

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. (NIV84)

Theme: The Surpassing Greatness of Knowing Christ!

It's Labor Day weekend, the unofficial end of summer. I've never looked forward to the end of summer. Growing up, I dreaded going back to school. The days are already getting shorter, soon it will become chilly and the wind will pick up. Vacations are fading memories, you spend less time with your family, and the sweet taste of fresh peaches and strawberries are replaced with the boring apple. I could go on and on about how summer is the best season, but that's not going to be the point of this sermon! The only silver lining for fall is that football was back. But since I've been here for six years, I've actually began to look forward to fall for a different reason: the return of our full bible study program—with two adult bible studies, Sunday School, Confirmation Class, and everything else, I look forward to starting up all these classes again. As great as summer is, I look forward to learning and teaching God's Word.

I've come to understand what Paul is saying in our text for today: nothing is as great as knowing Christ and his Word.

Although things were going well with the congregation in Philippi they faced a serious threat from a group we call the "Judaizers." The

Judaizers were a group of former Jews who claimed to be Christians. They went around spreading their false teachings; they insisted that you had to follow certain laws of Moses, especially circumcision, along with faith in Christ in order to be saved.

These Judaizers were proud of their Jewish ancestry, even if some of them weren't 100% Jews. They also boasted about how well they obeyed God's commands through Moses.

So Paul has a sarcastic argument for them. He says if anyone wants to point to the flesh, he has more reason to do so than anyone else. Paul was a Jew's Jew—he obeyed the law literally, he was 100% a descendent of Abraham—from the tribe of Benjamin. He knew Hebrew, the language of his people that many Jews had all but forgotten. He was a Pharisee who studied under the highly-esteemed Rabi Gamaliel. He cared deeply for God's law and not only obeyed it, but also obeyed man-made laws as well. He was so zealous for God and his Word that he went about persecuting Christians because he thought that they were teaching contrary to God and his Word.

By their criteria, Paul should be considered righteous or blameless. If anyone could put confidence in himself, Paul could. But of course, we can't—that is Paul's whole argument: all of that, in the end, does not matter.

Yet there are some who claim to be Christians who rely on the same things of the flesh that the Judaizers did. You hear it from time to time: I was baptized in this congregation, my grandparents are founding members, I was confirmed here, or married here, or I've been a WELS member my entire life, my grandfather was a pastor. There are times when we rest our hope and confidence on who we are or what we've done—but not on Christ.

Not that it is wrong to be proud about such things; but the problem comes when we rely on these things to save us. The argument is essentially this: "Don't worry about me, I won't lose my faith, I've been a member here my whole life, I'll be okay, I don't need to be in the Word that much, my faith is that strong." Do you see where the confidence often rests? It's on themselves and their ancestry—on the things of the flesh.

And how does it play-out in your life? When we rely on our ancestry or what we've done in the past, then God and his Word often take a

back seat. Other things become more important, we've got better things to do—work, sleep, sports, hunting, and so on. We don't see the benefit in hearing or studying God's Word on a daily basis, and so we don't. We think our faith is fine, even if we never feed it. As humans, we are life-time learners. You have spent time learning people's names; you study your favorite team and know the nuances of the players' strengths and weaknesses. Overtime you have learned to tell what it means when a car makes a certain sound. You know how to work a countless number of different electronic gadgets, you read articles every day on the internet or in magazines, or perhaps you open a book every night. You enroll your children in league after league and cart them around to countless practices every year. Just think of how much time you and your children spend each week learning things—now, how much does that compare to the time you spend worshiping God or reading and studying his word? Do you know more verses by heart than you do passages from the Bible? How much time has your children spent practicing compared to their time in God's Word? Do you know the players of your favorite team better than you know the Heroes of faith in Hebrews 11? I could go on and on. Why is it that we spend so much time learning during our lives, but not much time learning God's Word? Often, the reason is that we become too complacent and simply rely on our bloodlines or our past to save us.

What does Paul have to say? **I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.** To Paul nothing was as important as knowing Christ! Before he was brought to faith on the road to Damascus Paul was proud of who he was and what he had done. He was a great Jew. He thought that who he was and what he had done was for his benefit, that by them he could be saved.

But he came to realize that none of that really mattered. Who he was and what he had accomplished didn't do him any good, in fact they were worthless and even worse, detrimental to his faith. What he once cherished, he now threw aside.

