

Nothing Else Really Matters

Philippians 3:4-14 If anyone else has reason to put their confidence in physical advantages, I have even more: ⁵ I was circumcised on the eighth day. I am from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin. I am a Hebrew of the Hebrews. With respect to observing the Law, I'm a Pharisee. ⁶ With respect to devotion to the faith, I harassed the church. With respect to righteousness under the Law, I'm blameless. ⁷ These things were my assets, but I wrote them off as a loss for the sake of Christ.

⁸ But even beyond that, I consider everything a loss in comparison with the superior value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have lost everything for him, but what I lost I think of as sewer trash, so that I might gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him. In Christ I have a righteousness that is not my own and that does not come from the Law but rather from the faithfulness of Christ. It is the righteousness of God that is based on faith. ¹⁰ The righteousness that I have comes from knowing Christ, the power of his resurrection, and the participation in his sufferings. It includes being conformed to his death ¹¹ so that I may perhaps reach the goal of the resurrection of the dead.

¹² It's not that I have already reached this goal or have already been perfected, but I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I myself don't think I've reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. ¹⁴ The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus.

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When I first read this passage, the first thought that ran through my mind was, "Perhaps the only time we really understand this passage is at a funeral." Funerals bring values into sharp focus. We see clearly that being successful in business is no substitute for being a good parent or living a life that obviously follows in the footsteps of Jesus. Dressing fashionably and decorating tastefully are no substitute for caring for the sick and the needy. A funeral reminds us what has ultimate importance and what has lesser value.

But most of the time we may not have a clear picture of the relative importance of all that goes on in our life. We hear phrases of "common wisdom" that are supposed to help us sort out things. "Don't forget to stop and smell the roses," can remind us to take Sabbath time and to take opportunities to appreciate the beauty and value of creation. The observation that "Hearses don't come equipped with luggage racks," is a more colorful way of saying "You can't take it with you." In our fast and frantic culture, we desperately need time for rest and meditation. In a world where we are bombarded by advertising hundreds of times a day, the thought that all of the material goods and toys will be left behind is an important realization that can lower our idolatry to the god of more. We need to come to a complete halt and realistically, honestly, objectively, and brutally review what we value, what we devote our time, energy, and money to. Is the gain we have experienced in life true gain? Are our losses true losses? Does the stock market, or public recognition, or athletic ability provide an index of our worth? Contemporary status props include race, gender, houses, automobiles, degrees, church position, length of church membership. We each find our worth and define our status in our own unique way. For years I tried to reassure myself of my worth with things like published articles, Mensa membership, and patents held.

In today's passage, Paul begins by declaring all of the assets he had that had defined his status and worth. I was a super Jew, he says. My bloodline was pure, my obedience to

the law was blameless, and my devotion was fervent. With such solid footing, what more could there be?

In the previous chapter, Paul takes note of how Christ was in a similar position. “Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. ⁷ But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings. When he found himself in the form of a human, ⁸ he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:6-8) Taking Christ as his example, Paul talks about his past and his present. Just as Christ didn’t exploit his equality with God and humbled himself, so Paul says, “These things were my assets, but I wrote them off as a loss for the sake of Christ.”

We have to be careful here. Paul is not saying that all of these previous things have no value. He wasn’t a failure. Paul doesn’t reject the law; he rejects the confidence he had in himself because he kept the law.

Paul doesn’t toss away junk to gain Christ; he tosses away that which was of tremendous value to him. But he realizes that he couldn’t earn righteousness and he knows that his pride in his own obedience was misplaced. Just like in 2:6-11, Christ gave up all claim to equality with God in exchange for obedient service, Paul tosses away the pride and feeling of entitlement he had from obedience, and accepts the gift of righteousness that is based in faith. He says there can never again be “righteousness of my own based on law.” Paul doesn’t renounce his past; he renounces the past as what defines who he is.

He rejects his previous concept that good works would provide righteousness and the confidence that gave him in the strongest possible terms. Let me go chase a rabbit for a minute. It is here that translators pussy-foot around, not wanting to offend modern sensibilities. They use words like rubbish, garbage, and filth for how Paul saw his previous confidence in his worthiness.

I mentioned last week that those who make rules about what words are acceptable in the kingdom of God, would throw Paul out of the church for the language that he used. Paul doesn’t use the word rubbish or garbage here. There’s a story told about Harry Truman and his wife Bess. Harry was giving a speech at an agricultural convention. Bess was sitting in the front row with a friend. Harry told the convention, “I don’t know much about farming, but I know it involves manure, and manure, and more manure.” Wide-eyed, Bess’s friend whispered to her, “Dear me, can’t you get Harry to say *fertilizer*?” Bess replied, “It’s taken me years to get him to say *manure*.” Well, in this passage Paul hasn’t learned to say manure yet! Too often, people decide that if a word is considered crude by the culture, then it must certainly be sacrilegious and offensive to God. Those folks haven’t read 1 Samuel 25:22 in their King James Bible.

Now, back to the point that Paul is making in this text. Emphatically, Paul has set aside his previous pride in his devout faith and his meticulous obedience. Now that he has come to know Christ, he is following in the footsteps of Christ, he is a disciple of Christ. And there, in Christ, Paul says, “I have a righteousness that is not my own and that does not come from the Law, but rather from the faithfulness of Christ. Paul says we don’t have a righteousness of our own, but we trust entirely in the grace of God. Jesus put his trust in the Father and in that we see the faith of Christ. And when we follow on that same path, trusting in God, we receive the grace of being counted as righteous, even though we live imperfect lives.

Righteousness is a gift from Christ. It is grace. Before, Paul’s motivation was based on self-righteous trust in legalism. Now, Paul is more powerfully motivated by gratitude

that comes from experiencing God's grace, by receiving righteousness as a gift. We run the race – not in an attempt to make the team – but because we are already on the team. Paul's motivation isn't fear, or guilt, or pride. It's the motivation of grateful belonging.

Before, the things about which Paul once boasted separated him from others. I keep the law better than you. My devotion is more fervent than yours. I'm working hard to earn righteousness. But Paul learned that righteousness is grace; it is a gift from God. And being in Christ unites all who trust in him, and that involves relying on God alone. Therefore, we are all dependent on grace and no one can claim to be better than any other person.

Paul had thought that he had to be better than anyone else to be righteous. He had to compete and win to be righteous. But God does not expect us to win the race; God expects us to run the race, to be on the path of Jesus, to trust and therefore risk, and then to accept God's bountiful grace. Amen.

All the things that give us status and recognition count for little.
Our obedience to God's will and loving our neighbor are important.
But, everything pales before the generous grace of God
who takes our trust and our efforts and gracefully calls us righteous!