life, that significant person needs to embrace this central aspect of the main character's life.

And then, as the movie goes on, in one way or another, whether by accident or on purpose, the significant other discovers this secret aspect of the main character's life. And they see how key that trait is to the main character.

And at that point, the significant other, who now more fully sees the main character for who they are – that significant other usually has a choice. They can either embrace this unusual trait in the other person, and even join them in it ... or they can back away from the relationship ... maybe even break it off ... in order to avoid the risks and the dangers of this aspect of the spy, or the superhero, or the tornado chaser's life.

And that's kind of the dynamic we face with Jesus too. Jesus has come to us. And he has loved us well. And he has cared for us. And he has saved us. Jesus draws us close to us, and it is a blessing, it is a gift – and we are so thankful.

But if we really look at Jesus – not Jesus as we choose to imagine him, but Jesus as he really is in the Bible – if we read about his life in the gospels, if we hear his heart expressed in the words of the prophets, if we consider the scope of the gospel, and Jesus's mission to the world, then it's made clear to us that Jesus, at his heart, is a God of sacrificial love for others. That's who he is.

And he shows that to us. And like the stunned wife of the secret spy ... or Mary Jane as she sees that Peter is also Spiderman ... or the fiancée who recognizes that her loved one's life is all about chasing tornadoes ... we see more fully who Jesus is. And we too have a choice.

We can embrace the calling of Jesus's life ... we can adopt it ourselves, we can follow him, and stand beside him, and make it the calling of our lives as well – something we do together with him ... or we can step back from it ... we can distance ourselves from it ... and so in effect distance ourselves from Jesus.

Jesus is all about sacrificial love for others. He's shown that love towards you. He's going to show it to others. And he calls you to join him. How will you respond?

Paul here calls us to respond by reaching out, and taking his hand – by joining him in his calling ... by sharing in his suffering and becoming like him in his death. Paul calls us to embrace Jesus's life of sacrificial love for others, and to follow in his footsteps.

And when we do that, we will know Jesus even more truly. In those movies I mentioned, it's often as the wife joins her husband on the next spy mission, as Mary Jane helps Spiderman in his next battle, and so on – it's as they work together, that the significant other now knows the main character even more deeply.

And in the same way, as we join Jesus in his sacrificial love for others, as we die to ourselves and share in his suffering, by loving people as he loves them – as we join him in that, we will know Jesus more truly and more deeply as well.

Now, for some of us, that might mean a call to some kind of radical life of service – to missionary work among the poor and disadvantaged, or to a unique vocation and calling among the oppressed, and so on. And we each need to take that possibility seriously – the idea that the Lord may call us to go and serve in such a radical way.

That's one possibility, for sure.

But whether we are called to such a dramatic vocation or not, we are each called – each one of us – to lives of extraordinary sacrificial love, in the ordinary relationships of our lives. We're called to a different level of love and sacrifice than is typical in the world around us. And that's true in every one of our relationships.

With our spouse, or our children, or our siblings, or our parents, we are not called to the general average of love we see in the world around us, or even to be just a little bit above that average. We are called to try to love them like Jesus has loved us: to love them sacrificially, to put their wellbeing above our own.

In the workplace, we are called to love our co-workers, and love clients and customers, a love contractors we work with, not just as a matter of good business or a wise career strategy ... we are called to see each person as more than just co-worker, or client, or customer, or contractor, but as a person who Jesus cares about deeply, and therefore people we are called to care about deeply as well – well beyond their role in our career.

And the same is true of our neighbors, of our fellow students, of our teachers, and we could go on.

Because Jesus sacrificially loves the people around us, we too should sacrificially love the people that he's already placed in our lives.

But also, this call to sacrificially love others as Jesus did – this is also a call for us to step beyond our familiar and comfortable circle of people ... and a call to love those we find more difficult to love.

Saint Francis of Assisi was a man who lived in Italy in the late 12th and early 13th centuries. And as a young man, Francis was especially repulsed by lepers. Lepers were looked down on and avoided by most people in Francis's day. And Francis himself especially tried to avoid them. He found them physically repellent – just as the culture around him did.

But one scholar argues that the turning point in Francis's spiritual life really came when he realized that he was called to love the leper, because Jesus loved the leper ... when he realized that if he were going to truly know Jesus and draw close to Jesus, then he himself would personally have to serve and even embrace the lepers in his village ... because Jesus personally loved and embraced the lepers in his village. And that's what he did. And it changed his life, and transformed his relationship with Christ.

