

IF I HAD ONE WISH

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Phil. 3:1-14

My text this morning is the first clause of Phil. 3:10: AThat I may know Him@ or, as J.B. Phillips puts it, AHow changed are my ambitions! Now I long to know Christ.@"

I have often stood in awe before this thing we call memory, for when we begin to give the subject even a most careless kind of perusal, we are made to stand and wonder at the retentive power of the mind.

For instance, I remember a lovely twilight scene in which a young teenage girl sat beside her brother, one arm tightly wrapped about him to ward off the autumn chill, the other stretching upward pointing to the first evening star as she repeated a little ditty that has become so much a part of childhood generation after generation:

AStar light, star bright,
First star I see tonight.
Wish I may, wish I might,
Have the wish I wish tonight.@"

I couldn't have been more than four years old, for as I have said, my sister was a young teenager at the time and there were twelve years between us. I recall that shortly thereafter she became interested in boys and her attention shifted from a toddling lad named John to a towering Acad@ named Earl (at least that is what I thought he was, because, once my sister got interested in him, those cherished evening chats on the front porch were gone forever.)

It was my sister who first introduced me to the whole idea of wishing. And, to the imaginative mind of a little boy, the idea of merely wishing something into reality was a fascination beyond description.

However, it didn't take me long to discover there is more to achievement than merely wishing. I learned there is also the element of work. I discovered the only place Achievement@ comes before@ work@ is in the dictionary. And yet, there persists within each of us a longing to engage in the fanciful art of wishing, and I think that is good. There is a place for dreaming in our lives, for as I have said from this pulpit:

AMen do not reach the stars by digging
In the mud that murks the stream.
Stars are reached by those who sing
Climb the ladder of a dream.@

I got to thinking about this the other day as I tried to focus my feelings about the future of our church. It seems to me we are on the threshold of truly great things. As I see it, the past is only prolonged. We have come, as it were, to the river Jordan and have caught a glimpse of the land of Canaan . . . the land of promise . . . flowing with spiritual milk and honey. And, having been captured by a vision of what we can become, by the grace of God, we will never again be satisfied with what we are.

As I tried to focus my thoughts and feelings about our future and how we might attain it, God gathered those thoughts and feelings together in what we might call a dream, a hunger, a longing, a wish for you. And, this morning, I want to share it with you. But, it's not *just* a wish for you. It's also a wish for *me*, and for all of us who belong to this church family.

If I Had One Wish there are many things for which I might wish, because there are many worthwhile desires any pastor could have for his people. I suppose one obvious wish would be that his was

Not A Church Full of Tithers.

Preachers are often criticized for talking about money and I plead guilty to that charge. But you see, I know what great things could be done for the church and by the church if all of our

members would stop robbing God from that which is rightfully his. And, as more and more of you have discovered the personal blessings of tithing, our giving has grown until today it is nearly double what it was three years ago. And yet, according to our financial officers, we have only scratched the surface. They tell me that if all of our members were tithers, our giving would more than double what it is now. So you can understand why I might wish that we had a church full of tithers. And yet, If I Had One Wish, that would not be it.

Not A Church of Loyal Attenders

A second worthwhile wish would be that we were a church of loyal attenders. I have often spoken about this because I know the debilitating curse of absenteeism.

I also know the constructive power of the gathered presence of God's people in worship. I know the impetus that a crowded church gives to the morale of God's people, and the lift it gives to the pastor as he preaches. Therefore, it would be only natural for me to wish that we were a church of loyal attenders. And yet, If I Had One Wish that would not be it.

Not A Church of Soul Winners

Another wish you would all recognize as worthwhile would be that we were a church full of soul winners. Again, I have often spoken about that, and I am grateful that so many of the laymen of our church have caught that vision. Week after week they have gone together in teams of two to visit those who are our special responsibility. As a result several hundred people have come into our church the last three years. The knowledge of what a mere handful of men has accomplished, suggests the stupendous things that could be done if *every* member of our church had a passion for souls. The mere thought of it boggles the mind, and yet, If I Had One Wish it would not be that we were a church of soul winners.

Not A Church of Pray-ers

If I Had One Wish I suppose it would be most natural for me to wish that every member of our church knew how to pray. And again, how often I have preached about *that*. How often I have

reminded you that,

AA prayerless pew makes a powerless pulpit,
but a praying people make a powerful preacher.@"

How often I have told you that,

AMore things are wrought by prayer than this world ever dreams of.@"

And that,

AThe reverent, effectual prayers of a righteous man availeth much.@"

And, If I Had One Wish, I could easily wish, with all my heart that we were a people who really knew how to pray, and were willing to pray through to victory. What a noble wish that would be. What miracles could be accomplished if that were so. And yet, If I Had One Wish that would not be it.

