

How To Stay Motivated In the Christian Life

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August 17-18, 1996
The Cross
Ephesians 2:11-13

As you now know, this week we are celebrating Summer Harvest here with evening meetings on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday nights designed to introduce people to a relationship with Jesus. I am going to be speaking those three evenings and would very much like you to pray for me that God would give me the right things to say so that people can come into relationship with him. I know it is the passion of God to have restored relationship with people that he has made. Just like it would be the passion of a parent whose children were alienated and had left home and were disobedient to see their children come back home and be restored to relationship.

Now, it is my desire today to motivate you, who are part of the Vineyard Columbus, to invite someone to come out with you this week. That at the end of this message you would say, okay, I will personally come to one of the meetings or more and I will invite someone to come with me who needs to have a restored relationship with God. I will tell you right at the front end today that I would like to motivate you to invite someone to these meetings.

And I know whenever I am trying to motivate, that I am dealing with a series of obstacles, not the least of which in the modern world is a profound apathy that dulls us to any message. I am aware, as a communicator, that I am communicating to people who are being bombarded with thousands of messages. That you are being marketed to, advertised to, propagandized, sold at every turn. You can't drive out of the parking lot without seeing bill boards trying to sell you a new beer, a new restaurant, a new set of tires for your car.

We can't sit down to dinner any longer without having a long distance telephone company try to get you to try to switch your service. And if it is not switching your service, it is getting you to vote for a certain political candidate or use the right soap or contribute to a worthy cause, or take evening classes at Columbus State.

I understand that my challenge as a communicator is to break through the barrier that we all erect in the modern world just to survive. It is the barrier that keeps out all messages. It keeps all messages at arm's length. We aren't going to be motivated by anything because of our over stimulation. But as I said, where I would like to move us to by the end of this message is that you would say yes, not only am I going to plan to come to one or more of these meetings, but I am planning to invite someone. That is pretty much where we have been going all summer, friends.

You know, there are a lot of ways to motivate. And I began thinking about this motivational question because Marlene and I had the opportunity to visit a church in another state while we were on vacation. Like a lot of you, when we are out of state or out of town, we will just go to another church on Sunday. And

so we picked a church in the area that we were vacationing in and went as a family a couple of weeks ago. It was actually helpful for me to be back in the position of visiting a church. It gave me fresh eyes again to what people see when they come into a strange building and sit down amidst strange people. Well, not necessarily strange people, but strangers. It is a good experience for me, as a pastor, who is functioning from the other side so often.

We enjoyed the worship at this church. They used a lot of Vineyard songs. And then I got to experience how, at least, one pastor in America thought that people ought to be motivated. And essentially, he believed that the way to get people to do things, Christian things, was to inflict guilt and pain on them for about an hour and a half.

For example, he wanted the men in the church to attend a Promise Keepers conference. Promise Keepers, for some of you, is a national Christian men's movement. Men from all over the country are filling stadiums and listening to speakers who challenge them to keep their commitments. He wanted men to go with him to a Promise Keepers conference and so he said to the men, "How many of you will go with me to this conference?" About 15-20 men raised their hands. And then he said, "okay, what I would like you to do is stand because I want to pray." And so the men stood. The pastor's prayer was: "Lord, I pray that you would convict the men who have remained seated that they should go as well. I pray that you give them no rest, no peace. That you would afflict their consciences." Essentially, he prayed that we who were not joining him ought to be made miserable by Almighty God because he was certain that his cause was the Lord's cause. And if someone wasn't signing up, God should get 'em.

Well, frankly, I believe that to pray in such an absurd fashion is to use the Lord's name in vain. And I have never believed that guilt was a healthy long-term motivational tool to get Christian people to do what Christian people ought to do.

Here we are faced this week with a challenge to evangelize. We know, as Christians, that we are called to share our faith with others. That a Christian who is not a witness is a contradiction. That we ought to be influencing people toward a relationship with Jesus. That is Christianity 101. If you have been a Christian more than a day or two, you have received the general idea that you are not fulfilling your job description if you are not somehow involved in the great cause of Christ in the world to turn people in the world back to God.

