

God's People Defined

Introduction

I don't know if you paid much attention to the recent announcement of the **honours list**? If you have no idea what an honours list is, or you're picturing something to do with a university let me educate you. Twice each year, at new year and on her birthday, the Queen gives a bunch of people what are called "honours".

She declares them to be knights, dames, or a member of the order of the British Empire – that's an MBE for short – or, apparently, a member of the order of the Bath – which doesn't quite seem to have the same ring to it, perhaps related to outstanding toiletries or something like that.

Now, if the queen declares you to be a knight everyone has to start **calling you "sir"**. And I quite like the sound of that. "sir Round" rolls off the tongue nicely. It feels like the sort of thing which comes with breakfast in bed, doesn't it.

So I was looking at **what it takes** to get one of these awards and apparently to be made a knight you have to, and I quote, "make a major contribution in any activity, usually at national level." That's a bit vague really isn't it? And that might come in handy...

I was thinking perhaps I could make a major contribution in barbequing or burning stuff or something like that and so **declare myself** a knight, at last securing my breakfast in bed. I don't think I'm far off making a national contribution. Why don't you give it a try: "sir Round". Thank you. Thank you.

Alas, that's not how it works. **I can't make myself a knight**. I can try to make a major contribution. I can try to do the sorts of things which might get me nominated. But at the end of the day it's the Queen who decides who's a knight and who's not – nothing I do can make it happen.

Connection

The passage we're looking at today covers one really important topic: what defines God's people. What is it that makes us "in"? How do we get on that list?

Why does that matter?

- Perhaps some of you came along today wondering what it would mean to become a part of God's people – how do you actually **become a Christian**, and what does that really mean.
- Perhaps there are others here who have taken some steps towards God but you're wondering if you are **really a part** of His people, if it's real, or if there's more you have to do to take your place in God's people.
- And maybe there are some of you here today who are sure you're a part of God's people – but you need to **look again** at what you are basing your confidence on and whether that's valid. Have you really understood what it takes to get on that list?

It's essential we understand what defines God's people and the passage we're looking at today is going to help us explore this topic so let's see what we can learn.

Context

We're looking at a letter written by Paul, one of Jesus' first followers, to one of the churches he started in a place called Philippi in Greece. Paul's writing from a Roman prison and his future doesn't look particularly bright – there's a reasonable chance things are going to end with his death.

He's writing to a church which was started through what looks like a pretty brief visit: a conversion, an exorcism, a beating, an interrupted night in jail, more conversions and a quick departure - you can read the story in Acts 16. Things obviously haven't improved that much since Paul is writing to encourage the church to persevere through persecution in joyfully living for Christ.

Who are God's people?

The first question Paul answers for us in today's passage is "who exactly are God's people?" – it's obviously something he's talked about with the Philippians before – see in verse 1 "It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again" – and it's something important, "a safeguard," Paul calls it.

But before we can get into how Paul defines God's people I think we have to start at the very beginning. **Why does God have a people** at all? What do we mean when we say "God's people"? Doesn't it imply that there are some who are not God's people?

History of God's people

Well, if we flip right back to the beginning of the Bible we find that in the beginning, when God made the very first people, he made them "in the **image**" of God – so there's a sense in which we are all God's people, all a reflection of Him.

But our first parents turned their backs on God, not trusting him. They didn't want to be his people and live his way.

God didn't give up on them – he launched a rescue plan to see his relationship with the people he had made restored, something he would work out **through a people he chose** for himself starting with Abraham. It was starting with this people, and through them, that God would work to restore his relationship with everyone.

So, why does God have a people? This same rescue plan is still working out. We inherit our first parents' broken relationship with God – we start life outside of his people. The key question is how we cross the dividing line into being God's people, the people we were created to be.

Two definitions for God's people

Paul begins today's passage reminding the Philippians what it really is that makes us in God's people – and **he's pretty cross** with those who have other ideas for how to answer that question. Dogs! Evildoers! Mutilators of the flesh!

Name calling isn't exactly what you expect from a front-row member of God's people, is it. But if this gets Paul so worked up then we should sit up and pay attention – it's obviously something important.

