



Speaker:  
**Paul Forrest**

## The Dung of Self Righteousness

◀ Series: Philippians • 9 of 9

7/6/2022 (WED) | Bible: **Philippians 3:4-9**

I wonder how an unbeliever would react if you told them that every kind thing they've ever done was worthless. That God was not impressed with even their most noble acts. That even if they devoted their entire lives to the good of their fellow man, they'd not be one step closer to being right with God.

We've no need to wonder; they'd be offended! They'd think badly of you for saying it, even if you were just the messenger. If the religion, the system of belief, you're presenting to them didn't recognise their goodness, they'd reject it.

Here, Paul tells us he was just like that. He thought his background and his religious devotion counted for something with God. Before he knew Jesus Christ, he genuinely thought he was a good person.

Like so, so many people around us today, he compared himself to other people and concluded he was doing well. When you share the gospel with others, they'll say things like:

- "I'm not perfect, but..."
- "I'm not a robber or a drug dealer"
- "I'm not a bad person"
- "I try to do good"
- "I help in the community"

...you get the picture. I'm sure you've heard things like this. **And everything they say to you is junk.** Now it's good they're not robbers. It's good they show kindness to their neighbour. **As long as they don't think any of it will help them get right with God.**

As we think about what Paul said, we're going to firstly look at this list of credentials he gives us. Then we'll think about why he says they're all worthless. And finally, we'll look at the perfect righteousness of God given to those who have faith in Jesus Christ our Lord.

### Paul's religious CV

I've compared Paul's list of credentials to a "religious CV." (USA: "resume") If I were going for a job somewhere, I'd send the employer my CV listing my previous jobs and outlining my experience.

The apostle Paul isn't going for a new job! So why would he give this impressive list of his background and achievements?

I've already said people can't get right with God through their own efforts. Paul and the people of Liverpool are the same in that respect. None can earn merit with God.

If you remember from last week, Paul was explaining what it now means to be a real Jew. It's someone who's circumcised *in their heart*. Someone who has no confidence in the flesh—they don't trust in their own goodness or their own works. A true Jew is a person who has faith in Jesus Christ.

What Paul is saying is this: even if we could earn salvation—even if it *was* about us and our accomplishments—he'd still beat everyone else!

He's not saying this to show off. He's making a good point. By the measure of man, he was behind no one in moral uprightness. **But he confesses it all to be worthless.** The point is if his most excellent religious credentials are worthless how much more worthless are the works of people who are not as upright as him?

Let's have a look at some of the items on his religious "CV":

1. **He received the sign of the covenant** (v5). When he was just a baby, he was circumcised, as dictated by the law of Moses. It was through this that he became part of this arrangement with God. When he grew up, his duty would be to worship, honour and serve God with his whole heart. Of all the people who lived on the planet when Paul was born, he was among the tiny few who had this immense privilege of receiving the sign of this covenant with God.
2. **He was an Israelite.** He belonged to that nation which God had created to show his favour to. This was the people God entrusted with the Scriptures. And it was through these families that the Messiah would come. Paul belonged to the most exalted nation on earth.
3. **He could trace his ancestry to a specific tribe.** Paul has been a zealous missionary for Judaism. His mission was the conversion of Gentiles. These converts were to be treated like any other Jew. But they weren't flesh and blood descendants of Jacob. Paul was. He came from the tribe of Benjamin. It was a small tribe, but they were valiant, and their descendants were no doubt proud that the first king of Israel, Saul, was one of them.
4. **He was behind no one as a Hebrew.** This was an old-fashioned term, but Paul had been proud to still think of himself as a Hebrew. He belonged to a religious tradition which preferred the Hebrew language in a world where most Jews spoke Greek.
5. **He was part of the religious elite.** He wasn't just a faithful Hebrew lay-person but a religious leader. He belonged to the strict Jewish sect of the Pharisees. They kept the Mosaic law carefully (even if it was in outward behaviour only). Not only this; his father and his father's father had also been Pharisees.
6. **He persecuted God's enemies** (v6). Anyone who wasn't a Jew was an enemy of God. They were to be targeted for conversion, and if they didn't convert, they'd be

written off as the worst of mankind. And if they belonged to some unorthodox sect, like the followers of Jesus, they were to be persecuted. Paul hunted down the Christians and tried to force them to recant. And where this failed, he gave his support to their execution.

7. **He obeyed God's law rigorously.** We read there he referred to himself as "blameless." Paul didn't mean he used to think himself sinless or perfect. But he carefully followed all the instructions of the Mosaic law. This included making all the right sacrifices in the temple for the sins he did commit. As far as you could get in law keeping, Paul had been there.

What an impressive list! In terms of the law of God, he'd been at the top of his game. Following his conversion, he told the church in Galatia that he was far ahead of his fellow Jews in his zeal for the traditions of his ancestors.