For knowing Christ is far greater than anything else. To know Christ through faith or to rely on you and your own works isn't even a comparison, to know Christ is far better! Why? Because

righteousness cannot come from you or your ancestors; it is impossible for us to save ourselves.

Through faith Paul realized that only by Christ is he truly righteous. Righteous means to be pure or holy, blameless, or perfect in the eyes of God. By his suffering and death on the cross Jesus took our sins upon himself and suffered through our eternal damnation. His perfect life was then credited to us. Now the Lord considers us perfect and holy for Christ's righteousness rests on us! This gift of Christ's righteousness is ours through faith in him alone. As Paul describes this righteousness he says it, **is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.** By a gift of God's grace you are pure and innocent in his eyes on account of his son! You don't have to be anyone or do anything to be saved!

And that really is the only thing important. When it comes down to it, when it comes to salvation, it doesn't matter to what congregation you belong to, where you were baptized, or who your relatives are. It also doesn't matter how much money you made, how good of a family man you are, how good your kids are at sports, or how many bucks you have hanging in your man cave. The Lord opens up our minds and hearts and shows us what truly matters. And this one thing truly matters—knowing Christ through faith, by which we are saved.

Through the gospel the Lord led Paul to see, as he still does us, the power of the resurrection. It may seem a bit strange for us in September as the Pentecost season winds down to talk about Easter. But every part of our faith really depends on Easter; that is the power of Christ's resurrection. By his suffering and death on the cross Jesus paid for our sins and credited us with his righteousness. And the resurrection proves this—it proves that the Lord accepted Christ's payment for our sins. For if the Lord didn't accept Christ and his payment he wouldn't have raised him from the dead. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, **if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.**

But Christ has certainly been raised from the dead. And since he has been raised from the dead we are confident that our sins are forgiven and we are pure and holy in the eyes of the Lord who declares us not guilty as Paul says in Romans 4, **He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.**

Of course, Christ's resurrection brings about something else—the sure hope of eternal life. Christ defeated death by his resurrection from the dead. It could not hold Jesus back, but he was brought back to life three days after his death, just as he said it would. And this same man who predicted his resurrection also says, **because I live you also will live**. Christ is **the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep**. His resurrection is a guarantee that we too will rise from the dead and that we will forever in heaven with his eternal glory! All of this doesn't come to us based on who we are or what we've done—none of that matters, but on account of Christ!

Since who he was or what he had done as a Jew didn't matter one bit, Paul chucked it up to a loss, he got rid of it for the sake of Christ. And so he opened himself up to persecution. But Paul had grown to understand that was a blessing to suffer for Christ and like Christ—to share in his suffering. For we must suffer, carry our cross, and deny ourselves to be children of God. To suffer like Christ and for Christ means that we are his children who will inherit eternal salvation. And to suffer like Christ means that we connected with him in his death. His death brought glory and exaltation. Because of Christ our death brings with it eternal life as the Lord lifts us from the grave to his heavenly home where we will see Christ as he is and share in his glory.

That is the goal of our faith, that is what being a Christian is all about. It's not about this earthly life, but the life to come, a perfect life won by Christ and given to us by his grace. So we press on toward that goal by clinging to Christ and his Word. We make the most out of every opportunity that we get so we can attain Christ and his glory. And as for everything else? Paul considered it both a loss and rubbish. Actually that translation, rubbish, is a bit tame—sanitized, if you will. The Greek word for rubbish really refers to excrement or dung. To follow the crassness of the Word Paul used, we could say, “It's all crap.” Not that everything else is bad or wrong, but when compared to knowing Christ, everything else is crap—especially if it keeps us from Christ. It doesn't matter in the end; it's garbage; it's crap in comparison to knowing Christ!

The goal in this life is not for this life of the flesh, but for the life that is to come. So everything that we do should have the goal of eternal life in mind. Start with yourself. Get into the Word regularly and

often. Attend Bible study, read the Word at home, worship and come to the Lord's Table as often as possible.

And then pass it on to your children. Your goal as a Christian parent is not to make sure they get a good education, become good athletes, get them into a good college or a good job, or marry someone nice—those are all secondary goals. But the primary goal of Christian parents is to bring your children up on the Lord so that they may live forever! Don't hinder your children from Christ—bring them to worship, Sunday School, Confirmation Class, and everything else. So that they may have the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ!

I love summer. But it's time. It's time for us as a congregation and as individual Christians to put all the crap behind us and focus on what is great—knowing Christ, growing in his Word, and realizing the power of his resurrection, so that we may suffer, die, and rise with him. Amen.