

A little bit about Paul:

- Born and raised a Jew—“circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews” (Phil 3:5)
- also born a Roman citizen
- about age six would have attended the synagogue school for instruction in Scriptures and Hebrew
- Was educated in Jerusalem “at the feet of Gamaliel.”(Acts 22:3) – “a star pupil, the student to get the thousand dollar graduate scholarship” (Stendahl)
- From his letters he seemed to be “a very happy successful Jew, one who can, even when he thinks about it from his Christian perspective, say in his Epistle to the Philippians “...as to the righteousness under the law (I was) blameless” (Phil. 3:6) [Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, p. 13]
- He was at the top of his game—a Pharisee, righteous by the law, doing everything expected and more—so much so that he was a willing persecutor of the movement of followers of Jesus, whom he saw as distorting true Judaism.

All of this – he wrote to the Philippians – “I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.”

He was at the top of his game—above all others—and THAT’S what he was willing to give up “that [he] may gain Christ!”

Paul knew from his own experience—which is why Romans 8 is so powerful!—“⁶To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace...⁸and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

In his world he’d had it all—and after he encountered Christ and was launched on his mission to the non-Jews—he realized that what he thought was bringing him life/peace/joy was nothing compared to what he found in Christ.

“To set the mind on the flesh”

sounds like sensuality/gluttony/over-drinking/pornography/wild-living—and it certainly can include that.

“To set the mind on the flesh” at its root is to buy whatever vision of life/joy/reality/success that the world is selling.

For Paul: be the best Pharisee/religious person possible.

What do you think that is for us?

Ministers: can’t be together very long before someone asks, “How big is your church?” (And you want to give the largest number you can legitimately say!)

Steve tells me for church musicians: how many in your choir? how big is your organ?

In business: what you make. My dad was basically a simple man, wore the same shirts and seersucker pants to work, didn’t want for much. But I remember him saying that the income “was the way of keeping score.” Not so different from traders/brokers/bankers.

Culture: power/prestige/possessions.

For many of us: security...retirement income, health insurance, etc.

Do you see where I’m going???

“To set the mind on the flesh” is to buy whatever lie the culture you find yourself in is selling.

THIS – fill in the blank – will bring you life/joy/peace.

Paul had bought the lie: a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. It doesn’t get any better than that...until...

he encountered Christ and had spent years in Christ’s service:

⁶To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

Tony Campolo: I had spent the afternoon at a sales conference sponsored by a large insurance corporation. The executives of the company had brought in an array of top-flight speakers to teach the sales force the most successful techniques for marketing their product. The audience listened with riveted attention as they were instructed how to “set up” clients, push the right emotional buttons, and close the deal. What they heard were the best insights about marketing that the experts in the field of behavioral psychology could provide. “Surefire” sales pitches were demonstrated that, according to the speakers, were certain to elicit the desired responses from even the most reluctant prospects. The presentations were brilliant!

It was my task to end the day with a motivational talk that could “psych up” the sales teams to get the job done. I was supposed to get the audience’s juices flowing so that they would be enthused about doing the things they had been taught all day long. You can imagine the surprise, if not the shock, that greeted my opening words: “Everything you’ve heard today is wrong.”...

“People are not *things* to be manipulated with the right techniques,” I said. “They are not Pavlovian dogs. We do not have a right to set them up to respond to the ‘proper’ stimuli in order to elicit the ‘proper’ response. They are not creatures to be *used* to further our own economic self-interest. People are sacred! Each of them is an infinitely precious person in whom the Eternal God has chosen to make His home. And all of them deserve to be treated with reverent respect.” (*Everything You’ve Heard Is Wrong*, pp. 15-16)

Paul: everything you’ve heard is wrong!
You don’t have to buy the lie your culture is selling

The rich industrialist from the North was horrified to find the Southern fisherman lying lazily beside his boat, smoking a pipe.

“Why aren’t you out fishing?” said the industrialist.

“Because I have caught enough fish for the day,” said the fisherman.

“Why don’t you catch some more?”

“What would I do with it?”

“You could earn more money,” was the reply. “With that you could have a motor fixed to your boat and go into deeper waters and catch more fish. Then you would make enough to buy nylon nets. These would bring you more fish and more money. Soon you would have enough money to own two boats...maybe even a fleet of boats. Then you would be a rich man like me.”

“What would I do then?”

“Then you could really enjoy life.”

“What do you think I am doing right now?” (Anthony de Mello, *The Song of the Bird*, pp. 132-133)

Paul thought he had all he needed—then he met Christ.

When I was a senior in college I had a pretty active dating life for one semester—two or three different girls in some weeks. Was having a great time—didn’t get any better than that. Then I met Susanne—dated no one else. (Told her she ruined my social life!)

Paul: life can be good, even great, fairly satisfying.

But there’s a way of living that tops anything the world tells you.

He calls it “the things of the Spirit.”

It’s a life that finds its home with God—can live at peace in the world,
with a unique joy that you find only by living it.

It’s...

generosity,
compassion,
forgiveness,
subtraction,
less,
gratitude,
grace.

PRAYER

Spirit of God,

we are here before you...

drawn by the good news of life...life in the spirit of Christ.

Life grander than anything we can imagine.

Life grander than what turns into the hum-drum of our everyday existence.

Life joyful and bright.

Maybe our lives seem a little less,

because we forget to concentrate on that which is a little more.

Life in the spirit of Christ.

Maybe we've bought the lies the world would have us believe—

the things the world tells us will bring us joy:

you've heard them before, Lord,

we've said them too many times: position, power, possessions,

security defined by the size of our portfolio or retirement plan

success defined by where we are on the ladder.

Call us back, Lord,

convince us again,

those things lead to emptiness...death.

You offer life.

Bring healing where we need it.

Hope when we are discouraged.

Set us free to think about others—their needs, their joy, their healing.

Help us, Lord, to have more love for thee.