

Sermon Given by

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Philippians 3:1-11 - "Profit or loss"

If you were here last week you will have picked up that the theme of joy is the core message of this letter. And it is undeniably the focus of the passage we have tonight if the first sentence is anything to go by: ***¹Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord!***

Which of course should guarantee it a hearing in our society – even if we might re-phrase the quest for joy, maybe as the pursuit of happiness. The American Declaration of Independence held that to be a self-evident human right, on a par with life and liberty. It has proven to be very elusive – but most people probably don't imagine the Christian faith has the answer. Rejoice in the Lord sounds suspiciously like a cliché.

According to Christianity Today, "today on American college and high school campuses, the name most associated with the word Christian—other than Jesus—is not the Pope or Mother Teresa or even Billy Graham. Instead, it's a goofy-looking guy named Ned Flanders on the animated sitcom known as The Simpsons. The moustache, thick glasses, green sweater, and irrepressibly cheerful demeanor of Ned Flanders, Homer Simpson's next-door neighbor, have made him an indelible figure, the evangelical known most intimately to non-evangelicals". The article didn't even mention that he has a doorbell which plays Kumbaya when pressed. 'But if that is the route to joy', think most people, 'then it is not for me'.

Well let's try to look beyond the cartoon caricature tonight. I think we'll end up feeling the Bible has some unexpected things to say. Not least our first heading: If you want real joy

1. Take care whose teaching you follow

If I had begun a chapter ***'Finally my brothers, rejoice in the Lord'***, then I don't think the next few sentences would be the way I continued. 'Here's the route to joy, brothers and sisters – do take care whose teaching you follow...'

Let's look at it in black and white in the Bible so we can all see it for ourselves...

¹Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. ²Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. ³For 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— ⁴though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

The language is completely out of step with our society, isn't it? With new laws about incitement to religious hatred edging into Parliament, you do not go around calling people 'dogs' or 'evildoers'. Although... have you ever noticed that we're supposed to be tolerant of everyone, except those who have definite religious opinions? Evangelicals and Muslims are the bad guys: it **would** be ok to call them 'dogs' or 'evildoers'.

There are some famous last words spoken by Mme Roland on the way to her execution on the guillotine on trumped up charges in 1792. She bowed mockingly towards the Statue of Liberty in the Place de la Revolution: 'Ah Liberty', she said, 'what crimes are committed in thy name.' And you could perhaps modernise that for today: 'Ah tolerance, what bigotry is committed in thy name.' This is massively out of step with our society

Some would even say that the language of verse 2 is completely out of step with the letter... All the talk of Christian unity earlier in the letter has gone out of the window suddenly. What is going on?

As so often when there is an apparent contradiction in the Bible, it is the better, humbler path to give Paul the benefit of the doubt and to assume he hasn't had a memory lapse. By all sober reckoning, we can all see he had a massive brain and a massive heart. Isn't it humbler to assume he hadn't suffered memory lapse and forgotten the call to unity – after all he's going to come back to it. There is no contradiction apparent to him... We need to ask what is he so incensed about?

You get a hint in verse 1 where he describes the job of the true Christian teacher as being to **safeguard** Christians. ***'It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you'***. One of the greatest encouragements I received when I moved on from St Andrew the Great in Cambridge was from a man who had begun to follow Christ while he was a student and then he had stayed on to do a PhD (possibly so he could keep rowing). He commented after hearing my last sermon that it was almost exactly the same message as he had the first time he came to church six years earlier.

Which I took as a compliment! What Christians need is not originality but repetition, to keep them safe from wandering into danger. That is the true teacher's job.

The danger in Paul's day was that whenever he preached in a Gentile town, it wasn't long before the Jewish follow up team came along saying: 'how wonderful that you have signed up to follow the Messiah Jesus – but now what you need is to take on board all the rich Jewish traditions from which he came. Circumcision, food laws, the religious calendar. That's when you will know you are really on the team.'

These Judaisers would have called Gentiles 'dogs' – and now Paul says they're no better than Gentile dogs themselves. They want people to be circumcised, but they're actually mutilators, slashers – like the pagan priests in Elijah's day – perhaps you remember how they cut themselves to get their God's attention. 'They're not true Jews', he says, 'just pagans'.

