

CONFIDENCE

Philippians 3:4b-14

Fifth Sunday in Lent (Series C)

April 3, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The epistle lesson for the Fifth Sunday in Lent comes from *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, chapter 3, verses 4b through 14. In this epistle lesson, the apostle Paul teaches us what is really worth caring about. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From Philippians 3, beginning at verse 4b, we read in Jesus' name.

^{4b} If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more:
⁵ 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; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ 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 ⁹ 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— ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹² 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. ¹³ 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, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.
You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

So you think you're a good person.

Or maybe you don't. Maybe you know you're bad. That's good; you're not far from the kingdom. But don't completely check out; the rest of us will pick you up on our way through.

But maybe you think you're a good person: Baptized on the eighth day, or at least sometime in the first month; a Lutheran of Lutherans; an American of Americans; as for zeal, a Democrat of Democrats, or a Republican of Republicans; whatever you think it's good to be, that's what you are; as for the commandments, a rule follower; as for church attendance, regular; as for devotions, daily; as for radio, Christian; as for oil-changes, every three thousand miles; as for library books, returned on time; as for the speed limit, no more than five over. You get the idea. Whatever you think is important, you do it well. And whatever kind of person you think you should be, that's who you are. Of course, it's always easier to be the kind of person you think you should be than the kind of person someone else thinks you should be. And if you squint really hard, it might look like you're pulling it off.

If anyone thinks he has reason for confidence, Paul has more. He was everything a good Jew was supposed to be, plus a little more. He was circumcised on the eighth day. That's exactly when they were supposed to be circumcised. None of this "Wait for grandma to get home from her cruise" thing. Paul was from the tribe of Benjamin. That was one of the two tribes that remained in the southern kingdom. The ten northern tribes had long ago been conquered and dispersed by the Assyrians. And any of the Israelites who remained or managed to return still carried a bit of that stink on them. The southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin were only disciplined by God through the Babylonians. Their nation wasn't destroyed. Paul's Greek name was Paul, but his Hebrew name was Saul. He was apparently named after King Saul, the first king of Israel, who was also from the tribe of Benjamin. So Paul was a Hebrew of Hebrews, a true Israelite. As for obedience to the commandments, he was a Pharisee. The Pharisees were the strict rule followers. They measured out every tithe and counted their steps on the Sabbath day. They examined every commandment to figure out the best way to observe it. They established traditions and lived by them, ensuring that they would never break the commandments. And he was a persecutor of the Church. Later, of course, Paul would be ashamed of this. But before his conversion, Christianity was a great threat to his form of Pharisaic Judaism. It needed to be opposed. It needed to be persecuted. And Paul was zealous enough to do it. This earned him major credibility with the other Pharisees. Paul wasn't just a Pharisee. He was an inner-circle Pharisee.

Paul lived a disciplined, righteous, and commendable life. He was the kind of person we would have admired.

I have in my mind an ideal picture of a well-ordered and righteous life. You develop the right habits that help you do the right things all of the time. You go to bed early, you get up early. You cook from scratch and eat the right things. You read your Bible and pray at the same time every day. You exercise. You clean your kitchen every day. You read books. You manage your money well. If you have kids, you play with them, read to them, teach them the catechism, and put them to bed on time. You structure your life with so many good things that there's barely even an opportunity for sin or failure. I am not one of these people, but I admire those who are. And I think most of us do admire someone like this. They have the discipline and self-control to be healthy, happy, and successful. That was Paul, except even more so. People looked at him, and not only did they think, *I admire that guy*, but they even thought, *God must admire that guy*.

Paul even says of his former self, "As to righteousness under the law, blameless" (3:6). That's the way the Jews thought back then. If anyone could have earned God's favor, it was Paul.

But as Paul looks back on his résumé, he's not that proud of it. In fact, he's ashamed of it and considers it "rubbish" (3:8). And the word "rubbish" (σκύβαλον) could mean "garbage," or it could mean something a bit more ... organic. That which Paul once thought was a gain to him, he came to view as loss (3:8). And we should consider what he means by that, because it's really quite surprising. "Rubbish" and "loss" are not neutral words. It's not like the things he once thought were a benefit to him are now worthless. It's not like they have zero value. It's much worse; they have negative value. That's what the word "loss" means. It's negative. And "rubbish" has a negative value. Whether it's garbage collection or sewage, we pay people to take our rubbish away. It's not neutral in value. It's not worthless. It's less than worthless.

And Paul doesn't consider just one or a few things to be rubbish, but all of it! He says, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 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” (3:7-8). We can understand if he’s ashamed of persecuting the Church. He thought he was doing a good work, but it turned out to be quite evil. We can understand if he’s ashamed of that. But he counts everything as loss. Every item on his résumé has negative value.

None of these things brought him closer to God’s favor. They didn’t even leave him in the same place. Every single item took him farther away. Even his obedience to God’s commandments took him farther away, because it enticed him to trust in himself. That is a sin against the First Commandment.

