

“Gettin Rid of the Rubbish”

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Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ 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; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ 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 ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

SALVATION

Are we saved?

Do we believe that God has chosen us?

And if we believe that God has chosen us... if we are saved...then why us?

Are we saved because we have done the right thing?

Are we saved because we read the Bible?

Are we saved because we go to church and associate with other religious people?

What have we done to contribute to our salvation?

Paul said that at one time he believed salvation could be earned.

He thought that if a person had the right religious and moral training, they would be numbered among those who were saved.

And when it came to religious and moral credentials, his were impeccable.

He followed all the Jewish laws.

He enthusiastically persecuted those whose theology was suspect...(people like those pesky followers of Jesus).

He was proud of who he was.

After all, he was an elite member of God's chosen people.

RUNNING IN THE WRONG DIRECTION

In our lesson for today Paul says that he was determined to press on toward the mark.

That word translated "press on" connotes a chase, hot pursuit or hunting down.

When we first meet Paul, he's pressing on alright.

He's running after the followers of Jesus trying to exterminate them.

He was an Ahab-like persecutor of the church on a quest to bag Christians and take them off to jail...or worse.

But, then Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus and the hunter became the hunted.

The religious zealot was strong no more.

He was blinded by the power of the resurrected Christ.

And in his weakness Paul was cared for by the very community that he had persecuted.

Through this experience Paul's understanding of salvation changed dramatically.

Paul realized that all those things that he was doing
... all those things that made him so proud were worthless.

All of his moral and religious accomplishments were like rubbish in comparison to the salvation that was his in Christ Jesus.

In a 1964 National Football League game, Minnesota Vikings defensive lineman Jim Marshall scooped up a fumble by a San Francisco 49ers receiver and saw daylight ahead of him.

None of the opposing team's red uniforms stood between him and the end zone, some 60 yards away. So he took off running, as fast as a big defensive lineman could go.

Dreams of a touchdown were dancing in his head.

He heard the crowd roaring around him.
He saw his teammates running alongside him waving their arms on the sideline.

He cruised the last few yards into the end zone and celebrated his touchdown by jubilantly tossing the football up into the stands.

Then a player on the other team walked up and gave him a hug.

His eyes were opened.
You see, Jim Marshall had just run to the wrong end zone, and scored two points for the guys in red. When you watch the television replay, you hear the announcer yelling, over and over, "He's running the wrong way! Marshall is running the wrong way!"

The only person in the stadium who didn't realize Jim Marshall was running the wrong way was Jim Marshall. Jim Marshall was a great football player...one of the greatest defensive linemen to ever play the game.

But, all his skills did not help him because he was going the wrong direction.

Paul was like Jim Marshall.
 He had been pressing on toward the mark.
 He had courage.
 He had great theological and intellectual ability.

But, he was running the wrong way.
 He was chasing after the wrong goal line.

We sometimes make the same mistake that Paul made.

We look upon faith as an accomplishment instead of a gift. And this can lead us to take pride in ourselves instead of bringing glory to God.

When that happens, even our best efforts can cause us to go in the wrong direction.

SIN AND GRACE

So, what must we do to be saved?

Surely there is something that we can do?
 Surely there is something that we bring to the table when it comes to salvation?

I think the best answer to this question was given by Jonathan Edwards, an evangelist during the colonial period. He wrote that the only thing we contribute to our salvation is the sin that made it necessary!

In the words of the hymn, Rock of Ages,
 "Nothing in our hands we bring, simply to the cross we cling."

We live in an age where there is a decreased awareness of sin ...and yet everywhere there is increased evidence that sin is a huge problem.

We will not find salvation in what we can do for ourselves.

We will not find salvation in creating new laws.
 We will not find salvation in better education.
 We will not find salvation in more money.

You see our problem is sin.
We have met the enemy and he (or she) is us.

And the answer to the problem of sin is not found in what we can do.
The answer to the problem of sin is found in what God in Christ has already done.
The answer to the problem of sin is salvation by grace through faith.