But tell me, friends, what is the New Testament motivation to do what we ought to do? How would the apostle Paul approach a project, a campaign, an evangelistic crusade? How would he communicate to anyone that they ought to be involved in evangelism?

Here is what I see in the New Testament. In the New Testament I see people sharing their faith, their relationship with Jesus, not out of some grim duty, not because someone prayed: Lord, make them feel miserable. Give them no peace. Make them feel really horrible. Paul said his chief motivation to share was the love of Jesus – his love for Jesus and Jesus' love for him. He said the love of Jesus' constrains me. It hems me in. It grips me. What I see in the New Testament is that people spoke about Jesus out of an overflow of an experience

with him. They talked about the Lord because they were excited about the Lord. Because that is what they were glorying in. People in the New Testament talked about Jesus because that is what they were into. They were into Jesus.

See, people talk about what they are into. If you are into cars, you talk about cars. If you are into home decoration, you talk about home decoration. If you are into recent movies, you talk about recent movies. If you are into politics, you talk about politics. If you are into Jesus, and Jesus has done something for you that is real to you and relevant to you, you talk about Jesus.

A good gauge of what you are excited about is what you talk about. Let me ask you a question. What do you find yourself talking about? What are you excited about at the present moment? What do you glory in? Your kids? Your house? Your job? A promotion? What thrills you? What grips you? What stimulates you?

See, people in the New Testament were stimulated. They were excited. They were thrilled by the touch that they had received from Jesus. Jesus' love was so real to them, so tangible, that they couldn't help but share and talk and try to persuade others to get to know Jesus whom they had met. I never want you to go through the grim duty of trying to work up a checklist kind of witnessing chore out of a feeling of being an empty box. If you are an empty box, you don't have anything to give away. You are just going to do Christianity because you are supposed to. Because that is what is expected because some leader is looking over your shoulder and you feel like you need to measure up.

There is a much higher motivation for communicating, for getting involved. Because you want to. Because you are excited about it. Because the love of Jesus compels you. Because this is an opportunity to watch people get saved.

Since we tend to run out of steam as Christians, since we tend to ride the roller coaster where we are up and down; since all of us struggle with periods of flatness and apathy and dullness in our faith; since all of us face the challenge of rising up, of being stirred up and fighting through depression and legalism, this morning what I would like to talk about is "How to Stay Motivated in Evangelism."

I am going to specifically apply it to this upcoming week. But I think the general principles that we will learn from the apostle Paul are applicable anywhere. Again, the title of my talk is "How to Stay Motivated in Evangelism." Let's pray.

Let me read to you the text that we are going to be looking at today. It is Ephesians 2:11-13:

"Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called 'uncircumcised' by those who call themselves 'the circumcision' (that done in the body by the hands of men)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ."

I would like to suggest to you that these few verses contain a large part of the secret of staying motivated in the Christian life. That if you grasp Paul's meaning, that these verses become real to you. You can't help but be excited about being a Christian. That if you grasp what Paul is saying in Ephesians 2:11-

13, if it is relevant, you will find yourself speaking less about cars, sports, politics, rock groups or whatever it is that you spend your conversation on. You will naturally talk more about Jesus.

Let me set the context of this text for you. There are two great prayers that form the passion of Paul's heart and serve almost as bookends for Ephesians 2. Paul prays two great prayers for the Ephesian believers. And these two great prayers are highly motivational in their content. The first great prayer of the apostle Paul for the Ephesian believers, and I think for all believers throughout the ages, is that we might fully appreciate the power of God that is at work in our lives.

Ephesians 1:18-19: "I pray also that the eyes of your heart might be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the Saints, [and here is what I want to focus on] and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come."

Paul is praying, Christian, I want you to understand the power that has been at work on your behalf. The power of God that is right now at work.

And his second great prayer is found in Ephesians 3:17-19: "I pray that you being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge."