That I Might Know Him

No, my friend, If I Had One Wish it would not be that we would become a church of tithers or loyal attenders, or soul winners, or even pray-ers. But rather, it would be that you and you and *you* would have as your supreme passion and purpose in life the willingness and determination to say with Paul:

AThat -- I -- might -- know -- *him*.@" Really *know* him!

I could not wish for more than that. I could not wish for more than that each and every member of our church were possessed with a divine discontent which made us unwilling to settle for a superficial knowledge of Christ.

That's what Paul meant when he said, in Phil. 3:10, the supreme ambition of his life was to know Jesus. He was *not* talking about an intellectual knowledge, whereby Christ became the capital object of his mind's desire. He was *not* speaking of an emotional knowledge, whereby Christ became the captive of his heart's desire. He was *not* even talking of an experiential knowledge where, through the process of a new birth, Christ became the captain of his soul's desire. Paul

was talking about an e-x-p-a-n-d-i-n-g knowledge of Christ so that his entire being -- body, soul and spirit -- would *go on* knowing Jesus increasingly, expandingly, unerringly. *That's* what he meant when Paul said *A*that I may *know* Him.@

You see, Christ is a limitless spiritual treasury containing height and depth and length and breadth beyond all human understanding. Were we to give a lifetime, indeed a millennium of lifetimes, to the pursuit of knowing him, we would only begin to scratch the surface of the glory and power and beauty and blessedness which comprise his being.

Perhaps that's why, in the plan and providence of God, he has given his children the gift of eternal life. For, as Fanny Crosby explains it,

AThere are depths of love that I cannot know
>Til I cross the narrow sea.
There are heights of joy which I may not reach
>Til I rest in peace with thee.@

Oh yes, my friend, the hunger of your pastor's heart is that you and you and you -- *and I* -- will say with Paul, *A*that -- I -- may -- know -- *him*.@

Paul's Past Performance Not Good Enough

The staggering import of this wish cannot be fully understood until we look at the life of the man who first expressed it.

This was not the cry of a novice Christian.

This was not the hungry desire of a babe in Christ.

This was not the superficial song of one who had only a shallow
comprehension of the Savior and decided he would like some more.

No. No. No!

This is the passionate plea and prayer of the apostle Paul, a man who had walked with Christ for 30 years.

Paul was a man who had become a Christian through the medium of a staggering conversion. A vision of brightness. A voice out of Heaven. A violent, convulsive shaking up that literally threw him prostrate on the ground and made him blind for three days.

Paul was not a man who had doubts about his conversion. To Paul, his encounter with Jesus was real! And he remembered it well.

More than that, Paul was a man who had stood fearlessly before kings and governors and rulers giving witness to his faith, causing those very kings and governors and rulers to tremble.

He had endured shipwreck, stoning, lashing, and imprisonment, crying through it all Athy grace is sufficient for me.®

He had seen an earthquake in response to his prayers so his prison walls were shaken and the jailer was so moved he fell upon his knees in awe before the power of this man of God.

Paul was a man who more closely approximated the character of Christ than any other individual who has ever lived. He was a man who seemed to understand all truth. Who spoke with the tongues of men and angels as he proclaimed the gospel of the risen Christ.

This was the man who more greatly influenced the fledgling churches of the first Christian century than any other.

This was the man whose influence was stamped upon Christendom for all time to come, so that even today, you and I cannot worship or even conceive of Christ apart from the vision of Jesus which comes to us through the writings of Paul.

This was the man who began the whole system of Christian theology. Who took the great historical events of the gospel and translated them into the doctrines of the church.

This was the man whose grasp upon Christian truth makes our understanding of the Gospel seem like kindergarten stuff.

And yet, this was the man who, knowing Christ as no man ever knew him, was heard to express this prayer as the motivating passion and power of his life, *Athat I may know him.*@

Oh, my friend, does that not make you want to hide your face in shame? Does that not make you want to fall upon your knees before God and plead for forgiveness for the lackadaisical, superficial, almost unbelievable nonchalance with which you have often brushed aside this One who is called, King of kings and Lord of lords? It does me!

