

“Gain vs. Loss”
Philippians 3:1-8
April 19, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We continue our series this morning in Paul’s letter to the Philippians.

Last Sunday we looked at verses 1 through 3 of chapter 3. This morning we’ll reread those verses, and then we’ll continue on to verses 4 through 8, which will be our main focus.

With that said, we come to our text this morning: Philippians 3:1-8.

Please do listen carefully. This is God’s Word for us this morning.

Paul writes to the church in Philippi:

^{3:1} Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.

² Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. ³ For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— ⁴ though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ 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; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss 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

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, we know that those who walk in the ways of your word are blessed –
those who keep your testimonies
and seek you with their whole heart.

Lord, teach us the way of righteousness,
so that we might praise you with upright hearts,

Grant this for Jesus's sake. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:1-2, 5-7]

Introduction

So, we are looking at Philippians 3.

As we saw last week, in verses 1-3 Paul critiques the idea of taking something Jesus has not required – like a social marker or achievements – and making it a central proof of someone's relationship to Jesus.

Then, starting in verse 4, Paul begins listing social markers and achievements that were prized by his opponents, and he contrasts those things first with knowing Christ, then with receiving a righteousness through Christ, and finally with sharing in Christ's resurrection.

So Paul contrasts these earthly markers and goals with the value of *those* three things: knowing Christ, with receiving a righteousness from Christ, and sharing in Christ's resurrection.

Each of those is a pretty big topic, and the plan for now is to spend a sermon on each.

So our focus this morning is on the first of those: Paul's contrasting of those earthly things with the value of knowing Christ.

And specifically what we see here is that: Observable status and achievements in the world's eyes will not fulfill us; but rather, compared to knowing Jesus, those things have little value, and may even be detrimental.

Let me say that again: Observable status and achievements in the world's eyes will not fulfill us; but rather, compared to knowing Jesus, those things have little value, and may even be detrimental.

Let's break that down together.

Observable Status and Achievements in the World's Eyes Will Not Fulfill Us

First, we see here that observable status and achievements in the world's eyes will not fulfill us.

Let's look at how Paul makes this point in this passage.

One of Paul's points is that whatever his opponents urge the Christians in Phillipi to be or to do – whatever status markers or achievements they urge them towards, Paul has already received or achieved those things better than they ever will. Paul has been to the destination they will be tempted to strive for. And from that vantage point, Paul can tell them that getting there will not give them what they long for. It will not fulfill them. It will not complete them. These status

markers and achievements in the world's eyes do not deliver what they promise, and Paul would know, because he obtained these things better than they ever could.

And to make that point, Paul lists seven things that he had looked to in the past to fulfill him: three types of status markers, and three types of achievements, and one over-arching summary of them all together.

First, in verse five, Paul points out how he was circumcised on the eight day. Paul does two things here. First, he hones in on the controversial issue in his debate with his opponents. They wanted even non-Jews to be circumcised in order to be Christians. They said that gentiles had to have this Jewish status marker to be whole – to fulfill their spiritual longings. And Paul says “I am circumcised. And it won't do for you what you hope it will.” And more than that, Paul points out that he was circumcised on the eight day – which is an ideal that he received, which these adult gentile converts cannot. So Paul has received an even more prestigious form of circumcision than they ever could, and still, he says, it does not deliver what they're hoping for.

Next, in verse 5, Paul identifies that he is “of the people of Israel.” This is the social status – the social belonging – that would motivate a gentile to be circumcised in the first place, so that by circumcision they could be “of the people of Israel.” But Paul's had that privilege since birth – far longer than they could. And again, he tells them that it does not deliver what they hope for. [Fee, 307]

Third in verse five, Paul identifies himself as being “of the tribe of Benjamin.” Now, behind this claim is the fact that while a gentile convert could join Israel through circumcision, even then, they couldn't trace their lineage through a specific tribe of Israel. But Paul could. And he belonged to a pretty good tribe in the history of Israel. And so again, Paul's status markers among the Jews far outstrip anything that a gentile convert could hope for, but still he says, it does not deliver what they hope it will.