Paul is praying that we would grasp the power of God. And secondly, Paul is praying that we would grasp the love of God. He is suggesting that if we would grasp the power and the love of God, we will live motivated, switched-on, fully committed, radically sold-out lives for Christ.

How does he work this argument out to get us to appreciate the power of God on our behalf and the love of God on our behalf? Well, essentially, what Paul is saying in Ephesians 2 is that you can't appreciate the power of God unless you realize what God had to overcome in order to save you. You can't appreciate God's power on your behalf or God's love on your behalf unless you realize the obstacles that were in God's way in bringing you into relationship with him. To appreciate the power of God, you need to know what was in the way. To appreciate how deep the love of God is, you need to know how deep the hole was that you had fallen in that God had to rescue you from.

Let me say it differently. Before you can adequately grasp the greatness of a cure, you have to know how serious the disease is. If you have a slight headache and take an aspirin, you don't bound around the house, shouting at the top of your lungs because your minor headache went away. Calling neighbors and friends together saying: My headache is gone. Come let's party together. Share the joy of my healing.

But, if instead you were diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's Disease; if the doctors told you there was nothing more they could do; if you felt your body shriveling up and losing strength; if they suggested to you that you only had a few months to

live, or a year at most; if you believed their diagnosis and if in that situation someone came along and laid their hands on you and you felt a surge of energy run through your body, and immediately felt better and were then pronounced by those same doctors to be totally healed, would you not find yourself motivated to share your good fortune with anyone who would listen? In that situation, would you not bound around the house saying: I have just experienced an incredible love.

In Ephesians 2, Paul is saying to us: Friends, to fully appreciate God's power and God's love, you need to understand how seriously ill you were. How deep the hole was that you fell in. Ephesians 2:1-10 raises for us the obstacle of our sin. Paul is saying in Ephesians 2:1-10: Let's be clear about something. Your condition wasn't such that you needed just a little bit of encouragement; just a boost up; just a helping hand in order to become a Christian. You were dead. You were an object of wrath. You were captured and tied up by Satan. To become a Christian required an enormous exertion of God's power and God's love toward you. God had to overcome the obstacle of sin.

And then, in Ephesians 2:11 to the end of the chapter, God had to overcome your position, your status, as being separated from the nation of Israel, being outside of God's chosen people. We will explore that in a moment. But let me nail this first point down before I fully explicate the text.

The secret of staying motivated lies, in part, in understanding how great the problems were that needed to be overcome in order for us to become Christians. Or to use Paul's language in Ephesians 2:11: Therefore, remember that formerly you who were Gentiles...Remember [verse 12] that at that time you were separate from Christ excluded from citizenship in Israel, foreigners to the covenant of promise without hope and without God in the world.

Do you want to know, friends, why you lose steam as a Christian? Why you are not very excited? Why you aren't motivated consistently and continually to share your faith? Why it is hard for you to get up for a crusade even a crusade with a goal of bringing people into a relationship with Jesus? It is because you don't remember where you have come from. You don't remember how serious your problems were. You don't remember what God needed to overcome to bring you into relationship with him. You don't remember what you used to feel like before. And what people still feel like who are not yet Christians.

People in the Bible are motivated by a call to remembrance over and over again. Moses wrote a whole book called Deuteronomy, which is a whole book of remembrance, an accounting of the great things that God had done on behalf of the nation of Israel. The whole book is, friends, remember your slavery. Remember what it was like in Egypt. Remember how miserable you were. Remember what needed to happen for you to be delivered from Egypt. Remember the plagues. Remember how hard Pharaoh's heart was? Remember what it took to overcome that hard heart? Remember that Pharaoh still chased you? Do you remember the great sea and the deliverance that God wrought on your behalf? Will you not serve God? Delight yourself in God? Be thrilled by God? As you recognize what you have been pulled out of?

And this is also a New Testament argument. Paul challenges the churches that he has planted over and over again. He tells the Corinthian believers: Remember what you were. 1 Corinthians 1:26. Think about what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards. Not many influential. Not many of noble birth. You became Christians not because of what you were, but because of what God is. What God did.