No – Christians don't need to be circumcised – they **are** the circumcision, they have had **heart** surgery to belong to God's people; and they don't worship in set places or on set days – they **are** the temple, because they have the Holy Spirit living in them. They glory in Christ Jesus – not in Jesus plus Jewish religion. If you add anything to Jesus you rob him of his glory.

And the consequences of the false teaching he is warning against are serious! Paul only talks about safeguarding the Philippians because this religious teaching is dangerous – it wrecks people's lives and ultimately it wrecks their eternities. So it is no more loving to cast a

veil over false teaching (as if it doesn't really matter) than it is for a parent to give their kids permission to play on the M11.

I know I have mentioned before the vicar called William Haslam who became a Christian in his own sermon. Of course there was a build up – and one of the things which was significant in his conversion was that he looked out over the gravestones of the people he had buried as a vicar and was horrified to think that having died they might now be cursing him in hell for misleading them, by telling them to be more religious and to observe feast days and have the last sacrament on their deathbed – as if that was more important than trusting in Jesus Christ.

The first thing to say if you want to know real joy is **Take care whose teaching you follow**. Don't ever look down on teaching that makes a lot of Jesus Christ, even if it feels like you have heard it before; we need that safeguarding...

And don't be taken in by arguments that you need something extra, something original, more authentic.

How important this is if you are in TNG at the moment – you get to choose where you go to church if you go to university or move elsewhere for a job: choose carefully.

How tragic that religion without Christ – and even religion **with** Christ doesn't get people to heaven; it takes people to hell. Why – because it stops us trusting in Jesus and causes us instead to trust in ourselves. Which leads me on to my next point... If you want real joy,

2) Take care whose credit-rating you trust.

Verse 3 introduces us to a key phrase: Christians, says Paul, put no confidence in the flesh – although I had plenty of reasons to do so. And then he lists them in verses 4b-6. ***If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.***

He's saying that **if** acceptance with God is a matter of working up your own credit balance and relying on that, he could beat anyone at that game. He wasn't circumcised as a Gentile convert in later life. He'd only just been born.

He was by race a Jew; in fact he was from the tribe which had the first King; it was the tribe that stayed loyal to Jerusalem when the others all gave up on the temple; in fact Jerusalem lay within Benjamin's tribal boundaries.

He could trace his line back down the generations – a Hebrew of Hebrews (he didn't have to read the Old Testament in translation, Hebrew was his mother tongue...) You can't get much more Jewish than that.

Those are all a matter of **privilege**, things for which he couldn't really brag – it was just a quirk of birth. But then he lists his **performance**, things for which he definitely was responsible.

He had joined the strictest sect of law-keepers, the Pharisees; he had shown how committed he was by trying to extinguish the fledgling Christian movement – Acts 9 says he even imprisoned mothers and children – he was that driven.

In fact he was faultless. He's not claiming he was perfect and sinless, of course, but that he was absolutely scrupulous in his observance of the law – and that of course included the sacrifices necessary to cover any possible failings.

He puts it all in one column and the assumption is he has built up a healthy credit-balance with God. Now look how he carries on in verse 7 - 9. ***7But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 8What is more, 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 9and 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 and is by faith.***

Paul is telling us that on the Damascus road he discovered how wrong he had been. His credit-rating in heaven was hopeless because had left Jesus out of the picture. So take care whose credit-rating you trust.

If we are relying on your own birth **privilege** – I'm British, I'm South African, I'm white, I have Christian parents; my great uncle was a Bishop...

... or on our own **performance** – I've been to All Saints or to Maidwell CYFA Venture, Paul would say to us: 'Don't be tempted to trust your own credit-rating'. If he couldn't get in Credit with God, no-one can...

In fact he is even more blunt here. He doesn't just consider the entries of his religious CV a **loss** as opposed to a **profit**. 'I consider them **rubbish**', he says. And that is too polite! The word he uses means waste – it got used of waste food – the stuff at the end of the meal that ends up in the bin; and it got used of body waste – the old translations were right to say **dung** at this point.

I don't know if anyone has ever had the unpleasant experience of picking up something on the ground – you think it looks valuable so you reach out and grab it and then you discover – it's dog mess... Sorry to remind you if that has been your experience! It's bad enough just to step in it by mistake. But you reached out deliberately, because it looked like it was something important or precious and then yuck – and inside you rush to wash it off quickly.