After listing these first three status markers, at the center of his list, Paul gives a summary of his credentials: He is “a Hebrew of Hebrews,” he says. In other words, Paul is more of a Jew – more of a Hebrew – than any Gentile could ever hope to become. This statement sums up the first three items in the list (which are status markers he received), and it sets the stage for the final three items – which are accomplishments he achieved. [Fee, 305]

And so he continues. Fifth, in verse five, Paul points out that “as to the law” he was “a Pharisee.” Remember, in the first century, the Pharisees were a group of Jews that were popularly seen as being especially dedicated to studying God's law and applying every law to every situation. For most Jews, the Pharisees were seen as those who refused to compromise with pagan society, who stood up for the importance of God's Word. And Paul had been one of them: a rigorous, studious, diligent follower of the Jewish law – more than any Gentile convert could hope to become. And still it did not deliver what his opponents hoped for.

Sixth, in verse six, Paul points out that “as to zeal” he was “a persecutor of the church.” This might strike us as an odd inclusion on this list – but again, Paul is saying that whatever his opponents look to for their fulfillment, he had already surpassed them in his past life. They are so zealous for

the Jewish ceremonial law, that they are harassing the young Christian church. But before his conversion, Paul was so zealous for the Jewish laws, that he himself publicly persecuted the early church. Paul was not even just an average Pharisee. He was out ahead of them, persecuting Christians he thought were in error. Even when it came to harming the Church in the name of Judaism, Paul outdid his opponents. But still, that did not make him fulfilled or whole. [Fee, 308]

Finally, seventh, at the end of verse six, Paul notes that “as to righteousness under the law,” Paul himself was “blameless.” Now, Paul is not saying he was sinless – we know that from many other statements Paul makes. Rather, when it came to his public record as a Pharisee – to how he maintained his public, external righteousness, his status markers and outward religious achievements – in those things Paul didn’t have a single blemish on his record. [Fee, 309]

Taken altogether, Paul excelled far beyond what any Gentile convert could hope for in observable status and achievements in the Jewish world’s eyes – that is Paul’s point with this list.

But still ... those things did not fulfill him. They did not complete his faith. They did not satisfy his heart. And that’s what he wants his readers to hear.

As he says in verse 7, he came to see these status markers and achievements not as gain, but as loss. As he says in verse 9, he came to see them even as rubbish! They didn’t bring him the personal fulfillment or spiritual wholeness he longed for, even though at that time he thought they would – even though the world around him promised that they would. That’s the first thing Paul wants us to hear.

And it pushes us to ask: What are the things – what are the observable status markers and achievements in the world’s eyes, that we tend to believe will fulfill us – will make us whole ... but which won’t really?

What is the status in the world ... the status in your workplace or your family, or your community ... or what is the accomplishment or the achievement in some area of life, that you tell yourself: If I just had that ... if I could just do that, if I could just get there – if I just got that ... then I’d be okay. Then I could relax. Then I’d have peace. Then I’d be content.

It could be something at school or at work. It could be something related to your family or your friends or some other community that’s important to you. It could be a status or a possession or an achievement. But what is the thing, if you’re honest with yourself, when you look at your life, and you look at the angst or the anxiety or the stress or the insecurity you feel – you find yourself thinking “If I just had that, then I’d be ok. If I was just at that level in life, then everything would be alright.”?

Whatever that is for you – that’s what Paul has in view here – that’s what Paul is concerned about. So you need to identify what that thing is – what that accomplishment, or status, or possession is for you ... and you’re going to need to keep that thing in mind as we consider Paul’s words here.

And the first thing you need to ask yourself about it – the first issue that Paul raises about it here – is whether it really would deliver what you hope for ... whether it will give you what your heart thinks it will.