What were the obstacles. Well, in verse 11 Paul talks about the fact that the Gentiles who were made Christians were separated from Israel. "Therefore, remember that you who were formerly Gentiles by birth and called 'uncircumcised' by those who call themselves 'the circumcision' (that done in the body by the hands of men)..."

We must, of course, remember what God's plan was for the nation of Israel. After the fall of man in the Garden of Eden, God was faced with a planet full of people who were in rebellion to him, who were out of relationship with him, who worshipped rocks and stones and the sun and the moon and animals and themselves. And in order to bring the world back into relationship with him, God decided to form a nation. To choose a group of people who would bring a message about the true God to the rest of the world. God did make a division in the Old Testament between Jew and Gentile. God did draw a line. But it was not because God did not care for the whole world. God drew a line and made a distinction because he cared for the whole world. And he called the Jewish people to be a light to the world for a special calling, for a special job. To share the message about me with others.

Certainly one of his reasons was to demonstrate his faithfulness and power. Here is a small group of people with no military might, limited resources, limited population. The whole world hated them. The Spanish killed them during the Inquisition, then the Russians, then the Germans herded them off to concentration camps, burned their synagogues and destroyed their schools. Yet the Jews remain. The Roman Empire is gone, the Greek empire is gone, so are the Mayans and the Aztecs, but the Jews remain. It's a miracle. The Jews are meant to be a sign to the world of God and Faithfulness and power.

But you know what the Jews did in the Old Testament up until the time of Jesus? They took their special privilege and made it a source of pride and division, so that they began to exclude Gentiles from the touch of God, from the love of God, from the salvation of God. They said, "We are chosen. We are the circumcised. We have the mark in our flesh. You Gentiles are uncircumcised."

You say: well, how does that apply to Christians today?

Do we not struggle with this very same attitude that the Jews struggled with in the Old Testament? That of pride? Do we not find ourselves weighed down by a feeling of "We're in; we've made it? Look at them with their gay pride parades and their march for reproductive freedom. To heck with the rest of the world." Do we not forget that our chosenness is for the purpose of being a light and not for just special status with God, but special responsibility? Are we not tempted, as Christians, to withdraw from engagement from the world and to huddle in the church? To relate only to other Christians?

In calling the people to remembrance, Paul doesn't only speak in general terms, but as a master motivator he gets very specific in verse 12. He says: Let me tell you what I mean when I tell you to remember where you have come from. Not only were you excluded from Israel, there were barriers thrown up to you, but you were separated from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, from foreigners to the covenant of the promise. Without hope and without God in the world.

Now, I think that first phrase, "separate from Christ" is really the all encompassing phrase with the following clauses explaining what it means to be separated from Christ. This whole letter is about being in Christ, being incorporated in him, finding yourself in the sphere of Jesus. And he is saying: You need to remember what it was like when you were apart from Christ, away from Christ, not under the sphere of his influence, not connected with him in any way.

Do you take time, friends, to remember what it was like before you came to Christ? I will be honest with you and tell you that I frequently do intentionally remind myself of what I felt like 23 years ago before I became a Christian. I frequently stir those feelings up. What I felt like. How I related. How I felt about myself. How I felt about my future. Do you think often about where you have come from? You can't be motivated about the Christian life unless you remember where you have come from.

And, friends, you can't be motivated about evangelism or some project your church is involved in to reach the lost unless you remind yourself of where people are living. Whether or not their lawns are manicured and they go out and edge their lawns every Saturday. Completely apart from whether they have a large boat on Lake Erie and take each weekend to boat. Regardless of whether they take exotic vacations and have a great looking spouse and a 4000 square foot home complete with whirlpool and a high school gym size bathroom. If you can't plow through all of that and remember what the Bible says about where people are, you won't share.

So, where were you before you became a Christian? And where are people who have not yet come to Christ?

