

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 3, 2008**

WHAT REALLY COUNTS?

Philippians 3:1-11

Our passage this morning has been called the Apostle Paul's religious resume. In brief format, he outlined his background and experience so that we could see at a glance who he was and what he had to contribute.

That is what resumes are for. They give an impression of who we are, what skills and accomplishments we bring to the workplace. We highlight information about ourselves that we want potential employers to know and frankly, leave off those things we think are not helpful to getting the job. Basically, resumes are designed to get us in somewhere even though we're outsiders.

Any of you who have looked for employment in the marketplace know that preparing a good resume is necessary for finding a job. But resumes can be destructive for the Christian life. We tend to count on our resumes and forget about what really counts. By looking at Paul's resume, we'll talk about this and focus on what really counts.

You may recall that Paul wrote this letter while he was a prisoner in Rome. He had been arrested in Jerusalem and was taken to Rome to stand trial before Caesar. Even though the outcome of his trial was uncertain, he rejoices because he knows the gospel is being advanced because of his circumstances. People all over the city of Rome are hearing about Jesus, believers throughout the city are encouraged to boldly share their faith, and Paul is overflowing with joy.

For the past few weeks, we have seen how Paul was able to have this joy. He looked for God's sovereign and loving hand in the middle of his troubles. He believed that God ordained his circumstances in order to make the gospel clear amidst a people who desperately needed to hear about salvation. He followed the example of Jesus Christ, who though He is God, took on the life of a servant, suffered and died so that we might live.

TRUE CIRCUMCISION

Now, after another reminder to rejoice, Paul brings up a different subject in his letter. Remember that he writes to the Christians living in the Roman colony of Philippi, up in the area called Macedonia. Philippi was the first place Paul preached the gospel in Europe. We see this in Acts 16: Paul and his companion Silas came into Macedonia in answer to a vision from God. They first meet up with a Jewish merchant woman named Lydia and lead her to Christ. After a bit of adventure, including a night in jail, the Philippian church is born. And sometime after Paul and Silas leave, something happens that threatens to destroy the little church.

Like many places he built churches, a group of false teachers called Judaizers jumped in to challenge Paul's teaching on grace. These folks insisted that Christians take on the yoke of Judaism in order to

experience salvation. They demanded that the Jewish dietary laws be followed to the letter and that the covenantal sign of circumcision be applied to every male convert.

So Paul begins this section with a strong warning against these false teachers. We will look at this briefly. *“Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh.”* Strong, explosive words. In the first century, Israelites did not have household pets, so dogs were unwanted, dirty scavengers who fed on road kill, filth and garbage. A dog was a vivid metaphor for those who did not abide by the dietary laws of Judaism. Paul turns the image around and says the false teachers are really the unclean.

He calls them “men who do evil” because they teach a way of salvation that is different from the gospel and “mutilators of the flesh” because of their insistence on circumcision as a means to that salvation.

Paul had been fighting off the Judaizers for years and he knew what damage their teaching could do to the church. They were opposed to grace freely offered by God in both the Old Testament and the New Testament and made everything an outward and external matter.

Paul would write to the Romans: *A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code* (Rom 2:28-29).

Paul insists that Christian believers, Jews and Gentiles alike, have become the true Jews because of the inward circumcision of the heart. Look at verse 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 – though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:*

Worship by the Spirit – being born again is all that is needed. It is a work of God. Nothing else is added – not circumcision, not baptism, not confession to a priest or joining the church is necessary for salvation. It is by grace alone through faith alone. For this reason we glory in Christ. Jesus is the focus of our praise. We put no confidence in the flesh – that is we do not trust our own human effort to save us.

In order to drive home his point. Paul uses his own experience before his conversion on the Damascus Road as an example of putting confidence in the flesh. He claims that his resume is top notch.

First he lists what we might call his inherited privileges, the part of his resume he was born into, his background in being a Jew. Listen to how he describes himself:

- *Circumcised on the eighth day* – he was born a Jew, he did not convert to Judaism later in life.
- *Of the people of Israel* – an insider’s term, pure-bloods in the first century often called themselves Israelites or the people of Israel; even Paul’s parent’s were Jews.
- *Of the tribe of Benjamin* – that is an outstanding claim. Benjamin was the only son of Jacob born in the Promised Land, his descendants, the tribe of Benjamin were the only tribe that remained faithful to Judah and the house of David after the kingdom of Israel split when Solomon died. In

fact, Israel's first king came from Benjamin – his name was Saul (Paul's Jewish name before his conversion).

