

Losing All for Gaining Christ

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[0 : 00] This is the AM service on 1st of June 1997.

The preacher is Paul Barker, preaching from Philippians chapter 3, verses 1 to 11. The sermon is entitled, Losing All for Gaining Christ.

Be seated. And you may like to turn open to Philippians on page 954 in the Black Pew Bibles. That's the passage I'm preaching on this morning.

And I'll pray for us. Now God, we thank you for your word and pray that you'll give us ears to hear it and wills to obey it for Jesus' sake.

Amen. I want to begin by giving you a little handy hint. If you want to ensure that your vicar never calls, then put out a sign that says, Beware the dog.

[1 : 12] Because whenever I see a sign that says, Beware the dog, I have fear and trepidation. I imagine this six foot hound that's going to bound over me and slobber over me if I enter the gate.

And sometimes if I'm feeling particularly timid, I may just not ring the bell. St. Paul said the same thing as that sign. Beware the dogs, he said.

Well, if it were me, I'd be running for a mile. Beware of the dogs. Beware of the evil workers. Beware of those who mutilate the flesh. Well, it must be some ferocious dog that's going to do all that and mutilate the flesh.

You can imagine a pit bull terrier. But St. Paul, you see, is not giving a handy hint here. He's actually warning the Philippian church against something a little bit more serious than just an animal.

To call somebody a dog in the ancient world was a term of some derogatory disdain or abuse. It was really a term that Jews used for people who weren't Jews, for pagans or what are called Gentiles, that is non-Jews.

[2 : 19] And the Jews would use that term dog or dogs to talk with some derision about those who are not Jews. It's hardly politically correct, is it?

You can imagine that if St. Paul wrote this today, that he'd be caught up before the AFL tribunal on a racial charge. But Paul's fairly unrestrained in his warning against such people.

Three times he says, beware. It's the same group of people. It's not three different groups. Beware of the dogs. Beware of the evil workers. Beware of those who mutilate the flesh. Well, who are they?

Who are the people that he's talking about? The irony is that he's not talking about pagans or Gentiles. That is, the non-Jews. But rather he's speaking about Jews. So he's reversed the standard way of being derogatory or abusive about such people.

In Paul's day and in Jesus' day 2,000 years ago, the major difficulty or the major division between people was the division between Jew and what's called Gentile.

- [3 : 20] That is, between Jew and non-Jew. The Jews of Jesus and St. Paul's day were fairly self-righteous people. Very proud about being Jews. And very distinct from those who were not Jews and saw themselves as much more superior than them.
- So they became very disdainful of pagans and Gentiles. When the gospel of Christ began to be spread throughout the ancient world, the great trial that it went through was, how now do Jews and Gentiles relate?
- For the gospel was not just for Jews, but for Gentiles as well. And so all of a sudden there was the Christian church being founded that incorporated both Jews and non-Jews within it.
- The church that Paul had founded in Philippi and northern Greece was largely, but not exclusively, a Gentile church. That is, of people who were not Jews by race or birth.
- For many Jews who became Christians, their heritage meant a great deal to them. And all of a sudden they were brought into fellowship with people who for centuries had been regarded as unclean.
- [4 : 34] The dogs, the pagans, the Gentiles. And so many Jewish Christians, that is, people who were Jews who converted to become Christians, wanted to maintain the Jewish rules, regulations and rituals of their heritage.
- And so one of the most common problems that St. Paul and others in the New Testament face was the problem of Jewish Christians wanting non-Jewish Christians to adopt Jewish regulations and rituals.
- For example, for centuries since Abraham, a sign of belonging to God and belonging to what later came to be called the Jewish race.
- They wanted non-Jewish Christians to be circumcised in order to have full fellowship with Jewish Christians. Well, Paul is warning the Philippian church against such people.
- He calls them mutilators of the flesh, a derogatory way of talking about circumcision, a physical sign applied to men traditionally on their eighth day or a week after being born.
- [5 : 42] To call somebody a mutilator of the flesh was again a term of derision. It was usually applied by Jews to pagans who sometimes would slash themselves or cut themselves so that the drawing of blood would be some inducement to their gods and involvement in funeral rites and so on.
- But Paul says some astonishing things here about those Jews who are wanting Jewish rites and regulations and rituals to be applied to non-Jewish Christians.
- Beware of them, he said. For it is we, both St. Paul and the Philippians, not just Jewish Christians but Jewish and Gentile Christians. We who are Christians, he says in verse 3, are the circumcision.
- We are the circumcision. Not even we are the best circumcision, the Jews or Jewish Christians are a weaker circumcision, but we are the circumcision. Whether or not we're physically circumcised.
- That's a fairly astonishing thing for St. Paul to say. Because he's dismissing in one sweep all the physical circumcision that had been going on for 2,000 years for Jewish people and he's saying it doesn't matter.
- [6 : 53] It's of no significance or consequence at all. The real circumcision are those who are Christians, whether Jew or Gentile. He defines them in verse 3 as those who worship in the Spirit of God, who boast in Christ Jesus and who have no confidence in the flesh.