He says, first of all, "You were excluded from citizenship in Israel..." You were outside the community of Israel, which means you were outside the sphere of God's special concern and special knowledge. God cares about the whole world, but he cares about his people in a special way. His people alone are his children, not just his creatures. His people are especially attended to and specially taken notice of. Amos 3:2 says it so well when he says: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth. [in speaking of the Jewish people]"

It is not that God wasn't aware of everyone else. He saw all the other nations on the earth, but he didn't know them as the Bible counts knowledge. He didn't take particular interest in them. They weren't special in his sight. What Paul is saying is "Remember Gentiles, you were among the mass of people that God was not particularly interested in. You weren't special to him. You were outside."

Do you recall what you felt like before you were a Christian? I do. I remember feeling not particularly special to anyone, but particularly not feeling

special to God. People who are not Christians are striving to be special. One of my favorite memories, in fact, and you probably have one of these, concerns a time I felt special to a teacher. That is why people advertise their accomplishments and why they let you know what they own. And give you their resume at every opportunity. That is why people conspicuously consume and are insecurely opting for status symbols and trophy wives. Because they don't know that they could be special to the one who matters the most—God. They have never experienced being the apple of God's eye, being the object of special attention and special affection.

And, friends, I am afraid many Christians don't really understand that they are not just part of a mass. But that God himself considers you to be his special friend.

The next thing that the apostle tells us is that "You Gentiles were foreigners [or strangers] to the covenant of promise." Remember, I have already told you what God's calling was on the Jewish people. God called them out and said, "I have placed my eye on you. I am going to bless you. I pledge myself to you. You are special to me."

But then he made them particular promises. And the promises were recorded back in the days of Abraham. He said, "I will make you a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great. You will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you. And whoever curses you, I will curse. And all the people on the earth will be blessed through you." There is the promise of a very great inheritance and future blessings.

Do you remember what it was like to live without the promise of an inheritance from God and future blessings? Let me make it more plain to you. Do you remember when your only inheritance was that handed down to you by your parents and grandparents so that the only thing you could look forward to was essentially tracking in the tracks of your parents, good, bad or otherwise? That you could look forward to sounding like your mother when you yelled at your kids. And you could look forward to your father's perfectionism. And you could look forward to living out their sexual dysfunction, their depression, their alcoholism, their drivenness. Do you remember what it was like when the only inheritance that you had was that handed down to you by your earthly parents? That is what a non-Christian has to look forward to.

The only thing I get to draw on from the bank, the non-Christian says, is what was put in by my parents. I have no inheritance from God, the non-Christian says. I have no new future, a future free from all of the hang-ups and bondages and problems and ways of relating from my parents and grandparents. I have no new rooting in Jesus Christ, no fresh blood runs through my veins. I haven't gone through a heart transplant, a genetic change. I am what I am based entirely on my birth and family heritage.

The third thing Paul says is that you were without hope. This is where post-modern man lives, without hope. That when post-modern men and women allow themselves to slow down, when they allow themselves to think deeply, and they pull away from the videos and the computer screens and the workaholicism and the obsession with sports, when post-modern men and women slow down and

reflect, they are without hope. They become depressed. No hope. That's especially true of the younger generation – baby busters or Generation X or whatever you want to call it. No hope for a good job, no hope for social security when they retire, no hope for home ownership, no hope for the planet that's all goofed up with ozone depletion and rain forest destruction, no hope in politics.

Those who do slow down to reflect—the poets, the writers, the musicians, the songwriters—do they not have a pessimistic strain that runs through all of their reflecting? Is it not the case that anyone who looks at life apart from Christ is pessimistic?

Three thousand years ago the writer of Ecclesiastes looked at the world apart from Christ and said, “Meaningless, meaningless, vanity, vanity...utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless. All things are burdensome, all things are wearisome. What has been will be again. What has been done will be done again. There is nothing new under the sun. It is all vain.”

Do you remember when you were without hope? When there was an overriding sense of meaninglessness that weighed you down when you stopped long enough to think? That is where non-Christians live. Can you imagine having to put your entire trust in Bob Dole or Bill Clinton to rescue this country? Do you really think a \$1500 tax break will turn this nation around? That is where you must live if you look out at a world that is wracked with wars, death, accidents, divorce, abuse, lies. No hope.

