

“CREDENTIALS THAT MATTER”

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God’s Word: Matthew 6:19-21

Philippians 3:4b-14 NLT

⁴ though I could have confidence in my own effort if anyone could. Indeed, if others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more!

⁵ I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. ⁶ I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault.

⁷ I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. ⁸ Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ ⁹ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God’s way of making us right with himself depends on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, ¹¹ so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!

¹² I don’t mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. ¹³ No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it,^[b] but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.

What do you want more than anything else in the world? Is it a higher paying job? Is it a bigger house? Is it some “perfect career”? Is it to be the envy of your friends, co-workers; classmates? Is it to “know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead?”

Hold it...wait a minute...something I just said doesn't fit with the others. Remember when, on Sesame Street, they would have like three ice-cream cones and one hot dog, or three squares and one circle and then they'd sing that song: "Which of these things is not like the others..."? It's kind of like that isn't it?

In this world we can become so focused on the things that fill us up, and puff us up...things we do to keep up with the Jones'...that we lose focus or never even get a glimpse of what it is that is most important in life.

In God's Word for this morning that we read earlier, Jesus tells us not to store up for ourselves treasures on earth...but instead, treasures in heaven...He also says: "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Where is our treasure? What is most important to us?

In our Epistle Lesson Paul reminds us that he has pretty good reason to be confident in his earthly achievements, and to basically be an egomaniac obsessed with self. He lists his very impressive credentials that gave him high status in the community and the world.

Paul had been a rich and powerful man...he had been able to push his weight around to get things done...people looked up to him and those under him quivered when he headed their way.

That's power, and power is a very expensive commodity in this world. It's also something that most people would find very hard to give up.

Remember the Rich Young Ruler who came to Jesus asking what he must do to inherit eternal life? What did Jesus tell him? "Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me." Did the young man heed Christ's advice? No, instead he became very sad and walked away from Jesus "because he was a man of great wealth." Then Jesus made that very famous statement: "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

And then the people listening asked Jesus: "Who then can be saved?" And Jesus replied, "What is impossible for [people] is possible for God." In other words, God can get a rich person to heaven, but a rich person can't get him or herself there.

So Paul had been a very rich and powerful man. And he had been building up a lot of political and religious clout by persecuting the people called Christians. But one day, Jesus appeared to Paul...and Paul's entire purpose...Paul's entire direction changed!!! He became like the camel who can indeed go through the eye of a needle due to the miraculous and gracious saving power of God!!!

So anyway, having been saved on the Damascus Road...having begun to taste the goodness of the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul cast aside those claims, those credentials and worldly achievements on which he had once grounded all his self-esteem...he called them "rubbish"...and he considered

them “rubbish”...because they were obstacles, stumbling blocks, weights and impediments in his race toward gaining Christ and being found in Christ!

What do we consider as “rubbish” in order that we may “gain Christ... know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings?”

What do we consider as “rubbish” due to the fact that our greatest goal in life is to become like Christ “in his death, and so somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead”? Is it our bigger house? Is it our perfect career? Is it the envy and adoration we receive from colleagues and friends? Do we consider these things “rubbish”...which is a nice way of saying “cow dung”? Or are we not truly following Christ due to the fact that we are still possessed by the demons of the passing and perishing things of the world?

What do you need to give up...to give to Christ...to consider as “cow dung” in order to experience the “surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus” as “Lord”?

Where is your focus? Paul’s focus was “heavenward,” and in aiming his life “heavenward” Paul was able to experience so very much more joy, love, peace, patience and confidence than he would have ever experienced otherwise!!!

He was able to experience much more in this life than most folks, due to his dedication to Christ...no matter what the hardships he was enduring due to his faith!! Can we relate?

C.S. Lewis once said: “If you aim at heaven you get earth thrown in; if you aim at earth you get neither.” How much hell do we cause for ourselves due to the fact that we are not “forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead”?

What are we missing due to the fact that we are not willing to give up the old life for the new life in Christ? What are we holding onto? What do we still prize as “gold” when it should be “dung”?

It’s interesting that Paul says he wants to become “like [Christ] in his death.” How many folks have you heard say that with a straight face? Christ died a bloody, painful death on a horrible wooden Cross! How could Paul want to die like that?

Well, I don’t think he did want to die like that...I think that Paul was speaking metaphorically. Paul was so in love with Jesus Christ that he wanted to become more and more and more like his Savior, as should we. And the epitome of being like Jesus Christ is emptying oneself completely for the sake of others!

That’s what Jesus did in His life, and that is what Jesus ultimately did for all humankind in His death!!! Christ completely emptied Himself for you and for me.

And in doing so, not only was Christ resurrected, but all those who believe on His name are able to be resurrected as well!!!

So we are to empty ourselves in order that we may know Christ better, and in order that others might find eternal life through our witness!!! In order that others may be saved and enter “the race.”

Yes, Paul likens the Christian life to a race, but it is an unusual sort of race. There is indeed a starting place...that is the point when we finally yield everything to Christ and are born again or born of God. And there is a direction in which we are to run the race...it is "heavenward in Christ Jesus." And there is a "prize" which is knowing Christ, attaining the resurrection of the dead, being made perfect, eternal life with God. But one thing is truly most unusual about this race. There is no human competition!!!

Certainly there are things that compete with us...like our desire for a bigger house, more money, more power, more fame...more whatever this world supposedly has to offer...whatever the "father of lies" is dishing up and tempting us with...But there is no human competition.

Actually, it's the exact opposite! We want everyone to win! We want everyone to obtain the prize!!! We want everyone to be saved!!!

I was discussing this with some other preachers, and we agreed that, as Christians, we not only want our family to win; we not only want our friends to win; we not only want our next door neighbor to win; but we also want the most vile offenders, our greatest enemies to win this race!!! Is this not what Christ wanted and wants as well?

As we were talking it also came up that in Paul's day, Paul...whose name had been Saul before his conversion...had basically been the equivalent of a Saddam Hussein or a Bin Laden to the Christians he was persecuting...to the Christians who were being put to death for their faith.

This Paul who we cherish as the person God used in such powerful ways to spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth...this Paul who said, "Whatever was my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 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," ...was once one of the fiercest and most feared terrorists before he was saved!!!

Yes, as Christians we are to forget what is behind and strain toward "what is ahead." We are to "press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called [us] heavenward in Christ Jesus," but we are to want everyone else to win this prize as well!!!

This is what it means to die to self and live for Christ. This is what it means "take hold of that for which Christ took hold of me." This is what it means to become "like [Christ] in his death." This is what it means to be a Christian. We are to empty ourselves out completely in order to be completely be filled with Christ!!!

Is this your goal? Is this my goal? I pray that it is.