Again – how out of step with the way we speak so respectfully today. Think how the pious Jew would feel when ritual cleanness mattered so much to them!

But if we have religion without Christ, or even religion **with** Christ, it stinks to God. Yuck.

Actually we know that if we are honest. We're mid Olympics at the moment and I read some interesting pop psychology. Steve Brody's advice if you want to be happy was Don't look up, look down. That was the conclusion of a study by three research psychologist in the Journal of Personality and Psychology.

They did their research at the Olympic Games – studying relative happiness of silver and bronze medallists. **Silver** medallists look up at gold medallists on podium: and they think ‘if only...’ Whereas bronze medallists are thrilled just to be on the podium, because they are comparing themselves with the rest of the field.

There may be some value in the advice, don’t look up, look down – but I’m not sure. I like the Olympic ideal, and I think sporting excellence is something to rejoice in – but there is a meritocracy operating in human society which leaves people dissatisfied, whether we compare ourselves favourably or unfavourably with others.

We always wonder ‘Have I done enough?’ It’s partly why people get stressed about exams, about ofsteds, about losing their place in the team – before we even get close to the **really** big matters of our acceptance with God.

Our own credit rating is excrement. But thank God there is someone who we can trust to give us his righteousness – Jesus Christ. ‘I want to gain him and be found in him,’ says Paul: ‘one of his people - righteous, because he has taken my sin on himself at the cross, and paid in full for it. So I can receive his righteous status’.

Take care whose credit you trust – only one person in all of human history has a credit balance with God – Jesus; but because he died on the cross he can offer it to us, if we will trust him and not our privileges and performance.

What I am going to say now isn’t fool-proof – but you can nearly always tell whose credit-rating you’re trusting by asking the following question: if you were to die tonight and God was to ask you – ‘why should I let you into heaven?’ how would you answer that question?

And the next two words are key. If my answer begins ‘Because I...’ – that tells you whose credit rating you are trusting in. Because **I** was baptised as a baby; because **I** try not to do anyone any harm, because **I** tithe my income; because **I** set up Neighbourhood watch. And any number of variations. You’re trusting in yourself... And the end of that road – I have to say it - is judgement and disaster. Anyone who trusts in their own credit-rating is on the road to hell.

If you can say and mean it ‘Because **Jesus...**’ – accepts me, forgave me, credited me with his righteousness... and if that indicates you are trusting **his** credit-rating – that is something completely different. You are welcomed in.

And to know that deep down is the route to real joy as nothing else is: In Pilgrim’s Progress when Christian put his burden at the foot of the cross and symbolically trusted Jesus, he was skipping with joy. I pity anyone who doesn’t know that thrill.

One last aspect to look at. Again it is a complete reversal of what we might think. If you want real joy

3. Take care which lifestyle you choose. There’s just a moment for us to read verse 10 and then we’ll think more about it next week.

¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

This is written by someone who has been following Jesus for more than 20 years and yet he hasn't plateau'd. (Take note, please, if like me you are in danger of the spiritual equivalent of middle aged spread). 'I want to know Christ', he says – and here's what he means. Jesus is alive and I want the same power that raised him from the dead to be at work in me. In fact I want to be like him in his suffering. I'd rather be like Jesus and take what he faced than duck out of suffering and not be like him – because Jesus is everything to me.

The issue here is that Paul faced suffering for offering the gospel to Gentiles without insisting they become Jews, complete with circumcision, food laws and rituals. And now the Philippians were facing suffering from the Judaizers as well.

They could avoid it, of course, by becoming religious. No-one really persecutes you if you are religious. Chances are you become the persecutor.

So you won't suffer, but take that lifestyle and you will miss out on the most exalted fellowship it is possible to have. You won't share in Christ's sufferings.

What a poignant lesson for a youth service as life stretches out before the teenagers here. Every fibre of your being probably tells you that the route to joy is to **avoid** suffering. **If you believe that please don't touch the Christian faith.**

If you hand your life to Jesus Christ and stay true to him you **will** suffer. But you will have a friend and a joy that other people know nothing of. Take great care which lifestyle you choose. **'Rejoice in the Lord'** – find your joy in him and him alone – let Jesus be the one who makes you happy.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)