

When Loss is Gain

Philippians 3:4-9

Throughout the history of humanity, indeed ever since the fall, when Adam and Eve ate from the tree God told them not to eat from and sin entered the world, we have been faced with the great temptation to turn our relationship with God into a show. A performance. We take something like worship—responding to who God is and what he's done with humble, joyful, whole-hearted service—and we turn it into a competition. We fight to win God's affection by saying the *right* things, singing the *right* songs, or just plain being *right*, and doing worship better than *those* people. In fact, the first murder in history was the result of a 'worship war'—God accepted Abel's offering, but not Cain's, and so Cain got mad and killed him.

Or we take something like reading the Bible—reading God's Word, reflecting on who he is, enjoying our relationship with him as he makes himself known to us in his Word by his Spirit—and we turn it into a spiritual chore. "Gotta keep Dad happy; do my mornin' chores. Because if I don't, no telling what he might do to get after me today." And so reading the Bible begins to function like a pagan sacrifice—a daily offering to an angry, temperamental god in order to manipulate him into blessing me instead of cursing me and causing trouble.

We do it with career choices, with parenting tactics, with our family heritage, with our own spiritual hard work. Our interaction with God becomes a show—everything about us (who we are, and what we do) that we think will either make God love and accept us, or at least keep him off our backs. And with this performance mentality comes all the stress, all the anxiety, all the fear and frustration, the anger and pride familiar to competition. It's as if we've confused God with Simon Cowell, and Christianity with *American Idol* (the irony is thick, here). Every time we come into God's presence, we fear that dreaded thumbs down. So we leverage our heritage and status, we draw attention to our strengths and hard work, and we conceal our insufficiencies, clinging to all that this world considers to be gain in order to win and maintain the approval of God, or at least of each other.

This is in fact the mode of operation for the counterfeit Christianities Paul warned us about last week in Philippians 3:1-3. The so-called Judaizers held that faith in Jesus was by itself insufficient to find right standing before God; true followers had to become Jewish, receiving circumcision and following the old covenant law. It was a Jesus + kind of Christianity—Jesus + works; Jesus + Jewishness. And it was rubbish.

The apostle Paul will have none of this nonsense, and he'll not allow us to either. And so he continues in Philippians 3:4-9 to remind us that taking hold of Jesus as Savior means saying no to all other would-be saviors, because there is no gain in this world that compares to knowing Christ and being counted righteous through faith in him.

The book of Philippians, for those who are just joining us, is all about God's vision for his Church to be a community *centered on, shaped by, and partnered together for* the gospel of Jesus and its advance in the world. It's all about what the church should look like when the gospel gets a hold of our lives—when we realize that apart from Jesus, we really are that sinful—every one of us. We have all participated in the great human rebellion against God our Creator and King, and no amount of hard work or family heritage will ever make up for it. We are sinners, and sin must be dealt with to be forgiven and accepted by a holy God, who is too pure even to look upon sin. The gospel—the good news of Jesus—tells us that this forgiveness and acceptance is found only through faith in him. It is what Christ has done to establish God's kingdom and deal with our sin through his life, death, and resurrection that makes all the difference.

And when this gospel message takes a hold of our lives—when we realize that yes, our sin is really sinful, but that *God's grace in Christ is sufficient to deal with our sin*—then we find ourselves satisfied in Jesus and free to love one another genuinely and to take the gospel of Jesus into the world regardless of the cost. Paul wants to make sure we get this, and so in chapter three he rehearses the essential foundation of our gospel partnership and what's at stake in truly depending on the gospel of Jesus for our life and ministry, both individually and as a church.

Last week we heard in vv. 1-3 Paul's strong warning against counterfeit Christianities like that of the Judaizers—again, those in Paul's days who were willing to believe Jesus was the Messiah, but who continued to teach and require that you had to become Jewish to truly walk with God—circumcision, law, and all. We saw how a counterfeit Christianity was any version of the faith that tells us that trusting in Jesus and what he did on the cross is either unnecessary or simply not enough to declare us in the right with God.

But as Paul reiterated, our safeguard amid such counterfeits is to rejoice in Jesus—to find our full satisfaction, delight, significance, and identity in him. Because God's true covenant people are those who worship God by the Spirit, not the flesh, and who therefore boast in Christ, not in self, whether family descent or personal performance. They are thus those who put no confidence in the flesh (v. 3).