The First Commandment is what makes our good works so sinful. The LORD says, “You shall have no other gods before me.” But if we trust in something else, we violate the First Commandment. If we take any confidence in who we are or something we have done, we put ourselves in the place of God. For Jesus Christ to be our God means that he is our righteousness. He is our Savior. If we find confidence in anything about ourselves, our identity, our works, or even our faith, if we think that is our own doing, we are robbing God of his rightful glory. There is nothing more offensive to God than to think that you have something to offer him, as if he should be impressed. Our good works, if we find any confidence in them, and that could mean that God is impressed with them or that they get us a little closer to God than someone else, if we find any confidence in them, it is a violation of the First Commandment and an offense to God.

We should repent of our good works. And by that I don’t mean that we should stop doing good things. Our neighbors still need our good works. By “repent,” I mean that we should repent of the confidence we have in them. We should despair of them.

What’s on your résumé? What have you done that you secretly think God should be pleased with? Repent of it. Despair of it. When we confess our sin before God, we come with all we are and all we have done. And we don’t distinguish between the good and the bad. We don’t say, “Here’s some good stuff, but please don’t look at the bad stuff. Please forgive me of the bad stuff.” No, we confess all of it. Even the things that seem to us to be good works, we despair of. “Please don’t look at any of it. Take it all away. Look upon me through the righteousness of Christ, because that’s the only thing I have that has any positive value.”

So Paul despaired of all of it and desired only to be found in Christ. He says, “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” (3:8-9).

You have a much better righteousness. We are free to despair of our own righteousness. All those things that we hold onto and take pride in, we can let them go. They’re worthless. They’re less than worthless. And we can let them go, because our Lord Jesus Christ gives us something better. He gives us his righteousness. And it’s free. It is completely free. He takes our negative-value rubbish away from us, and he puts his perfect righteousness in its place.

To gain Christ means to gain his crucifixion and resurrection. Paul says, “...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (3:10-11). To gain Christ means to gain his crucifixion and resurrection. All of that becomes ours. We share his death. We become like him in his death, not in our deaths, but in his death. We die in him. That’s what Baptism does. It buries us with Christ. And we do this without actually dying. We die through Christ’s death. And the benefits of that death are given to us. So your sin, which includes

CONFIDENCE (Philippians 3:4b-14)

everything you think is a good work, is crucified, paid for, and destroyed in the death of Christ. That's what you get through Jesus' crucifixion. All of your negative is taken away.

And if we gain his death, we also gain his resurrection. If, by faith, we share in his crucifixion, we will also share in his resurrection. This is the "prize" Paul speaks of. And there is nothing else worth seeking. The positive value of this far exceeds the negative value of our rubbish and the condemnation it deserves. Can we even imagine this? No; we can't. This is far beyond "too good to be true." It's literally unbelievable. The prize we receive is everything Jesus deserves. The resurrection he deserves: yours. The glory he deserves: yours. The kingdom he deserves: yours. That's the prize. At Christ's return, your dead body will be raised from the dead. It will be transformed. It's not going to be the way it is when you die. It won't even be reverted back to your best possible state in this life. It will be transformed into absolute perfection. And your spirit will be transformed too. The angst, and sin, and sloth we experience in this life: gone. Our spirits will be transformed into perfection. Not only will you do what's right, you'll enjoy it too. This prize will not fade. It is the eternal gift of God. It is exactly what Jesus deserves as the pure and sinless Son of God. He receives it, and he shares it with you and all who trust in him.

The value of this is indescribable. We talked about the negative value of all our rubbish. The positive value of the prize far exceeds the negative value of our rubbish. It's "the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus [our] Lord."

This is the mindset the apostle Paul lives with. And it makes the sufferings of this life worth it. It makes all the striving of this life worth it. It makes obedience to God's commandments worth it.

There's a paradox here. Before gaining Christ, Paul strived with all his effort to obtain righteousness under the law. Then it was given to him as a gift. But he didn't give up on his striving. He says, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (3:14). He presses on to receive what is already his.

That's where we are in this life. We have not yet obtained this resurrection, except it already belongs to us, because the complete and perfect righteousness of Jesus has been given to us. If we have died with him, and if we have his righteousness, then his resurrection is guaranteed to us. And we can have confidence in this. We press on to make it our own, because Jesus Christ has made us his own (3:12). You belong to him. He redeemed you.

It's not the end of all effort. But it is the end of our efforts to please God. It's the end of our efforts to earn something. All of that was rubbish. But Jesus gives us real confidence. We know that we belong to him. We know that his resurrection is promised to us. So we press on in joyful obedience, knowing that we will receive the promised prize.

Your efforts are rubbish. Jesus took that rubbish to the cross. And he gives you his righteousness instead. You live in that righteousness now. And you will share in his resurrection on the Last Day. This is the confidence Christ gives. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.