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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington
6 April 2025

Sermon on Philippians 3:4b-14

Worship Theme:

GOD'S OPEN-DOOR POLICY: HIDING TREASURE IN THE TRASH

Our Father makes the treasures of his house available to any and all. He places them in the last place we'd expect—the trash. In God's family, the things the world prizes and pursues are counted as worthless. The best example of this is Jesus Christ himself. The Father sent his greatest treasure—God the Son—to earth. And many considered Jesus to be trash—a troublemaker that needed to be killed. In truth, Christ is the precious cornerstone that God used to build his house, the one with the open door.

Sermon Theme: "The Surpassing Worth of Knowing Christ"

1. Get Rid of the Garbage
2. Rejoice in the Righteousness from God
3. Press On Toward the Goal!

What is your biggest goal in life? Get good grades, graduate high school or college, and land the dream job? Is your goal to climb the corporate ladder, or run the most successful business in town? Maybe all you want in life is to have a beautiful family, own a cute little house with a perfect yard, and have enough income to always be comfortable.

The Apostle Paul had goals too, and he was absolutely crushing it in life. From the moment he was born, Paul had everything an Israelite could want and more: *circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews*. He took that incredible start and jumped right in to learning as much as he could about following God's laws as a Pharisee – people who were so determined to stand out that they wrote extra laws beyond what God had given them just so they could impress God even more with how they lived! Paul was so on fire for obeying these laws that he persecuted Christianity, which so many viewed as a threat to their Jewish religion, their way of life, and even God himself! And how did Paul think he was doing in obeying the law and impressing his Maker? "*Faultless*." Paul was a true man among men, the golden standard for everyone else to follow. If his goal was to be the greatest Israelite there had ever been, he was well on his way.

Every bit of what he said probably made sense to anyone who heard and read this letter. It's how the human mind naturally thinks – "my status in life and my standing before God is all based on how hard I work and how well I do." We all have moments in life when this thinking creeps in, no matter how hard we may try to keep it out. We do something sinful and one of our first gut reactions is "what good thing should I do to balance this out and to make up for it". No matter how much or how little of God's Word we know, we struggle with focusing too much on our goals and on what we do, putting our confidence in ourselves.

How shocking, then, when Paul says, “*whatever were gains to me I now consider loss. I consider everything a loss, I consider them garbage.*” Paul had so much going for him – where did THAT thought come from?! It doesn’t make sense! That is, until it makes perfect sense as we remember how God works through his Word to reveal the truth to us. God held up everything Paul had ever done, and said, “Not good enough, not nearly good enough!” Paul looked at his long list of achievements and, by the grace of God, realized something: they were worthless. Completely worthless. Sin had ruined every last one of them, taking everything Paul thought was so good and so God-pleasing and making it nothing but a flaming pile of garbage. Through the very law which Paul had worked so hard to keep, God showed him that sin cannot be balanced out by people. We can never do anything to make up for it or take it away. God’s law led Paul to confess, “I do not have *a righteousness of my own that comes from the law.*” Nothing he did was ever good enough – it was all garbage. Nothing you and I do is ever good enough either – it’s all garbage because of sin. God’s law is clear – our lives are garbage because of sin; **get rid of the garbage!**

But we can’t. We can’t do anything to rid ourselves of this filth, we just don’t have the power or ability. So how does it go away? Paul knew the answer, and gushes about it over and over in these verses: *Christ Jesus! Christ Jesus is the answer to the garbage and filth of our sins.* He is the only way they can be taken away from us, the only reason we have hope in this life, and through him alone our complete lack of righteousness is replaced with perfect righteousness. The very perfection and holiness God demands from us he freely gives to us: “*whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. I consider everything a loss because of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ 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.*”

Everything Paul thought was so worth pursuing and so worth having was nothing but trash compared to the demands God has for us. But God considered our trashy sinful selves worth saving. So he freely gives us righteousness, holiness, and perfection through faith in Jesus. Paul could hardly believe it! He started this chapter with the words, “**Rejoice in the Lord!** *It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again.*” (3:1) This righteousness from Christ is so valuable and so important that Paul wants nothing more than to **rejoice with God’s people over this priceless gift.** And he’s willing to joyfully talk about it and write about it over and over again! The Letter to the Philippians has even been called “Paul’s Letter of Joy”, and these verses are a big reason why. We will never have *a righteousness of our own that comes from the law.* But we do have *the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith in Christ.* What a gift! God removed the trash of sin from our lives, and in its place, God gives priceless value to every single one of us, turning sinful trash into holy treasure.

What does that priceless righteousness mean for us? We know Christ. Don’t overlook this amazing truth! The God who is so almighty, powerful, and holy that

human beings can never fully understand him – THAT GOD! – is known by us. And every time we open his Word we get to keep learning more about him and knowing him even better. Paul says, *“I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so attaining to the resurrection from the dead.”* What is he saying? I want to die to sin like Jesus did so that I may be raised to life again like Jesus was.

Had that happened yet? Paul continues, *“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.”* Paul longed for eternal life with Jesus in heaven, but he wasn’t there yet and he knew it, just as you and I long for eternal life in heaven with Jesus but we aren’t there yet either. So what was his conclusion? Press on toward the goal! Live the new life God gives! This is the very reason Jesus saved us – so that we will live perfectly in his presence forever! Forget all the sinful things that tempt us and forget everything we once thought was so incredibly important in life, and instead *strain toward what is ahead.*

It was clear to Paul that everything he worked so hard to do to please God was never going to be enough – it was all garbage. So he left it behind. It’s not bad or wrong to have goals and dreams in life – God wants us to use whatever gifts and talents and possessions he blesses us with for his glory and the good of his people. But nothing we do saves us. Only what Jesus does saves us. So do not return again to that old way of life – a life of balancing out, and making up for, and earning and trying to please; a life tainted by sin, rebellion, and disobedience.

Instead, *press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus.* Paul knew that life on earth can be a terrible struggle. So many of us know that too; we face challenges, hardships, and setbacks all the time, some so huge and painful that we wonder how we’ll ever make it. The answer is simple: we make it with Jesus. This is **The Surpassing Worth of Knowing Christ**. Our life in this world is not the only life we get. We have heaven waiting for us! And yet God considers this earthly life valuable too, so he promises to go with us every step of the way, filling us with perfect hope, peace, and joy. Every day is one step closer to the goal for which God has called us heavenward.

There is no place for sinful garbage in our lives any longer, no reason for us to place our confidence and hope in personal achievements or goals. We can never do it, so **get rid of the garbage**. Rather, **rejoice in the righteousness that comes from God**. We are saved by the merit and in the name of Jesus Christ, and we are holy and righteous through faith in him. Now that we have this new life from God, **press on toward the goal** and never stop. God fills us with strength through his holy Word and reveals to us the greatest treasure we can ever have, **the surpassing worth of knowing Christ**. The greatest goal is life with Jesus now and forever, and by God’s grace, that’s exactly what we have. All glory and praise to our gracious Savior God now and forever. Amen!

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.