

## Philippians 3:4-14

In the New Testament, we see Paul having frequent disputes with a group called the Judaizers, Jewish Christians who insisted that Gentiles had to keep all the Jewish laws in order to be Christians. And in that way of thinking, it's not really Jesus who saves us; it's our own hard work of keeping the Law.

This is still a common way of thinking. Many people think they will "go to heaven" because they are "good people who never murdered anyone or anything like that." I recently saw a story about the pastor and theologian, R. C. Sproul. He was teaching a class on Romans. About halfway through the course, he asked, "Why do you think you will go to heaven?" About half the class answered in a way that was some variation of, "Because I'm a good person." So, even in the Church, this is a common way of thinking.

Paul spent the first half of his life living in this way of thinking. He was completely invested in the idea that the way to right standing with God, was by one's own efforts in keeping the Law. He had good qualifications in this regard.

"Circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day." Paul was born Jewish; he was not a convert. "A pure blooded Israelite." Most first century Jews had at least some Gentile blood in their family history at some point. "From the tribe of Benjamin." Benjamin was one of only two tribes which stayed loyal to the throne of David.

"A real Jew." Literally, "a Hebrew of Hebrews." The most likely explanation of that phrase is that Paul still spoke Hebrew. Most Jews, even in Judea, spoke Aramaic. Outside of Judea, most spoke Greek. Those who could still speak Hebrew were proud of holding onto that part of their heritage.

"A member of the Pharisees." We criticize the Pharisees for many things they got wrong, but no one could deny their sincere devotion to the Law and traditions. There were only about 6000 of them. It wasn't easy to devote every waking minute of life to keeping up all those countless rules and traditions.

"I was never accused of a fault in keeping the Law. And I was zealous for the Law." Zeal was frequently associated with the idea of being willing even to commit violence to defend the faith. Paul's zeal led him to persecute Christ and the Church.

Paul builds up his resume just so he can tear it down. He once considered these things to be "gain," but now he counts them "loss." Those are terms of the marketplace. In modern terms, we might say Paul thought these things put him in the black with God, but he was really in the red.

"All is worthless compared to knowing Christ. All else is garbage compared to that." The Greek word here is SKUBULA, which literally meant "that which is thrown to the dogs." Or

it could be used for excrement, which was “thrown to the dogs.” No indoor plumbing, after all. It is amazing that Paul, a former Pharisee, would now use such a harsh term to describe keeping God’s Law. But it all had to be sacrificed for the sake of knowing Christ. Whatever we cling to, whatever we hold onto for our confidence, our identity; it all must be sacrificed for the sake of knowing Christ.

What does it mean to know Christ?

First, it means that we enter into covenant relationship with him. A covenant is an agreement between two parties who are not family that makes them family. Marriage is a covenant. It’s not just an agreement to live together and have children. It makes you family. To know Christ is to become a child of God, part of God’s family.

Second, knowing Christ means having intimate fellowship with God. Greek had two words for knowledge. One meant knowledge of something. The other meant personal knowledge. That’s the one here. It’s the difference between “I know about Jesus” and “I know Jesus.” Knowing God is the goal of God’s people. And it is available to all God’s people in the New Covenant in Christ. Knowing Christ means being joined to him, united with him. We are united with him in his suffering, his death, and his resurrection. Our goal in this life is to know Christ. To know his heart. To know his character. And then to live them in our own lives. Everything else flows from that. Our values, our behaviors, our lifestyle; they all flow out of knowing Jesus.

“So I press on toward the goal.” The goal is knowing Jesus. “Not that I have already achieved perfection.” The Greek word here is TELEIOS. It’s a hard word to translate into English. It can mean perfect. It can mean maturity or completeness. It can mean full grown. Or well-versed in a subject matter. It can mean “without blemish” when describing a sacrificial animal. It can even be used to describe a Christian who had gone on to perfection by being martyred. I think maturity in Christ is the best understanding. “Striving to become all Jesus saved me for.”

“So I press on. Forgetting the past.” Paul didn’t really forget his past. He remembered he had been a part of the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. But he didn’t live in his past. He didn’t live in his failures. He pressed on toward the goal. You can’t win a race looking over your shoulder. And there is an athletic image here. It’s the image of a runner, sprinting for the goal at the end of the race. Nothing else matters in that moment but reaching the finish line.

In Greek culture, when a runner won the race, he was “called up” by the king to receive a prize. We want to be called up, too. So we focus on that one goal: To know Jesus to become all he wants us to be. Nothing else in this life compares to that. Nothing is as important as knowing Jesus and becoming who he created us to be.