Well, two important things are being said here by St. Paul. One is that his view of the Old Testament heritage of Jewish people leading up to the time of Jesus is that those who receive the same status and privilege and find the fulfilment of the Old Testament are not Jews or even Jewish Christians but are Christians, whether or not they're Jews or Gentiles.

So for us who are Christians here today, most of whom I suspect are not from some Jewish racial background, we are the ones in whom is found the fulfilment of the Old Testament people of God.

We are the circumcision. Not because we're Jewish of ancestry, but because we have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We are the circumcision.

Or as Paul says elsewhere, we are the Israel of God. You see, in the New Testament, there's not this perception that some people have today of there being two groups of God's people, the Jews and Christians, as though somehow God is now dealing in a bifocal way, dealing with one group of people of God whom he's going to save through Jewish regulations and the other who are Christians whom he's going to save through Jesus Christ.

[8 : 29] No, the line is continuous from Old Testament people of God, Jews, to New Testament Christians. And those who are Jews in the modern times but are not Christians have, in a sense, cut themselves off from the line of the people of God.

For what counts is faith in Jesus Christ. And that's what makes us true heirs of Abraham, the father of the Jewish race of the Old Testament. Not because we're racially descended from him, but because we, like him, have faith in God and therefore in Jesus Christ.

Now, the implications for that are very important. Often you hear it said today that the modern state of Israel since 1948 is a fulfilment of Old Testament promise, that somehow the people of God will return to Jerusalem and so on.

But that's a thorough misreading or even ignorance of the New Testament entirely, which recognises that the people of God are Christians. And therefore the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises are found in them through Jesus Christ, not rather in Jewish people who are not Christians today.

Christians, not modern Jews, are the heirs of the Old Testament promises, which find their culmination in Jesus Christ. The other important thing about what Paul is saying here about these people wanting the Christians to have Jewish rites and regulations and rituals in order to be fully members of God's people is that it's the inner reality that matters, not the external ritual.

[10 : 00] What matters is faith in Jesus Christ. What matters is worshipping of God in the Spirit, boasting in Christ Jesus and having no confidence in the flesh, to use Paul's terms in verse 3.

That's what matters. It's the inner attitude or relationship or faith that counts, not the outward external forms and rituals. Now I guess that most of us are not often tempted to adopt Jewish rituals into our church life or Christian practice.

I've never heard it said at Holy Trinity that we think that in order to become a member of Holy Trinity, men need to be circumcised or that we need to keep a Sabbath day ritual strictly or something like another Jewish kosher food laws or something like that.

Nobody here is tempted, you see, to adopt those Jewish rules and regulations and rituals. But on the other hand, all of us are vulnerable to the temptation to adopt some rituals, some regulations, in addition to the inner reality.

And very often what happens is that it's the outward form that becomes more important in our minds, eyes. So sometimes there are people who place a great lot of store in the outward form of baptism, full immersion or sprinkling or something in between, as being the be-all and end-all.

