

Text: Phil 3.1-14
St Stephen's

Feb 4th, 2007
Sun

Surrendering Your Past

We are in a message series on worship these weeks of Feb. Last week we talked about the place of worship, and we noted that Paul said worship happens in a special place – the place where you can see God's mercy. That's the place where your heart is melted, where your hopes rise and where you are glad to surrender your life.

John Newton wrote it like this:

*Our pleasure and our duty, though opposite before
Since we have seen his beauty, are joined apart no more.
To see the law by Christ fulfilled and hear his pardoning voice
Transforms a slave into a child, and duty into choice.*

When you stand in view of his mercy, you don't see so much a **duty** but a **beauty**. It is the place of worship, the place where lives are freely surrendered, where duty becomes glad choice and high privilege. That is worship.

Today we turn to the subject of surrender. Surrender is a worship word. We sing it and live it, **surrendering all to him who surrendered all for us**. Over the next weeks, we will look at surrendering **our past, our future** and **our substitutes** to the Lord. Worship means surrender.

I want to start with one of the strangest verses in the NT. It comes at the very end of John's first letter. He closes his five chapter letter with these words...

Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.

1 John 5:21

You might think John's words are way out of touch with our lives, that idols are a part of the ancient world but not a part of the modern

world. But you would not be right. I mean we don't worship carved statues of ancient Roman gods, but that's not what John means here. An idol is anything less than god that you might worship. Look how the NLT paraphrases this verse...

Dear children, keep away from anything that might take God's place in your hearts.

1 John 5:21 (NLT)

That, of course, could be almost anything. Idols are very real. Whatever is most important to you is your god. B. Pippert said it like this, *"Whatever controls us is our Lord – one thing is certain, we do not control ourselves; we are controlled by the lord of our lives."*

What we want to do today is to take a look at **surrendering your past**, because there are things in your past that can become an idol in your heart, and keep you from worshipping God. Here's one...

1) Your Accomplishments

Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Philippians 3:4-6

Paul had a lot going for him. By any human categories, his accomplishments were stunning.

A citizen of Tarsus

Acts 21:39 *"I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city."*

He came from a moderately affluent family, and as property owners they qualified for Roman citizenship.

A Jew among Jews

Phil 3:5 *circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews...*

His religious training

Acts 22:3 *"...Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers..."* Gamaliel, one of the great teachers of his day... Like getting an MBA from Harvard...

His education

Gamaliel insisted that his students learn not only the scriptures and the traditions, but also be familiar with the Gentile writers of his day. Paul spoke Greek, Hebrew and Aramiac, the only intellectual of the Apostles. Known for his "great learning".

A present day equivalent would be... "a man who could speak Chinese in Peking, quoting Confucius, could write closely reasoned theology in English and expound it at Oxford, and could defend his cause in Russian before the Soviet Academy of Sciences" Sanders, p.12

His accomplishments

Philippians 3.5-6 *"as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless."*

Paul had a lot going for him. By any human categories, his **resume was stunning**. And you might well ask, what is the problem with all this? What could be wrong with Roman citizenship and Jewish heritage and the best education and hard work and great accomplishments.

What was wrong was that **his effort became his righteousness**. His phrase in vs 9 is *"a righteousness of my own"*. Everyone was impressed with Paul's resume. So was

Paul. Paul was impressed with what he was doing for God. And **he thought God owed him.**

If you look at your past and you are impressed with your resume, and you think God must be pretty pleased with all you've done, and you honestly think, down deep, that he owes you – **watch out.** My friend Jim Smith said, *"For too long I was impressed with my "commitment" to Christ; now I am only impressed with Christ's commitment to me."*

There is **not room in your heart to be impressed with yourself and to be impressed with Christ.** You must choose, and it is an issue of worship. In an act of worship, Paul ripped up his resume... Just gave it to God. You can do that. That is worship.

Here is another part of your past you could surrender to him,

2) Your Failures

Look at the phrase in vs 6:

"as to zeal a persecutor of the church..."

