

Philippians 3: 4b-11

“What some treasure, others consider garbage”

Paul began this text sounding like a braggart:

“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 legalistic righteousness, faultless.

“(7) But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. (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 (9) 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.

“(10) I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, (11) and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Theme: Family history and hard work often help launch us in life, but only faith in Christ puts us in good stead with God.

We continually ask:

“What is success?”

“How do you become successful?”

In an 1887 letter to a Mrs. Foote, Mark Twain wrote, **“All you need in this life is ignorance and confidence; then success is sure.”**

Twain’s humor seems right to some.

As you know, many people set out every day in blissful, ignorant, confidence. After my 2nd year of college, I felt confident and honored when the church leaders where I grew up asked me to speak for them until they could find a fulltime minister.

The congregation planned a picnic and held a coed softball game before we ate.

An older couple owned a nearby farm, which seemed a perfect setting.

We marked off the bases in their pasture and began playing.

“This ministry stuff is fun,” I thought.

My first time at bat, I got a hit:

“Ministry is getting even better,” I felt.

As I rounded second base and ran toward third, I saw the throw coming from outfield to third base.

Confidently—successfully, I slid.

A triple isn't too bad, is it?

Then dreadful evidence surfaced that my blissful, assurance came with hitches.

During my skillful, triumphant slide to third, I went through a cow pie; most remained on the back of my pants.

Suddenly I was an untouchable minister.

Was the slide a preview of my future?

Ideas of success change as we grow older.

For me as a kid, success meant beating Marlin Brock in a footrace.

Marlin was a Kansas hometown neighbor about my size with whom I often hung out.

Marlin and I maintained a fierce rivalry.

Whoever won the race in our grade received the adulation of our female class mates.

It riled me when girl classmates sighed, “Oh Marlin, you are so fast!”

My view of success evolved later in Oregon.

Then achievement meant sporting a duck-rear-end haircut.

That held the key to a girl's heart, I thought.

Jim Kellar's black, wavy hair formed a perfect duck's rear end.

After applying cups of pomade, grease, and Brylcream and hours combing my blond, scraggly mop, the back of my head resembled not a duck's rear end, but an orangutan's.

I can't imagine that the Apostle Paul as a youth saw success as vainly as I did.

Yet Paul’s early ideas of accomplishment resembled 21st century mindsets.

With the exception of being circumcised on the eighth day, of which Jewish boys in those days boasted, Paul’s measures of success could be found in Marcus, Meriden, Merville, Cleghorn, Kingsley, Pierson, and even Sioux City.

Paul bragged that he was “of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; (6) . . . as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.”

Translate that into today’s language.

Paul talked big about his parentage.

- His family not only came on the “Jewish” Mayflower.
- His great granddad captained the ship.
- No mixed blood flowed in Paul’s veins.
 - He was a Hebrew of Hebrews.
- In addition, Paul strictly believed the traditions and consciously kept every law.

He fervently felt just.

Paul sensed personal failure on no issue.

He thought he came from superior intellectual and moral stock.

Paul didn’t climb the success ladder, he rocketed.

Paul dashed far ahead of even my friends, Marlin Brock and Jim Kellar.

Paul assumed his worldly success proved his rightness.

Most of us probably wouldn’t rank ourselves as high as Paul did, but, we’re sure we’re right on some things, aren’t we?

We’ve acquired a few bragging rights.

We’re not deadbeats.

Our scorecard might not show 100%, but we’re not zilch either.

We expect the Lord will cut us some slack.”

“We might not reach Paul’s level of righteousness, but we’re not bad, either.”

Yet Paul’s pride suddenly ended.

His arrogance flattened and his bragging halted.

He quit talking about his righteousness.

Remember that perfect scorecard that listed Paul’s righteous acts and accomplishments?

It’s as if he took a big red marker and wrote something across his righteousness list.

He wrote the Greek word “skubalon.”

Paul deemed his former accomplishments and righteousness entirely “skubalon,”

Paul meant that everything he formerly bragged about:

- **His family background;**
 - **His advancement;**
- **All of his honors and attainments;**

Every single thing amounted to “skubalon.”

Sophisticated Greek writers considered “Skubalon gutter language.

Translate that word literally into our speech and it amounts to that 4-letter word that rhymes with “it.”

Paul’s righteousness and good works score tallied no more than what stuck to the back of my pants after that third base slide.

The King James Version got it right when Paul totaled the worth of his accomplishments in v. 8: I **“count them but dung.”**¹

What changed Paul’s ideas of success?

- 1. First, before he went to Damascus, Paul thought that the people who believed in Jesus’ resurrection were dead wrong.**

About noon one day on the Damascus road, Jesus stopped Paul, knocked him to the ground, and blinded him with bright lights.

Paul saw Jesus very much alive.

Paul finally realized that guys like Stephen, who talked to Jesus while they were dying were not babbling or delirious.

Jesus came back from death, appeared to believers, and spoke with them.

Jesus’ resurrection was fact.