[11 : 18] But of course what really matters is faith in Jesus Christ. It's the inner reality, not the outward form, that is crucial. The same to do with things like prayer books, which prayer book we can use or none to worship.

What matters is the inner reality of faith in Jesus Christ, not whether we use a modern prayer book, a semi-modern prayer book, or an ancient prayer book or no prayer book. The same with music, old or new.

The same with what clothes we have to wear to church or other sort of customs that some churches and denominations import. No smoking, no dancing, no drinking, and so on.

What matters is faith in Jesus Christ. And all the external rules and regulations that we set up are to be, in a sense, torn down if it becomes what we rely upon for our relationship with God.

What matters is our faith in Jesus Christ. Earlier this year I was at the National Anglican Conference in Canberra and the saddest part of that, in one sense, for me, was the inability of the Anglican Church to define what it means to be Anglican.

[12 : 27] And in the end the only thing that seemed to have common consensus, by and large, about what defined an Anglican was using the prayer book. Now that, I think, has put the external form above the internal reality.

Because in the end what must count first and foremost is faith in Jesus Christ. Not what sort of prayer book or none that is used. And so on. But sadly, when the central tenets of Christian faith are confused or lost in some parts of the church, what matters most then becomes the external form, not the inner reality.

Let's never forget that. How we do things is important. But it's the inner faith in Jesus Christ that is of crucial importance. And in the end all the other things are secondary to that.

St Paul's attack on these Jewish people who are trying to get Christians to adopt Jewish rituals is not motivated by anti-Semitism or envy or jealousy. Paul himself, of course, was a Jew.

And indeed he goes on to parade his impeccable pedigree as a Jew. It would be like somebody coming along and saying that they were baptised at St John's Turac, that they were confirmed at Trinity College Chapel, a graduate of Scotch College, graduate of a university, indeed have a higher degree, ordained at St Paul's Cathedral, even a vicar of Holy Trinity Doncaster.

[13 : 58] Well, if you can imagine someone with that sort of conglomeration of pedigree and background, that's the sort of thing that Paul is saying here in verses 5 and 6.

He says, If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more. Circumcised on the eighth day. He wasn't a late convert to Judaism.

His parents upheld Judaistic rules very strictly. So he was circumcised at the right time, a week old. He was a member of the people of Israel.

It should really read a member of the race of Israel. That is, you could be a member of the people of Israel by being a sort of adult convert from being a Gentile. But what Paul means here is that he was actually born, he's of racial descent from Abraham.

He's not a sort of proselyte who's become a Jew in later life, but was born into Israelite heritage. Not only so, he's of the tribe of Benjamin.

[15 : 01] There are 12 Israelite tribes. They're named after the 12 sons of Jacob in the book of Genesis. And of those 12 sons, only Benjamin was born in the Promised Land.

All the others were born outside the Promised Land. Benjamin, indeed, was the tribal area in which Jerusalem is situated. So Benjamin has some special claim.

The first king of Israel was from the tribe of Benjamin, Saul. And, of course, St Paul's name, before he was a Christian, was Saul. And then it was later changed to Paul. So the tribe of Benjamin is held in some esteem.

It's one of only two tribes that was loyal to the Davidic king after Solomon died. So Paul is saying something of great importance and pride for him. Furthermore, he says, I was a Hebrew born of Hebrews.

We might think he's being tautologist here by saying that after saying that he was a member of the people of Israel. But to call himself a Hebrew means that he was a Hebrew or Aramaic or both speaker.

[16 : 02] That is, not a Greek speaker fundamentally, although because that was the lingua franca of his age. Everybody spoke Greek. But he spoke Hebrew, which put him on a pedestal amongst Jewish people.

That's his background. That's his pedigree, where he's come from. He goes on then to parade his achievements. According to the law, he was a Pharisee.

That is, someone who was very devout, very pious, very strict, respected, highly acclaimed were the Pharisees as the most holy people in this Jewish society.