So what's going on? What are the **two competing proposals** for defining God's people? It all comes down to who gets you "in". On the one hand

Paul's opponents point to themselves. "I got me in. I did it." On the other hand Paul points to Jesus. "He got me in. He did it."

Circumcision and people

A couple of things in the text might need a bit of explaining here.

Circumcision is obviously key. In polite company I don't want to have to delve into details unless absolutely necessary so I'm going to assume you all understand what that is. I see the men grimace and so I'll take that as a yes.

Why is circumcision an issue? Because it had been the key defining mark of who God's people were for a long time, a **boundary marker**.

It was God's idea, something he commanded Abraham to make standard for his family way back near the beginning of the bible and something that had **marked out God's people as separate** and different from the others around them for thousands of years by the time we get to Paul's letter.

In verse 2 when Paul calls his opponents "mutilators of the flesh" this is almost certainly what he's referring to. And when in verse 3 he says "we are the circumcision" what he means is "we are God's people – we're the ones with the real defining mark of being 'in'."

The true mark of belonging

And what is that mark? Paul tells us: "boasting in Christ Jesus" not putting confidence in the flesh.

Now **boasting seems a bit of a strange basis** for membership in God's people, doesn't it? I mean generally that's the sort of thing we're meant to avoid, right? What place does boasting have among God's people?

Well, I think that's exactly the point here really – it's an odd kind of boasting that **boasts in someone else**, isn't it? Of course there's always the "my dad's better than your dad" type of thing – but here the sharp contrast is between Paul's opponents who boast in the flesh, that is in themselves, and Paul's position of boasting only in Jesus – that is, not in anything he has done.

Paul a winner under their rules

And it's a big deal for Paul to say this since, as he goes on to point out, if it was about pointing to yourself, saying "I got me in. I did it", then Paul could

have done that like a champ. If those were the rules, he was a winner. He was a card carrying super Jew according to those rules. “If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more,” he says. He reels off a long list of qualifications – all joined up by the same thing: me. I did it. I got me in.

Gain to loss

But then he goes and stamps on that idea hard. All these qualifications, all these achievements, all the sorts of things which would score points. What does it all add up to? “whatever were gains to me I now consider loss.” Zero. That’s what it adds up to.

Paul’s **thinking has fundamentally changed**. “I now consider” he says – so he used to think he had a pretty good score. Boy has his mind changed. The stuff he thought was important, the stuff he thought was putting him soundly in the category of God’s people – worthless. Utterly ineffective. Bankrupt.

What replaces all those things? “knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” Paul tells us in verse 8. We’re going to dig into what exactly it means to know Christ Jesus as Lord later on but let’s stop here and take a moment to reflect.

The insufficiency of law-keeping

Why is it that none of this stuff which Paul had credited himself with matters? **Why doesn’t it get him in** to God’s people? He kept God’s law – he says: “as for righteousness based on the law, faultless” – surely that’s enough? This isn’t just claiming “I’m not so bad – sure I’ve made some mistakes but weighing it all up I think God’s going to be reasonably pleased with how I turned out.” No, this is pushing things much further. Paul says he was faultless. Faultless. He scored 100%. Why isn’t that good enough to make it into God’s people?

The Pharisees, the Jewish sect Paul used to belong to, made a huge effort to **keep every regulation** of the Jewish purity law which defined God’s people. They put rules around the rules to make sure they didn’t break them. When the law told them to rest on the Sabbath day they made long lists of exactly what work was so you could be sure not to do it by mistake. When the law told you to offer firstfruits to God they would leave part of their food when

visiting others and eating with them just in case some hadn't already been offered to God.

Why isn't this good enough for God?

For an answer to this we have to turn to Jesus. What does Jesus have to say about this sort of top scorer? This is Jesus in Matthew chapter 23. It's not pretty.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Ouch.

What's the problem with Paul's 10-out-of-10 law-keeping past? **Nothing – as far as it goes.** But it's focused on **fixing the outside.** It's focused on the visible. It's focused on what looks right. It's an exercise in **missing the point.** Arranging deckchairs on the titanic - when there's a gaping hole in the underside.

