

(Sermon 15)
Philippians 3:4-7
Jesus Plus Anything Equals Nothing

Intro

- In the present passage, Paul gives to us his salvation testimony. Paul is clear he wasn't saved by his religious genealogy, good works, or religious position. Salvation, he reminds us, is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Every Christian has different circumstances surrounding their conversion. But what is the same for every Christian is that all receive Christ in the same way- by grace alone through faith alone. We must be born again.

- As Christians the history of our lives are broken up into 2 phases: B.C. and A.D. There was a time "Before Christ" and there was a time "After Deliverance". Nobody gets a free pass to heaven. Salvation is based solely on God's grace. And until the Spirit regenerates us, opens our eyes, and grants to us the gifts of faith and repentance we are alienated from Christ and therefore from God. We need delivered from our sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the gospel.

Bishop John Taylor Smith, former Chaplain General of the British Army, was once preaching in a large cathedral from Jn 3:7: "Ye must be born again." As he drove his point home he pointed out that nothing could be substituted for the new birth. He said, "you may be a member of the church; even a member of the historic

Church of England as I am, but church membership is not the same as the new birth.”

He then pointed to the rector who was sitting to his left and said, “you might be a clergyman like my friend the rector, but if you aren’t born again you can’t see the kingdom of God.”

He then pointed directly to the archdeacon to his right and said, “you may be an archdeacon like my friend sitting here and not be born again. Unless you are born again you cannot see the kingdom of God.”

A day later he received a letter from the archdeacon that confessed though he spent over 30 years in the ministry he had never been a Christian. He wrote, “When you pointed to me and said ‘you might even be an archdeacon and yet not be born again’, I knew at that moment that I myself had never been born again.” He said he was miserable and could not sleep all night and begged to meet with the bishop to talk.

The next day they got together and spoke about the Word of God for hours. Both got on their knees and the archdeacon took his place before God as a poor, miserable sinner confessing and trusting in Jesus Christ as his Savior.

Though religious and even in the ministry, the archdeacon’s life was marked by B.C. prior to salvation “Before Christ”, but once saved his life was marked by “After Deliverance”.

- In Phil 3:4 ff. Paul tells of his life B.C. (“Before Christ”) and A.D. (“After Deliverance”). It’s a reminder to Christians how revolutionary salvation is for our lives. This is a passage of rejoicing and warning. It provides an opportunity to rejoice with gratitude at how Christ has saved and mercifully changed us. But it’s also a passage of great warning. Paul has just told the Philippians about the Judaizers who trusted in faith *plus* circumcision to be saved. They had zeal for sure, but it was

misguided zeal. Paul said of the Jewish people in general they had zeal, but it was a zeal not according to knowledge (Rom 10:4).

- Have you ever known someone with zeal or passion? You look at their lives, what they've accomplished, how successful they are, and their passion is contagious. But then have you ever known someone whose life was a wreck because they were marked by misguided zeal or passion? This passage serves as a warning to us that even good things in the Christian life that we should be zealous about can work against us if we begin trusting in them as the root of our salvation. Salvation is not based on what we do, or our zeal for Christ. Salvation is based upon what Christ has done for us. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

- The false teachers, as we saw last week, put confidence in their flesh instead of glorying in Jesus Christ. That's how v3 ended with Paul saying that true Christians, "*worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh*".

- So beginning in v4, Paul gives his testimony of coming to know Christ in order to show the foolishness of trusting in anything we can do to achieve salvation. This is one of the greatest passages in Scripture revealing the glory of salvation in Christ alone.

Proposition: Paul's testimony is easy to follow because it has 3 *discernible points*. He begins with a *great claim* in v4. This is followed by his *great credentials* as a religious person in vss 5-6. Finally, he closes with a *great conclusion* showing the worthlessness of his religious achievements compared to the value of trusting in Christ's merits for salvation instead of his own. So let Paul's testimony both make us rejoice in the salvation made available through Christ, and also let us be warned about ever placing confidence in the flesh to achieve salvation.

Trans: Let's begin in v4 where Paul makes a great claim.

I. Great Claim (4)

- Notice he says: **though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more.** In other words, Paul is saying that if anyone could find salvation through religious achievement, then he fits the bill. If anyone could work their way to heaven and acceptance with God it is me, Paul is saying.

