

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, ^[a] the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ ^[b] and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; ^[c] but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Beloved, ^[d] I do not consider that I have made it my own; ^[e] but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly ^[f] call of God in Christ Jesus.

OLD TESTAMENT: Psalm 19: 1-6

The heavens declare the glory of God;
And the firmament shows His handiwork.
² Day unto day utters speech,
And night unto night reveals knowledge.
³ *There is* no speech nor language
Where their voice is not heard.
⁴ Their line ^[a] has gone out through all the earth,
And their words to the end of the world.
In them He has set a tabernacle for the sun,
⁵ Which *is* like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,
And rejoices like a strong man to run its race.
⁶ Its rising *is* from one end of heaven,
And its circuit to the other end;
And there is nothing hidden from its heat.

“Downward Mobility”

Can you think of a time when you’ve had to throw away something that was good in order to have something that by comparison was far more valuable? *Growing up in Nebraska, I remember seeing pictures of beautiful chests of drawers, doll houses, china cabinets and other heirlooms frozen in time in the mud alongside the Oregon Trail, the Trail which stretched from MO to OR and was used by the wagon trains to travel across the prairies. At some point, brave pioneers made decisions to throw their treasures away, off their covered wagons, in order to lighten the load for the weary oxen. If they hadn’t, they’d not been able to make the trip before the winter storms overtook them.¹ The decision was for them a matter of life and death.*

This is the kind of decision which Paul described from his prison cell in Rome, as he wrote to the church in Philippi. The Philippian church in Northern Greece was like so many...experiencing some internal conflict. And Paul wrote to not only thank the congregation for being so financially generous to him, but also to try to help them work their way through the infighting. Among their number, you see, were those known as Judaizers. They were Jewish Christians who advocated that the Gentile believers would need to first become Jewish before being Christians. They insisted that the Gentiles would need to be circumcised, schooled in the Torah, adhere to the strict Jewish dietary practices and the rest of the law before they could be followers of Jesus, the JEWISH Messiah. Of course, this caused great angst and contention.

In his letter, Paul opposed the Judaizers, and strongly preached for inclusion of Gentiles as they were....inclusion, always inclusion is the Gospel...but first Paul established himself as one who should be listened to. For Paul was, himself, a Jew, BORN into the tribe of Benjamin. He was of pure lineage, circumcised on the 8th day, and a student of the Scripture all his life. He studied under Gamaliel, was obedient to the Law and trained as a Pharisee. He’d been such a good Pharisee, in fact, that he’d persecuted the Christians in defense of his tradition. In addition, he reminded the readers of his Hebrew heritage, a fact which meant that his family preserved their native language in the home. Nevertheless, all of this...his education, bloodline,

¹Fred Craddock. Sermon: “*Throwing Away the Good Stuff*”. In: *The Cherry Log Sermons*. (Louisville: WJKP; 2001), 96.

family background, social status, zeal, obedience, “the fabric of who he had always been”², he told them, he’d thrown away to follow Jesus. It was, to him “rubbish”. It meant nothing.

Fred Craddock makes the point that Paul was not saying this as someone who had bad habits which needed discarding before converting to Christianity, or as someone who couldn’t sleep at night due to his shameful past and need for rescue. No, “if there was a Jewish bragging contest,” Craddock says, “Paul could legitimately win.” “His credentials were impeccable, spotless, but he had taken them to the dump.”³ It was a decision of life and death.

So, why? Why did Paul let go of something so good? Was he thinking that “everybody who was anybody was now following Jesus, so he’d better get in on it? Had he seen the Church as an occasion for some more upward mobility, a way to add to his credentials or make his resume longer, a way to get a few more titles under his signature? NO. Not at all. Paul was saying that nothing of what he’d had, nothing that had he’d ever been was of any value now in comparison to what he’d gained and who he was in Christ. And he could not hold onto both.

If we read carefully his whole letter, we can feel his passion and hear him, in essence, asking, “How can I claim to be a follower of this Jesus, who was with and equal with God and gave it all up to become a lowly human being, who was obedient in that task unto death, even death on a cross, who came from the high places, from the throne, from the position of glory and honor and praise, who possessed all that was so good, yet tossed it all for me? Paul was asking, “How can I claim to be a follower of Jesus and still seek any upward mobility for myself, keep my own self-interests, my own pedigree and resume, my own pride and identity, and just tack on the label of being a Christian? How can I claim to belong to the One who lived to be a servant, and then not do so myself? *“It is downward mobility which is the goal,”* Paul ultimately concluded. *“Being like Jesus is the only thing of value. It is the only course that we must now run.”*

Brothers and sisters, this message is not just for the Philippians. It is for us too. If we are going to claim ourselves as disciples of Jesus...if Christ is indeed our Lord and Master...then

²Shannon Kershner. *Sermon: Staring at Death*. http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2014/100514_8am_930am.html. (accessed 7-31-17).