You see **the outside is just the tip of the iceberg** if you want to really keep the law. Really keeping the law is about the inside first. It's about loving God and loving people, Jesus says. It's about justice, mercy and faithfulness, Jesus says. It's about what's going on inside – the outside is just a reflection of that. "First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside may also be clean," Jesus says.

So I have to ask you:

Have you been arranging deckchairs? Are you busy slapping lipstick on a pig – if you'll forgive the expression? Have you been polishing up the outside of your cup without changing the inside?

Are you trying look like a nice person to the casual observer when you know you inside you haven't really changed at all?

[pause]

What's the solution

If being a part of God's people rests on cleaning the inside, not just the outside, **what can we do?** If that's the problem, what's the solution? The problem is not about what we do so much as who we are. And how could we change that? I'm me. End of story, right?

In verses 8 and 9 Paul says this inside **change starts with "knowing Christ Jesus,"** with "gaining Christ", with "being found in him." Paul explains the Christian way into God's people in verse 9 – what gets us on to God's honours list: "not having a righteousness of my own" but a "righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith."

This is what it means to be in God's people. **Not looking to ourselves** to get us in, our own righteousness. Not thinking we can get ourselves on that list by ticking some boxes. It's knowing Jesus, who makes the list, and accepting his invitation to share in his righteousness through faith - and so his place in God's people.

That's what Paul means when he says he wants to "be found in him" – it's not just a strange metaphorical celestial hide-and-seek where Paul's in the cupboard marked Jesus. No, when the proverbial show is over and the fat lady sings Paul wants the conclusion to be that he is included in Christ, and so in God's people. That's the truth he wants to be found out about him.

I'm going to come back to what it means to "know Christ Jesus" and how to see the inside change later but there's another question we need to look at here too: **Why is this an issue for the Philippians** at all? Didn't Paul explain all this to them before, and isn't this just a repeat – like he says, a reminder. Are

they just forgetful? Surely the Philippians aren't really going to fall from pointing to Jesus as the one who got them in into pointing to themselves? Surely they know they don't cut the mustard?

Why is this an issue?

Well, perhaps. But maybe there's something else going on here too.

Notice how **persecution has been a key topic** coming up again and again in the letter. It's clearly a big problem as it was for so many of the first Christians and as it had been for Paul himself when he was staying in that town.

In no small way that's because **Christianity was viewed as a subversive outlaw religion** by the Romans who ruled so much of the world at that time. I mean, take a look at it from their point of view: a bunch of people are following a guy who died as a criminal and putting allegiance to him over their allegiance to the emperor as Lord. That doesn't sound like good news for an empire at all.

So there's lots of suspicion of Christians and questions over them – perhaps even open persecution. That's a big **contrast to how the Jews were treated** by the Romans since Judaism was a *religio licita* – a permitted religion, one of a set of valid things to believe and follow in the empire without getting in trouble.

Now, if all it took was **just a little snip** to put you under the cover of Judaism and put an end to a bunch of trouble surely that'd be a pretty powerful attraction?

And **what could possibly be the harm** in that? It's just avoiding being obnoxious to our Jewish peers, they might say. Just avoiding poking our finger in their eye when we don't need to, right? What's the trouble with going along with some of the things they want so we can still be a part of their group?

Even Paul seems to walk some way along this line – he gets one of his gentile companions, **Timothy, circumcised** because of the Jews, Acts 16:3 tells us. So what's the problem?

I think the problem is it's a **slippery slope**. Sure I just did this to get them off my back. But the danger is it doesn't stop there. Since we're dancing to their tune isn't it likely there'll be another push for a bit more compliance? And then another? And before we know it we start looking an awful lot like them. We blend in nicely. No more persecution. But now our way of life tells a completely different story about what it really is that defines God's people – and it's a story we might start to believe ourselves too...

Fitting in and forgetting

I think this is a real **danger for Christians today** – to take on things which make us less objectionable to the world around us, often pretty small things, often things which aren't a big deal and don't conflict with what we believe. We take them on and over time they **become just a piece of the scenery**, part of who we are, part of what we do. And over time we grow confused about what their true place and importance is. **What really is the main thing** about being a Christian? What really is the defining issue?

