

## Patience

### Essay 14 in the series “Ode to Joy”

“All of us who are mature  
should take such a view of things.  
And if on some point  
you think differently,  
that too God will make clear to you.  
Only let us live up  
to what we have already attained.”

Paul wrote that? Yes, he did, in Philippians 3:15-16. And, yes, you’re right again, it doesn’t sound like much of a law code, does it?

Here’s what’s happening. Paul has just stated what matters most to him – the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord (verse 8). Compared to this, everything else he considers garbage. Everything else! What he wants now is to gain Christ and be found in him (verses 8-9), be found in the realm that is Christ, out there beyond all the trouble, beyond all the distractions, beyond all the things that worry us and steal our joy, a realm that is Christ, a glorious realm where all is put in perspective. So Paul wants to know Christ and the power of his resurrection (verse 10) and even what it feels like to share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, because now he knows it’s all Christ and it’s all good.

So he aspires to know Christ, not to know about Christ but to know Christ, Christ as present with him in every breath he takes, above him, beneath him, before him, behind him, beside him, surrounding him, as if in the higher dimensions all around him, as close as the air he breathes, present in the food he eats, in the people he meets, in the work he does, in the words he speaks, and in the struggles he faces. Now Paul admits that even he hasn’t mastered all this, but forgetting what is behind, he presses on. He strains forward, to win the prize for which God has called him heavenward in Christ Jesus.

It’s then he writes verses 15-16, and here we see a Paul most people don’t know. Paul gets a bum rap these days. I tried to find a more elegant way to say this, but Paul gets a bum rap. In fact, he’s gotten a bum rap for centuries now. Jesus, we like, but Paul some aren’t so sure of. Somehow people see Paul as a law-and-order guy laying down hard doctrine over the gracious gospel of Jesus. Maybe this happens because over the years on various issues, but especially slavery in the early nineteenth century and female subordination in our time, traditionalists have quoted Paul out of all historical context first to keep slaves in their place and then to keep women in their place. But the shame in this is not Paul’s, it’s the traditionalists who misunderstand and misuse him.

If you read Paul closely you find a man who distinguishes between his own opinions and the teaching of Christ, who is sensitive and responsive to circumstances, who makes concessions to human weaknesses, who reasons in good and better, in what is best and

what is acceptable, who has no desire to be restrictive, who in every way works for the good of those to whom he writes (all this being evident just in 1 Corinthians 7).

If you read Paul closely you find a man who grants that what's safe for one person may not be safe for another, who tries in every way he can to direct people to what is loving, who feels no need to follow precedent (all this in 1 Corinthians 8-10), who has no desire to lord it over others (2 Corinthians 1:24) but instead works for the joy of those to whom he writes, who states emphatically that that we are "not under law, but under grace" (Romans 6:14), that "we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code" (Romans 7:6), that "Christ is the end of law" (Romans 10:4), that "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6), and who now writes:

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So, yes, Paul gets a bum rap. Paul late in life, very late, in AD 67-68, now chained in prison in Rome expecting to die soon, in 2 Timothy 2 warns against "quarreling about words" (verse 14). It's of no value, he writes, and only ruins those who listen. If it doesn't go anywhere, if it convinces no one of anything, don't do it. "Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments" (verse 23). Instead, just do the right thing yourself. Don't argue. Invite others to a different perspective.

And so Philippians 3:15-16 is quintessential Paul in its graciousness, in its patience, in its trust in God. Paul begins, "All of us who are mature should take such a view of things" – the view that what matters most is to know Christ Jesus our Lord, to gain Christ and be found in him. Compared to this, everything else is garbage. That's what Paul says. What matters most is this consciousness – to know Christ as everywhere and within us, as close as the air we breathe. But then Paul makes a surprising concession, "And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you." Is that a little zinger? Maybe. I leave it to you to decide. I would only add that Paul doesn't seem in a zinging mood. Instead, he leaves it to God. He does not demand. He does not assume that all will see eye to eye with him on all matters. Others do. Many church leaders do. Parents do. Even friends do. But not Paul. Not inspired, Spirit-filled Paul. Now we might assume that Paul because he is inspired and Spirit-led might have reason to suppose that others will, or at least should, agree with him. But no, he doesn't, and I would propose that he knows this and accepts this because he is Spirit-filled.

Paul does not assume that all would see eye to eye with him. He asks only that we live up to what we have already attained – which again is so wise. It turns out over and over that we already know enough. The challenge is to act on what we already know to be true. If

we just do this, if we live up to what we have already attained, we will do well. We will see our way forward and we will do well.

So when we are faced with someone who thinks differently than us, someone at work, someone in the neighborhood, someone in church, someone in our family, our mother, our son, our “ex,” what do we do? Make demands? Become angry that they do not see eye to eye with us? Misrepresent them? Attack them? Or maybe on a whole lot of things could we just remember, “I’m not arguing with you. I don’t have to convince you you’re wrong. I don’t have to convince you I’m right. I’m just not arguing. Instead, I’m inviting”<sup>i</sup>

Could we remember that, yes, all who are mature maybe should see it in a certain way? But if on some point we think differently, we leave it to God. We only do our best to live up to what we have already attained. And where does this approach, this trust, this patience with one another lead but to joy?

In fact, there is no joy in any other way.

– Dale Pauls

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<sup>i</sup> Adapted from Jeanine Thweatt-Bates’ blog *Rude Truth*, July 24, 2013.