³Fred Craddock. *“Interpretation: Philippians”* (Atlanta: JKP; 1998), 55.

we need strive to live as he did, to pray, care, share, serve, sacrifice. We need let go of things which have previously defined and motivated us. We need let go of the value of our economic status, heritage, education or training, accomplishments...all maybe good things in their own, but things which feed our desire to be upwardly rather than downwardly mobile. We need set our eyes on a new course and run a new race.

I like that story of the man driving down the highway whose wife called him on his cell phone to tell him to watch out because she'd heard on the news that there was a crazy person driving the wrong way down that same highway. The man replied, "You're not kidding, honey. There's not just one crazy person going the wrong way, I can see hundreds of them!"⁴

Yes, we need set our eyes on a new course and run a new race. Instead of chasing after accolades based on our self-interests, even our own sense of righteousness, we need have new motivators. For instance, if we're contemplating doing something solely because it will elevate or even maintain our status or power, we need rethink it. *I recall having to reconsider my motivations when the bottom floor of St. Joseph's hospital in Houston, including the Pharmacy Department, was flooded with about 4 inches of dirty water. My colleague, Joe Pirotta, and I had been told when we arrived that day that we needed to go about our normal work, tending to the patients for whom Pharmacy consults had been written. So, we did. As Clinical pharmacists, however, we felt the benefit of our extra training that day, as we gratefully headed off to the upper floors. When we returned to our offices at the end of the day, we found our boss, Sister Mary Johns, (St. Joseph's was a Sisters of Charity hospital), on her hands and knees, scrubbing underneath one of the freezers. She was probably not even 5 ft. tall and maybe, maybe 100 lbs...and there she was, the Director...on the floor, in her white dress and habit. She didn't even look up from her work when she quietly bid us "good evening". Joe and I glanced at each other and all thoughts of going home vanished like puffs of smoke in the air. We took off our white coats, put down our briefcases, and each both found a bucket with bleach solution and began to scrub.*

⁴Jeremy Troxler, Sermon: "Run for Your Life" <http://chapel-archives.oit.duke.edu/documents/Troxler--RunforYourLife.pdf>. (Accessed 8-1-17).

As Christians, our actions, if they are motivated solely by status or self-interests, need be regularly re-examined. In addition, if we're tempted to act only because it would satisfy the requirements of others, then we need ask, "*How does this help to heal the world? How does it benefit another? How do it help our own souls?*" If it does not do these things then a "no thank you" should be our response.⁵ Frederick Beuchner says, "*Journeying through life for the sake of saving our own robs us of joy and causes us to cease living in any sense that really matters. Journeying instead for the world's sake, for Christ's sake---even when the world scares or sickens us half to death---little by little makes us come alive.*"⁶

Susan Howatch, in her book, *Ultimate Prizes*, describes a wealthy, elderly character who reflects near the end of his life on what he'd spent his days chasing after. One day, he says to his nephew, "I should not complain. I sit in my grand house and look at my bank balance and around at the mementos of my past, all my prizes, and I think, 'What a success I was!' (pause) But yet, after a while I do begin to hear that silence, that long, long, silence, and I know with a terrible certainty that the only prize worth chasing is love, and it's precisely the prize I've managed to lose."⁷

Friends, Paul, writes from prison, facing his death, to the congregation in Philippi and to us to emphasize that the only pursuit in life of value is being in Christ. It is the pursuit of downward mobility, moving to a position where we are defined by Christ, where we live for him and those he loves, not by any power or accomplishment of our own, but exactly the reverse, by virtue of his binding us to himself in his death and resurrection.

Therefore, if a child needs supplies for school, we need fill their backpacks. If a person needs food to carry them through the day, then we need make provisions for them. If a stranger in our land needs welcome, or a hopeless victim of disaster needs help, we need offer the extended hand. If a voice needs speak out against racism, bigotry and hatred, it need be ours. If a kind smile and an ear for a grieving soul would ease the pain, then we need smile and pull up

⁵Shannon Kerschner.

⁶Frederick Buechner. *The Sacred Journey*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1982), 107.

⁷Susan Howatch. "*Ultimate Prizes*" (New York: Leafree Limited; 1989).

a chair. If encouraging words would bring reassurance and strength to mission workers in a foreign land, then we need write them. If love needs be given, then we need give it. When compared with living for Christ, friends, all of the rest of it...all the rest of it is rubbish. It's a decision of life and death. Amen.