- Now it's important to see that Paul is not really boasting in his religious achievements here. He has just pointed at that the Judaizers are the true boasters who put confidence in the flesh. Instead, Paul is making this great claim, first, to avoid the possible

accusation that may come from a Judaizer hearing Paul's argument that he is just jealous that his religious achievements aren't as good as others and that's why he's downplaying the importance of circumcision or any other form of obedience to the law as a means to salvation. So Paul will show that he has been the most obedient to the law and it profited him nothing in the way of salvation. And second, he also makes the great claim of v4 to show how his example of obedience serves to teach everyone that even the most moral and religious person like himself cannot merit salvation before God. He proves this in vss 5-6 by giving his own list of religious achievements as contributing nothing to his salvation. What Paul had once considered "*gain*" in his religious achievements, he now sees as a "*loss*" in light of the gift of Christ.

- If Paul could place his list of religious accomplishments beside that of the Judaizers he would win the award of the most religious person. In 2 Cor 11:21 he declares the foolishness of boating and would only do so for the sake of argument. And the same is true here in Phil 3. Paul does not think for one minute that his religious achievements count for anything in regard to his salvation. But since the Judaizers were insistent that there's did, Paul is going to show them that his achievements are superior and they did nothing for him!

All of this reminds me of the story of the flea who sat on top of an elephant as it walked across a long wooden bridge stretched over a river. With every step was heard a loud creaking. With every step was felt a huge thud. And when they finally got to the other side the flea looked down at the elephant and said, “Boy we made a lot of noise crossing that bridge, didn’t we.” But the flea didn’t do anything. The elephant did it all.

It’s just as ridiculous to think we have done anything to achieve our merit our salvation. We’ve done nothing. Jesus has done it all.

Trans: After giving his great claim in v4, Paul goes on to list his great credentials in vss 5-6. Paul’s great credentials back up his great claim.

II. Great Credentials (5-6)

- Paul lists 7 religious credentials to “show up” the Judaizers and show that he was more rigidly obedient to the law than they and it did nothing for his salvation. The religious credentials divided into 2 categories. First, Paul speaks about the *religious pedigree he inherited*. There are 4 credentials under this category. And second, Paul speaks about his *religious pursuits initiated*. He identifies 3 credentials under this category.

- But hopefully you will see that whether one has inherited a religious pedigree from their parents or has initiated religious pursuits on their own, neither does anything to merit salvation before God.

Trans: Notice first, Paul addresses his...

A. Religious Pedigree Inherited, 5a

1. Ritual Credential, 5a1

- And first he mentions what we might call a *ritual credential*. He points out in v5 that he was **circumcised on the eighth day**. Paul's religious pedigree was true from the very beginning on the 8th day as the law required (Gen 17:12; Lev 12:3) **he was circumcised**. Although not done *by* him, circumcision was done *to* him. Through this ritual he entered God's covenant community right after he was born. He was a so called "eight-dayer", not a Gentile who converted to Judaism as an adult and was then circumcised. He was in it from the beginning like Isaac (Gen 21:4) and all the male boys following in the Jewish line right up to Jesus Himself. No doubt, there were some Judaizers who weren't part of God's covenant community until much older and then they were circumcised, but not Paul.

- As we saw last time, circumcision was the sign of the covenant- a ritual signifying the hope that the time would come when the Spirit would set apart the child to God so that their heart was circumcised. It was never part of salvation to begin with. Paul likely points out that he was **circumcised** well before many of the Judaizers. If this were some sort of contest, Paul has many of them beat. Adding up the years from the time of his circumcision to the

present day would beat just about any Judaizer who converted as an adult. He had their prized ritual of circumcision applied to him when he was barely out of the womb. But his point is, of course, that it profited him nothing concerning salvation.

- The same is true today. Baptism is not the gospel. It is only a sign of the gospel. Infant baptism does not save. Adult baptism does not save. Having the most biblical mode of baptism possible does not save. Baptism should not define your theology; the gospel should define it because baptism doesn't save. Only Christ saves.

2. National Credential, 5a2

- Paul moves from his *ritual credential* to his *national credential*. He says in v5 that he was **of the people of Israel**. He was an Israelite by birth. God chose Israel as his adopted sons and to them belonged God's glory, covenants, the law, temple worship, the promises, and the patriarchs (Rom 9:4-5). In Amos 3:2 God says, "*You only have I chosen among all the families of the earth.*" The US may have Christian moorings, but no nation has been set apart to God like Israel.

