

# All Things Loss

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## Philippians 3:4b-9

Paul wrote, “Even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more; 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; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 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 and be found in him, not having righteousness of my own that comes from the law but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.”

Years ago, when I was a Seminary student at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary my primary Christian Education professor and mentor was Dr. Dorothy Jean Furnish.

Dr. Furnish was a trailblazer. She was a seminary professor 15 years before the United Methodist Church even elected their first woman bishop. She was the author of many books. She changed the concept of Sunday School. She worked to change the notion that Christian Education was a profession for women by bring onboard a male Christian Education professor at Garrett which changed up the optics. Dr. Furnish had a PhD in Religion from Garrett. She was a seeker of and advocate for justice in all forms.

When I first met Dr. Furnish, she was in her mid-60s, had spent 20 years working in local churches and almost 20 years as a seminary professor. She was about 5 foot 4 and one of the most unassuming persons you could meet. When I first met her, she laughed and said, “Call me DJ – Dr. Furnish is my brother.” Who was also a Seminary professor at down Perkins School of Theology.

The first time I entered DJ’s tiny office at the Seminary one of the first things I noticed, besides her impressive collection of books, was the lone certificate hanging on her wall. She did not display her many degrees or accomplishments but rather, she had framed and hung her Baptismal Certificate. When I asked her about it, her reply was always that it was the most important certificate she had. It named her as a Baptized child of God. It was the foundation of all that she was and all that she did. God had claimed her as an infant before she had the chance to be anything or to do anything for God.

She would preach frequently to her mentees about the challenges of credentialing. While to her, education was vitally important, ordination and other credentials that separated us from our

congregation and the source of our calling often made ministry more challenging. That lesson about remaining grounded in being first and foremost a Baptized child of God continues to be central to my identity.

In the passage from Philippians Paul carefully lays out his many credentials. He has many things about which to boast – and boast he appears to do.

Paul was circumcised as a mere child of only 8 days old. This was the original Old Testament mark of being a part of the chosen people of God. Like infant Baptism it was all about the action of God before the infant did anything to earn it. Circumcision related to his confidence in rituals.

This action marked Paul as one of the people of Israel. God himself had chosen the Israelites to be God's chosen people and they were set apart and made holy for God's divine purposes. Paul is boasting that he has always been among God's chosen – that he was not a Gentile who came to know God but was from birth a member of this holy nation.

Paul was of the tribe of Benjamin. Benjamin was Joseph's younger brother, one of 2 sons born to Jacob and his favorite wife, Rachel. The tribe of Benjamin had a strong heritage. The first lawful king of Israel came from the tribe of Benjamin; The temple stood on land once belonging to the tribe of Benjamin. The tribe of Benjamin was the only tribe to remain faithful to Judah when Israel divided into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. Paul could legitimately take pride in being of the tribe of Benjamin. Being an Israelite and Benjamite spoke to his security in ethnicity and rank.

Paul was a Pharisee. Even though the Pharisees were often at cross purposes with Jesus there was no denying that they were well educated and dedicated to keeping God's law. It was a small elite group and making the cut to be a Pharisee was quite an accomplishment.

He even claims one of his greatest shortfalls. In his zeal and passion for his Jewish faith he persecuted the early Christians before his conversion. This might not seem like something to boast about, but religious passion was held in high esteem – even when it was ill-placed. Paul was obedient to the law.

And lastly Paul challenged his readers to find fault in him. He was not claiming to be without sin but he was claiming to have held true to the works and ideals of Judaism. He did what was required of him. In that he was found blameless.

As much as Paul is a braggart, everything that he boasts about is true.

Oftentimes people who are known to be braggers and to boast in their abilities and accomplishments are also known to be exaggerators and even liars. They will say anything to make themselves look not only good but better than everyone else and it doesn't matter if it's true or not.

This was not the case with Paul. The things that he claims about himself are true.

But the second part of this passage takes such a twist. It doesn't matter if everything that Paul claims about himself is gospel truth. Nothing he had done has any value in comparison with knowing Christ. A good resume is insufficient for salvation. Wow – that's a statement that could stop us short.

We live in a time when there are many measures of success. You must:

Go to the right College

Get the right job

Hold a position of influence

Marry the right person

Buy a house in the right neighborhood

Have 2.5 children

Be recognized

Achieve financial wealth

Engage in the right hobbies

Etc., etc., etc.

So often our lives are shaped by these external expectations. What are the credentials that we base our identity on? Are these the things upon which our worth is truly measured?

Paul would, and does, say no. These things are all loss, rubbish, dung, worthless.

But don't we need to have a home, a family, a purpose in life? Of course we do. But do our goals and ideals bring us closer to God? What if our Baptismal certificate is the most important credential in our lives? What if what influenced our ideals, goals, identity was living out our call to be chosen, Baptized, children of the King. How would the resume of our life look different.

One example might be how we view our finances. I grew up believing that Philanthropy was all about making money to make the world a better place.

Andrew Carnegie gave away roughly 90% of his fortune, establishing thousands of libraries, universities, and institutions. He wrote an essay titled, The Gospel of Wealth arguing that the rich should use their money to improve society.

Bill and Melinda Gates foundation focuses on global health, sanitation and poverty.

MacKenzie Scott gave over \$14 billion in grants focusing on racial equity, gender equality, and public health.

LeBron James supports education efforts in downtown Akron providing tuition, meals, resources, and college support for at-risk youth.

Now most of us don't have the financial resources of LeBron James or Andrew Carnegie but God has blessed us with resumes and resources, and we can use them well or we can use them in

a way that they are rubbish. We can choose to chase after things that don't bring us joy and we can hoard the best that we have rather than use all for God's righteousness. We can choose the way of the world, or we can choose a better way – God's way.

Choosing a better way includes letting go of our obsession with worldly success. Don't strive for the things the world says are important. The greatest blessings come to us unexpectedly. If we become driven by what we think we are entitled to than we often miss out on the blessings that come our way. Things we have to beg for or demand of others rarely bring us joy. The things we boast about separate us from God and from one another. Christ unites all who believe in him.

Choosing a better way is leaning into our God-given identity. Our 5 practices are designed to help us do that. By focusing on and practicing Worship, Grow, Serve, Give, and Invite we are aligning ourselves with God's will for our lives. We are already God's beloved and we don't have to do anything to be deserving of that. Our practices are a reflection of our commitment.

Lastly, a better way is leaning into a life of humility. Worldly expectations and goals lead us to a place of comparison in which we are never satisfied with what we have. There's always a desire for more. More money, more recognition, a bigger house, car, portfolio, more accolades, more power, more pride, more vanity, more, more, more. This desire for more makes us sad, insecure, and restless.

Humility, on the other hand is expansive – turning us outward, and making possible an encounter with true joy.

One of my favorite theologians, C.S. Lewis often returns to the idea of humility in his writing. In his book, *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis by the virtue of humility, as by all other, God wants to turn our attention away from self, to Him and our neighbors.

For Paul, none of the things he boasted about and could have had confidence in were bad or needed to be gotten rid of. But he knew that if any of these things, that ultimately are meaningless, begin to conflict or cause problems with our dedication to our Saviour, that's when there's problems. It's when what you think you value doesn't align with what your faith knows is important.

So don't lean heavily on your resume, your credentials, your accomplishments, your pride. Set aside those things that are ultimately meaningless and focus on your identity as a Baptized, called, set apart Child of God. Amen.



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