

*If anyone else thinks that he has grounds for confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup>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; <sup>6</sup>in regard to zeal, persecuting the church; in regard to the righteousness that is in the law, blameless.*

*<sup>7</sup>But, whatever things were a profit for me, these things I have come to consider a loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup>But even more than that, I consider everything to be a loss because of what is worth far more: knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For his sake, I have lost all things and consider them rubbish, so that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup>and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, which comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God by faith. <sup>10</sup>I do this so that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death, <sup>11</sup>in the hope that in some way I may arrive at the resurrection from the dead.*

*<sup>12</sup>Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus also took hold of me. <sup>13</sup>Brothers, I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it yet, but there is one thing I do: Forgetting the things that are behind and straining toward the things that are ahead, <sup>14</sup>I press on toward the goal, for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

Our second reading each Sunday is usually part of one of the letters written to the early New Testament churches. And most of those letters are written by the Apostle Paul. We hear the word of God through the pen of Paul so many Sundays of the church year, but do we think about Paul's story? Today we will, and we'll see that his story in many ways is similar to our stories.

It all begins with confidence in the flesh. Paul had found a lot of confidence in who he was and what he had done. As was the custom by the most observant of Jews, Paul was circumcised on the eighth day. He was a Benjaminites, Hebrew in lineage and in the way he lived his life. He studied under one of the best teachers of the law. That devout upbringing shaped him to become a Pharisee, and to climb the ladder of pharisaical leadership. Everything in Paul's life focused around upholding the law of God, ticking every box that God demanded ticked. And how zealous was he for the faith? Well, he pursued Christians to jail them and even kill them. He considered the name of Jesus blasphemy, so in what he believed to be the highest service to God, he devoted his life to stomp out that name. When it came to Paul, no one could top him when it came to righteousness of the flesh.

What are your accomplishments? Maybe you could point to your own upbringing and the successes you had in your early years. Maybe you could point to career success or all you've done for your family or how often you go to church. Maybe you could say that you are a truly authentic person, that you live out your life in honesty. Or maybe, you could look to how much time and money you've given away to church, charity, or people you've found in need. What a good Christian you are! How could God not be proud of you?

Maybe you're already catching on that this is a trap. Maybe you say, "We're Lutherans! We're saved by grace alone!" But that doesn't mean we don't try and justify ourselves. We try to justify ourselves before others, as we "let slip" all the wonderful things we've been up to lately. I think they call that a humble brag. But we also try and justify ourselves before God. Sure, I've got this one sin that I really have a hard time struggling against, but does God not know how sincere I am and how much I truly care for him? Would God really look down on me for that one bad thing with all the good things I've been doing?

We live these pious lives to prove that we are upstanding people. But that service is ultimately inward looking. It's a religiosity that has little to do with the cross of Christ and much more to do with the glory of

man. So, we tell ourselves and others lies to cover up for our shortcomings. We mumble mantras into the mirror, hoping that if we say we are worthy enough times, eventually it will come true. We seek out friends to give us baseless compliments, to always tell us we are right and never call us to account. Just like Paul, we seek validation in the flesh.

But what is all that confidence in the flesh worth? For Paul, all of those accomplishments and traits kept him going. He saw all those things as profitable in life. This was how he would feel valuable. This was how he would make himself valuable to God. But on the road to Damascus, when Paul stood before the Lord himself, how did Jesus find him? Not enough. Lacking. It was in that exchange that Jesus asked Paul, “Why do you persecute me?” Come to find out, Paul thought he was serving God with all his zeal, but in fact he was doing the opposite. He was killing God’s people. He was trying to stamp out the name of God in flesh. As he lay on the ground, thinking he was facing final judgement, he probably expected to be declared guilty and incarcerated in hell’s prison for eternity. What good was all his education now? How much had that eighth day circumcision benefited him if it led to this? Paul came to understand just how much he was grasping at straws trying to live the right kind of life. This was the honest appraisal of life he needed.

An honest appraisal is probably what we need too. When many people think about eternity, they take refuge in their accomplishments. They think about the time and money they gave to the church. They think about how well they did raising their kids or caring for their family. They think about all the lives their generosity has touched in the community. But the refuge they run to is not a stone-walled castle of confidence. It’s a tent made of paper-thin walls.

