

LIVING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Scriptures: Philippians 3:17-21; Romans 12:1-2

Introduction

There is a classic puzzle that involves nine dots in three rows. The task is to draw four straight lines through all nine dots without lifting your pencil.

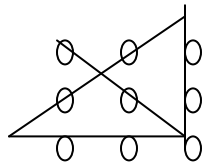
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People often start by drawing four lines around the edges, but that leaves out the dot in the middle. Or they try a Z-shape, but that leaves out the dot on one side. Or they try a kind of S-shape, but that leaves out two dots. So how do you draw four straight lines through all nine dots without lifting your pencil? I will let you ponder that for a minute while we read our second scripture.

Read: Philippians 3:17-21

Sermon

The key to solving the puzzle is to go outside the box. If you draw the straight lines beyond the boundaries of the nine dots, it will work. This is the very kind of puzzle that gave us the expression: “thinking outside the box.”



That is also the key to our scripture reading today from Philippians, chapter 3. In verses 18-19 Paul says,

For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.

To set your mind on earthly things is to think inside the box, to think only in terms of this life. It means thinking about what I can get for myself, and how much of it can I get before I die.

There is an old song by Peggy Lee that goes like this:

Is that all there is? Is that all there is?
If that's all there is, my friends, then let's keep dancing,

Let's bring out the booze and have a ball,
If that's all there is.

If you think only inside the box, if this earthly life is all you think about, then as Paul says your god will be your belly. Life will be a search for the things that make you feel good, not just food but possessions, recreation, relationships, or respect. Sometimes what people seek in this life is not possessions but prestige: building a reputation so that people will look up to you or at least remember you when you are gone.

All of which makes the cross seem ridiculous. What possible pleasure could there be in carrying a cross? What possible prestige could be derived from a humiliating, ignominious death? If this life is all there is, the cross is something to avoid. You would be better off to keep on dancing or partying or fishing or shopping or traveling.

In fairness, many people find meaning in this life by trying to make life better for others: their children, grandchildren or others in the community, and that is a good thing. But here is the problem. If we have no greater goal than to make *this life* better for our children and grandchildren, we are condemning them to live inside the box. We are teaching them to operate on no higher values, no greater goals, than pleasure or prestige. If we leave our children wealth and property, education and opportunity, but no sense that they belong to someone greater than themselves, someone whose purpose for them stretches to eternity, have we really done them a favor? Or have we condemned them at some point to look at their own lives and wonder, "Is this all there is?"

Living inside the box, living only for what we can get out of life, is a dead end. As Paul says in verse 20, "Their end is destruction." If you live only for what you can get out of this life, what you get will eventually disappear. The possessions you have so carefully accumulated will decay. The reputation you have so carefully cultivated will be forgotten. I hate to be the one to break this to you, but you are all going to die, and a hundred years from now you will be nothing more than a name in someone's genealogy. If you confine yourself to the box, if you limit your vision to this life, there is no solution to the puzzle of why we are here.

But if you think outside the box, suddenly everything changes. Verses 20-21:

But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

If you think outside the box, if you realize that there are possibilities for meaning and fulfillment beyond this life, then suddenly the cross makes sense. Remember, Paul is writing this from prison where he awaits possible execution for telling the Roman authorities that Jesus is Lord. That would be a stupid thing to do if this life is all there is. But in chapter 1 Paul says, "By my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or death." Paul is living outside the box. Paul knows there is more to life than this life, so he is not afraid to serve Jesus even if costs him his life.

Let me stress that living outside the box does not mean ignoring the box. Living for a kingdom greater than this world does not mean ignoring this world. It means that anything we do to serve Christ in this world will not be wasted. In chapter 1 Paul says, “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” This life really is important, but it is important because it is not all there is. Anything we do to serve Jesus in this life: sharing the gospel, helping the poor, teaching children, improving the quality of life for all people—these things are not lost in the kingdom of God. They are brought to fulfillment. If you are counting on these efforts to be fulfilled in this life, you are doomed to disappointment. But if you believe in a God who can take these limited, partial, and imperfect efforts and bring them to completion in the kingdom of God, then you know that even in this life your life will not be in vain.

Let me close with an example. Over the summer I have been reading *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Many people, including my children, were required to read this book in high school, but somehow I missed out. I am thrilled, however, that students in high school are required to read this book, because it is shockingly theological. Every chapter is loaded with deep discussions of the Bible and profound reflections on the meaning of faith in God. But best of all it is not abstract theology; it is theology that shapes the characters in the story and ultimately shaped the character of an entire nation. When Abraham Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author, he said, “So this is the little lady who made the big war.”

At one point in the story two slaves named George and Eliza flee with their son from a master who plans to break up the family and sell them to different slave owners down the river. They take refuge with a Quaker family in Ohio, led by a man named Simeon. During a conversation with Simeon, George speaks bitterly about the slave traders. He says,

Does (God) see all they do? Why does he let such things happen? And they tell us that the Bible is on their side; certainly all the power is. They are rich, and healthy, and happy ... and have it all their own way; and poor, honest, faithful Christians—Christians as good or better than they—are lying in the very dust under their feet. They buy ’em and sell ’em, and make trade of their heart’s blood, and groans and tears, --and God *let’s* them.

Simeon responds by opening a Bible. He says, “Friend George, listen to this psalm; then he begins reading from Psalm 73:

For I was envious of the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They are not in trouble like other men, neither are they plagued like other men. Therefore pride compasseth them as a chain; violence covereth them as a garment. Their eyes stand out with fatness; they have more than heart could wish. They are corrupt, and speak wickedly concerning oppression; they speak loftily. ... They say, How doth God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?

Then Simeon turns to George and says, “Is not that the way thee feels, George?” George is amazed. He says, “It is so, indeed, as well as I could have written it myself.” “Then hear,” says Simeon, and he continues reading:

When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me until I went unto the sanctuary of God. Then understood I their end. Surely thou dost set them in slippery places, thou castedst them down to destruction. . . . Nevertheless, I am continually with thee; thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me by thy counsel, and afterwards receive me to glory.

If you think inside the box, if you look at things only in terms of this life, then a lot of injustice, oppression, and exploitation in this world seem to go unpunished. People all over the world live their entire lives in luxury while around others—including people whose labor provides their wealth—live in desperate poverty.

But what if you think outside the box? All that wealth and power do not prevent people from dying, and after they die their riches are disbursed and their memory is forgotten, or vilified. But there is a Lord in heaven who can make your life count for something—count forever!—if you are only willing to commit it to him.

At the end of the psalm Simeon says to George,

If this world were all, George, thee might indeed, ask, Where is the Lord? But it is often those who have least of all in this life whom he chooseth for the kingdom. Put thy trust in him, and no matter what befalls thee here, he will make all right hereafter.

Then the author makes this concluding comment:

If these words had been spoken by some easy, self-indulgent exhorter, from whose mouth they might have come merely as pious and rhetorical flourish, proper to be used to people in distress, perhaps they might not have had much effect; but coming from one who daily and calmly risked fine and imprisonment for the cause of God and man, they had a weight that could not but be felt, and both the poor, desolate fugitives found calmness and strength breathing into them from it (pp. 208-210).

The riddle of the nine dots cannot be solved from inside the box, and neither can the riddle of life.

- Ken Onstot
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