Unlike Paul who said, *AI have not attained ... I do not pretend to have apprehended ...*@ many of us seem to feel we *have* attained. We *have* reached the mark. That there is no need for us to go on knowing and learning and growing in Christ. We would never dare *say* it! But we declare it just the same, by our unwillingness to go any further with Christ than we have already gone.

We are so afraid of getting *A*carried away@ or being *Aa* fool for Christ=s sake.@ Well, perhaps it is time that we *got* carried away! Perhaps it is time we *became* fools for Christ=s sake. Perhaps it is time we outgrew our spiritual adolescence and moved on toward spiritual maturity. Or better yet, perhaps it is time we escaped from our staid, stolid, stoic, so-called maturity, and regained some of that eager, enthusiastic, energetic zest which is characteristic of a truly Spirit-filled, God-guided life.

Perhaps we have been living in the past too long. Perhaps we have drawn so heavily upon yesterday=s blessings and yesterday=s experiences and yesterdays conquests with Christ, we have missed out on the blessings and experiences and conquests he wants us to enjoy today.

Let me get right down to where you live for a moment.

How long has it been since you had the almost delirious delight of seeing one of your prayers

answered? Specifically. Unmistakably. Gloriously. Absolutely answered! How long has it been?

How long has it been since some new flash of spiritual insight broke in on you like the radiance of a newborn day, completely altering your way of thinking and doing? How long has it been?

How long has it been since you experienced the refreshing, exhilarating joy of some personal conquest with Christ? How long has it been since Jesus was truly real to you? Truly alive to you? Truly dear to you? How long has it been?

You see --

It is one thing to be a church member, it is another thing to be a Christian.

It is one thing to be a Christian, it is another thing to be a growing Christian.

It is one thing to be a growing Christian, it is another thing to be a kind of growing Christian who is not content with little blessings, timid conquests and tepid commitments. The kind of Christian who, with an insatiable hunger and feverish passion, cries out with Paul,

APast performances are not good enough. I press on. I reach out for that which is before me, *that I may know him!*@

If I Had One Wish, and that wish were my last, I could only wish that each and everyone of you would become captive of Paul's magnificent obsession. And, forgetting that which is behind -- rejecting the temptation to settle for second best, refusing to let past victories become opiates to even greater conquests in the future -- you would move on! Reach out. Strive after that deeper, wider, higher knowledge of Christ which spells life abundant and victorious.

Present Priorities

But not only did Paul reject past performances as not good enough, he went on to recognize he could only know Christ fully if his present priorities were right.

J.B. Phillips takes this passage and translates it into modern English so Saint Paul is made to say,
AHow my ambitions have changed! *Now, I long to know Christ!*@

What did he mean by changed ambitions? Well, take a moment and think about those first nine verses of this third chapter of Philippians.

In verses five and six, Paul explains that he was a Jew of Jews, a Pharisee of Pharisees, a member of the tribe of Benjamin, an enthusiastic adherent to the faith of his fathers. So enthusiastic, in fact, he engaged in violent persecution of that infant organism called the Christian Church. He says that, as far as the law is concerned, he was blameless. His whole attention had been given to the keeping of the law. He had fulfilled every jot and tittle of it.

Elsewhere, Paul shares how there was a time when his attentions were given over to intellectual attainment. His efforts were spent in making economic and material gain. His whole attitude toward life was colored by his determination to Aget ahead.@ To belong to the right group. To be accepted in the right society. To receive the plaudits and recognition of the right crowd.

But suddenly something happened, and we hear Paul say,

AHow my attitudes have changed! *Now I long to know Christ!*@

He went on to say,

AI count all things but loss, that is to say, I consider everything else
to be useless rubbish, compared with being able to know him.@

Paul had a new set of priorities! And I think the reason so many of us know so little of Jesus is that we still have the *wrong* priorities!

We don't put first things first. We don't count all things but loss, that we might know him. Oh, we are Christians. We are children of God. We are born-again believers. And therefore, we possess all the right ingredients for a really happy and radiant life. But, because we take these right ingredients and use them in the wrong order and proportion, we wind up with a life that is

flat and devoid of the blessed buoyancy we're convinced a Christian life should possess.

Oh, my friend, if you would know him and the power of his resurrection, then you must not only cease resting on the honor of past performances, but, like Paul, you must set right the order of your present priorities.

Profitable Practices That Can Help

How do you go about doing that? Let me suggest a few profitable practices which may help you in your quest.

An Intimacy of Fellowship

I think the most helpful practice you might undertake would be to cultivate an intimacy of interior or internal fellowship with Christ. There is something wonderful about knowing him. Something so beautiful, so holy, so intimate about it, it can only be likened to the relationship of a loving bridegroom to his adoring bride.