Can you feel the **pressure to conform** coming from your TV each day? Coming from the papers? Coming from your peers? Can't we just be more tolerant? Can't we just be a bit more inclusive? Can't we just be more eco-friendly? Nothing wrong with that, surely?

How long will it be before we slip into thinking being a Christian is **fundamentally about being tolerant**? Being a Christian is fundamentally about being inclusive? Being a Christian is about recycling? We start believing the story we're selling others. "Actually, I'm pretty good. You know, I think I score pretty highly. You know, if I was God, I'd probably quite like people like me."

But Paul says "NO! Look out! Remember the truth. **None of this is worth anything in the end**. None of this is real gain. It's all loss, zero, bankrupt. When the chips are down the only thing which matters in the end is Jesus – and He's of surpassing worth, worth everything, more precious than anything we might come up with, no matter how good or nice.

So ask yourself:

is there anywhere I am going along with things just for the sake of acceptance? What am I putting on to try and stand out a bit less?

If someone looked at my life, what would they think was the defining issue?

[pause]

Knowing Christ

Now there's one more thing here I want us to have a good close look at. We've mentioned it a few times already – it's this idea of "knowing Christ". Paul describes it as being of "surpassing worth" – megabucks – and it's the true defining mark of God's people.

But **what does it actually mean?** I think it needs some pretty serious unpacking for us to have a fuller understanding of what Paul is getting at. Thankfully Paul gives us a hand with this right here.

Not "knowing about"

But for starters, let me give you something it isn't. Knowing Christ isn't knowing a topic – like getting ready for an exam as I'm sure many of you have been in these past weeks.

It's not like when you arrive at the pearly gates St Peter will be there with a **multiple choice** quiz booklet with your name on it. "Ah, Matt, we've been expecting you. If you could just fill this in we'll see if you make it..." There's no heavenly "points-mean-prizes" round where Bible trivia will turn out to be of significant eternal value.

Knowing Christ isn't knowing *about* Christ. The two are totally different.

This is immediately obvious to us all, I think. Let's try a few test cases, shall we? Do you **know anything about the Queen?** Name? Pets? Birthday? Favourite tippie? Ok you all know something *about* the queen. Now, are we privileged enough today to have anyone here who actually *knows* the queen? I was wondering if we'd have someone here who fits the bill. It is Oxford, after all. But even if we did – do you think they would *really know* the Queen? Or just have had a little acquaintance with her?

So, first point on knowing: **knowing is not knowing about**. As James' letter in the Bible points out, even the demons know a thing or two about God. Being able to spell out the entire life story of the British monarchy does not mean you know the Queen in the slightest. Learning about Jesus is a fine thing to do – not at all saying that's a bad thing to do. You'll end up knowing about him and that's surely good – but you won't necessarily end up knowing him.

Relational knowing

So what does it mean, then, to know Christ? Well, ask yourself what it means to know any person. What does it mean for me to know my wife? My father? My pastor? Truly knowing a person is all about relationship with them.

Doesn't that show us the huge gulf between the two ways of defining God's people we've been talking about? One side says it's all about rules – the other it's all about relationship. **A personal relationship with God**. That's the utterly unique claim and basis for Christianity.

Knowing Jesus – My story

I wonder if there's anyone here today who feels like they know about Christ – but they don't actually know him? You see I grew up learning and knowing lots about Jesus through going along to Sunday school and church. It didn't make a hoot of difference to my life. It wasn't until I was at university that I finally opened myself up to actually knowing Jesus, not just knowing about him.

There's something unusual that Paul says here in our passage which really chimes with my journey to faith. Paul talks in verse 8 about "knowing Christ Jesus **as my Lord**". I think that's a significant part of what really knowing Jesus means – its knowing him as your Lord. That was key for me. That was the line I didn't want to cross in the end. I knew about Jesus and I knew what he wanted for my life – but it was my life and I was in charge of living it thanks very much. I wanted to be my own boss - I didn't want a killjoy Jesus as Lord.

