

A Riches to Rags Story

Rags to riches story have always been popular, perhaps especially in our country. We've all grown up on the story of famous people who started out poor and unknown and ended up rich and famous: stories like that of Abraham Lincoln who rose from poverty to become president of the country, or as one boy summed up his life, "Abraham Lincoln was a great man. He was born in a log cabin that he built with his own hands" This morning however I don't want to begin my lesson with a rags to riches story, quite the opposite. I want to begin by sharing with you a riches to rags story, a story about a man who born into a very wealthy family, who received the finest of educations, who was destined for a great career in Law and statesmanship, who was elected at a very young age to a very influential political office and for all practical purposes had a bright and promising future.

Then he made a choice, a decision most fateful that had enormous consequences for his life. Because of this one decision he experienced a series of disturbing transformations. He went from being famous to infamous, from a lawmaker to a lawbreaker, from wealth to want. What kind of decision could make such a change in a person's life? We are not left to guess about that because he explained the reason for his unthinkable

decision in a letter to some close friends. Let me read a portion of it to you.

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus...

If anyone thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more; circumcised 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; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What 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 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 and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings becoming like him in his death, and so somehow to attain to the resurrection of the dead.

In my reading of Paul, this is what might be called his signature

statement. In it contains everything you need to know about the man, his history, his motivation, his passion. Those last words especially define not only Paul's life, but what should I think be our life as well. And it is those last words that I want to reflect on with you this morning. Paul says, "I want to *know* Christ." Just what did Paul mean by "knowing" Christ. The Greek word for "know" is the word "ginoskein." It doesn't refer to just any kind of knowledge. It is used to refer specifically to experiential knowledge. It is not just wanting to knowing about something, it implies much more.

For example I could say I know about war. I've read several books about various wars. I've taken classes in college that taught me about war. Most importantly I've seen dozens of John Wayne movies. So I know a lot about war. But I don't "know" war, not in the sense of giniskein. To give another exmample. I know a lot about childbirth. I have an advanced degree in family studies which required me to read books and take courses which taught about childbirth. Lisa and I have had three children and I've been with scores of parents as their children were born. I know about childbirth. But every mother in this room "knows" childbirth in a way that I will never even begin to fathom. This is the kind of knowing Paul wants.

This greek word "ginosken" and its Hebrew parrallel "yada" are in

fact the words used in scripture to refer to intimate, sexual knowledge of another. In Genesis it says, “And Adam ‘knew’ Eve his wife and she conceived.” In Luke when Mary hears the angel announce that she will be with child she responds “How will this be since I do not “know” a man?” So, you see, Paul is referring to a kind of knowing that goes far beyond an academic knowing about something. Paul wants knowledge of Christ that is experiential, personal, relational. This kind of knowing is not always safe; it can in fact be very risky for it is a kind of knowing that demands a serious commitment not just a casual involvement. It is the kind of knowing that the science teacher Christy McCauliff so passionately desired. She had taught her students about space for years. She knew a lot about the facts of outer space, what she wanted to know was the feeling of space, of being there. And so she applied along with 11,000 others to be the first teacher in space. The whole world was watching, including thousands of school children, as Christy and six others rocketed upward, only to witness 73 seconds after the launch, the space shuttle Challenger explode into a thousand pieces. Christy’s passion to know space cost her everything, a price she was more than willing to pay.

Paul had known about Christ for years, a knowledge that had little transforming effect on his life. In fact it was that knowledge about Christ

that caused him to see Christianity as a threat, something to be condemned and Christians as people that should be put to death. But then one day he met Christ and from that moment on everything changed for him. Now he wanted to *know* Christ personally, to *know* Christ intimately to *know* Christ passionately, even if it meant he would be condemned and even put to death. As it turned out, knowing Christ would be a greater threat to Paul than knowing about Christ, for to know Christ ultimately means to die. Jesus himself had taught that. “Whoever want to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake...will find it.” How do we want to know Christ? How close have we drawn to him. How passionately are we committed to him. How risky is our faith?

The second thing about Paul’s statement is now just how he knows but what it is he wants to know. I want to know **Christ!** And here is the challenge for all of us Christians, not to replace knowing Christ with knowing something else. I want to know Christians, and so we replace Christ with fellowship. I want to know the Bible and so we replace Christ with Bible knowledge. I want to know morality and so we replace Christ with rules about right and wrong. I want to know Evangelism and so we replace Christ with zeal and growth. I want to know worship and so we replace Christ with worship experiences.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with any of these things. In fact Christ wants us to know them all! But not at the expense of knowing him; None of these can replace him. Paul had all of these before he met Christ. After finding Christ, all of these things without Christ was “rubbish.”

Don't misunderstand! It is not that Paul suddenly loved any of these things less. Indeed he loved them all of these things profoundly more. But they were not his passion. Christ was his passion. Loving Christ first and most is what enables us to have the sweet fellowship, treasure the scriptures, strive to be holy and desire to share Christ with more and more people. To seek these things instead of Christ robs them of their meaning and their blessing to us. It is not unlike marriage.