Paul speaks to the issues of his setting. And because he accrued all those things he though would give him peace and fulfillment, he knows from firsthand experience that they didn't give him what he hoped they would – what many people hoped they would.

We can't speak from Paul's perspective. But we can find other people who share this trait with Paul of having laid hold of the thing they thought would fulfill them.

So think of that thing you long for – that thing you think will give you peace and fulfillment, and make everything okay – think of that thing.

And now think of some people who have it: people who have reached that status or accomplished that achievement – who have laid hold of that thing you so desperately want. Think of them.

Are they at peace? Are they fulfilled? Do they seem whole? Do they seem content?

My guess is that the answer is no.

Now, once I say that, a voice from your heart probably speaks up and says: “Well that's because those people don't appreciate what they have or what they've done, the way that I would. They're ungrateful. But I wouldn't be like that – I'd be happy, I'd be fulfilled, I'd be content.

But would you really? If you can't find anyone else who's found their fulfillment and their contentment and their peace through the earthly object, or status marker, or achievement that you hope will fulfill you – if no one who sought their peace in that thing has seemed to find it there so far ... it seems like a pretty good bet that that thing does not provide what it seems to promise. And you are unlikely to be the first person ever for whom it goes differently.

What's far more likely is that once you reach that status you long for ... instead of finding peace, you'll see even more clearly yet another status, above that, that looks even better. Or you'll begin to fear that you'll lose the status you now have. Once you obtain that object you want, you'll feel good for a moment or two ... but then it will fade. And you'll start looking for something else that might make you feel right again. Once you achieve that accomplishment you long for, you might feel good briefly ... but the praise will fade away ... the confetti will be swept up ... and people will move on with life ... and you'll still be you. And you'll feel like you either need to repeat the accomplishment to feel okay, or go and try to do something even harder, to bring that feeling back for a few fleeting moments.

And some of the best evidence of this is looking to people who have received the status, accomplished the goal, reached the summit, earned the membership, obtained the thing that you long for ... and observe that it didn't really do for them what you hope it will do for you.

Paul has been there. He's achieved all the things in his particular cultural setting held out for him—he accrued all the badges that were supposed to complete and fulfill him and give him peace and make him alright. And Paul says: It wasn't gain ... it was loss. It was "rubbish" Paul says in verse 8. That's a tame translation of the Greek. The Greek term is a vulgar word that can mean several things, but one of them, as the King James Version has it – is dung ... feces ... excrement. [Fee, 319] Paul says, "Guys, I accrued all those things, thinking they would complete me and fulfill me ... and in the end, it was crap. It didn't do what it promised at all."

So first, earthly status and achievements will not fulfill us.

The Value of Knowing Jesus

Next, Paul directs our attention to the value of knowing Jesus.

Because what earthly achievements and status markers promise but fail to give us, Paul says that knowing Jesus will actually give us those things. Knowing Jesus will complete us. Knowing Jesus will fulfill us.

And in Paul's understanding, this is true for multiple reasons.

First, Jesus is the one who made you. And so only he can truly fulfill you. You exist because he wants you to exist. You would not be here, unless he wanted you here. You're here not by accident, not by chance, but by his will and his design. As Augustine says, he made you for himself. And your heart will be restless until it rest in him. Jesus made you.

Second, Jesus knows you. Humans are deep and complex. "A human being is an immense abyss," Augustine said. [Augustine, Book IV, 14, 22 (p. 106)] "There [...] [is] a cosmic universe in every person," David Brooks writes. [Brooks, 235]

You are deep and complex. But Jesus knows you. Jesus understands you – even if you don't feel like you understand yourself. He knows every inch of your heart, every desire of your soul, every constellation of thought in your mind. He knows you deeply and truly.

Third, Jesus cares about you deeply. He wants to be with you. He wants a relationship with you. He offers to embrace you, and draw you close, if you would come to him. Jesus cares about you, and loves you.