They donated all that time and money to church, but certainly they could have given more. They spent all that time raising kids and caring for the sick, but there were at least some moments when they despised these tasks. They touched the lives of so many in the community, but did they ever do it for the slaps on the back and the thank-yous? Now that confidence in the flesh is gone. The tent is shredded. How could I ever be enough if there’s always more I could have done? God does not find value in people who try their best. God finds value in people who are perfect, people whose list of “What more could I do?” is empty. I fear that there will be many who lie on their backs, just like Paul, when the Lord comes to them, and all their accomplishments that they put their trust in will fail them. Instead, will come the unexpected words from Jesus, “Why do you persecute me?”

No, these things of earth are rubbish. Paul even calls them “excrement.” Even things that are blessings from God like family and hard work do not save. That’s not to say they are worthless, because they have their proper place. But if we place any eternal confidence in the works of our hands, they will fail us. In the scheme of salvation, these things are all excrement.

If these accomplishments in life are not worth everything, then what is? Paul tells us it’s knowing Christ. God certainly does not find all kinds of value in sinful people. Instead, he makes value in sinners. You are valuable because you have been remade in Christ’s image. And this should come as no surprise to you that your connection to Jesus changes everything. As you stand with the crowd at the foot of the cross, you see the weight of your sins sapping life from the one who created all life. Your Great High Priest is both the sacrifice and the sacrificer to forgive all your sins. As the baptismal waters drip from your head, God gives you new value in Christ, his new son or daughter that he loves and is well pleased with. And why is he pleased with you? Again, it’s not because of any personal accomplishment from you, but because your brother Jesus poured out his righteousness all over you. And as you chew on the bread and drink the wine, which Jesus says is his very body and blood, you receive forgiveness, forgiveness that is outside of yourself and completely a gift. As you study

the scriptures, I think it becomes more and more apparent that your value before God is never found in what you've done. Your value is found in the cross of Christ.

Paul now finds his value in Christ, and you'd think that would create some stillness and even complacency, but that's how Paul talks here. The peace he has in Jesus does not mean his life will be free from suffering. The devil will be working with twice the motivation now to drive him away from what is his greatest refuge, the faith he has in Christ, and back to that shredded tent of righteousness that is by the law. Though Paul has been made new in Jesus, he's also still going to have that sinful flesh that wants to trust the works of its own hands instead of the work done by the Messiah. Paul knows to combat these forces working to rob him of his true treasure, he will have to cling to Christ. Being united with Jesus will shape him. It will lead him to see that Jesus' resurrection is the sure sign that he is right with God, that he has been brought from death to life. But it will also lead him to know Jesus more and more as he suffers alongside Jesus, as daily he dies to sin alongside Jesus.

This is what Martin Luther called the theology of the cross. It's the opposite of the theology of glory. The theology of glory tells us that God brings success to those who are faithful to him. It promises triumph, health, and material blessings. The theology of glory does not find joy in suffering. Instead, it blames suffering and hardship on weak faith.

But the theology of the cross tells us that God's true glory is found in suffering, weakness, and humility. It tells us that the struggle against our flesh and against the temptation to put value in our flesh will never cease on this side of glory. Instead, through suffering, we come to know Jesus better and better. The sign of the cross marks not just the event of greatest worth on Calvary two thousand years ago, but the journey of struggle that God leads us through as he continues to fashion us more and more like Christ.

The Apostle Paul was no theologian of glory. He had no expectations that his faith in Christ would lead to a big house, a great-paying job, or even the respect and admiration of others. He was a theologian of the cross. He expected struggle. He expected that this journey through life would look less like a stroll through a botanical garden and more like a climb to the top of Mt. Everest. But he was not too intimidated by the journey. Why? Because he was not weighed down with accomplishments of the flesh. He was no longer under the illusion that he must outwork sin. Instead, all those things had been flushed for Christ, the one who accompanied him on that heavenward journey.

Your journey through this mess with Jesus too, and as you struggle, you struggle with Jesus. Whatever crosses you bear, God gives them to you so that you can know Christ better, the one who has taken hold of you. And you know that your value to God isn't based on how well you carry them. Your value has already been set at the empty tomb and at your baptism and this communion rail. And that value is righteous and enough through Christ. Amen.