And not only no hope in this life, but of course, no hope for the next. I certainly remember when I believed that when I died it would be all over. I remember when I believed that the only thing that happened to people was that they rotted in the ground and turned into fertilizer. That we were here for just a brief time and then it was gone. And the worst possible thing that could ever happen was that you would die because you would cease to exist. That there was nothing about men and women that was eternal. That is where people live. No hope.

And I know they manufacture false hopes and being embraced by light. There is a lot of mythology to produce some hope. It is all just partying on the deck of the Titanic. There is a pervasive sense that it is all fictitious. Because the bottom line is that without Christ, people live without God.

Paul is saying: You Gentiles, you lived outside of fellowship with God, outside of finding resource with God. Apart from God's help, away from God's encouragement. Do you understand that this is the difference between the non-Christian and the Christian? That in drawing the contrast between the Christian and the non-Christian, the issue is not that the Christian has no problems and the non-Christian has problems. The Christian has problems just like the non-Christian. The Christian suffers accidents just like the non-Christian. The Christian loses their job and goes through relational problems, just like the non-Christian.

The difference between the non-Christian and the Christian is that when the Christian goes through problems, trials and tribulations, the Christian has God and the non-Christian doesn't. This is what distinguishes us. That we are not left utterly alone, utterly desolate, utterly isolated in our pain. Yes, we have pain.

But we have God. That is why the Psalmist says: "When my father and my mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up."

That is why the apostle Paul said at the end of his life in 2 Timothy, "At my first trial, everyone forsook me, but the Lord stood with me and he has strengthened me." That is why Jesus said, "You will all leave me, but I am not alone, my Father is with me." The boast of the Christian is: No matter what, I have God.

Do you remember when you couldn't say that? Do you understand that people all around you are living without that resource? That to be a non-Christian means that you are unable to say in a time of trouble: Well, it all may collapse, but I still have God.

See, that's what faith is all about. Because faith takes into account all of the evidence and whatever it is you are going through. But you know that all of the evidence includes God. All the evidence is not just what the doctor said. It is what the doctor said plus God. All the evidence is not just what you are currently looking at in your marriage. It is what you are looking at in your marriage plus God. All the evidence is not just your financial situation currently. It is that plus God. It is not just you having an unmanageable relationship with God. It is that plus God.

Do you want to know the secret of having a strong faith? It is in every situation, you weigh in God. You say, "I am not going to be like a non-Christian. I have God!"

You face obstacles, sickness, trial, but then you weigh in God and you start saying, "God, you are omniscient. You know everything." This little obstacle that you are facing didn't catch God by surprise, did it? Do you think God promised you something, to provide for your needs, and then got waylaid by you losing your job – "Oh my gosh! I didn't plan for that one! I made that promise about providing, then this caught me totally off guard. Now I have to scramble to make something happen." Friends, let me share a little secret with you. God is not scrambling trying to improvise a solution for you and God is not sweating the outcome of His activity. He's totally in control even though we aren't and we're frantic and panicked. He's in control.

You say, "Well, yeah, but this was a sin that I sinned. I did this deliberately. I walked away from God."

Do you think that God didn't know that? That you would do that? You turn back to God, and God can and will bring blessing back into your life.

Take into account that God is the master of the universe when you're struggling with faith. Take into account that nothing is too hard for God. Take into account God's power. Abraham was fully persuaded that God had power to do what he promised. He lays that out in Romans 4:17 "The God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were." God's power is evident by resurrection, bringing life to the dead – life to dead marriages, life to dead emotions, life to callings. And calling things that were not as though they were.

Some of you say that you are not very useful, that you cannot find your place in the body of Christ because you are a nobody. Faith says that God can take

nobodies and make them into somebodies. You know, God loves to do that because that gives him the most glory. God has a call for each one of you. There is no one sitting here that God doesn't specifically have a ministry for. And it is more than sitting here listening to messages and it is more than standing and singing. God wants to make every one of you useful. God often takes nobodies and makes them somebodies. That is the way God operates. He always picks Gideons and Davids, the least, the last. The disciples are the least and the last and God made them somebodies.