As a matter of fact, Paul often uses the metaphor of marriage to describe the Christian life. But the intense intimacy, the relaxed radiance, the perfect purity of marriage cannot be achieved in the midst of blustering busyness and ceaseless scurrying. It can only be experienced in quietness. In being alone with each other. In the adhesive atmosphere of personal fellowship.

And that's the only way you will ever really know *him*!

You must be still in order to know he is God. For, as the Bible explains it,

AIn quietness and in confidence will be your strength.®

Someone has said that one reason so many of us know so little of Jesus is that we are too busy.

AWe are like an office boy in a gigantic corporation. He has a boss. He knows his name. He is even working on the same floor with him. But he doesn't really *know* him. He only knows *about* him. By reputation. Through word of mouth

from others. His knowledge is, at best, secondhanded.®

Many of us are like that office boy. We are working for God, but we don't really know him. Every word of him comes to us secondhand. By word of mouth through others. We are hirelings instead of partners.

And how desperately we need to learn the art of meditation. The secret of closing the door of our heart. Of pulling down the shades of our mind. Of entering into the sanctuary of our soul where we can be still and know him, *as he is*. For it is in the intimacy of fellowship that we are tuned to him.

An Intimacy of Partnership

Not only must we cultivate an intimacy of fellowship, we must also cultivate an intimacy of partnership with him. And this is only one side of the coin.

Let me show you what I mean.

AHere is a woman who is married to a surgeon. She knows him in a way, that is, she knows him as a man. She knows him as a husband. She knows him as the father of her children. But there is another sense in which she does not know him at all. For you see, he is not only a man, a husband and a father, he is a surgeon, too.

AShe doesn't know him as the nurse in the operating room. She doesn't know him as his medical associates do. She doesn't know him even as intimately as some of his patients. She doesn't know him when he is working. And the simple fact of the matter is that he is working most of his waking hours.® (C.S.Lewis?)

May I suggest to you in reverence and sincerity, you will never know Christ, you will never know the heavenly Father, until you work with him as well as for him. It is there that you will learn to

know him best, for he is always working!

The Intimacy of Discipleship

And then may I suggest along with an intimacy of fellowship and partnership, a third profitable practice would be for you to cultivate an intimacy of Discipleship.

By that I mean learning the real meaning of what it is to trust and obey. A disciple is one who so completely trusts his Lord he obeys without question or debate. His Lord speaks, and he follows!

There can be no deeper knowing of Christ without that kind of trust in him and obedience to him. There can be no sweeter consciousness of his presence without complete submission to his person.

As we have often said, Jesus will not be Lord *at* all unless he is Lord *of* all. And that is precisely what Paul meant when he said,

AForsaking that which is behind (that is, rejecting everything else I have tried and turned to) I press on toward the prize, for I count all things but lost *that I may know him.*@

And, If I Had One Wish, I would not wish that we were a church of tithers or loyal attenders or faithful soul winners or even earnest pray-ers, however important these may be. I could only wish that each and every one of you might say with Paul,

AThat I may know Him.@

For when *that* is true, Aall these (*other*) things will be added unto you.@

You will be a tither, for you will count all things but loss that you might possess him.

You will be a loyal attender, for you will covet every opportunity to learn just a little bit more about him.

You will be a faithful witness, for you will not cease to tell the wondrous story of what Jesus has done for you and is prepared to do for others.

You will be an earnest pray-er, for knowing him, you will want to fellowship with him. To bask in his presence. To relax in his love. To constantly uphold your brothers and sisters and their needs before him.

I don't know the supreme longing of your heart, this morning. I don't know what is of paramount importance to you. But this one thing I *do* know, compared to Christ and an ever growing, expanding, stretching, illuminating *knowledge of him*, everything else pales into paltry insignificance.

How is it with you this morning? Are you satisfied that you know him as you should, or as you could, if you laid aside every weight and the sin that so easily besets you?

Are you content to maintain the spiritual status quo? Or, is there within you this morning a spark of divine discontent which makes you long for something more than just a faint, fleeting glimpse of him?

If so, then let's grow together. Let's lock hands and hearts in one divine pursuit, crying out with Paul, *Athat I may know him!*@ And, if we do, all glory to God, we will become that colony of heaven on earth which Christ ordained us to be. We will be a church after God's own heart.

(Later versions of this message were followed by a gifted soloist or choir singing, *Al Wish You Jesus*@ by Scott Wesley Brown.)