*And it was all junk*, he said. And how much more rubbish must be the lesser achievements of the majority of Jews?

## The worthlessness of self-righteousness

Have a look at Romans chapter 10. Verse 3's talking about him and his fellow Jews. He says, "...being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness."

But for Saul of Tarsus, God had plans. The risen Jesus appeared to him one day and put an abrupt end to his promising career as a super-Jew. Saul was converted. It's interesting how we see him gradually use his Roman name of Paul more, seeing as it means "small." There were practical advantages to using it, but I like to think he preferred it—a reflection of his humility.

Paul became part of an exciting new movement. And just like today, the church was made up of people who are very different in terms of education. There were people there who were illiterate and people who were highly educated, like Paul.

And the last of the great apostles used his mighty intellect for his service in the church of God. The book of Romans we just read from is regarded as the most theologically sophisticated book in the Bible. Paul was insignificant in the eyes of the world, but an important figure in God's kingdom.

As soon as Paul was converted, the Holy Spirit began to illuminate the apostle's keen mind. Paul quickly came to some shocking conclusions. And one of the subjects he wrote about most frequently was this business of righteousness.

I mention this word "righteousness" a lot. It's one of those words which can send people asleep if they have a shallow experience of God.

Anyway, I've defined it in different ways. Sometimes, my definitions aren't very good. But it's because I've tried to use plain language to get across something of the idea. For example,

I've called righteousness the *perfect goodness* of God. And I'm aware this isn't the best of definitions.

Let me try and be a bit more precise. We can think of righteousness as obeying law. Now I'm not saying there's some law out there which God obeys and this makes him righteous. With God, *the perfect standards are within his own nature*. So to say God is righteous means **he never falls short of those standards that are within himself**.

Now: God won't be sharing his future with lawbreakers. Anyone who wants to live with God forever must be righteous, just like God is.

The Jews had come to believe they could achieve the righteousness God required through their own efforts. In this way, they follow the religion of the rest of mankind. Any religion which tells its followers they can get right with God by performing certain acts is **false**. They are all works-based religions, whereas ours is a *grace*-based religion.

If you have a look at Isaiah chapter 64, we hear the prophet describing these efforts of man to please God. Verse 6 says, "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment." "Filthy rags," the King James version says.

So Paul realised the utter worthlessness of a righteousness which comes through your own efforts. As a Jew, he'd tried to gain it by following the rules in the Law of Moses.

Back in Philippians 3, we read what Paul came to realise about all those things we listed which he was previously proud of, the things he placed his confidence in. *All this*, he said, *I count as loss*. When he met Jesus Christ, he realised all that he thought counted as merit was instead *demerit*. It wasn't profit but *loss*.

Imagine you own a company and it's time to submit your accounts. You think your business has been doing pretty well. But the accountant rings you up with some terrible news. Despite how great the business looked, you've made a huge *loss* over the past year. After all that time and effort, you've made a loss!

Paul understood when his life came under the scrutiny of the Great Accountant, his whole life to that point was **loss**. The profit he thought he'd earned with God through his religious activity had vanished.

All these aspects of his devotion to God were not just pointless. In v8, he describes them as "rubbish". Different Bibles translate this word in different ways. Some say "dung." Others say the word refers to the food scraps thrown out for the dogs to scavenge. Considering just a few verses previous he was talking about the religious "dogs" around him, that interpretation would work too.

The point is clear enough: all the very best things about his old identity were nothing but a pile of old junk.

Have a look in the previous chapter, chapter 2, and v7. I spoke about this a few weeks ago. It talks about how Jesus Christ humbled himself, even emptying himself of his glory. He

became a real man. He was divine all right, but if he were to walk in here this morning in the clothing of our day, all you'd see is a normal man. No halo. No shining face. Not distinguished in his appearance in any way.

We might say *Paul* went through a process of emptying himself, too. He had a sort out! It's like he opened the box of his heart and went through it all. *Let's see:*

- *A silver bracelet to mark his circumcision—rubbish...*
- *My Jewish genealogy and family tree—rubbish...*
- *The honours degree I got in Jewish studies—rubbish...*
- *This ornate scroll of Isaiah, a gift from the high priest to recognise my zeal—**rubbish**.*

He had a sort out of his own heart and got rid of his reputation, his achievements, his self-reliance, HIS SELF RIGHTEOUSNESS, so that he could then be FILLED with the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

He traded everything for what he calls in v8 “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord”. He lost his whole life in order to know Jesus. And he did it gladly!

I was thinking about what a modern, self-righteous, religious person would sound like in our day. There's no shortage of people in Liverpool who are religious. We have tens of thousands of people who are religious. **The problem is almost all of them are relying on their own righteousness.** Just listen to them. It'll all come out:

- “I was baptised as a baby”
- “As a child, I was confirmed,” or “I had my holy Communion”
- “I live in a Christian country”
- “My family are all devout Protestants,” or “My family are all devout Catholics”
- “I'm a good Christian”
- “I give things up for Lent and only eat fish on Good Friday”
- “I attend church several times a year, and always throw my pound in the collection...”