But in vv. 4-9 Paul continues his argument, further clarifying the necessity of rejoicing and trusting in Jesus (rather than self) in our relationship with God. He takes the temptation to turn our relationship with God into a performance head on, first by beating the Judaizers at their own game, and then by dismantling the whole thing so that nothing but Jesus and faith in him is left standing.

Paul's Would-Be Self-Righteousness (vv. 3:4-6)

So let's look first at Paul's would-be self-righteousness, vv. 4-6 (beginning in v. 3):

For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh--⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put 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; in regard to the law, a Pharisee;⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness under the law, faultless. (Phil. 3:3-6, NIV modified)

As Paul finishes describing what true Christianity looks like in v. 3, how it does not depend on the flesh—on our sinful selves, who we are, where we come from, what we can do in our own effort—he decides to indulge his opponents momentarily for the sake of argument. And this is important. Because what he says in vv. 4-6 show us that Paul is not insisting on finding our right standing before God through faith in Christ because he himself would otherwise be excluded by their standards. No, according to their own standards, Paul is just as “righteous” as the Judaizers. So he offers seven pieces of evidence for this claim, the first four dealing with his heritage and the last three with his own hard work.

First, he mentions his circumcision on the eighth day. He bears the mark of covenant membership under the Law of Moses, having had faithful parents who properly followed God’s code. Second, comes from the people or race of Israel. He claims a certain genealogical purity. Third, he’s from the tribe of Benjamin—the only tribe to remain loyal to Judah and the throne of David when the kingdom of Israel split in two after Solomon’s death. In summary, he is a Hebrew of Hebrews, a perfect specimen of the Israelite heritage.

Yet he goes on. It’s not just his heritage that he could boast in, but his own hard work and performance. “As to the law, a Pharisee.” Paul was an expert in the Old Testament Scriptures and the strict Pharisaical tradition that surrounded them, trained under the famous rabbi Gamaliel in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3-4). Then there’s his zeal for God and the purity of his people. He was a kind of modern-day Phinehas (cf. Num. 25:6-8)—traveling the countryside, rooting out evil among God’s people by persecuting the church—these new followers of Jesus who seemed to reject God’s law and allow non-Jews to fellowship with them. Finally, as to righteousness under the law (which is a much better translation than the NIV’s “legalistic righteousness”), Paul was blameless. That doesn’t mean he had achieved some sinless perfection, but that he kept the law in such a way that he offered the proper sacrifices to atone for his sin, as the old covenant law made provision for.

So Paul had much that he could boast in—much to his credit. Much more than some of his opponents, no doubt. But what does he do with it? What does he do with this status, this heritage, this hard work? Does he leverage it, trying to win God’s approval, as the Judaizers presumed they could do? Does he use it for slightly lesser things, simply to win and maintain the approval of people? And what do we do with all that could be credited to us as gain in this world or in the church today?

Do we take confidence that since my dad is a successful business man or is maybe an elder in the church, or since my mom has taught Sunday School for twenty years and she’s a committed Christian, that I must be in good with God (regardless of what I believe or how I live)? Do we take a secret, subtle pride when we know the answer to the question at Sunday School or Home Fellowship? Do we look for praise when we do something to serve God and get angry and bitter when no one seems to notice or say anything? Do we turn our relationship with God and our interaction with his people into a show, looking to who we are and what we do as our functional savior? See, I don’t need to trust Jesus as Savior if God accepts me for my Bible knowledge, or my humanitarian relief efforts, or because my kids are so holy and well-adjusted.

Now there’s nothing intrinsically wrong with having things that this world values. There’s certainly nothing wrong with being successful at business, or having a rich heritage of faith in

your family, or working hard at obedience. The question is, *what do we do with it?* Do we find our identity and significance in it? Do we expect God to show or perhaps withhold his favor to us because of it? What do we do with any gain we have?

Paul's answer in vv. 7-9 is clear. There is only one thing to do with it when it comes to being accepted by God: we count it all loss for the sake of Christ.

Paul's Christ-Earned Righteousness by Faith (vv. 7-9)

Paul begins by disavowing his gain in v. 7: "But whatever was to my profit [or gain] I now consider loss for the sake of Christ." But he goes even further in v. 8: "What is more, I consider *everything* a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, 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 is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith." (vv. 8-9). Paul follows the pattern of Jesus, who did not count his status as God as something to be exploited for selfish gain, but made himself nothing (cf. Phil. 2:5-11).