Do you see where Paul is going with this? He's a blue-blood, a "came over on the Mayflower" type. His credentials are solid. Even a *Hebrew of Hebrews* – though born outside of the Holy Land. Most Jews born outside of Palestine could speak only Greek. Paul spoke Hebrew and Aramaic with ease. If anyone had bragging rights for his background, it was Paul.

He goes on to list his personal achievements.

- *As to the law, a Pharisee* – that means he was one who knew the Old Testament Law backwards and forwards and kept it diligently. The word Pharisee meant "separated one" and Paul was certainly someone who had separated himself to learn and know the Old Testament.
- *Zealous, persecuting the church* – believing Christianity to be wrong, Paul fought against the church; in fact he persecuted Christians and sought their death. He was gung-ho for God and thought that his actions against the church proved his devotion.
- *As for legalistic righteousness, faultless.* He was blameless. This does not mean Paul thought of himself as perfect, without sin. He was a Jew who kept all of the Old Testament rituals carefully because he was aware of his sin.

He thought he was covered because he was religious. Let me ask you this: Do you ever think your religiosity makes you righteous? You have been baptized, you have been confirmed or joined the church. In a few moments you will take the Lord's Supper. Do you think that observing these rituals, in and of themselves, will save you? If you do, you are counting on your resume and forgetting about what really counts.

FOUND IN CHRIST

So why did Paul list these things? Simple. By listing his background and accomplishments, he has picked up credibility so that he can say take his resume and burn it. Paul's conversion experience taught him that his resume counted for nothing when it came to his standing before God. In verse 7 he writes: *But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.*

What once was gain he now counts as loss. In other words, those things in his background and experience that he once thought would put him in good standing with God, he now sees as detrimental. His heritage and accomplishments are human efforts and miss the point of God's grace. Let me explain.

First, when we put confidence in our resume, we compare ourselves with other people instead of the absolute holiness of God. We fail to see how far short we fall from God's standard of righteousness. It is fairly easy to compare ourselves with other people – depending on our own self-image and who we compare ourselves to, we either come out on top or behind.

But when we compare ourselves to Jesus Christ, who was perfect righteousness, who lived without sin, we always come up short. We see ourselves for what we really are – dead in our transgressions and sins as Paul wrote in Ephesians 2. Unable to work our way to God's favor apart from His mercy and

grace. When we burn our resume and quit putting confidence in the flesh, we see our need for a savior. Only then will we trust in Christ.

Second, the circumstances of our background and even our accomplishments are gifts from God. They are not designed to carry the weight of our self-worth. When we rely on our background, accomplishments and reputation to make us feel secure and significant, our performance becomes our identity. We forget our need for Christ.

As believers, we forget who we are in Christ. This is the sin of self-confidence. It leads to prideful arrogance (when we think we have something worth boasting about) or deep discouragement (when we think we do not).

How do you know when you have placed your confidence in the flesh? Check how you respond when your background, accomplishments or reputation are ignored or threatened. How do you feel when someone fails to recognize what you've done, when you've performed well and no one has noticed. If that bothers you, you've fastened your sense of self-worth to your resume.

Please don't misunderstand me. I am not saying that a good performance, a job well done, or other accomplishments are not important. They are! But they are not meant to define who you are.

I am not saying that we should not recognize with gratitude what other people have done. We should be open and free with our praise of others. But if we should be on the receiving end of praise and honor and we don't get it and it bothers us, then something is wrong. We have put confidence in ourselves and our achievements instead of Christ.

Paul goes on to say that he counts everything as loss when *compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus*. In light of knowing Jesus, nothing else matters!

Look at the word Paul uses to contrast our human accomplishments with knowing Jesus. Our English translations use the word "rubbish"; it kind of softens what the word really means. Actually, the word is an offensive term, used frequently in ancient graffiti, meaning rotting trash or excrement. Paul says that his resume amounts to nothing, it is a load of, well, rubbish.

The Bible uses that language to describe our righteousness compared to God. Isaiah 64:6 says: *All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.*

God uses these images in His word because He wants us to really understand how much we need a savior. How far we fall short. Why we cannot put confidence in the flesh and trust in our accomplishments and self-righteousness. They count for nothing!

