

Who Are You? Philippians 3:4-9

As kids we brag most about the stuff we have because of the family we're born into — a bigger house, the first color TV on the block, a new (or newer) car. Later when we come of age we brag most about the stuff we have - a cooler bike, a taller stack of video games, the first computer on the block (remember the 8088?), the newest cell phone.

As adults we brag most about the stuff we've earned — a bigger paycheck, a better college, a successful career, a position of power and influence, how far we've climbed from where we started.

In today's epistle Paul covers all that bragging territory, and then some, as he argues against those who were advocating what Gentiles had to do to become Gentile Christians.

These "Judaizers" were insisting that those not born Jewish must become Jews through the rite of circumcision and obedience to Torah law. They argued that if you weren't circumcised and didn't follow the Torah, one could not become a full members of the Christian community of faith.

Paul rejected this teaching, and he could not have been more adamant. He begins his argument with a lengthy litany of his own unquestionably elite status within Judaism. **If anyone had bragging rights, it was Paul.** In strict obedience to the Torah Paul was circumcised on "the eighth day" (you can read more about that in Genesis 17:12 and Leviticus 12:3).

He makes it clear three times over that his ancestry has been Jewish for generations. He identifies himself as a member of "the people of Israel" and specifically as a descendent of "the tribe of Benjamin." The tribe of Benjamin, by the way, was distinguished not only by its patriarch being the only one of Jacob's sons born in the Promised Land, but also as a "royal tribe," from which Israel's first king, Saul, was chosen.

But besides being "Hebrew" by birth, Paul notes that he embraced his Jewishness and excelled at piety through his own commitments and choices. Paul identified himself as a "Pharisee," — that's the party within first century Judaism that stressed rigorous obedience to all tenants of Torah law.

Although the image of Pharisaic Judaism presented in the gospels is far from flattering, it was the commitment of Phariseeism to bring obedience to the law into every facet of life that enabled Judaism to survive the destruction of the Temple and its sacrificial culture.

Even as a Pharisee Paul reveals that he was particularly zealous, not only practicing the law but protecting it from anyone who challenged its ultimate authority. It was this protective "zeal" that led him to persecute the church.

All of this - Paul's rigorous Pharisaic obedience to the Torah, and his enthusiastic protection of the Law's authority through the persecution of those calling themselves Christians - lead him to make a final, bold assertion.

Paul declares himself to be "blameless," or "without fault." Now that's something to brag about! Certainly more noteworthy than the house we live in, having the first color TV on the block, or using the newest smart phone.

It's precisely at this moment when Paul has proven how great his confidence should be in himself and his status that he turns the tables. Using the language of an accountant, Paul declares that his pedigree, his zeal, everything that he was proud of before his conversion - all which had been counted as "gain" - is a dead loss "because of Christ."

For Paul, knowing Jesus Christ changed everything. The "loss" and "gain" sheets have been exchanged by the transformative act of "knowing Christ Jesus."

Now, "knowing" as used in our text is more than an intellectual assertion. "Knowing" in both Greek and Hebrew entailed a deep, even intimate relationship. Among the first century mystery religions "*gnosis*" or "knowledge" was the key to being connected to the deity.

Paul declares that "knowing" Christ Jesus has revealed to him just how flawed his previous perceptions and assertions were. Those things his previous world saw as "gain" — his noble lineage, his pharisaic piety, his zealous defense of the Law — a valueless "loss." They're all garbage ("*skybala*" — literally "excrement") now that he has "gained" Christ.

In v.9 Paul offers a consolidated version of his "justification by faith" argument, as expanded and expounded in both Romans and Galatians. By "knowing" Christ Paul now finds he is "in him." It's that relationship which gives Paul a new claim to "righteousness" not made possible by adhering to the Law but only by adhering to the person of Jesus Christ.

So transformative is this new relationship that Paul now wants to "know" every aspect of Christ, and "share in {Christ's} sufferings," even to the point of death. Paul the Pharisee, the zealous persecutor of the church, wants to know Christ even as a crucified "blasphemer," rejected and reviled by the very people he used to study and pray with every day.

Although Paul expresses the desire to participate in both Christ's suffering and resurrection, he recognizes that he is still on his own faith journey. Paul recognizes that he has not yet "reached the goal." Paul denies that he himself has achieved any perfection or completion of his life of faithfulness, but declares he will "press on" towards that final goal. Paul's words emphasize that it is not any righteous acts of his own that keeps him on this path. It is the transforming knowledge that "Christ Jesus has made me his own" (v.12).

In fact, Paul wants to be Christ's slave ("*doulos*") — a choice Paul makes to follow Christ. And with that choice Paul finds honor and status and a purpose worth living (and perhaps) dying for. After all, to be the slave of God Almighty is, in Paul's mind, the highest of all possible honors.

For Paul the only direction his life can now take is forward. His past life, his past "gains," are wholly lost to him. He is fully focused forward to "what lies ahead." Seeing that Paul writes this from prison, awaiting a possible death sentence, this view might not seem very uplifting. But Paul sees only one goal, one achievement worth pursuing. That is the "high" or "heavenly" call of God that has come to him in Christ Jesus.