- Paul had the blood of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob passing through his veins. You may come from a long line of preachers or missionaries, but this doesn't make you right before God. We would never deny the blessing that comes with being part of a

Christian heritage. You hear the Word. You receive God's blessings due to your parents and grandparents obedience. You know truth. You hear the gospel. You are protected from the vices of the world. But your Christian heritage doesn't save you anymore than Esau or Judas Iscariot's Israelite heritage saved them.

Several years ago, I had the privilege of taking Corie and the kids to my great, great, great, great, great grandpa David Smith's log cabin he built with his own hands. As we drove away and headed down the hill to the church he attended less than a ¼ mile away, I imagined what it was like for him to take his large family to church in a wagon headed down that same hill on that same road. Here I was with my family doing the same thing. When we got to the church his tombstone is one of the oldest in the churchyard. And we have learned that he donated the land upon which the Presbyterian Church was built. From that little church that is still standing and in operation came the first Seminary west of the Allegheny Mountains to train Presbyterian ministers for the gospel. From my grandpa David's his line came scores of ministers. And although that history means much to my heart, it does nothing for my salvation. Everyone has a B.C., that is a time "Before Christ". Salvation does not come by physical birthright.

3. Tribal Credential, 5a3

- Paul is speaking about the religious pedigree that he inherited so he mentions his *ritual credential* and his *national credential*. And next he mentions his *tribal credential*. He also points out in v5 that he is **of the tribe of Benjamin**. Of the 12 tribes of Israel, **Benjamin** was one of two full tribes that stayed committed to king David after the kingdom split. It was in the land assigned to

Benjamin that the temple of God was built, where His Shekinah glory dwelt, and where sacrifices pointing to Christ were made.

- Paul wasn't just circumcised. He was an Israelite from birth. And he wasn't just any Israelite, but one from the proud **tribe of Benjamin**. Benjamin was the special son of Jacob and Rachel whom Jacob nicknamed "son of my right hand" (Gen 35:18). Jacob's favorite son was born to his favorite wife Rachel. And after losing Joseph, Benjamin became his absolute favorite since he was the only remaining son of Rachel left. And it was from the **tribe of Benjamin** that Israel's first king, Saul, would come. In fact, Paul's name was Saul before his conversion. Likely, he was named after Saul. How many times did his parents tell him, "Now Saul, we are Benjamites not Reubenites or Danites. You know how you ought to behave. We have a legacy to live up to."

- But Paul came to realize that legacy and heritage meant nothing apart from Christ. It is ironic that King Saul the Benjamite persecuted David, and Saul of Tarsus persecuted David's greater Son, Jesus Christ. On the Damascus Road when Saul of Tarsus became Paul, Jesus asked him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And at that moment Paul was converted and became a follower of Jesus Christ never turning back.

- His heritage meant nothing unless He embraced Jesus Christ and kissed the Son. The same is true with us. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones says in one of his sermons on the Sermon on the Mount, entrance into heaven is like a turnstyle- only one person is allowed in at a time, for the gate is narrow that leads to life. And one does not get in by holding on to the coattails of their parents faith.

4. Racial Credential, 5a4

- Speaking about the religious pedigree that he inherited, Paul lays claim to yet another credential that profits him nothing spiritually. We'll call it the *racial credential*. He says that he is a **Hebrew of Hebrews**.

- This is sort of a summary of the above. It's an idiom that has the sense of "the purest of the pure". No mixed blood was Paul. If there ever was a pure Hebrew it was Paul. He was born, reared, and committed to the Hebrew heritage. He learned the Hebrew language and remembered it as an adult (Acts 21:4). He was from Tarsus, a city in Asia Minor, not Israel. But his family didn't sellout like many of the other Jewish families when they were dispersed from the land. They were diehard Hebrews. Paul left Tarsus sometime as a young man and headed to school in Jerusalem to study under who was considered the greatest Jewish teacher who ever lived, Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). He even says in Acts 26:4, "*So then, all Jews know my manner of life from my youth up,*

which from the beginning was spent among my own nation and at Jerusalem.”

- But his racial credential, he came to realize, counted as nothing before God. God has elected people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. Salvation is not based on ethnicity, but on God’s grace and mercy. Paul finally understood this on that day on the Damascus Road.