GETTING RID OF THE RUBBISH

In comparison to God's grace, everything else is rubbish.

Jesus once said,
"What good does it do to gain the whole world but lose your soul?" (Mark 8:36)

Paul had to get rid of the rubbish in his life in order to save his soul.
He had to eliminate those things that were keeping him from the grace of God.

And this is true for us as well.
Are there things in our life that keep us from following Christ?
Is there rubbish in our life that needs to be thrown out?

The answer is yes.
We all have rubbish that needs to be thrown out.

Spiritual rubbish comes in all forms.
It can be an attachment to material things.
It can be the love of money.
It can be pride.

It can even be ... as it was with Paul ... religion
...putting our hope in religious ritual instead of sincere faith.

In order for Paul to get rid of the rubbish, he had to develop a new desire.
He had to develop the desire to know Christ.
He had to learn how to run in a different direction.

He had to learn that his “righteousness” was not based upon his accomplishments.

His righteousness was based upon what God in Christ had already done for him.

FAITH AND WORKS

In other words, doing the right thing, true righteousness, begins when we understand the grace of God.

In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.
God is love, and God loves us.
This basic belief enables right action.

One of the objections to the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith is that if we can’t contribute anything to our salvation ... then there’s no motive to do the right thing.

God will forgive us.
God’s in the forgiving business.
We may as well sin all we want.
There’s nothing to restrain us.

Paul addresses this widespread misunderstanding in his letter to the Romans.

He wrote, “Should we continue in sin so that grace may abound?”

In other words, “If God is going to forgive us anyway, shouldn’t we give God more opportunities to forgive? The more we sin ... the more grace abounds.”

Paul rejects this idea of course.
God didn’t save us so that we could get comfortable with our sin.
God saved us from our sin.

Indeed, when we experience God’s amazing grace,
...instead of getting comfortable with our sin, we take our own sin more seriously.

In our lesson for today Paul insists that his efforts to be a righteous person before he met Christ on the road to Damascus were futile.

They were rubbish.

In fact some of his most “righteous” acts...at least in his eyes ... namely the persecution of the early church were in fact acts against God’s will.

He was fighting against God.

RESURRECTION POWER AND WORKS

So, what turned Paul around?

It was the resurrection.

Paul saw the power of resurrection on the road to Damascus. He met Jesus, and that changed everything.

His encounter with the risen Christ made Paul want to follow Christ.

Instead of persecuting the church, now Paul was willing to suffer for the church, the Body of Christ.

The grace of God did not make Paul complacent.

On the contrary the grace of God motivated Paul every day of his life.

Grace produced works.

Grace produced a desire to become like Christ

... to share in his suffering, his death and eventually his resurrection.

Paul had eternity in his heart,

and that made everything else... even good things... look like rubbish in comparison.

In chapter two of this letter Paul told the Philippians,

“...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling...” (Philippians 2:12)

What did Paul mean by that?

Surely he didn’t mean that the Philippians could be saved by their works.

That would go against Paul's basic contention that salvation comes by grace through faith... not by works. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

No, Paul was saying that when we really understand the grace of God, it overwhelms us.

It fills us with a sense of holy awe.

And with fear and trembling we travel in a new direction.

Resurrection power had come into Paul's life,
but he was by no means the person he was destined to be.

He was still weak.

He still sinned.

And the apostle was brutally honest about his own shortcomings.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans,

"What's wrong with me?

The things I should be doing I neglect.

The things I shouldn't be doing ... well, those are the very things that I do.

I need more than good advice.

I need to be saved."

Salvation.

That's what he needed, and that's what he got.

Paul knew that he didn't have a good hold on what it meant to be a child of the resurrection.

But, despite that Paul also knew that the resurrected Christ still had a hold on him.

"Grace, grace ... marvelous grace... grace that is greater than all our sins."
And that grace made all the difference.

It was grace that pointed Paul in a new direction.

It was grace that gave Paul's life purpose and hope.

HEAVEN: A NEW DIRECTION

Grace does not make us perfect.