What really counts is gaining and knowing Jesus Christ. Look at verses 8 & 9: *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.*

What Paul is talking about here is what we call an alien righteousness that is imputed to us, placed upon us by someone else. In other words, it is a righteousness that is not our own that comes from our human effort to obey the law of God, but is placed upon us by God.

It is a righteousness that comes from the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Remember how Jesus was described in 2:6-8?

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!

What God sees when He looks at us is not our resume, but the resume of Jesus Christ. He sees the perfect obedience of the Lord Jesus Christ and not the pale, half-hearted efforts that you and I try to produce.

When the Father looks down from heaven at you and me, he doesn't look at our flimsy human achievements, the ones that Paul calls rubbish. He sees the perfect pedigree and work of the one at whose name every knee will bow and whom every tongue will confess as Lord.

This is a truth that we must grasp if we are to go on in the Christian life. Our goodness and righteousness before God – and therefore with each other – does not depend on our own efforts but on the perfect faithfulness of Jesus Christ. We receive by faith His life, His character, His reputation, which is without fault and can cast aside our own.

Because we no longer rely on our own resume, we can know Christ. Now, when Paul talks about knowing Christ, he is describing experiential knowledge. It is more than simply recognizing that Christ died for our sins and giving an intellectual nod to that fact. James tells us that even the demons believe in Jesus and they shudder in fear (James 2:19).

What Paul means by knowing Christ is both understanding the true claims about Jesus and experiencing them for yourself. It is a matter of shifting the weight of your confidence away from yourself and putting your full weight on the sufficiency of Christ.

When that happens, our lives take on the shape of Christ's death and resurrection. We get to know Him and become like Him. We experience the power of His resurrection. We are no longer spiritually dead, but are made alive in Him with a resurrection effected by the creation power of God Himself. It is a present reality in that we are freed from the power of sin and a future reality as we look forward to a future resurrection. It is a powerful force that cannot be stopped.

Tim Keller tells the story of a man in the Middle Ages who, for some reason, had a fear of the final resurrection. He sealed his grave with an enormous marble slab that he thought could withstand any attempt to raise his body. But before the burial was complete and the slab was laid, an acorn fell into the grave. Over the years, a great tree grew and split the slab in two. If an acorn can split a marble slab, how much more can resurrection power break through our graves and bring us to life! That is the hope that we have when we trade in our righteousness for Christ and as we long for the resurrection.

And we have the opportunity to see the transformation of our lives in the here and now. That is especially seen in how we relate to our own circumstances as Christ's resurrection life lives within us. That suffering might mean persecution for the sake of the gospel or it might mean having a Christ-like response to the sufferings of this life. Fellowship in Christ's sufferings means that Christ's resurrected life is lived out through us and God's power is displayed.

George MacDonald said, "The Son of God suffered unto death, not that men might not suffer, but that their sufferings might be like His."

CONCLUSION

In February 2001, Pastor John Oros spoke to an audience about his experience as a church leader in Romania during the Communist era:

During communism, many of us preached...and people came at the end of a service, and they said, "I have decided to become a Christian."

We told them, "It is good that you want to become a Christian, but we would like to tell you that there is a price to be paid. Why don't you reconsider what you want to do, because many things can happen to you. You can lose, and you can lose big."

A high percentage of these people chose to take part in a three-month catechism class. At the end of this period, many participants declared their desire to be baptized.

Typically, I would respond, "It is really nice that you want to become a Christian, but when you give your testimony...there will be informers here who will jot down your name. Tomorrow the problems will start. Count the cost. Christianity is not easy. It's not cheap. You can be demoted. You can lose your job. You can lose your friends. You can lose your neighbors. You can lose your kids who are climbing the social ladder. You can lose even your life."

Let me tell you my joy when we looked into their eyes, and their eyes were in tears, and they told us, "If I lose everything but my personal relationship with my Lord Jesus Christ, it is still worth it."

What about you? What do you prize most? What really counts in your life – your resume or Christ's?

Whenever you are called upon to choose between anything of value in this world and Christ, do you chose Christ? What do you treasure? Do you have Paul's attitude, "To live is Christ, to die is gain."?

My prayer for each of you is that you understand that what really counts in life is not your resume, but that you know Christ.