Who are your lepers? What is the population that you find yourself repelled by? Do you recognize that Jesus loves those people – that he embraces them, that he cares for and is concerned for their day-to-day lives? And if he cares about them, and you want to be close to him ... then how is he calling you to love, and serve, and embrace, and sacrificially love that same population which you naturally want to pull back from?

Paul reminds us here that truly knowing Jesus means embracing and following in his footsteps of sacrificial love, even towards those we find it most difficult to love. Because Jesus loves them.

Such a calling is good. But it's not easy. We shouldn't try to romanticize it. A single act of such love may leave us feeling noble. But daily actions of sacrificial love, in the midst of our everyday lives, in the mundane settings of life, in ways that disrupt our lives and cost us something – in ways that no one else will see and no one else will compliment – such things are hard. There's a reason Paul compares it to dying in verse 10 – because if you do it right – if you love others like Jesus loves – then it will sometimes feel like dying. There's a reason Paul describes it as suffering.

Truly knowing Christ means embracing, and following in his footsteps of sacrificial love.

That means sharing in Jesus's sufferings. It means becoming like him in his death.

Trusting In God's Gospel Promises

That may sound dark. That may sound grim. But it's not really.

It's hard. But it's not dark or grim.

And that's because in all of this, the one we're following – the one we're imitating – is not just a Lord who suffered and died. He's also a Lord who rose to new life. And Jesus's new life – his resurrection – surrounds this passage.

Paul starts in verse 10, before he says anything about suffering or death, by saying that he needs to know Jesus “and the power of his resurrection.” And then, at the end of verse 11, he looks forward to his own resurrection – speaking of how he might “attain the resurrection from the dead.”

That phrase in verse 11 might confuse us and sound like Paul is saying we need to secure our resurrection on our own. But as Gordon Fee points out, the phrase is probably meant to stress the means by which Jesus has achieved and will apply his resurrection power to us. [Fee, 335-336]

This calling to the difficult work of sacrificial love is surrounded by references to resurrection: first Jesus’s, and then our own. Which emphasizes the fact that the Christian calling of sacrificial love is not a grim march of self-denial and loss. It is, rather, a hopeful and joyous journey to new life.

Yes, it’s hard – yes, the sacrifices are real, just as Jesus’s was. But it does not end in the grave for us, any more than it did for Jesus.

First, in this life, though we give and though we suffer, the Lord is with us – the God of resurrection is by our side – and he is renewing us day-by-day. We may not always see it, we may not always feel it, but he is at work in us, and he is with us. And he is the God who can bring joy in the midst of pain – who can bring peace in the midst of turmoil, who can bring rest in the midst of labor.

And so, as we sacrificially love others, we can rely on him, and on his strength, and his peace, and his joy. And with his help, we will be able to do far more than we could ever do on our own.

That’s part of what it means to know the power of Jesus’s resurrection in verse 10.

But then, on top of that, this focus on resurrection reminds us in verse 11 that our sacrifices in this life are not the end of the story. Because by God’s grace, we look forward to the rest, the restoration, and the reward that is promised to us at the resurrection.

When we sacrifice in this life, our loss is not the end of our story, because we serve a God who will restore all things to us in the life that is to come. When we labor in this life, our exhaustion is not the end of the story, because we serve a God who gives rest to us in eternity. And when we do what is right to honor God and to care for others, and no one seems to really notice, that too is not the end of the story, because we serve a God who rewards us in the next life for what we give in this life.

Jesus sees our efforts – he is aware of all we do in our to follow in his footsteps of sacrificial love, and even though our efforts are far from perfect, he is delighted by them, even when everyone else seems to take what we do for granted. And he will reward us in the life to come, even if we see no reward in this life.

The power of Jesus’s resurrection in our lives now, and the promise of our own resurrection in the life to come, should bring power, and peace, and hope, and even a kind of joy to our acts of sacrificial love in this life.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, there is no greater blessing in this life or the next, than knowing Jesus Christ.

And Jesus is all about sacrificially loving others.

And so, to truly know, as we receive his gifts in the gospel, let us also join him in the work he is doing in the world – the work he passionate about, by loving God, and loving the people around us.

Because Jesus already loves them. And what more could we want than to draw close to him, to join him in what he is doing in this world, and to serve other, with Christ himself close by our side?

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Fee, Gordon D. *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*. NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.

Ferguson, Sinclair. *Let's Study Philippians*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997.

Hansen, G. Walter. *The Letter to the Philippians*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.