

“Gain and Loss”

April 6, 2025

First Christian Church

Scripure Text: Philippians 3: 4b-11

Fred Craddock told the story about a missionary family in China who were forced to leave the country after the communists seized power. They were told they had two hours to pack up before soldiers would return and escort them to the train station. And they were only permitted to take two hundred pounds of their belongings with them. This prompted two hours of intense decision making. What about the vase that was a family heirloom? Take it or leave it? And the brand new typewriter that was vital to their ministry? They just couldn't leave it behind. And some books? On and on it went, putting stuff on the bathroom scale, deciding what pile it went in, until they finally had one pile of possessions that totaled two hundred pounds on the dot. The soldiers returned right on schedule and asked, “Are you ready?” “Yes.” “Did you weigh your stuff?” “Yes, two hundred pounds on the dot.” “Did you weigh your children?” “Um, . . . no.” “Weigh the children!” At that moment the family let go of the vase, the typewriter, and the books because comparatively, they were trash. Craddock said that sometimes events crash into our lives in such a shocking way that we are instantly forced to view what we have and what we treasure in a new light. We can let go of what had once been valuable to us because it has come to mean absolutely nothing to us.

Meeting Jesus was that event for Paul. In the ancient Mediterranean world, a person's social status was determined by their honor. And a person's honor was defined in two ways. First was ascribed honor, which refers to one's status in the community due to the reputation of family and ancestry. Ascribed honor was something you were born into. It had a whole lot more to do with who your parents and their parents were than you. But there was also acquired honor. Acquired honor was all about you and what you did and did not do. You could improve your social status through personal achievements. In Jewish circles, Paul had them both. Verse 5, he was “circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews.” In other words; by blood, by ritual, and by association, his ascribed honor was unquestionable. And as far as acquired honor went, he was unrivaled. Moving from verse 5 to 6, “as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” In other words, he not only followed God's written law, but the oral law as well. He was so passionate about it, not only did he purify himself of everything ungodly to the point of being called “blameless”, he also worked to purify the community of faith. To understate the point, Paul took great pride in his position of honor in the Jewish faith.

But then he met Jesus. He met the risen Savior. And he said why would I live for honor in a small community on earth, when I can live forever. Paul met the risen Lord and said, “That is

where I want to be. I want to grab hold of Jesus. I want to grab hold of resurrection. Whatever that means. Whatever that takes. I want to know Jesus. I want to know eternal life. I want a righteousness not based on me and what I can accomplish, but a righteousness granted by the creator of the universe. All the honor offered by this world. All the ascribed and acquired honor that has been the focus of my life, forget that. Throw it out. It is nothing but trash, disposable garbage compared to resurrection.” Just like their new typewriter and heirloom vase became trash once their children had to be put on the scale, so all that earthly honor turned to trash once resurrection and eternal life was put on the table. It became more obvious than the nose on his face that he must let go of one life focus in order to grab hold of another – one that matters.

Paul’s language from verse 8 makes him sound like an accountant. “I regard everything as loss... in order that I may gain Christ”. I am not good at reading financial sheets, but often I am handed a gain/loss sheet. It basically looks at how much money came in that month and that year, and how much money went out in that month and year. It is a quick way to see if you gained that month or lost that month, as well as seeing how you are doing for the year. So what does that look like here? When trying to grab hold of Jesus and resurrection, what goes in the gain column and what in the loss column? What do you grab hold of, and what do you let go of and leave behind?

For Paul, he is actually subtle here. Yes, I needed help seeing it myself, because subtle is not my thing. Just one chapter earlier, Paul either quotes or writes a hymn celebrating Jesus. He introduces the hymn by saying, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others.” Then he says, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” then goes on to extol how Jesus was in the place of honor, working with and being part of God in heaven, and how Jesus left all that, let go of it, and came to earth, taking the form of a servant, even dying at our hands. And He did it in order to lift us up, to make us more than we could ever be on our own, to save us and make a way to God and eternity. And because Jesus did that, God raised Him from the dead, and gave Him the place of honor and life. And now Paul wants to grab hold of Jesus and resurrection, so what does he do? He let go of his place of ascribed and acquired honor, called it rubbish, in order to serve others, others who were considered less than him, serving them even to the point of being arrested and soon after writing Philippians, be put to death. Paul wanted resurrection like Jesus, so Paul lived his life like Jesus – letting go of this world’s honor and serving those less than him.

We often mistakenly think of faith as a painless little adventure that costs very little and leads to resurrection. But that is not the way Paul shares it with us. He says you need to let go of what you used to claim as most important, and use that empty hand to grab hold of Jesus. Again, starting in chapter 2, verse 3, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in

humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

So many things in this world seem so valuable: our money, our reputation, our honor, our family identity, our political outlook, our traditions; but Paul lets us know we have some really tuff decisions to make. We can only hold onto so much. Are we going to hang onto the family heirloom, our newest form of typewriter, and a book, and lose our children, our future, our eternity; or are we going to let go of what this world values in order to take hold of Jesus by humbling ourselves, becoming a servant to those less than ourselves, and looking out not for our own best interest, but the interest of others. We can you, you know. We can look out for others’ interests above our own, because our future is taken care of. Jesus has made a way to resurrection, to heaven. We just need to release and grab hold.

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