

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

By Eric Howell

Philippians 3:4b-14

October 5, 2008

Our reading from the New Testament this morning is from Paul's letter to the Philippians. As a reminder of what is important and perspective on what really matters, and what only appears to matter, it is perfectly suited for a pastor, for churches, and for a pastoral search process.

The first part is all resume. And I don't just mean the scripture text. The first part of our relationship was all resume. Mine and yours. Isn't that an odd way to get to know someone, but that's the way it is. You have a list of my experiences, some accomplishments, some recognitions, basically anything I could think of that would give you a picture of the kind of work I've been about. What I had on you was basically your website. Your list of weekly activities, your philosophy statement, a picture of your staff, texts from past sermons, and the like. We Googled each other and learned what we could. All of this is helpful information. We learned a lot about each other in that stage. That stuff is not irrelevant. It's important.

It must be a little like the experience of an on-line dating service, where all you get is a picture and a paragraph and maybe answers to a questionnaire. Not irrelevant, but not the complete picture either.

The first part of today's text is all resume. And it's a good one from someone who knows something about advantages and accomplishments. Paul reads his resume like a political candidate for high office demonstrating that not only has he done well, he has done exceedingly well. But if all you know about him is this resume, you would miss what really matters.

"If anyone has reason for confidence in himself, I have more. Not just circumcised like a good boy, but on the 8th day like it's supposed to be done. Not just a world citizen, but of the chosen people of Israel. Not just one of the twelve tribes, but of the tribe of Benjamin, the center of tribal identity, on whose land the temple stood, the center of worship and gravitas. As to the law, not just someone who kept the Ten Commandments, but a Pharisee who obsessed over the minutiae of the myriad of laws. Zealous to persecute the church; so righteous I could be called blameless." It's as if someone might relentlessly establish their credentials today by saying, "I'm not just a Baptist, but a Texas Baptist. Who graduated with a degree in Religion from Baylor. When I was born as a PK in Waco, my mother dressed me in a onesie that read "Just as I Am" and floated me down the Brazos in a wicker basket until I was found in the reeds and adopted by Lottie Moon. And now I'm a deacon and Sunday School superintendent in the First Church of What's Happening Now."

Paul isn't necessarily bragging, just saying about himself what anyone else would have said. This guy is good. He was a well-respected religious person.

How is it then that he can look at all of this and use these words to describe it all: *zemia*, *skubalon*, loss, unspeakable filth?

Can you imagine using those words to describe your family tree? Your hometown? Your education? Your church? Yourself? Maybe you can. There are people who at times in their lives say things to themselves they would never say to another human being. Hurtful things. You are sorry. You are worthless. You are *skubalon*. For someone in this spiral of depression, the Gospel is good news in a different sort of way. Christ's salvation is redemption and restoration of life, not further devastating judgment upon it. "I have come that you may have life and have it to the full," he once promised.

I don't think this is Paul's situation. His evaluation of himself is not one from a place of depression, low self-esteem, failure. He's done pretty well for himself and feels pretty good about it. But all that has changed now that he knows what really matters. This text is an invitation and challenge to weigh the power of our own lives, accomplishments, and even mistakes against the significance of cross and resurrection.

Something happened in his life and that same something has happened in many of ours. It's a new lens for seeing life. We encounter Christ and we are different from that point forward. Not all of us have "Road to Damascus" moments, but for many of us, we get what he's saying. We might be reticent to use exactly the same language to describe our lives, but we understand and have our own stories to tell of that moment in life when everything changed.

This testimony is not "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I was lost but now am found." That's Peter's cry at the resurrection. That's the woman who touched the hem of Jesus' cloak. That's the woman at the well, the lepers who were healed, the blind man who could see again. In contrast, this is not the testimony of someone who was a mess and God straightened him out. Rather, this is the personal reflection of someone who had it all made and then met the one who made him and that changed everything. But still *zemia*, *skubalon*, loss, unspeakable filth?

I know something about unspeakable filth and have a hard time thinking of the good things as that. Years ago, while I was pastor of a small country church, fresh out of seminary, I took a side job at the county trash dump working for one of my church members. The silver lining was that I got to drive an eighteen-wheeler around the complex and occasionally a front-end loader. The dark cloud was that I spent most of the day driving a shovel and broom, pushing bags and loose trash into place for loading into the trucks. Not safely insulated in the relatively sterile and air-conditioned cab of the truck, I was instead intimately involved with the foulest, rankest, stuff humans produce. It's your kitchen garbage can, now sitting out in the hot sun, combined with hundreds of others.

In our day and time the experience of trash is kept for those blessed souls who work at dumps and landfills and drive trash trucks and pick it up while you are still sleeping. While I was changing our first child's pants when she was a baby I would teach her where the stinkies were going. "To the trash can. To the trash truck. To the dump. To the landfill." It was my way of both trying to get her to appreciate that there were other people on the end of that thing and to psychologically manipulate her into potty training herself out of environmental guilt for where all those diapers are ending up. In Paul's day and time, they would have known what *skubalon* smelled like. So his audience would have understood and probably been shocked by the statement that compared to knowing Christ, the rest of it is like filth. But maybe they wouldn't. Maybe they experienced Christ like that so powerfully in their lives as well. Maybe

they got it because knowing Christ so thoroughly changed their lives that they were willing to walk away from family, friends, respect, anything that substituted for knowing and following Christ.

I am aware of a Chinese pastor who visited the U.S. and toured the churches. The Chinese underground church is exploding in recent years. They have little infrastructure, resources, or systems, but people are coming to know Christ. This pastor looked at the amazing fancy mega church buildings and reflected, "It's amazing what you can do without God."

He's right to a point. We can build massive buildings without God but we can't force-fill them with the spirit and peace of Christ. We can do church business without God, but we can't become authentic community to one another. We can do religious services without God, but we can't experience real worship. We can go on a mission trip without God, but we can't give ourselves to mutually transformative missional living.

When we have that moment of clarity in discovering the power of Christ's death and resurrection in our work and lives, we see, even if just a glimpse, the insufficiency of trusting in anything less than that, no matter how good it might be or how good we might be.

At the end of the day, the most important thing we have to give to one another and the world is Christ. It's hard to imagine that anything would make everything else be described as unspeakable filth. But maybe that's how good it can be to know Christ. Maybe that's just what God has in mind. Not that we would denounce God's creation or even ourselves as filth, but that in the limitation of our language, superlatives aren't enough. Knowing Christ is awesome? Knowing Christ is so cool? Knowing Christ is great? That just doesn't seem to cut it. Knowing God in Christ is such that everything else that is good in my life in comparison can't stack up. Now that says something to me.

I believe that this is the substance of a deep shift among many today. We have grown weary of doing church with all the distractions and the things that are not of Christ. And we want simply to know Christ and follow him. We are uninspired by the silliness, the ridiculous, and the unnecessary. We want to know Christ and follow him. We hunger for something authentic. We want to know Christ and follow him to his cross.

My sense is that DaySpring is about that kind of life. You get that the call of Christ is a call to your own cross. The thing is that it is not just a moment's conversion. It 's a journey. We strain; we lean forward; we hope. We are unfinished, so we press on to make it our own. And find what really matters. DaySpring is a place of renewal, healing, and beauty and can be a place through which lives in this community are made new through deepened faith, through which broken hearts are restored through love, and because of whom hope is kept alive. It will only be because Christ is alive within you. Only because you cling to only that which really matters.

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