I know people who want to get married even though they have not yet met a true love! Some women want to be married even more than they want to marry any particular man. For some it is an opportunity to have a family. For others it's a good tax break. There are many reasons (mostly good) to get married. But to be in love with a beloved, to give yourself to a beloved, makes all other reasons for marriage fade to the background in comparison.

Paul goes on to explain what knowing Christ really means. He says he wants to know the power of the resurrection. Power is central to Paul's

Message. He prays that the Ephesians may have power. “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know...his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead” (Ephesians 1:18,19,20). To the Romans Paul wrote, *the same power that raised Christ from the dead is now at work in our mortal bodies* (Romans 8:11). The biblical meaning of the word power is something that is mighty, divine, miraculous. The word “miraculous” makes us a little nervous doesn’t it? And understandably so. We’ve certainly seen much abusive teaching concerning the miraculous. Nevertheless, the biblical testimony is Christ’s resurrection power is available to us! We’re talking supernatural here, things that can’t happen by man’s power alone.

But let’s be clear what resurrection power is really all about. It is far more than changing water molecules into wine molecules; it is designed to accomplish an even more impressive feat, changing cold apathetic hearts into fiery hearts ablaze with a passion for God. And that is what we see in the testimony of scripture. Resurrection power changed greed to generosity in a tax collector named Zaccheus. It changed vengeance into forgiveness in a political terrorist named Simon. It changed a crushing guilt to a crucial grace that transformed Saul the persecutor into Paul the saint. Here is the

point. *Resurrection Power is not so much the power for us to perform miracles; more often it is the power for miracles to be performed on us!!*

Finally Paul says knowing Christ means knowing the fellowship of his suffering. If we would know Christ passionately, we must share Christ's passion. We must become vulnerable to the suffering of others. Like Christ, we too must become incarnate, we must enter the world of others' pain. The pain of those closest to us, the pain of the "least of these" around us, the poor, the sick, the outcast. To know Christ's suffering means for us to look out over Lubbock the way Christ looked out over Jerusalem weeping for people who are rejecting God and rejecting each other; to not run away from people's problems but to run to them, embrace them, share them. We all remember that terrible day in New York City on September 11, 2001 when thousands of people were running away from trouble. Who could blame them? But there were also a remarkable few running toward the trouble, not away from it. The purpose and meaning of their lives was not to find a way to avoid trouble but to be the first to respond to it. "First responders." That's what Christ was and is; the First Responder to a world in great trouble. And that's what he calls his followers to do as well, to know the fellowship of sharing Christ's suffering.

But we live in a culture that tells us the most important question to

ask is what can I do to be happy. We are governed by a constitution that guarantees our right to the pursuit of happiness. We measure the value of our jobs, our possessions, our friends even our marriages by the standard of how happy they make us. And if we are not happy then we feel we have a right to pick a different job, buy more possessions, find new friends, change spouses. There is nothing wrong with being happy. But Jesus taught us the most important question isn't what makes us happy, but what makes us holy. He doesn't guarantee us any right to happiness in fact he promises, "In this world you will have trouble." And when trouble comes to people, those who share Christ's suffering can't let people suffer alone. When a member is diagnosed with cancer or some other serious disease, when a family is wrestling with a child who is addicted to drugs, when someone loses their job and is suddenly in financial crisis, when a marriage is falling apart, when a brother is facing Alzheimers and has little or no family support, when a spouse dies leaving behind a partner of fifty years, when a loved one chooses to reject the faith he has been raised and nurtured in, when the joy of a newborn is shattered by the news that the child will have a life long disability, when the expenses of a health condition bleed the savings dry and bankrupt a family, when advanced age makes it impossible to live at home and lack of finances means you must take up new residence

in a nursing home, when a person who is homeless or disabled or mentally ill or just incredibly poor becomes your friend bringing needs that seem to overwhelm you, just to mention a few of the troubles that have visited us here recently. And when such trouble comes to the people around us, we have a choice. We can run from others' troubles or we can run to others in trouble.

Christ says, "In this world you will have trouble" because if we love Christ we will love people and the most important question of our lives will no longer be what can I do to be happy, but what can I do for those around me who are unhappy. Here is the reason we don't know Christ more intimately! This kind of knowing can hurt; it can hurt a lot. And we're not sure knowing Christ is worth the suffering. So, we satisfy ourselves with various kinds of religious knowledge that risks little and avoids suffering. The only problem is if we think we can know Christ without sharing in his suffering, we will never really know Christ at all. How could we ever expect to be close to Jesus and not care about the people he cares so much about!

Paul teaches us, as much by his life as by his letters, that knowing Christ, being changed by his power, becoming like him in his suffering will not be easy and certainly not painless. But then being born has never been painless. There was much labor in our physical birth. Should being born

again involve less labor? It will not be easy to leave the comfortable womb of a religion insulated from the pain and suffering of others. But Christ, through the Spirit, labors as a midwife to help delivery our new nature. It is a long labor but one day we will be fully delivered, fully mature and all the pain will have been worth it. So we gladly continue this life long journey of knowing Christ, loving him better and becoming like him more, confessing with Paul as he continues his testimony to the Philippians, *I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, 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.* To know Christ. That was Paul's passion. May it be ours as well.