Why? Why is Paul so willing and eager to lose everything? That doesn't make any sense. You work your whole life at something and now all of a sudden it doesn't matter; it's insignificant? Why does Paul go there? How is it that in Christ, loss is actually gain? Three reasons: first, because all the gain in the world can't compare to the satisfaction and joy of knowing Jesus. Second, because no worldly gain is actually capable of winning God's approval and acceptance, since it's unable to deal with our sin. And third, because to take hold of Jesus as Savior, you have to say no to all other would-be saviors. Only then can our righteousness be found only in him.

So first, *loss is gain because there is no worldly gain that compares with being satisfied in Christ*. Jesus told the parable of a man finding a treasure hidden in a field. He covers it back up, goes and sells everything that he has in order to buy that field so that the treasure in it is his (Matt. 13:45-46). He lost everything in order to gain something more valuable. Jesus is that treasure. His kingdom, his purposes, the satisfaction and peace of knowing, enjoying, and serving him.

We find our identity, value, and significance in what we treasure most. And thus what we treasure shapes how we respond to what happens in life. Think about the last time you got angry. Maybe this morning—trying to get out the door to church. Why did you get angry? There was something that you wanted, you *needed*, and somebody or something got in your way. Maybe you need into the bathroom ('you've been in there twenty minutes!'). Maybe it's getting people into the car. Maybe it's the car in front of you. Something about who you are and your significance in life was caught up in and then thwarted in that moment, and you got mad.

If your identity is vested in what others think of you when you walk in here, what you look like, whether you're on time, then your joy and satisfaction will go up and down depending on whether or not life goes according to your plan. If my identity and significance is vested in what you think of me as I preach, then my satisfaction and joy is only as secure as what's waiting in my email inbox after the sermon.

But when we're satisfied in Jesus, such that he is all our hope, all our joy, and our identity and significance is in him, who he is, what he's done on our behalf to reconcile us with his Father and share with us his own status as a righteous child, then there's no room left for self. Sure we'll be annoyed when we have to wait for the bathroom or disappointed when we show up late, but we're not undone. Because our identity isn't in what others think of us, but in our union with Jesus Christ. And it's being satisfied in Jesus that frees us to say no to the would-be gain of this world and lay our lives down for the cause of the gospel. Loss is gain because no worldly gain compares with being satisfied in Christ.

Second, *loss is gain because only Jesus is actually capable of dealing with our sin.* It's not uncommon when you're explaining the gospel to someone and trying to help them understand their need for a Savior, to hear them say something like, 'Well, I'm not really that bad of a person.' And sometimes, they're kind of right. Compared to some people we know, they're kind, polite, serving on the school board, they keep up their lawn, they help out at the homeless shelter, they may even attend church every Sunday. It looks like they're doing pretty good. But we're thinking about our righteousness—whether we're in the right with God, not guilty—according to the wrong standard. If you compare a hundred different light bulbs to one another, some of them are going to shine brighter than others, and some are going to look pretty dim. But compare all of them to the sun, and you get the point. The standard of holiness that God measures our lives by is not the guy next to us; it's himself. And in his light, we all fall dreadfully short. And no amount of hard work and no privileged heritage can do anything to make it up to him, not least because there is an eternal penalty for sinning against God in heaven. Sin has to be dealt with—it has to be paid for: either by us in hell, or by God's eternal Son, who took our sin and its penalty on himself on the cross to cancel the debt, paying it in full, so that we can be declared 'not guilty,' righteous before a holy God.

Paul says that this is the kind of righteousness he wants: "not . . . a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith." Paul knows that despite what the Judaizers were teaching, the law that God gave Israel at Sinai was never meant to be used as a means of manipulating God's favor. It was given to them as instruction so that they would know what it meant to walk with God as his people. And it was given to them, Paul tells us elsewhere, to expose their need for a Savior, since none of them were able to keep it out of their own flesh and self effort (cf. Rom. 3:20; Gal. 3:19, 23-26).

So being declared in the right with God, being forgiven of our sins and welcomed into his family, is not something we can attain through our performance. It comes only by faith—by turning away from sin and trusting that Jesus is God's Son, that what he did for us in his life, death, and resurrection was sufficient to rescue us from our sins, give us new life, and restore us to relationship with God as his children and servants of his kingdom—servants who obey not in order to be accepted, but because we are accepted on the basis of our sufficient Savior and King, Jesus.