And for that reason, fourth, Jesus died for you. He didn't just send you a perfunctory invite to his Kingdom. He died so that you could join him. He died in order to bridge the gap between you and him. Jesus died for you.

Because, fifth, Jesus wants to purify you and make you whole. Those parts of you that you know are not right – the parts that are not how you should be ... the parts of you that push you to do things you know you shouldn't do: ugly things, selfish things, harmful things – the parts that prod

you to do things that, later, looking back, you regret, and even hate – Jesus wants to cleanse those parts of you, to repair them. Jesus wants to make you truly whole.

Finally, Jesus wants to be with you forever. He wants to walk with you in this life. And in the next life he wants you to see him face-to-face, and for you to live in his kingdom forever.

Jesus wants to care for you in each of these ways. And Jesus has the power to do them all: to make you, to know you, to seek you, to die for you, to cleanse you, to heal you, to make a place for you to be with him forever.

That is what Jesus offers. And those kinds of things are really what our hearts long for. In fact, those are the things you really want when you look to earthly status markers or accomplishments to fulfill you. Only Jesus can give what we truly long for.

When we look to status or accomplishments to make us feel accepted and loved, Jesus can give us the acceptance and the love of the King of the Universe – an acceptance and love that will not be fickle, or falter, or fade.

When we seek earthly status or accomplishments to get security in an insecure world, what greater security can there be than to have the favor of the King of the Universe, knowing that he is with us, that he is working all things in life for our ultimate good, and that whatever may come in this life, he will bring us to himself in the end, safe and secure, forever, in his kingdom?

And when we look to status or accomplishments to give us significance ... what greater significance can there be than knowing that our Maker, the God of the Universe himself, loves us and is pleased with us?

We could go on and on. But what we need to see here is – as Paul puts it in verse 8 – the “surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, [our] Lord.”

The acceptance, the love, the security, the significance that you hope that status or accomplishment will give you – Jesus offers all of this to you in your relationship with him. And what he offers makes the offerings of earthly status and accomplishments pale in comparison.

That is the value of knowing Jesus.

Compared to Knowing Jesus, Those Things Have Little Relative Value

And so, compared to knowing Jesus, earthly status and achievements have little relative value.

And we see this discussed in verses 7 and 8. There Paul talks about how he “counts,” or how he “considers” those earthly statuses and accomplishments compared to “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ.” In verse 7 he says that compared to knowing Jesus, these things have so little relative value that they are more like loss than like a gain. He goes on in verse eight to say that compared to knowing Christ, these status markers and achievements seem to him like “rubbish.”

I mentioned earlier that that word can be used to describe dung. But it can also be used to describe “street refuse.” [Fee, 314] This was the garbage that was thrown into the street for the wild dogs to forage through. That’s how little relative value these achievements and status markers have compared to knowing Jesus.¹

The gap between knowing Christ, and having those earthly achievements is like the gap between a wonderful meal, and the leftover table scraps you might dump out back for the wild animals.

Having Jesus should reframe our perspective that drastically.

I remember an RUF pastor sharing once about how when he and his wife started having kids, there was a college student in his ministry who had an old minivan. And this pastor had an old sports car. And the pastor offered to swap vehicles with the student – to give up his old sports car in order to get an old minivan.

And he said there were a bunch of students who just freaked out: The old sports car was so cool, how could he trade that for a minivan!

And the pastor reflected how the sports car, which once had a lot of value for him, had come to have little value to him compared to the value of his family and his calling to meet their needs.

In his mind, back when he had no wife, less established friendships ... having a sports car was a way to be cool – to gain the admiration of others, to make friends, and maybe even, with the status that gave him, to attract a girlfriend.

But now that he’d grown, now that he had a wife and a family, now that he was older and his friendships were settled, he already had the love and meaningful relationships he had longed for. He didn’t need to be cool. And so, the cool sports car became much less important to him – so much so that having it began to feel like a loss if it wasn’t helping to serve his family. A minivan suddenly seemed like more of a gain than a sports car to him.