WHAT THE RELIGIOUS PEOPLE OF OUR CITY NEED FIRST AND FOREMOST IS TO CONSIDER ALL THE WORKS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS THEY'VE DONE THROUGHOUT LIFE AS RUBBISH. As long as they're holding onto anything they can NEVER gain Christ.

## The perfection of the righteousness of God

I said earlier God **cannot** allow any creature into his presence who isn't righteous like him. We've looked at the righteousness which comes through living a morally upstanding life or obeying the Law of Moses, and hopefully we're all in agreement that it's useless.

In v9, Paul talks of a different type of righteousness. *It's a righteousness which comes from God.* It's God's *own* righteousness. It's a sharing of this perfect attribute of his with *us*.

What this means is those of us who've received this righteousness of God himself enjoy two huge benefits:

1. Firstly, at the judgement of God, **we must be declared “not guilty.”** When the judge looks at us, he'll see us as those who've kept all his legal requirements—perfectly. It's actually *because* he's perfect in righteousness that we *have* the confidence of this amazing outcome in the Great Courtroom.
2. The second benefit is **we get to live with God.** I assure you, friends, we are *already* living with God. But there's a level of existence to come which excels this one by far. A cohabitation with our Lord without the interference of sin. A life in the immediate presence of God which will never end.

So we know man needs this righteousness which comes from God. But how does he get it? We've already said man cannot do anything to deserve any favour from God. How does he get it then?

The answer is also in v9. This righteousness from God comes as a result of **faith. Faith in Jesus Christ.**

Our saviour willingly went to his violent death two thousand years ago. On a hill far away, to an old rugged cross, Jesus of Nazareth was nailed. Always present in his thoughts was that golden list of God's elect people. His love for them, and his holy determination to save them from their sins, moved him to subject himself to that which, as a man, he recoiled from.

**Every individual for whom Christ was punished will never have to face the punishment themselves.** I am staggered that the saviour of the world had the name Paul Forrest in his mind as he hung there. And all the fury of God that was coming my way was redirected onto the sweet head of Jesus.

And the End of Days will no doubt reveal the immensity of my sins. The number of them. The depth of them. And the eternity of retribution due to me was in some way made into a highly-concentrated mixture which flowed from heaven into the soul of Jesus my Lord.

The great project of my salvation continued. When I came into this world, the roadmap of my life was already in existence. God would gradually reveal himself to me and show me I was one of that multitude whose redemption was secured at Calvary.

God gave me repentance and *faith*. Faith in Jesus Christ. And if you're a disciple of Jesus Christ, he's done the same for you!

Paul says a few things about Christ here. The end of v8 talks about how he wants to put his former life behind him so he could *gain* Christ. He's talking there like Christ is a possession that he never wants to let go of!

Straight after that, he talks about being found *in* Christ. The metaphor changes now so that Paul imagines himself being in Christ like he would live in a castle. Whenever you next come across the cities of refuge in the book of Numbers, recall that these are images of Jesus

Christ. When we go to Jesus in faith, we can think of that as being admitted into the safe stronghold of God.

Brother...sister...if you belong to God today you are located in the city of refuge that is Jesus Christ. You may live in Liverpool, and you may go on holiday to Mexico(!), but you will **always be in him**.

And the third thing Paul says about Christ is a bit further on in v9. There, he talks about *faith* in Christ. When God seeks out his elect people, he gives them this faith.

- They believe Jesus died for sinful people
- They understanding he died for *them*
- They trust this sacrifice of Christ's was acceptable to God
- And they joyfully accept the promise of forgiveness of sins and life everlasting

Paul understood the difference between a righteousness that comes through the Law and the one which comes by faith. When we find Christ, we see him to be the great mediator between God and ourselves. In faith, we see him presenting his own shed blood in the most holy place in heaven. We see it being accepted by God, and **we see that on this basis the righteousness of God becomes ours**.

Last week, I said one of the marks of a true Jew was glorying in Christ Jesus. Today, we see just how Paul gloried in Jesus. It was by abandoning all confidence in himself that he could find Christ. It was by discarding the junk of his **own** righteousness that he instead received the righteousness of **God**.

It's my hope that all of you here this morning will have had the same realisation as Paul. My hope is you'll have already looked at the accounts of your own life, worked it all out, and saw all your self-righteous efforts as loss.

I hope you've gladly suffered the loss of all those former things so that you might **gain** Christ, be found **in** Christ, and have absolute **faith** in Christ; so that he will take centre stage in your heart and be the sole object of your adoration.

Amen.