Which brings us to our third point: *loss is gain because to take hold of Jesus as Savior, we have to say no to all other would-be saviors.*

This is probably the hardest part of the whole thing. It's not that hard to understand that I'm a sinner—I know I've certainly failed in my life. I can understand the argument that Jesus is more satisfying than anything else. But this is where you actually open up your hand and let go. This is where I have to wrestle and ask myself, am I really willing to lose all other gain in this world, to consider everything that I pride myself in as not worth what we flush down the toilet (to give you a flavor for the word Paul uses translated in our Bibles as “rubbish”), and to find my identity, my joy, and my hope solely in Jesus?

Taking hold of Jesus means not only repenting of our unrighteousness—our sin, but also of our *self*-righteousness—our pride—everything about us that makes us think that God ought to love us, and others ought to make much of us. If the mathematical equation of Christianity is, as one author has recently put it, *not* Jesus + something (whether it's Jesus + works, or Jesus + Judaism, or Jesus + this kind of music, or Jesus + perfect kids, or Jesus + this doctrine or this ritual), but rather “Jesus + Nothing = Everything,”¹ then we need to be okay with losing everything in order to take hold of Christ. And that means we've got to put away the performance.

Did you hear that? *We have to put away the performance.* For some of you, that's difficult news. Because you're not sure you're ready to really lose everything and give the credit to someone else. And you need to repent of your self-righteous pride and realize that all you have is Christ. You need to stop depending on the would-be savior of your performance and put all your hope in him.

For others, this may be the best news you've heard in a long time. Because it means you no longer have to play the game. All the fear of what others think, all the guilt and shame you hide so well, all the frustration at your own insufficiency, the weariness of performing, the dread of failure—you can lay it all aside because *Jesus is enough.* He is our sufficient Savior when all other would-be saviors fail. And some of you need to say this over and over to yourself, because it's really hard for you to believe it: Jesus is enough. Jesus is enough. I'm accepted by God because *Jesus* is enough. All you have is Christ, and praise God, he is enough.

Yes, God wants us to obey him as his children. But he wants us to do so with a joyful gratitude that flows out of the gospel, out of our identity in Christ, not in order to win his favor and acceptance. So we need to rehearse to ourselves daily the transforming truth of the gospel—that though our sin really is that sinful, God's grace in Christ really is sufficient to deal with our sin and to change our lives by the power of the Spirit according to God's holy Word.

Do we believe the gospel? Do we believe that there is nothing we can do, or need do, to win the affection of God, but that Christ has done everything necessary to reconcile us to him? His invitation to us is simply to believe and follow him. Do we believe this? And if so, do we live like we believe it? Or do we turn our relationship into a show, treating God's grace as less than sufficient, spending our days in quiet desperation, hoping God pays more attention to our good days than bad? Do we continue to hold on to things other than Jesus, not quite convinced of his supremacy or sufficiency, or hedging our bets on back-up saviors? Or do we live in the joy and freedom of knowing that our greatest problem has been dealt with in Jesus, that by God's grace

¹ Tullian Tchividjian, *Jesus + Nothing = Everything* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011).

we stand before him clothed in the righteousness of Christ—on our worst days as well as our best, and that through faith in him the greatest treasure this world affords is our forever?

May God rescue us from ourselves, and all would-be saviors, and may we know the surpassing joy of knowing Jesus and being counted righteous in him.

Discussion Questions

1. As you think about your life and spiritual journey with God, what do you find yourself most tempted to boast in and depend on in order to gain acceptance? What do you feel most eager to hide or conceal, for fear of rejection?
2. As you think about the practical steps you take to serve God or grow in your knowledge of him, what is it that motivates you? Guilt? Shame? Fear? Pressure from others? What others will think? Grace? Gratitude?
3. We find our identity, value, and significance in what we treasure most. And what we treasure most shapes how we respond to what happens in life. Think about recent trials or recent successes in your life: how did you respond? What does that tell you about your treasure? How might treasuring Jesus cause you to respond differently in that situation?
4. How would you explain to someone why faith in Jesus and his life, death, and resurrection is the only possible means of being declared not guilty of our sin before God? How would you help them understand what difference believing this makes for interacting personally with God day in and day out?
5. What does it look like to repent not only of our unrighteousness, but our self-righteousness, saying no to all other would-be saviors?
6. As a group, what can you do to help each other “put away the performance” and live in the joy and freedom of knowing we have been clothed in the righteousness of Christ?