Accepting that Jesus was **in fact my Lord** was part of what it meant for me to actually know him rather than just know about him. If that connects with you at all please come and talk to me after the service. I would love to share more of my story with you and hear where you are.

[pause]

Paul gives us more here, though. He expands on what it means to know Jesus in a very surprising and somewhat strange way. See what he adds on in verse 10? “I want to know Christ – yes to know the power of his resurrection and participate in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.” Pretty straightforward stuff, right? Not.

Three things there – Power. Participation. Becoming like. I want to focus just on the last one. What does Paul mean when he talks about knowing Jesus as “becoming like him in his death”?

Knowing as becoming like

Does this mean Paul wanted to die a **death as a substitute** for the sins of others like Jesus, dying in their place? Becoming like him in that way? Of course not – Paul knows Jesus was the ultimate once-for-all substitute. That’s not what he means by becoming like Jesus in his death.

Does this just mean **Paul actively wants to die**, then, as a part of knowing Jesus? He may well be expecting to die because of his faith. But he’s probably not going to die in the same way as Jesus for starters – crucifixion was reserved for criminals and Paul was a Roman citizen so he’d go by beheading if he was going to go – it’s not going to be that much like Jesus. But more than this, if knowing Jesus really means dying for your faith then it’s only martyrs who know Jesus. Though there were plenty of them and they are rightly honoured that’s not what Paul could mean here.

Details of the **language** give us some clues. Paul says knowing Jesus is becoming like him – becoming – it’s a **process which is continuing**, the language makes it clear. This can’t possibly be a one-time death that Paul is looking forward to. It’s not that knowing Jesus means he will become like Jesus just at some future point, when he dies. No, knowing Jesus is the process of becoming.

And also the particular word he uses for becoming, literally “**taking the same form as**” should make our ears prick up. That’s an echo. It takes us back a few verses to where Paul was talking about Jesus’ death. Do you remember Philippians 2:8 we looked at recently? “And being found in human form, he

humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

What was Jesus’ death like? Terrible – yes. Unjust – yes. But this verse tells us it was **humble obedience**. Let me read that to you again. What does it mean, becoming like him in his death? “he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross”.

Paul is saying truly knowing Jesus, which is what he wants, what we should want, is a process of becoming like him in his death – a process of becoming **humbly obedient no matter what the cost**. That’s what it means to know Jesus.

Conclusion

So, then, what have we learned? We set out looking for what defined God’s people.

What was it that made you “in”? How did you get on that honours list? The answer is “he did it” – not me. It’s Jesus who gets us on that list, not ourselves.

And more importantly, what is it that defines God’s people?

Knowing Jesus – not knowing about him, but knowing him. As a person. In relationship.

And knowing Jesus means a life of becoming like him in his death – becoming humbly obedient no matter what the cost.

Annexe

let's take a peek at each in turn and see what we learn.

Powerful knowing

So the first thing Paul tells us about knowing Jesus is that this means knowing the power of his resurrection. That's an odd thing to put first, isn't it – particularly given what comes next. Resurrection seems to be the end of the story – but it's put at the beginning. It's also a unique phrase you find nowhere else in the Bible. The power of God. The power of the Spirit. Sure. But what exactly *is* this power of his resurrection?

Well, in Jesus' story the resurrection was the moment he was finally vindicated by God. Death couldn't hold him – it had no right. He didn't belong there. He was –and is – righteous through and through. The resurrection was God declaring this – he has no sin. He should not be dead.

The power of this resurrection, then, what's this power? Isn't it that the resurrection confirms Jesus' righteousness – that's why it happened. And doesn't that connect to Paul's discussion of what it means to be God's people? In effect he's saying knowing Jesus is knowing the power of his righteousness – that righteousness by which we can be declared to be in God's people.

Still with me? Ok, that's the easy one out of the way.

Participatory knowing

Now, how does it help us understand what it means to know Jesus when Paul says this means we “participate in his sufferings”? Notice its sufferings, plural, not suffering. This is not talking about Jesus dying on the cross. Paul describes what happened at the cross with other words when he refers to it. So what sufferings are in view here? Messianic eschatological suffering which we participate in through Christ.