Listen, this Summer Harvest crusade is a week away. I believe God wants you to taste the blessing of being useful to the master by using you. Do you realize that if every person in the Vineyard invited one person, there would be over 2000 people invited?

Being motivated in the Christian life is to remember where you have come from. Remember how serious the sickness was that you had. Remember how life is apart from Christ.

But there is something more than just the negative. To stay motivated, we also must remind ourselves of the positive. Remember what you have come into. Don't just remember the depth of the hole that you fell in, but remember the height that God has now lifted you up to in Christ. Are you excited about being a Christian? Does it thrill you? Is the thing in your life that you are the proudest about is that you are a Christian? Strip away all the other accolades and all the other accomplishments. Is the thing that is most exciting regarding you is that you are a Christian?

If not, then you don't know what it is that you have come into and why it is that it is a great thing to share. So Paul says in verse 13: "But now in Christ you who were once far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ."

One of my favorite Christian authors, Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones, who was a heart surgeon turned into a preacher at Westminster in England preached a whole message on this little phrase, "but now." Dr. Lloyd-Jones said that the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian can be summed up in this one little phrase, "but now." This is the line, he said. This is the sharp contrast that everyone in the world can say yes, I have known gloom. I have known sin. I have known rebellion. I have known guilt. Only the Christian can say, "But now, into my darkness light has broken. But now, into my guilt forgiveness has come. But now, into my depression new hope has been brought forth. But now, against the accusation of the enemy, I can raise up the cross of Jesus Christ.

If you want to know: Are you a Christian? Has there been this exchange? This absolute contrast?

You say: Well, I don't know. I guess it is all shades of gray to me, Rich. I guess I am maybe a little better than I was. I am moving forward. I am growing toward Jesus.

Paul doesn't use that kind of language of shades of gray, growing toward Jesus, evolving. He uses the language of either/or, of absolute contrast. "But now." I used to be like this, but now I am like this.

But now... These words remind me of that verse in Matthew 4 that talks about people who have sat in darkness and have seen a great light. Those who dwelt

in a land of deep darkness, on them a light has dawned. You know, we are huddled together and it is absolutely dark. But now there is this gleam of light. We were in despair. We were hopeless and helpless. But now we have hope. Everything has changed because of the cross of Christ.

Yes, this is the way it was. We were under the judgment and the wrath of God, but now this whole new reign of grace has broken into the world. Time is broken up – before Christ, BC, and AD, in the year of our Lord. We measure history by the coming of Christ. And so we see this incredible change that takes place in terms of the history of the world because of Christ and because of the cross. It is not just an abstract turning point that Paul is talking about when he says, “But now we who were far have been brought near.” He is talking about a personal turning point in your life when you place your faith in Christ.

In fact, a really good way to measure whether you understand Christianity at all in your life is if you can say, “but now” when you are discouraged, depressed or accused. You know, our consciences regularly accuse us, and certainly Satan does. He comes along and says to you, “Look at you. You have blown it again. You made that commitment and you are just a failure.” And, indeed, you know what the Bible says, “God’s wrath rests on sinners.” You know you deserve to be judged. If you are a Christian, you can hear the accusation of the enemy and you can say, “Yes, all of that was true of me. I do deserve to be judged and I do deserve the anger and wrath of God. But now, God says that I am innocent in his sight. I should be totally insecure about the future and what the day of judgment has, but now because of the death of Christ, I am eternally secure. Nothing can ever separate me from the love of God that was shown to me in Christ. Yes, I sin. Yes, I stumble. But now I will not be condemned. I was guilty, but now God says that I am righteous.”

And so when you have those defeated feelings, “My goodness, you slipped into the same pattern again and you blew it again.” You can say, “yes, I did slip into the same pattern again, but now, because of what God has done at the cross, I can be an overcomer. No matter how many times I have failed, but now I can be an overcomer.”

