

“Knowing Christ”

“I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Philippians 3:7-8).

In the age of Instagram, where people cultivate their image and curate their conceit, pride is a way of life. Yet, even in our ego-driven culture, nobody likes a show off. Arrogance is never an attractive quality, and that’s what makes Paul’s words at the beginning of today’s epistle reading so shocking. He writes, “If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Philippians 3:4-6).

Paul’s former life as Saul was one of absolute adherence to the Jewish way of life. From the beginning, He had done everything demanded by the Law of Moses, as well as his own religious teachers, and he had led his life with such discipline and commitment to the rites and rituals of the Jewish faith, that he was above reproach. In fact, when the Jewish leaders of the day needed someone to lead the charge against the early Christian church, Saul was the man they turned to.

It took a direct and dramatic appearance from the risen Christ to break and change the heart of this zealous Jewish leader. And man, did he ever change! When Paul wrote the words of today’s text, he was under house arrest – probably in Rome where he would eventually die for proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As he wrote later in the letter to the Philippian church, Paul knew what it meant to be rich, and to be highly regarded by the powerful people of his day. In so many ways, Paul had it all, and yet what he says in today’s text strips away any advantage or glory he may have found in the things of the world. “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ” (Philippians 3:7).

As we consider this text in an age when we have more than Paul or any of his contemporaries could have even imagined, it’s critical that we take these words seriously, because when Paul talks about “confidence in the flesh” he is referring to anything that places our own efforts and abilities at the center of our spiritual universe. The biblical word for this inclination is idolatry. And in this text, Paul attacks our innate idolatry head-on, leaving nothing out. “Everything!” Paul writes, “Indeed, I count *everything* as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Philippians 3:7-9).

By God’s jarring grace, Paul had come to understand that all of the things on which he had relied and all of the ways in which he had excelled in the eyes of the world were meaningless. Not only did they do him no good, but they had actually kept him from a saving faith based on what Christ had done for him. The best that Paul’s former life of religious idolatry could offer was an earthly righteousness based on human achievement.

But on the road to Damascus, Paul had seen God’s perfect righteousness – a righteousness not earned or deserved but given freely through the work of Jesus. This was the “surpassing worth” that Paul described as the knowledge of Christ. In this faithful knowledge, Paul was introduced to the power of Christ’s resurrection, and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, and the eternal implications of

His death and resurrection. And it was this revealed knowledge of the Gospel that led Paul to write in such bold language that the only thing that matters is, “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:8).

In other words, the man once known as Saul – who embodied life by the Law and proudly persecuted the church of Jesus Christ – now proclaimed that absolutely nothing mattered outside of knowing Jesus as the Savior. And this is a message we need to hear today, because the idolatry of self-righteousness in each one of us declares our own actions, and words, and thoughts to be good enough. Deep down, we honestly think that we are “O.K.” on our own and we fundamentally feel that we are “good” people.

But this self-righteousness will not stand before God, no matter how good it may look on the outside. According to our nature, we are like the death row inmate who is guilty beyond a shadow of a doubt, and yet goes to the gallows declaring his innocence. It is an utterly false declaration. In fact, as Paul writes in Romans 3, “There is no one righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10). And in Isaiah 64 we read: “All our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6). And make no mistake, these indictments include all of us.

Righteousness is always and can only come through faith in Christ. Salvation by works and salvation by grace cannot coexist. Righteousness comes from God alone, and this true, saving righteousness finds its source only in Christ and His Gospel. The Law cannot justify and the Law cannot bring life. Righteousness cannot come from within, and in this proclamation from prison Paul is staking everything on this external righteousness. Paul’s past is always before him and knows he is a sinner, but by the power and promise of God Paul knows Christ, and that knowledge makes all the difference.

As the text moves on, we see the difference it makes, and in these words, Paul speaks for all of us. He writes, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:12-14).

Here, Paul speaks in ultimate terms. Using the image of a race not yet finished, the Apostle Paul encourages his audience with words that focus on eternal things, understanding that this present life is a shadow that is passing away, and that our life is hidden in Christ, and that in Him we have been freed from the pride-driven lie of this world.

My friends, today, God has given you eternal things. Today, He has redefined your value and transformed your worth from conditions based on what you’ve accomplished, to a status that has been conveyed on you purely from the outside and based solely on what Christ Jesus has done for you. Today, we have a promise from God and we know how the story ends, and because of this assurance we can continue to run the race in this world with an eye on the next no matter how hard the course becomes. That’s what it means to know Christ Jesus, and in this grace-given freedom from ourselves, we can fully love our neighbor and we can fully live our lives without fear, knowing that the race will be done and the prize will be won in Christ alone. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today. Amen.

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