In similar way, if we know Jesus, then we already have the acceptance and love, the security and significance that our hearts long for. So those achievements and status makers that we had hoped in the past would bring us those things – those achievements and statuses should become much less important in our assessment, now that we have Jesus, just as the sports care became less important to that pastor once he had a wife and friends. Because in Jesus, we already have what we truly long for.

Compared to knowing Jesus, earthly status and achievements have little relative value.

¹ And that imagery brings Paul’s metaphor from verse 2 full circle. Paul is saying that only dogs (i.e.: his opponents) would consider these earthly achievements and status markers worth fighting over.

Compared to Knowing Jesus, Those Things May Even Be Detrimental

Finally, Paul takes things one step further and points out that compared to knowing Jesus, earthly status and achievements may even be detrimental to us if they keep us from Jesus.

And we get this at the end of verse 8. There Paul speaks of the possibility that he may suffer the loss of these status markers and achievements “in order that” he may gain Christ.

Paul is saying that sometimes these achievements and status markers may even get in the way of knowing Jesus, and so be to our ultimate hurt. [Fee, 320]

When we grasp at these earthly things to satisfy our soul, instead of reaching for Jesus, then we become like the thirsty sailor, who’s offered cool fresh water, but chooses instead to fill his stomach with salt water, substituting the fresh waters that would quench our thirst with the salt water that will only leave us more thirsty.

We become like the person who has someone who loves them right there in front of them – a spouse, a family member, a friend – someone they could connect with when they feel lonely ... but instead of talking with them, they scroll social media, and feel even more lonely in the end.

When we grasp at status and achievement to fill our souls, it can keep us from Jesus, and leave us feeling even more empty.

And so, as these things are revealed to be of less value than Jesus, it’s not just that they are benign, but of lesser value ... they can become harmful if we continue to grasp at them rather than embracing Jesus.

Earthly status and achievements will not fulfill us; but rather, compared to knowing Jesus, they have little value, and may even be detrimental.

Conclusion

What we need is to stop clinging to those earthly achievements and status markers, and cling instead to Jesus.

But how do we do that?

Well Paul’s own experience can be instructive for us.

Because for Paul, it didn’t start with him letting go of his earthly status and achievements. It started with him seeing the value and worth of Jesus.

As Gordon Fee puts it: For Paul, “the gain came first, and came in such a way that the rest fell away as utter ‘refuse’ in comparison.” [Fee, 320]

We do need to see that the earthly things we hope will fulfill us, can't really do so. That's Paul's point here.

But that's not where the greatest power lies. The greatest power lies in the value of Jesus himself.

And so, the foundational step we need to take – the foundational application point we need to consider – is to look to Jesus, and to see his value.

The best way to abandon your pile of small, copper coins, is to really notice the gold bar sitting in front of you.

Jesus is that spiritual gold. But sometimes we need to remind ourselves that he's there.

When you feel insecure. When you feel unaccepted. When you feel unappreciated or even unloved. When you feel insignificant – in those moments, your instinct is often to look to, or fantasize about, or grasp at that status or that achievement or that thing you think will make you feel whole. But that's the moment when, instead, you need to look to Jesus. In that moment, you need to remember Jesus's surpassing value. You need to behold him, in Scripture, in worship, in prayer, among his people.

And when you do – when you truly see him by faith ... then you will let go of your quest for earthly status or accomplishments, in order to lay hold of him.

And so, brothers and sisters, let us look to Jesus.

Let us see his surpassing worth.

Let us consider other things loss in comparison to him.

And let us be willing to suffer the loss of all things in order to know him.

For only he can truly satisfy our souls.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Augustine, *The Confessions*. Translated by Maria Boulding. Second Edition. The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012.

Brooks, David. *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*. New York, NY: Random House, 2019.

Fee, Gordon D. *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*. NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.