- Paul is trying to get these Judaizers who said that faith in Jesus plus circumcision leads to salvation that they were really making quite a weak requirement. It’s as if he says, “If you’re going to make the law a requirement for salvation, why not be all in. If you think you are putting confidence in the flesh, I far more. I wasn’t just circumcised. I was circumcised the 8th day. I am not just an Israelite, I am from the tried and true tribe of Benjamin. And I am not just from the tribe of Benjamin, but even when my family was dispersed, we remained faithful to the language, customs, and laws of the Hebrew people. And yet this religious pedigree I inherited contributes nothing to my salvation!”

Trans: But Paul’s not done. His great credentials are based on 2 facts: the *religious pedigree he inherited* which includes *ritual, national, tribal, and racial credentials*. But then he gives his *religious pursuits initiated*. These include things he did.

B. Religious Pursuits Initiated, 5b-6

- Paul lists 3 main pursuits here. First, he speaks about his *pursuit of position*.

1. Pursuit of Position

- I alluded to this earlier when I mentioned Paul went to Jerusalem as a young man to sit under the tutelage of Gamaliel, the great Jewish teacher of the day. From such learning resulted a prized religious position that Paul pursued from a young age. He points it out at the end of v5. He says: **as to the law, a Pharisee**. Standing before King Agrippa, Paul even called himself “*a son of Pharisees*”. But being a Pharisee was not something you inherited, it was something you initiated yourself. You had to pursue it and it took great discipline and learning. Prior to his conversion, Paul prided himself in earning such a position.

- Pharisees were the most passionate of Jews about God’s law. They were the fundamentalists of Judaism. The Sadducees were the liberals who didn’t even believe in the resurrection and were more into politics and associating with Rome than following God. And the Zealots were basically racists and revolutionists. In Acts 26:5, Paul calls Phariseism the “*strictest sect*” of the Jewish religion. It

was the highest level of spirituality. Pharisees were the most religious, knew their OT Scriptures the best, knew the law the best, and were the respected, knowledgeable teachers of the day. They were experts not just on the law, therefore, but on how to interpret the law. And they were also knowledgeable about the traditions attached to the law known as “the traditions of the elders”. The word **Pharisee** itself likely derives from a Hebrew word meaning “to separate” to indicate their separateness to the law as it’s guardians and experts. In fact, the Pharisees had somewhat noble beginnings. Coming on the scene during the Intertestamental period shortly after Ezra’s time, they were the ones who wanted to preserve God’s law that had been revived during Ezra’s day.

- The Pharisees had the most influence on the common Jew because the Sadducees were made up of the snooty aristocratic families. The Zealots were secret conspirators who sort of kept to themselves. Still, Josephus (a Jewish historian) estimates that there were only 6,000 of them so it was an elite and highly respected group. These were the men hanging around the temple, and one of them might even show up at your local synagogue to teach. They opposed Jesus and He had very harsh things to say to them due to their hypocrisy, pride, influence on the people and rejection of Him as the Messiah. But before the time of Christ, they virtually went uncriticized. Their word was accepted as the final word. They were

the teachers and custodians of the OT Scriptures. And nobody viewed them as hypocrites until Christ exposed them.

- But Paul came to realize that his position as a **Pharisee** meant nothing in the eyes of God. His pride was brought low when he met Christ on the Damascus Road. It's a reminder of what I said at the beginning, no rank or position in the church guarantees one entrance into heaven. It's not our religious position in the church, but our spiritual standing in Christ that counts before a holy God. No amount of Scriptural or theological knowledge saves. No teaching abilities or appearances of spirituality saves. Only Jesus saves.

Trans: But Paul moves in v6 to yet another pursuit he initiated.

2. Pursuit of Passion

We'll call this the *pursuit of passion*. Notice v6 where Paul says: **as to zeal, a persecutor of the church**. He likely points this out to once again "one up" the Judaizers. So what if they *proselytized* converts to their false gospel system, Paul *persecuted* Christians for not obeying the law for salvation. This was true **zeal**. The Judaizers were lightweights compared to Paul. He chased down, arrested, put in prison, and even oversaw the execution of those who didn't see God's law as meriting salvation (Acts 9:1-2; 22:1-5; 26:9-15; I Cor 15:9)! Acts 8:3 says he even "*began ravaging the church, entering*

house after house, and dragging off men and women [putting] them in prison". Paul was on a Sanhedrin-sanctioned religious rampage to oppose anybody that followed after Christ claiming that obedience to the law was not necessary for salvation. That's extreme enthusiasm for what on the surface was a **zeal** for God.

