

Forget the Garbage; Know Christ

Philippians 3:8-14 (NIV)

⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. ¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

The Apostle Paul was an adult convert to Christianity. Before his conversion, he was unapologetically a Pharisee, a sect of the Jewish faith. He was circumcised on the eighth day in accordance with the Law. He could trace his family lineage all the back to the tribe of Benjamin. As far as keeping all the laws, rules, and regulations of his religion, he was a true Pharisee, one who would go above and beyond in personal piety. In his zeal for his beliefs, he also spearheaded efforts to persecute the Christian church, the ones who were seemingly out to destroy his Jewish faith. Paul was a model for all Pharisees to follow.

Then it all changed. While on his way to arrest yet more Christians and lead them to their inevitable execution, a blinding light from heaven flashed around him causing him to fall to the ground. He heard a voice say, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” It was Jesus calling to him, changing his life. Within days, Saul was baptized. He spent several days with Christians, started using his Greek name Paul, and began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God, proving from the Bible that Jesus is the Savior of all, the Messiah promised long ago, a message that the Pharisees were trying to destroy.

This guy, Paul, was a Pharisee of the Pharisees. He was the best of the best when it came to a person following and adhering to one’s religion. Then it all changed. He says, “I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage.” (verse 8) At first, this phrase may not carry a whole lot of weight for us. We are Christians. We are used to knowing and reading and hearing from the Christian Paul. Of course he should consider his old life as a Pharisee as rubbish, garbage to be thrown away. You’re a Christian now!

It’s one thing to see the change years after it happened and to kind of gloss over this statement, but think about how he came to that realization. He had spent maybe 30 or 40 years of his life devoutly following his religion. He was the best of the best. All the little Pharisees wanted to be like him. And now he leaves it all behind. Now, the beliefs that he had put decades of his life into living are considered garbage, worthless, a loss.

Imagine working for a company, for an institution for 20 or 30 years, having risen up the ranks getting promotion after promotion. Then one day your boss calls you in. Maybe it’s for another promotion you think. Your boss sits you down and tells you that everything you have ever done for your job was worthless. It didn’t matter. You didn’t change anything. You didn’t make anything that will last. You have spent all those hours toiling and working hard for nothing. The wind gets knocked out of you. Maybe you have a reaction of anger, that you just want to hit something because what you have done with your life means nothing. Maybe you just want to go off by yourself so that you can break down out of the sight of others. Everything that you have done means nothing.

As much as we would never say it out loud or admit it verbally, all of us base part of our self-worth on what we have done with our lives, what we have accomplished. Maybe we didn’t even notice that we were doing that, but the moment that you say that something that I have poured my time, my effort, my heart, my soul into is worthless, I realize that I am hurt personally. I am hurt because I did base my satisfaction of my life on what I did, whether it was getting good grades, taking good care of my family, being a good friend, or getting a job done well. I am what I do. Take that away, take away any accomplishments, and I am cut deep. I am hurt, lost, depressed. What am I if my accomplishments are worthless?

Paul had to go through this realization. Every adult convert to Christianity has to go through this. You have to go through this. As much as we like to see the results of our work, of our jobs well done, sometimes we can never do enough. In fact, with God, this is always the case. If you are deriving satisfaction of your life based on what you have done that will not be enough for God. You could flash all your accomplishments before him, and he could ask one simple question: have you been perfect? With honesty, we have to

say “no.” We do not meet God’s standard. It doesn’t matter how many things I do, how many projects I led to success, how many “A’s” I got, how many friends I have, or how good I’ve been as a parent, if I’m not perfect, then I do not deserve to be in God’s presence. All that time spent on carefully following the rules and the laws, it can never make you right before God. Is religion all a waste of time then? Because how you tell it, none of us have a shot. I should just give up now. I’ve wasted my life. It’s worthless, worthless garbage!

Paul had to work through this same dilemma. I don’t know how many days or months or years it took for him to fully grasp this, but God brought him to the answer. Paul’s self-worth could not be based on his accomplishments because his accomplishments would never be good enough even though he gave it all his effort. Instead, he considered all his past efforts to be garbage that he “may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of [his] own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.” (verses 8-9)

The solution to Paul’s self-worth was not in taking satisfaction for what he had done, but in knowing Christ, in knowing what Christ did for him, in knowing what Christ suffered and died for him, in knowing that Christ was raised to life for him. Paul found the answer of how he would be worthy before the Almighty God: Christ took hold of worthiness for him. Christ accomplished it for him. Christ gave him a righteousness not based on what Paul had done but on what Christ had done. This is why Paul knew that the only thing worth having in this life was not a list of accomplishments and gold stars, but to have the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus and everything Christ did for him.

Paul gives us his realization. It’s painful to think that all that I have done, all that I have accomplished, those things are only for this world. Those accomplishments are fleeting. They will not satisfy you or me for the long haul. Instead, the only thing worth knowing, the only thing worth having, is the knowledge, the belief, that Jesus Christ has given me a righteousness through faith in him. This is the only righteousness a person can have before God. This is a righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

I usually have this little speech with my Catechism students once a year. I talk about it in regard to the attitude that I want them to have when they prepare for class, do their memory work, and participate in each lesson. Math, science, social studies, etc., they are all good to know in this life, and this knowledge will help you as an adult. But what you students will learn with me in Catechism is something that goes beyond this life. It’s knowledge that you will not just use in your life, but knowledge that you will use in the life to come, forever and forever. You are going to learn about Christ, your Savior, and what he has done for you. That knowledge will be with you for all eternity and will never become obsolete or useless. In Catechism class you will get to know Christ and what he has done to give you heaven.

This same simple desire that I wanted to encourage in my Catechism students is what led you to get up this morning and come to church. It is a desire to know Christ. You know that you will enjoy the prize of heaven at the end of this life because Christ took hold of it for you. From Christ you have worth that will always satisfy, that will never be a loss to you or garbage to be swept away into the trash bin.

What do we do now? Do we kick back and take it easy until we die? No. Even after learning that there was no way that he could ever have a righteousness before God by what he did, Paul told us to strive for one thing. “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me...Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” (verses 12-14)

Forget what is behind. Forget the accomplishments. Leave those things that gave you self-worth in the past because you know Christ. He is your self-worth. He has obtained for you a righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. He has obtained for you a place in heaven. He has obtained for you a new life after this one, a life of unending bliss and perfection. He has obtained for you a bodily resurrection just like what he did. He has called you heavenward.

So press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of for you. Strain toward what is ahead. Continue working hard at those good grades, continue taking care of your family, continue getting your job done well, continue being a good friend. Why? Because this is what God would have you do, not because these things give you self-worth. Do these things because you already know what God has in store for you. Your accomplishments may be worthless garbage needing to be thrown away, but what Christ has took hold of for you will never fade. Forget the garbage. That’s your past. Strain toward what is ahead to what really counts. “Press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called [you] heavenward in Christ Jesus.” (verse 14) Amen.