

Trinity Lutheran Church, Gillette, WY  
October 5, 2008

The Prize of Christ

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, amen. The text for the sermon this day comes from the Epistle, which was read earlier.

All too often in our lives, we like to think of ourselves as being more important than what we are. If we were not present, the world would fall apart; in short, the world needs me, the world needs you. During the life of Paul, it was no different. The practice of laying out ones credentials to attain a higher place in society was a common practice. When Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, he lays out his credentials and shows the Church who he is: *“circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal; a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless.”* His life conformed to the law from his eighth day, when he was circumcised. He was from the high-ranking tribe of Benjamin. Both of his parents were Hebrews. Add to this privileged ancestry his religious achievements: faithful Pharisee, zealous persecutor of the church, above reproach as a keeper of the Law of Moses. If anyone had the credentials of the day, it was Paul. If you want to look at the people of the day, if Paul were not there, then the world could very well fall apart.

We share the same mentality of Paul, don't we? We think that the more degrees we have, the more letters after our name, the more important and valuable we are. Through all of this, we further our careers, earn more money, and now have the right to look down our noses at those who are below us on the food chain.

That may be how some in the world may think, but that is not what Paul is writing to the Church at Philippi. He could have very easily laid out his credentials and demanded that he have a position of authority and power both in the church and the government, yet he did not. He had far outclassed even the best of the Judaizers. If salvation were by works, Paul would have been guaranteed clear entrance to heaven. And at one time Paul considered all that to his profit; they were all advantages that would have helped him gain an eternal reward. But since that blinding experience on the road to Damascus, Paul's eyes of faith were opened, and he now realized that all those things were to his disadvantage. They stood in the way of his having a right relationship with the Lord and kept the gates of heaven shut up tight for him. They did not gain any righteousness for him but only led him away from the true righteousness in Christ. They were now all to his "loss." Those old ideas needed to be abandoned as totally useless and worthless. Paul doesn't hold his credentials as a bargaining chip. Instead, he makes a statement to the Philippians that is unexpected of the day: "*But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.*"

This is not the response that one would have expected to come from the mouth of Paul, nor is the response that one would have expected from many living in Philippi. Paul was not afraid to preach the Word of God to anyone at any time in any place. By these contrasts Paul shows the surpassing worth of Jesus Christ compared to his former life. None of his former credentials can compare with what Paul has found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in whom this former legalist has found a righteousness "*that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ.*" By comparison, all his former achievements he considers σκύβαλον, "rubbish, things that are worthless and detestable."

What he thought was the feast of God's approval was nothing but the garbage left over after the feast. Note that Paul does not reject God's Law, but he rejects the confidence that he had in himself because he kept the Law. Justification before God has come through *God's* fulfillment of the Law in Christ. For Paul there can never again be "*righteousness of my own that comes from the law.*"

It is important to realize that some of the things that we as Christians often regard as a real advantage and to our "profit" can actually be to our disadvantage if we regard them as a meritorious work. Boasting over the fact that one has been baptized and confirmed, that one has received a Christian education through a Lutheran elementary or high school, taking pride in one's church attendance and "all that I've done" for the church—this stands in the way of relying on Jesus Christ alone for salvation. While they can do much to benefit us, when they become objects of trust for righteousness before God, they need to be thrown out like garbage. Christ is the focus. Faith in Jesus Christ is far superior to anything we can give to the Lord.

The question we need to ask ourselves is "What is our focus?" Are we focused on the things that we do, the achievements that we have earned, our own personal recognition in the eyes of others? If that's where our focus lies, then there is no need for Jesus, for all that we need, we can accomplish ourselves. If however, we have the mentality of Paul, then we can boldly confess, "*For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*"

That was the problem that Paul found in many of the churches which he visited or which he wrote to: people were more about strutting their peacock feathers to others, indicating to others all the things that **they** have done to earn eternal life. There is

nothing that we ever could, can, or will be able to do to earn eternal life. We deceive ourselves into thinking that salvation can come from inside of us. Salvation is external, coming from the work of Jesus Christ and Him alone. It is His life, death, and resurrection which is able to bring about forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

For Paul, he was looking forward to the resurrection, namely, his own resurrection from the dead and the life everlasting that is found in Jesus Christ. As Christians study their Scriptures and make regular use of the sacraments, the Holy Spirit brings the glories of Christ and the power of His resurrection into ever clearer focus. Through the Holy Spirit's work in their lives, they begin to experience the power of Jesus' resurrection as they rejoice more and more over their forgiveness, and as they, through repentance and faith, gain the daily victories over sin. As they put up with the ridicule and persecutions the world hurls their way and as they daily put to death their sinful nature with all its desires, they share in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings and become more like Him in His death. The final goal is their own resurrection to glory.

My friends, this is what Paul strove for; this was his prize: resurrection and everlasting life. This too is our prize. It is a prize that is won by faith and faith alone, not by works. Relying on our works pushes us further away from the prize which was won for us by Jesus Christ and His death on the cross. We need to keep our eyes on the prize. Do not be distracted by the attractions of this world or by its distractions. Consider the example of Peter when he walked on the water. He was distracted by the storm and took his eyes off Jesus and began to sink. When we take our eyes off of Jesus, we lose sight of the prize won for us by Jesus Christ. Growing in grace means learning more and more to live in the awareness that our guilt has been forgiven, that our future is secure in Christ,

and that as a result we are truly free to live in the present. God will continue to do the work that He began in us when we came to Christ until we see Him face-to-face.

Paul rightly makes the point when he says, “*Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.*” Why is this important? The importance lies with the last eight words of this verse: “*...because Christ Jesus has made me his own.*” We do not make ourselves Christ’s own. We do not bring about our own salvation. It is Christ Jesus who makes us His own. It is Christ Jesus who gives to us salvation. Because of Jesus Christ, we “*press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*” In the name of Jesus, amen. Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, amen.