But, grace does give us a new set of priorities.

Some of the things that seemed so important to us in the past don't seem so important any more.

In fact, in comparison to God's grace, those things that seemed so important now seem like rubbish, trash that we throw out.

Paul put it this way, "... this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

Our anthem today was (will be) about heaven.
 "I've got a home in glory land that outshines the sun."

We love to sing about heaven, but sometimes we forget that heaven also gives us a purpose.

The purpose of heaven is to give direction to our life today.
 We set our minds on those things that will last.
 And we place less emphasis on those things that will pass away.

If we carry eternity in our hearts, our character and our actions are shaped by God's love.

This past week a deranged man shot into a crowd of people. The result was a horrific.
 Many lost their life and many more were wounded.

But, in the midst of such horror we also saw the power of love.
 A husband shields his wife from a bullet.
 An off duty policemen gives his life trying to save others.

How could they give their life in this way?
 I would contend that it is the power of love.
 Their character and their actions were shaped by their love for others.

In we believe that God is love,
 if we believe that we have received the grace of God,
 if we believe that our goal is, in the end, a heavenly one,

...we too can respond to the challenges and threats of life
 ...with a sense of compassion and a "peace that passes all understanding."

Some say that all this talk of heaven can create a people who do not care about compassion and justice today. I would suggest that just the opposite is true.

C.S. Lewis once said,
 "If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were those who thought most of the next."

We've all heard that old saying about the person who was "so heavenly minded that he was of no earthly good."

But, the Bible constantly turns that saying on its head.

Those who are heavenly minded do the most earthly good.

Our encounter with the eternal
 ...the resurrection and the assurance of God's grace
 ...enable us to live this day with a sense of hope instead of despair.

In response to the glory of eternity...
 What rubbish do we need to get rid of?
 And what earthly good do we need to embrace?

Let me mention two that come to mind

FORGIVENESS

First, the hope of heaven enables us to throw out the rubbish of past wrongs and embrace the practice of forgiveness.

Many people have deep spiritual and psychological problems because they retain the sins of the past. God's radical forgiveness in Christ Jesus gives us a fresh start.

We forgive past sins that have been committed against us.
 And we remember that in Jesus Christ we too are forgiven.

Nothing creates heaven on earth more than a people who know they are forgiven and who forgive others in return.

FEAR

Second, the hope of heaven enables us to throw out the rubbish of fear about the future,
and replace that fear with trust in the kingdom that comes.

Don't misunderstand.

Christians know that human beings...all of us...are sinful and often make terrible choices.

But, we also believe that when all is said and done God's grace will triumph.

Fear about the future can paralyze all of us.

What will happen if another hurricane comes?

What will happen if we get in another war?

What will happen if I lose the one I hold most dear?

We can indeed lose in so many ways.

Most of us have experienced such loss.

But, as the Bible puts it, heavenly minded people trust in the promises of God for tomorrow.

As Paul put it in his second letter to the Corinthians, "We walk by faith and not by sight".

(2 Corinthians 5:7)

In other words, we base our actions not upon the fears that we see ... but upon the promises that we believe.

JEREMIAH

A good example of this is an action taken by the prophet, Jeremiah. The Babylonians were on the verge of taking God's people into captivity. Jeremiah himself was in prison.

And in this time of national turmoil and personal fear, what did God tell Jeremiah to do?

Buy real estate!

From prison he formally completes the deal.

Remember this was a time when God's people would be taken into captivity for many years.

Why buy real estate at this time?

To show that though the people had left God,
God would never leave them.

This purchase was symbolic prophecy.

It was a way of saying that there would come a time when God's people would return to the Promised Land. There would be a day of peace when people once again bought and sold land.

Jeremiah walked by faith and not by sight.

The hope of heaven calls us to live in the same way.

We do not fall into despair when the news is bad and the way seems dark.

We believe that one day God's people will return to the Promised Land.

We leave our fears behind and step out in faith
...believing that our road will eventually lead to glory
...glory that does indeed outshine the sun.

Amen.