

Lent 5 / April 3, 2022

Philippians 3:8

“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”

What do you value? Possessions? Property? Talents and abilities? What is most important in your life? Reputation? Status? Relationships? Relationship with God? Nothing was more important to St. Paul than his relationship with God, before and especially after He came to know Christ as Saviour. Paul was a Pharisee and nothing was more important to Pharisees than their relationship with God. Pharisees sought relationship with God through a righteousness based on obedience to the law. Pharisees prayed at least seven times a day, maybe more. They spoke long, loud prayers on the street corners, in the markets and in the churches. They fasted to focus their minds on the things of God. They studied the scriptures, attached verses to their garments. They lived as pure a life as anyone could. It was all for the sake of their relationship with God, which they pursued through their obedience and sought to achieve through their personal righteousness. Nothing was more valuable than their righteousness earned through observance of the law.

Paul wasn't just an ordinary pharisee. He considered himself a super Pharisee. Everything the pharisees required of themselves, Paul did, twice over. His religious zeal was so great that he persecuted the Christian Church, considering its teachings about Jesus to be false and dangerous to the Jewish faith. Then something remarkable happened to Paul. He came to know Jesus as his Saviour and received from Him a different kind of righteousness; God's righteousness in forgiveness. His relationship with God was still most important in his life, even more important because now He truly had a good relationship with God. It was no longer a relationship based on his actions, but now a relationship based on God's action in Christ. No longer a relationship based on His goodness, but now a relationship based on forgiveness; earned by Christ and received through faith in Him. Whatever we may value in life, nothing is more important than our relationship with God. Nothing is of greater worth than knowing Christ as Lord. He is our Saviour in time and for eternity. Nothing is more valuable than the righteous of God, given as a gift of grace, received through faith in Christ Jesus.

Paul says a lot and covers a lot of ground in our text. He talks about himself and his great zeal for God. He was born of the tribe of Benjamin. Saul, Israel's first king, was one of his ancestors. In terms of his outward obedience to the laws of Israel, he was blameless. He's not saying this on his own account. He may sound like he is boasting, but he is not. He concludes by saying it is all rubbish in comparison with Christ and the righteousness that comes from God through Him. He is pointing out the worthlessness of human righteousness based on keeping the law; as if there is anything we could do that could compare to what God has done for us in Christ. He is speaking against Christians who were turning from Christ to the law of Moses and the traditions of the pharisees, to enhance and ensure their relationship with God. As if Christ had not done enough and His righteousness received through faith were not enough.

There was a tension in the first century church between people who wanted to keep the customs of Judaism and people who wanted nothing more and nothing less than Jesus' righteousness. The people who wanted to retain the customs and rituals of Judaism, said that Jesus was the Saviour. But then they added that in order to ensure and deepen our relationship with God, we need to keep the ritual and dietary laws of the Old Testament. They made themselves out to be superior believers, because of their outward obedience to the laws of the Old Testament and traditions of the past. Many of these people were former pharisees like Paul. Which is why Paul speaks of his accomplishments as a pharisee, before declaring them rubbish in comparison with the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus and receiving the righteousness of God that comes through faith in Christ. Nothing is more important than knowing Jesus as Saviour. Nothing is more valuable than the righteousness of God received through faith in Him!

Paul knew from his own experience that while keeping rituals and observing traditions make people look holy, that they do nothing to bring us to God. In fact, rather than enhancing our relationship with God, they can destroy it, if they lead us from trusting Christ to trusting ourselves. Some evangelism programs have a question: “If you were to die tonight and God asks you why He should let you into heaven, what would you say?” What would we say? I've heard people say, ‘because I go to church, pray, give an offering, say grace before every meal.’ In all of those cases people have based their relationship with God and their right to enter heaven on their own righteousness, which as Paul says is worthless rubbish in the eyes of God.

The only righteousness that counts in the presence of God, is His righteousness, earned for us by Christ, given us to us as a gift, received through faith in His name. It's good to worship, pray, give an offering, say grace, but those things are the expression of a good relationship with God, not the basis. The basis of our relationship with God is Jesus and His righteousness, given as a gift, received through faith. Nothing compares with the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus as Saviour and receiving from Him, the righteousness of God that brings us into His presence; now through faith and fully in the resurrection of the dead when He returns.

The people Paul opposed presented themselves as very religious people. Judging by appearances they were super Christians. But, if those people wanted to hold up their religious pedigree and proclaim their great holiness in their works, Paul said he had more. He was a super pharisee! He had a greater pedigree as a descendant of the tribe of Benjamin. He had a Jewish father and a Jewish mother. He came from a long line of pharisees. He had done greater works of obedience to the law than his fellow pharisees. He's not boasting. He's saying that if anyone could have made himself righteous before God by obedience to the law it was him, but even he failed.

He failed because its impossible to make ourselves righteous before God by obedience to the law. His point is that human righteousness is rubbish in comparison to the righteousness of God, which we receive through simple faith in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. Every human righteousness is worthless in comparison with Jesus' righteousness. In the letter to the Corinthians Paul said "God made Him who had no sin to be sin so that in Him we would become the righteousness of God." Jesus' righteousness brings us to God in peace. Nothing is of greater value or more enduring worth.

These people had the appearance of being pious, holy people. But their holiness was based on themselves and their piety; not upon the righteousness of God, who makes us holy in forgiveness for the sake of Jesus. They had the form of Christianity, without the substance. Jesus is the substance of our faith. His blood and righteousness are our beauty and our glorious dress! In their hearts they had turned away from Jesus and were approaching God on the basis of their own righteousness, of being good people.

We can all fall into that trap, basing our relationship with God on the strength of our faith, the fervency of our prayers, the frequency of our worship, study and devotion. All those things are good, but they are not the basis of our relationship with God. Christ is the foundation of our faith. These are the expression of the relationship we have with God for the sake of Jesus and the righteousness God gives us through Him. When you die and if God should ask you why He should let you into heaven, don't say because you went to church, read your bible, gave an offering, said grace before and after each meal. Don't say you were a good person. Confess Jesus, His blood and righteousness.

There is nothing more important than our relationship with God in time and certainly in eternity. There is no one more important than Jesus. He made it possible for us to have a good relationship with God through His sinless life and sacrificial death, by which He atoned for our sin. He brings us into relationship with God, by opening our hearts to faith through the gospel of forgiveness and the working of the Holy Spirit. He is the reason God will open His house to us when we die. Nothing is more important than our relationship with God Nothing is more valuable than knowing Jesus as Saviour. In Him we receive the righteousness of God that gives forgiveness in time and life in eternity. God open our hearts to receive His righteousness through faith in Christ Jesus. In Jesus' Name Amen.