Christians are people who can say, “But now...” Because they see a turning point in their lives. Something has changed in their relationship with God. We call it the “born again” experience. The theological word is “regeneration.” We have changed in our position with God. Christians are people who can say, “That was all true, but now...”

Can you say that? Can you honestly say, “Yes, I see that there is a turning point in my life. There is a change in my relationship with God that I am certain of. I know I am born again.”

And if you can say that, do you say that when feelings of discouragement threaten to overwhelm you? Do you say, “But now... yes, that was all true of me. But now something is different. There is a new reign in my life. There is a new power in my life. There is now grace in my life. There is a new Lord over my life. I am no longer mastered by anger. I know it is strong in me, but it is not my master. Christ is now my master.”

Paul continues, "But now, in Christ Jesus you who were far away have been brought near."

I love Paul's phrasing here. Because he doesn't say, "But now, in Christ Jesus you who were immoral have now been made moral." He doesn't say, "You who were irreligious have now been made religious. You who didn't go to church now go to church. You who didn't practice liturgy have now begun to practice liturgy."

In helping us to understand the sharp contrast of being a non-Christian and being a Christian, he says, "You who were far off have now been brought near."

See, the whole issue boils down to whether you are now in relationship to Christ. Have you entered into a relationship with Christ. Are you nearer to him? Are you in fellowship with him? Can you say, "I know Jesus? I am close to Jesus?" That is what a Christian is. A Christian is not someone who used to be immoral and now became moral. Or used to be irreligious and now became religious. A Christian is someone who used to be far away from Jesus and now is close to Jesus, is in relationship with Jesus.

That is why it is so silly, it is so absolutely goofy when I hear someone say, "You know, Rich, I wish I had a testimony like yours. For you, the line was really clear. You were a Jew. You didn't know anything about Christianity and you were all goofed up. You made a radical change. For me it has been gradual. I wish I had a better testimony. I wish I had held up three liquor stores and been thrown in jail and was on death row and then experience the glorious light of Christ. It would be so much easier for me."

Anyone who talks that way doesn't understand what it means to be a Christian. It all has to do with being near to Jesus, being in relationship to Jesus. And none of us had that. We were all far away. I don't care how moral you were, you were far away from Jesus. There are many non-Christians who are moral. There are many non-Christians who know a lot about religion. There are many non-Christians who go to church. You may be among them. But you are not near to Jesus.

How did it come to be that you got near to Jesus? Here is Paul's answer:

"But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ." You can underline the phrase: through the blood of Christ. The Apostle Paul is saying: Let me make myself absolutely clear here so that you understand what has raised you up to this privileged place of having the promises, of receiving a special call, of having hope, of having God when you are in trouble.

Let me be perfectly clear about what brought you close to Jesus. It wasn't your moral improvement campaign. It wasn't your resolution to do better next time. It wasn't your active religious life, your prayers, your church going, your exertion. It was only this. By Jesus' blood. By his death on the cross. By his broken body. By his life poured out. It was only by the blood of Christ that the obstacle of your sins has been removed from the sight of God. It is only by trusting in the blood of Christ that you heard a word from God saying: Not Guilty. I have taken away your sins. I have forgiven you. I have taken your transgressions and placed them on the sin bearer, Jesus.

How does a person get saved? By putting the reliance on the blood of Christ. How did I get clean? By the blood of Christ. How do you get cleansed today if you feel dirty? By the blood of Christ.

1 John 1:7 says, "If we walk in the light, he sees us in the light. We have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us, cleanses us right now from all sin." If we come out into the light, into the honesty about ourselves and our situation and our condition and our sin, and we rely on the death of Christ, his blood today will cleanse us.

Friends, as Christians, you have had your sins forgiven. As Christians you have had your consciences cleansed. As Christians, God has said to you and you alone that he views you just as if you have not doing anything wrong. You are now special to God. You are now his chosen people. You are the light of the world. Are you excited to be a Christian? Does it motivate you to think about what God has done on your behalf? Will you tell someone else? Will you invite someone this week to Summer Harvest? Let's pray.