Just as those faith-filled believers claimed, Jesus returned from his grave.

¹ The TEV translates “garbage,” the “NIV” & “NRSV” rubbish (Σκύβαλον).

2. Second, on the road to Damascus, Paul began to understand Jesus’ perfection.

Here’s what I think happened:

Read any of the Gospels this week and pay careful attention to what Jesus said and did.

Note his patience, his purity, his forgiveness, his unselfishness, his honesty, his courage, and his desire to please God.

Next, on one side of a piece of paper, list your credits and accomplishments, your goodness and your good works.

On the other side of the paper, list how you do compared to Jesus.

Total your score.

Paul apparently did something akin to that and he realized how deeply buried he lay in the debit column.

Paul’s score: “skubalon.”

Peter’s score amounted to manure, too. The teaching that so-called saints accumulated extra credits for ordinary people to draw on amounts to skubalon.

Compared to Jesus, all human beings dwell helplessly in the deficit column.

Did Jesus remind Paul of what the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel wrote?

Ezekiel wrote that if the Lord sent a famine, plague, or any destruction on the land, even if Noah, Daniel, and Job were there, they could save only themselves.²

Isaiah said, “It’s worse than that.”

“All our righteous acts are as filthy rags.”³

The word Isaiah used meant menstrual rags.

What could you get for a ton of used ones?

That’s the worth of our good deeds.

Add yours, mine, Martin Luther’s, John Calvin’s, Mother Theresa’s, Billy Graham’s, your mother’s, and every saintly person you know.

The total amounts to no more than what you could get for a billion dirty diapers.

² Ezekiel 14:14 The name Daniel might refer to a contemporary known as “Danel.”

³ Isaiah 64:6.NIV

3. That brings us to our third point:

Jesus paid the full debt we all owe.

When we stand before God in judgment we have nothing to claim but Jesus' righteousness.

"It's not of works lest anyone should boast."⁴

We whose scorecards look like dung;
Jesus qualified to share in the resurrection.

Here's a true story told by a minister named Terry Rush:

"'I don't know what to say,' is often the thought when one is notified of a friend or relative who does not know God. Everyone wants to say and do the one right thing that would be effective in giving their friend the true hope in Jesus. But what should we say?"

"At one point in my early ministry, I was basically frozen as to effective outreach. Frankly, I could not do it. My desire to impact others was deep, but my skills were far too shallow for the circumstances. Now I know a

few things to be considered:

- **People want to know God.**

Spirituality is both private as well as intimidating to some. They don't know the lingo or the correct process, so avoidance is often their easiest route. Yet they do want to know.

"I was asked to visit three brothers who operated a body shop up the street. They didn't go to church, but a fourth brother went to mine and urged me check in on them. I did. They were polite enough, but ready for me to exit at first chance. Just a few weeks later the church member asked me if I remembered the quiet brother on my visit. I did. He went on to tell me that his brother learned he had cancer and had specifically asked to see me.

"When I went to see this middle-aged man, now very ill, I sat in the kitchen as his dad went to tell him I had arrived. The quiet man entered the room, his robe draping from his weak, skeletal frame. "Terry, I'm in a world of hurt," he said. "Can you help me?" I did. I told him about the Christ, who took his place

⁴ Ephesians 2:9

on the cross. That June I buried this man in Christ. A month later, I buried him again when he passed away.

“People want to know about God. It may not be on our time-table. We simply sow seed to sprout in their moment of readiness.

“• People want to know what to do. People must learn where to best hide so that death can't get to them.

“I love the true story I read maybe 30 years ago about the two hunters in the Georgia timbers. A roar came from behind and the men discovered a wind-driven fire was about to consume them. At first they ran but soon realized the fire was faster. Brilliantly, the men started a new, smaller fire in front of them.

“As the original blaze approached, the two ran out into the burnt area they had just created. The consuming fire raced to the edge of the newly burnt area and proceeded around the hunters. The fire could not claim them as they safely stood in the center of a patch already burnt.

“So it is with all of us. We hear death

roaring with intent to steal and to kill. What each must do is hide in the one place that death can't reach that place where somebody already died. Jesus' resurrection beat death at its own game, and we stand in the center of that death.

“When we stand in his death, the first death can't put its hands on us. ‘Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life” (Romans 6:3-4).’”⁵

Do you wonder whether I think we are all worthless?

The aggregate value of our works and accomplishments amounts to nothing in earning our salvation.

Yet God considers us precious.

⁵ Terry Rush, minister, Memorial Drive Church of Christ, Tulsa, OK **Christian Chronicle**, Feb 2009.

Why?

God created us and Jesus died for us.

In Galatians 2: 20 (NIV) Paul described the transaction:

“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Paul’s works earned him nothing before his Creator.

He became worthy only because he hid in Christ’s righteous blood.

Paul and we are precious because the Son of God died for us.

I pray that you believe strongly in Jesus’ resurrection, his perfection, and his death to pay for your mistakes and mine.

You are very precious to the Lord.

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