Trans: So Paul speaks about his *pursuit of position* and *pursuit of passion*. But notice with me that finally Paul ends his list in v6 by saying: **as to righteousness under the law, blameless.**

3. Pursuit of Persistence

- We'll call this his *pursuit of persistence*. Nobody- and I mean nobody- more persistently obeyed God's law more than Paul. People looked at Paul's life and said he walked the straight and narrow if anyone ever did. He was the rising star of Judaism. A great student of the word and law, a great persecutor of the church with his holy zeal as the Jews viewed it. And most importantly, from all outward appearances, he was **blameless** with respect to the law.

- Paul wasn't perfect. Even as a pre-converted Jew Paul knew he was a sinner. His point is that outwardly he conformed like no other to the standards of the law.

- I've known people who were **blameless** outwardly and so have you. I've known non-Christians more moral than some professing Christians. But that doesn't make them saved. Moralism doesn't save anybody. If it could, then it would have saved Paul. And it won't save you either. You need Jesus. I need Jesus. Without Him we perish eternally in our sins- and deservedly so.

- These were Paul's great credentials- 7 of them- the number of perfection, perhaps to remind us that if anyone came close to perfection it was Paul. But these credentials profited him nothing in the end.

Trans: Paul began giving his testimony by making a *great claim* in v4. This was followed by listing his *great credentials* in vs 5-6. Paul's great credentials are based on 2 facts: the *religious pedigree he inherited* which includes *ritual, national, tribal, and racial credentials*, and his *religious pursuits initiated*. These include his *pursuit of position, passion, and persistence*. But now we come to the climax of the passage. After giving his *great claim* (4) followed by his *great credentials* (5-6), Paul closes with...

III. Great Conclusion (7)

- And here it is, v7: **But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.** That word **But** looks back to the day Paul was walking on a road when suddenly he realized all the religious

credentials he viewed as assets became losses in light of meeting Christ.

- He uses accounting language here when he says, **whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ**. He began to view gains and losses differently once he became spiritually rich in Christ. There was a definite moment. He could remember it. Maybe you can remember the moment of your conversion too. But even if you can't, rest assured there exists such moment when you were born again. If you are really a Christian there was a time when the blinding light of the gospel revealed the sin of your heart, you confessed it, and looked to the only pure One- Jesus Christ- to save you.

- You may be like me and your pretty sure you know the day of your conversion, or maybe you can't pinpoint it exactly. But trust me, if you are really a Christian there was a time in your life marked by B.C. ("Before Christ"). And now you exist in the A.D. ("After Deliverance").

- Paul remembered his day of deliverance. He remembered how the Spirit of God and the voice of Jesus through the gospel showed him that all his works and obedience to the law (all the religious stuff he pridefully laid claim to) that he saw as in the **gain** column all at

once he started to be viewed as in the **loss** column, as he says, **for the sake of Christ**.

- Salvation is like a transaction. The word **gain** is κέρδος, which describes the profit column in accounting. And the word **loss** is ζημία describing the loss column. The assets or gains on Paul's spiritual ledger ended up in the opposite column of losses.

- That's what the gospel does to us doesn't it? It turns our lives upside down. It reverses our priorities. We naturally think we can earn God's acceptance through good works. And the gospel says the opposite- it says Christ gained life for us. What we once viewed as valuable, we now see no value in. And the One we once spurned, namely Christ, we see as inestimably more valuable than all the riches of the world. In fact, even more than that we transfer those religious assets to the losses column because they don't just become "0's", but actually become negatives to work against us when we trust in them for salvation.

- And that's the point isn't it to declaring and believing in the true gospel? Good works, even law obedience, if that's what you are trusting in to save you will actually work against you as negative credit, not positive.

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- It's not Jesus plus circumcision that saves. It's not Jesus plus baptism that saves. It's not Jesus plus last rites. It's not Jesus plus church membership. It's not Jesus plus a Christian heritage. It's not Jesus plus walking the aisle. It's not Jesus plus reciting the sinner's prayer.

-Jesus plus *anything* equals *nothing* and Jesus plus *nothing* equals *everything*! That's Paul's testimony and I pray it's yours as well.