Phil 3.6

Let me give you the **setting for that phrase.** After the resurrection of Jesus, Christianity spread like wildfire. It seemed like there was no way to stop it. But then **persecution** broke out. Stephen is dead. Murdered while **Paul, then Saul, held the coats** of those who stoned him. Hundreds fled the city. Saul begins to **hunt them down**, all the way to Damascus. Do you know how far Damascus is from Jerusalem? About 140 miles. About as far as from Pittsburgh to Cleveland, without the turnpike. Do you know how he got there? He walked. It would take about 7 days. 20 miles per day.

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Acts 9:3-4

Saul asks a **question...**

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.

Acts 9:5

With that answer, **Saul's world collapsed...** Right then and there he knew that Jesus was **alive – risen – Lord!** He saw in a flash that he was working as hard as he could to **tear down** what **God was building up** – and his righteousness collapsed like a house of cards. Right then and there he knew that he had **a problem in his life**, and his problem wasn't the Christians, wasn't the Gentiles, wasn't someone else. **His problem was Saul himself.** Near the end of his life he reflected back on all this...

I used to blaspheme the name of Christ. In my insolence, I persecuted his people. But God had mercy on me ...

1 Timothy 1:13 (NLT)

Look at that little word, '**but...**' Isn't it wonderful?

He continues...

This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—and I am the worst of them all. But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life.

1 Timothy 1:15-16 (NLT)

Paul's failure was colossal. And what he is saying is that God had mercy on him so that you and I would take heart. If God could, would forgive Paul, he can, he will forgive you and me and anyone else. There is no failure so bad, no sin so crushing that it has to be the final word on your life. If you surrender your past to Jesus, he will give you a new future. You can do that. Paul did, and that is worship.

Here is another part of your past you could surrender to him,

3) Your Dreams

Harry Potter (1st book and 1st movie) is looking in the Mirror of

“Erised” (‘Desire’ backwards) Harry sees his parents. He is amazed, because his parents died when he was an infant. He is astounded. He gets Ron. But Ron looks in the mirror and sees himself as a sports champ. The mirror shows you the **deepest desire** of your heart. Finally his mentor Dumbledore comes and finds the boys, and says they are going to move the mirror because people have wasted away in front of this mirror. You **can** waste away in the pursuit of your dreams.

What are the deepest desires of your heart? What would you see in the mirror of Erised?

Paul would have seen in that mirror someone who was **great for God**. He was convinced that the way to greatness before God was to **earn** his way by superhuman effort and to **prove his zeal** by his hatred of pagan people. In his great ambition, Paul was ready to kill for God.

Our dreams are **very powerful**. But dreams about life are always, in the best of us, **twisted and bent** by our brokenness. They **filter** how we see our world and sometimes even **blind** us to what is really going on around us. **Paul’s dreams had to be shattered and surrendered** before Paul could discover God’s dreams for him.

Our dreams can get in the way of God’s dreams. That is what idols do. To surrender them to God is worship. And it brought sheer gain:

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 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 refuse, in order that I may gain Christ

Philippians 3:7-8 (RSV)

I remember **a wooden toy truck** I made for my oldest son. It was one of my first woodworking projects. It was a "tractor-trailer", what we call an "18 wheeler". It was about two feet long, and big enough to sit on and push around. He and my other sons loved it. I made it carefully and I made it well. I thought it would last forever. But then the day came when he got his first bicycle. I don't think he ever looked at that truck again. It faded into disuse because of the **surpassing worth** of the bike. And that bike gathered rust from the day he got his driver's license. The incomparable value of the greater leaves little room for the lesser.

When you surrender your past to Christ, be it your accomplishments, your failures or your dreams, it makes room for something far greater, the surpassing worth of knowing Christ, embraced by him and embracing him in return...

- of living impressed not with what you have done for him, but of what he has done for you,
- of living not bound in anger and accusation over your failures, but living free in his forgiveness,
- of living not under the twisted weight of your desires and dreams, but of rising to the full measure of his plans for you.

That is worship.