Very legalistic in maintaining the law to the last little dot and so on. As to zeal, a persecutor of the church. And if we read the Acts of the Apostles, we read of St. Paul being one who's so fervent about persecuting the Christian church because it infringes the Jewish laws that he was going all the way to Damascus to try and find Christians there and persecute them and execute them.

Then, of course, he was converted en route. As to righteousness under the law, blameless. Not that he was claiming to be perfect or sinless, but rather that he was exemplary in his moral character, in his obedience to Jewish law in every respect.

[17 : 23] Paul is parading every credential that he can to show that he has everything to boast about as a Jew. But, yet whatever gains I had, he says in verse 7, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

In his accounting sheet of life, he'd been in credit through and through. Through all these things that meant that he was a superior Jew to virtually anybody else.

But now, as he's become a Christian, he's realised that all those things on which he used to boast and take pride are actually regarded as loss. It's not just that they're worth less or they're not worth much, but they're actually a debit, a loss in his life.

Because he'd relied upon all of those things rather than relying upon the Lord Jesus Christ. He realises now as a Christian that in God's heavenly audit, if you like, all the things that he thought put him in profit, all the things in the black account of his ledger should have been in the red to his detriment and to his loss.

Here is the most moral, devout, zealous, religious, privileged person you could imagine and yet all of that is nothing, in fact worse than nothing.

[18 : 52] As a Christian, Paul's values have been utterly reversed for he's come to realise that what matters is Jesus Christ. Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

You see, he couldn't just say these are all the positives that I had and now I add to them faith in Christ which makes it even a bigger positive. No, you see, he had all these positives but they're all negatives, he finds, because the one thing that counts goes against all of them and that is Jesus Christ.

Well, what a warning this is to us. What sort of currency are we dealing in with God? What sort of things are we relying upon to keep us in credit with God?

Our upbringing, our parents' faith that we were baptised at Turack or Doncaster or somewhere else. We went to some Anglican or Christian school. Maybe our past record of Sunday school or Sunday school teaching or being on the vestry or being a leader in the church or helping to build the church or giving money to the church or leading a group within the church, keeping it clean on Friday mornings or so on.

Maybe we rely upon our church attendance, our visiting record. Or maybe it's not so much church things that we rely upon but our family life, our moral standards, bringing up our children well, our prayer life.

[20 : 20] Paul says that all of that in the end counts for zero when we're dealing with God. More than that, he says, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and I regard them as rubbish. What matters is knowing Jesus Christ.

What matters only is knowing Jesus Christ. A relationship with him. Not the intellectual accumulation of facts about him but knowing him personally.

It's a relational idea. And all the background and all the pedigree and all the achievements don't necessarily guarantee a relationship with Jesus Christ.

And without a relationship with Jesus Christ, they count for nothing. Indeed, worse than that, they're rubbish, filth, refuse, excrement. That's the word that Paul uses here. And notice that it's knowing Jesus Christ my Lord.

[21 : 31] Not our Lord or your Lord but my Lord. Personal and singular. Not my parents' Lord or my children's Lord or my spouse's Lord but my Lord. Personal and singular.

Our relationship with God is something that is personal to us. Not private but personal. It's not something that's mediated through our spouse or parents or children or vicar or church attendance or abilities or achievements in church or record in church or anything else like that but something that is personal to each one of us if we're Christian people.

what matters is knowing Jesus Christ. Indeed, Paul goes on to say in parallel term what matters is gaining Christ at the end of verse 8.

everything else is loss and rubbish in comparison to gaining Jesus Christ. And it cost Paul a lot to be a Christian. It cost him his job probably.

It cost him his status in Jewish society. It cost him all the benefits and privileges that he would have had as a leader of the Pharisees. It cost him his safety for he was beaten, imprisoned. It cost him in the end his life as he was put to death for being a Christian.

[22 : 43] The very thing that he was persecuting Christians about at the beginning. But he's got no regrets. He's not saying this bitterly because he knows that all of that that he's lost is inconsequential in comparison to knowing and gaining Jesus Christ.

