

Foreword to Richard Sibbes' 'Christ is Best'

If your Christian life has become at all stale and joyless, then a tonic I heartily recommend is this most cheery Puritan, Richard Sibbes (1577-1635). Really, anything of his will do, but this little work will give you a fine taste.

Christ is Best was originally a funeral sermon preached by Sibbes, opening up Paul's dilemma (in Philippians 1:23-24): would he rather die and be with Christ, which is best of all, or live on so as to build up the church further? Through it, Sibbes displays how beautifully different a lively faith is from dead religion. In dead religion, one can easily talk of receiving 'grace' so as to 'get heaven'. Paul does not. Instead of desiring to depart and be *in heaven*, Paul says he desired to depart and be *with Christ*. For, says Sibbes, 'heaven is not heaven without Christ.' In other words, true faith is not about buying into some abstract system of salvation (even one paid for by Christ); first and foremost it is about the Spirit bringing me to know, love and desire Christ himself.

Knowing that made all the difference to what Sibbes was about as a pastor and preacher. Wanting more than upright behaviour, more than mere assent to gospel truth, Sibbes sought to cultivate in his listeners such holy *desires* as Paul had. 'Desires are the immediate issue of the soul', he said; in fact, 'Nothing characteriseth a Christian so much as holy and blessed desires, for there is no hypocrisy in them.' Paul had been brought to appreciate that Christ truly is best, that he is better and more desirable than anything else in life or death: Sibbes simply wanted our hearts to beat with Paul's.

But how? How can we – we who naturally find almost anything but God alluring – have our hearts and their desires so redirected? How can we, without hypocrisy, come to embrace Christ as our most dearly cherished treasure? Sibbes explains how it was for Paul:

St Paul loved the person of Christ, because he felt sweet experience that Christ loved him; his love was but a reflection of Christ's love first. He loved to see Christ, to embrace him, and enjoy him that had done so much and suffered so much for his soul, that had forgiven him so many sins, *etc.* (pp. 15-16, below)

In other words, hearts begin to desire Christ above all when they sense how much he loves us sinners, how much he has suffered for our forgiveness, how unfathomably kind and merciful he is and has been. We love him, because he first loved us (1 John 4:19).

Sibbes knew well that when hearts are thus captivated by Christ and turned to delight in him above all, something happens. He put it like this: 'Beloved, those that have warmed their hearts at the fire of God's love, they think zeal itself to be coldness, and fruitfulness to be barrenness. Love is a boundless affection.' What all my efforts could not achieve, the love of Christ achieves: it wins me to love God and love others with sincerity, freedom and spontaneity; I begin to *enjoy* holiness and *hate* sin.

Sibbes's preaching awoke and invigorated faith, love and joy in Christ for great numbers in his own day. I pray now for you, reader, that this little sermon may cause you to say 'Christ really is best of all; he is my highest desire and my only boast.'

This is the foreword to the Banner of Truth Pocket Puritans title, *Christ is Best*.



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