

“Don’t Get Left Holding The Bag”

Philippians 3:1-11

2 Corinthians 5:14-17

John 17:1-5

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There’s an old story about when Alexander the great conquered the Persian empire. In that conquest, Alexander’s soldiers overran the palace of Darius, the king. Looking for things to steal, one of the soldiers came upon a leather bag containing the crown jewel of Persia. The jewels were worth millions of dollars by our standards today. However, in his ignorance, the soldier dumped the jewels on a rubbish heap, saving only the leather bag. Then he proceeded to go around the camp telling the other men about that great bag that he found to carry around his food. I think it’s safe to say that, he was not the sharpest knife in the drawer.

If you think about it though, I wonder how often we have thrown away the jewels and kept only the leather bag? How often have we mixed up our priorities and we just didn’t see what was really important, what was really valuable? So often, those things that we thought were worth nothing, turn out to be the most valuable, and those things that seemed so important, turned out to be absolutely worthless. This is really the issue that Paul was addressing in that passage from Philippians that we read today. First, Paul addresses the Judaizers, as they were called. He refers to them as, “dogs”, “evil doers”, and, “those who mutilate the flesh”. Do you get the feeling that Paul didn’t think very highly of them? That’s simply because they were teaching lies. They were telling the Gentile Christians that faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior wasn’t enough. They also had to obey the laws and ceremonies that God laid down for his people in the Scriptures, especially with the requirement of circumcision, as well as, dietary restrictions. This was all in addition to having faith in Christ. So, in reality, they were basically telling these gentile Christians that they needed to convert to Judaism before converting to Christianity.

Well, Paul went ballistic, because these Judaizers were undercutting the gospel covenant of Christ, robbing those Christians of the freedom that Jesus won for them, making them think that they must contribute toward their own salvation, such as, through circumcision. This is why Paul called them, “dogs”, “evildoers”, and “mutilators of the flesh”. He was ticked off! Because he believed that anything that makes you take your eyes off of Christ, it makes you throw out the crown jewels of the gospel, leaves you holding an empty, worthless bag. And that’s exactly what those Judaizers were trying to do.

So, Paul attacked their stance on circumcision and explained what true circumcision is all about. He writes, "For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh." (Philippians 3:3)

Now, this was important coming from Paul, because, at one point, he was a very important, very prestigious, and a very zealous Jew. From a Jewish perspective, he had everything going for him. In fact, he even referred to himself as, "a Hebrew of Hebrews". Listen again to what he wrote. "If anyone else thinks he has a reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: 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." (Philippians 3:4-6) Folks, his credentials as a Jew were impeccable. So, if anyone had a reason to put "confidence in the flesh", Paul did. You see, he used to believe that that gave him a huge advantage in gaining eternal life. However, in reality, it just led him away from the only righteousness that saves. Well, finally he realized that all of this was just an empty bag, it was worthless.

So, Paul threw that bag away and went after the jewels. Listen again to his words. "But whatever gain I had, I counted as a loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as lies because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. (Philippians 3:7-9)

What Paul is getting at here, is that a righteousness based on ourselves and on our performance, no matter how sincere, will only leave us holding the bag, an empty, worthless bag.

OK, some of you may be thinking, what does all of this have to do with us today? We don't have any Judaizers around today. Oh really? Well, if you are that gullible, then I have a bridge in Brooklyn that I can sell you. Folks, this issue that Paul was addressing way back then, it's still an issue today. In fact, throughout my years in the ministry, I have dealt with this issue more than any other.

It's incredible but so many people, including those who call themselves Christians, are really basing their salvation on their performance. Have you ever heard comments like this? "I come from a long line of Lutheran 's, Missouri Synod Lutherans." My usual response to that is, "I am so, so sorry." Or how about, "I was baptized and confirmed Lutheran. That's got to mean something." Um, No. Do you know what that is called? Confidence in the flesh; exactly what Paul was dealing with back then. I can't tell you how many times I have sat with people who were so uncertain on their salvation

because they questioned if they had done enough, if they had performed well enough to earn heaven. I have sat with people who consistently live in the past. They focus on their sins of the past. They dwell on all those horrible things they have done. They can't let go of them, or rather they won't let go of them. And no matter how much they try to change, to be a better person, they still feel like it's not enough, they're not performing well enough to earn forgiveness, to earn salvation. There are your Judaizers, right there! They have thrown the crown jewels away, and they are holding onto an empty bag. And I guarantee you, there are people like that in this room right now.

Please, if you depend on yourself, your righteousness, your performance, your heritage, you will never have that confidence, that hope in Christ, but only doubt about yourself. You'll never really know God's presence, his peace, his joy, but only your guilt and your emptiness. And you will certainly never possess those jewels of the kingdom. Instead, you'll only end up holding that bag, an empty, worthless bag.

Folks, our Lord Jesus and his saving gospel are indeed, the jewel of our life. Nothing, nothing can compare with knowing him. Oh, how we need to know this deep within us! How we need to cling to this with our whole being!

Paul writes here, "I want to know [Christ] and the power of his resurrection. (v10a) OK, first of all, "to know Christ", means to have a very real and personal relationship with him. It is to have life, true life in him, and to possess the riches, the jewels of the kingdom of God. Paul also speaks of knowing the power of Christ's resurrection. You see, the reason why Paul refers to the "power" of Christ's resurrection, is because it proves that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, and that everything he said and did is true. He is truly the son of the living God. As such, he completely destroyed the power of sin, death, hell, and Satan, in his sacrifice on the cross.

And what his resurrection shows us is that this is all true, and that he freely gives to each one of us the crown jewel of his kingdom. Jesus has restored our relationship with the Almighty God, as his children, as people who belong to him. As such, we can know his presence in our life. We can know his love, and the forgiveness that freely flows from that love. We can know the peace of God deep within us and the lasting joy that he brings to us. We can actually take hold of this life in Christ, a life that will never end. And we can cling to that confidence, that hope of our home in heaven, where we will spend an eternity in the glory of the Lord.

In that passage from 2 Corinthians that we read today Paul wrote, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come." (2 Corinthians 5:17) Well, the reason why we are a new creation in Christ right now is because of the power of his resurrection.

In John's Gospel today, Jesus prayed, "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." (John 17:3) Again, the reason why we can have eternal life and the reason why we can know the Lord is because of the power of his resurrection. It all comes back to Christ's resurrection.

Understand, truly knowing Jesus and knowing the power of his resurrection, this is what really matters, this is that treasure, those jewels that really matter. Everything else, in comparison with this, is rubbish, as Paul puts it. It is just an empty bag.

I know that everyone of us, at times, get our priorities all mixed up, even in our spiritual life. We go after those things that seem so important, so valuable, but in the end are totally worthless. That's when we end up holding an empty, worthless bag. So, my prayer for all of us today is that, by the spirits power, we would let go of that bag and take hold of the priceless jewels of truly knowing Jesus and knowing in our life the power of his resurrection. Because folks, that is life, that is eternal life, and there is nothing greater. Amen.