And the third expression he uses again in parallel with these comes in verse 9. To be found in him. What matters is knowing Christ Jesus. What matters is gaining Christ Jesus.

What matters is being found in Christ Jesus. Paul's standard way of describing Christians is to call them as people in Christ.

He's not saying here that he's not a Christian and he wants to become one. But rather he has the final day in view. The day of judgement when all people of all generations will come before the judgement throne of Jesus Christ.

And he's saying that his goal is that on that day on that final day he will be found to be in Christ. What will that mean?

[23 : 52] How can you tell? Well then he describes what it isn't in verse 9. To be found in Jesus Christ is not having a righteousness of my own that comes from a law.

Paul will not be able to stand on that final day before the judgement seat of Christ and say that according to the law I am faultless and blameless. I have exercised exemplary moral character.

Look at all my credentials and achievements here. I'm a Jew above Jews. I'm a Hebrew of the Hebrews. I'm a Pharisee of great zeal and fervour. No, the righteousness that will be his on the final day is not his own achievement.

Not something that he deserves or has earned or has gained. All of the things on which Paul could rely, all of his achievements count for nothing on that final day of the judgement of Jesus Christ.

For that would be self-righteousness. I'm good enough for God. I can stand before God's throne and say how good I've been. Look at my church attendance record and so on.

[24 : 57] No, Paul says you can't do that on the final day of Christ. But the opposite is what really is important. To be found in Christ.

not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law but one that comes through faith in Christ. The righteousness from God based on faith.

The righteousness that counts on that final day of judgement is not a self-righteousness but one that has its origin in God. its origin in God and its basis is Jesus Christ's own faithfulness even to death.

For the reason that I will be righteous on the day of Christ is not because I can say before God some of the things that I've achieved in my life but rather that Jesus' death has taken away my sins and on the basis of Jesus' death God has reckoned me righteous in his sight.

not something I've earned but something that is a gift from God secured by Jesus' death. It's what the Bible calls grace it's a gift something that I don't deserve and yet God in his grace and mercy offers as a gift to each one of us and as Paul says at the end of verse 9 it's received through faith.

[26 : 24] God says this is how you'll be righteous on the last day because Jesus dies for the sins of the world he will take away your sins and I will reckon you righteous in my sight and through faith I accept that and receive that and look forward with confidence to that final day of being able to stand before God's judgment throne and say I am righteous in your sight because Jesus died for me.

There's nothing else that would give me confidence to stand before God's throne and have confidence for heaven. Well you might think does this really matter? Aren't I just clutching at something that's very fine distinction here?

But it does matter. It mattered for the founders of the Anglican Church for the reason the Anglican Church began in the 16th century cutting itself off from the Roman Church was not really because of Henry VIII's wives and divorce but was really about this doctrine that our acceptance or justification is what it's called from God is by grace alone received through faith alone.

And Archbishop Cranmer the author indeed of the first book of prayer book which we have modern versions now Bishops Latimer and Ridley and others went to the stake and were burned because of this doctrine.

It matters. It's fundamental to Christian faith that our relationship before God is based on Jesus' death for our sins and not anything else that we do or achieve.

[28 : 03] Our righteous standing before God is called justification. That's the theological word. The common sort of word is justification by faith. That's what Christians believe.

And it's God's work. It's God's gift. It's achieved through Jesus' death on the cross and it's appropriated by our faith in him.

The writer of her hymns or one writer of hymns expresses it very well. Not the labours of my hands can fulfil thy law's demands.

Could my zeal no respite no? Could my tears forever flow? All for sin could not atone. That is, he's saying that everything I do or could do will not atone for sin.

All for sin could not atone. Thou must save and thou alone. Nothing in my hand I bring.

[29 : 06] Simply to thy cross I cling. Naked come to thee for dress. Helpless look to thee for grace. Foul I to the fountain fly.

Wash me saviour or I die. Or to use the words of another hymn writer which we're about to sing.

When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died, my richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it Lord that I should boast save in the death of Christ my God all the vain things which charm me most I sacrifice them to his blood.

Amen. and the country