

**+ Philippians 3:4b-11 + Rejoice that Christ Is Our Everything! +
+ 10th Sunday after Pentecost + 24 July 2016 +**

Is sacrifice worth it? Parents work long hours and live frugally so their kids can have a good home and a good education. They set aside their wants and needs for the sake of their children. Is it worth the sacrifice? Police officers rush into harm's way to keep people safe. Firefighters rush into burning buildings to rescue others and save property. They both put themselves in danger for the sake of others. Is it worth the sacrifice? Military personnel deploy far away from home and family to fight against enemies who seek the destruction of our nation and our way of life. Many do not come home, while many more come home with the scars of war. They serve for the sake of our country. Is it worth the sacrifice?

A doctor and his family are forced to flee their country leaving behind everything—wealth, home, reputation—due to death threats because he stood up for the sake of a fellow Christian. Is it worth the sacrifice? A young woman responds to her friends with the reason for the hope that she has. They laugh about what she says, but their relationship with her cools off because she's actually a Christian. Is it worth the sacrifice?

I'm sure you could come up with plenty of other examples of sacrifice—where someone willingly gives up something important for the sake of another. Perhaps you've sacrificed much for spouse or children or friend. Perhaps someone else sacrificed much for you, but is sacrifice worth it?

God's Word today also speaks of sacrifice. Abram packs up his wife Sarai, their nephew Lot, and their household to go where the Lord told him to go leaving his family behind. He would probably never see his extended family again. Why? The Lord of grace told him to go. Was it worth it?

Jesus has some hard words for our consideration. "Give up my parents, my spouse and kids, my siblings for him? Give up everything for him?" Jesus urges us to count the cost of following him, which might mean leaving behind family or friends or reputation or wealth or prestige to follow him. That's a pretty high cost for the sake of Christ. Is the sacrifice worth it?

Then there's the Apostle Paul. We find him under house arrest in Rome at the end of a couple-year ordeal during which he had nearly been killed by a mob, falsely accused, shipwrecked, snake-bitten, in and out of prisons because no judge wanted to deal with him, and finally chained to an armed Roman soldier. Every time he moved the clink of the chains reminded him of everything he had sacrificed for the sake of Christ. Perhaps in moments of weakness when he was exhausted or hurting or lonely and all he had was a lot of time, perhaps then Paul asked himself the question, "Is it worth it? Is sacrificing all that I once valued worth it?"

Paul once had so much to lose. You could say he had been the ultimate Jew—MVP, all-star, and CEO all rolled into one. He had an impressive résumé. Some people become Jews later in life. Not Paul! He was circumcised eight days after he was born according to the Law of Moses. Some people had Gentile blood mixed with their Jewish DNA. Not Paul! He could trace his ancestry all the way back to Benjamin, the beloved youngest son of the Hebrew patriarch Jacob. He was a Hebrew's Hebrew who was also a Pharisee, well known for their extreme obedience refraining from all 39 types of activity they banned on the Sabbath and upholding all 613 commandments they had added to God's ten.

Not only did he stand up for the Jewish faith, he zealously hunted down Christians to wipe out the name of their blaspheming leader, Jesus of Nazareth. No one could find an outward fault with Paul! He had the respect and honor of his people. He had been educated by the top rabbinic scholars in Jerusalem. He was the one that every Jewish mother wanted her boys to be like, and they would've had his poster on their walls.

Paul had so much earthly glory and prestige for himself, but for what? As he turned back to the papyrus of the letter he was writing to his beloved congregation in Philippi, Paul heard the clink of the chains once more and knew his answer. ***"But whatever was to my profit, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them worthless dung that I may gain Christ and be found in him..."***

Everything that had given Paul confidence in the past—his heritage, his bloodline, his education, his orthodoxy, his misguided zeal, his legalistic righteousness—all of it when compared to Christ was worth nothing more than what animals produce that you spread around your plants. All the profits he had on his eternal balance sheet were losses compared to Christ. As Paul looked back on his life before God changed his heart, he saw how much he had lost, how much he had sacrificed, yet he was willing to view it all as worthless dung compared to what he had in Christ.

Take a look at your own life. What do you have going for you? You likely didn't have an orthodox Jewish upbringing, so your list won't look quite like Paul's...or will it? What part of your life fills you with the most pride—your education, your job, your spouse, your kids or grandkids, your church, your abilities, how much you make, who you're related to, or where you come from? Have you ever let pride slip into your thinking when someone didn't treat you like you thought you deserved? Paul would tell you that everything that fills you with pride or brings you glory or prestige—while nice in this life—is nothing more than worthless trash compared to knowing Jesus and being found in him.

Now if any of that has robbed you of getting to know your Savior better, you should probably feel pretty sick right now! Sadly, too often we treat the worthless trash of this world as the treasure we seek—in the time we put into it, in the money we spend on it, in the way we talk about it, in the priorities we set for it, in the decisions we make for our own goals instead of God's. As nice as all those things might be, they can become as toxic as the contents of a septic tank. They can destroy your relationship with Christ your Savior.

That's why Paul urges the Philippians (and you and me) to realize how much we really do have to lose for the sake of Christ, but then he lifts our eyes to see what we have to gain in Jesus. ***"I consider them worthless dung 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 is through faith in Christ—that righteousness that comes from God and is by faith."***

Is sacrifice for the sake of Jesus worth it? Paul practically shouts, "Yes!" Paul lifts your eyes away from what you do and what you earn and how people look at you and how you try to look in God's eyes and makes you look at Jesus. Paul lifts your eyes to see what Jesus gives you—his perfect record on your account, his perfect keeping of God's holy Law, and his perfect payment for all your sins. That's righteousness before God—not what you do or who you are or where you come from or who your daddy is, but what Jesus did for you and what Jesus gives to you—and all that old stuff looks worthless.

It looks worthless because your righteousness before God is yours on the basis of this faith—that you know Jesus as your Savior and that you live, suffer, and die with Christ knowing you will rise again. Paul describes it this way, ***"I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead."***

Yes, you have much to lose, but look at how you have everything to gain in Christ! Knowing Jesus as your Savior means you ***"know the power of his resurrection..."*** While all that gives you pride and confidence in this life is great for the here and now, all of that disappears when the cruel shadow of death looms over you. Yet knowing Jesus as your living Savior assures you that death has been defeated, that you will rise from the dead someday, and therefore while you still have breath in your body, you can serve your Lord with joy and thanks and courage—just like Paul did.

...But what about when suffering or difficulty or even the possibility of death come into your life? In those moments, everything that gives you pride and confidence in this life proves to be powerless to help and save you. Yet when you suffer, especially for your faith, when you have to sacrifice what was once important to you, when you're left helpless and powerless, the only thing that can give you power at that moment is knowing Jesus and the power of his resurrection. In that sense, his life for you shapes your life and assists you when you suffer for the sake of Christ. At times like that, by faith, you die with Christ even as you look forward to ***"the resurrection."***

So can you finally answer the question, "Is sacrifice for the sake of Christ worth it?" I hope so. Is Christ worth risking wealth and reputation and accomplishment? Is Jesus worth sacrificing precious time to be in his Word personally or in his Word with your spouse or in his Word with your kids? Is Christ worth planning and prioritizing to bring yourself and your family not just to worship, but also to Bible study and Sunday School every week? Is Jesus worth intentionalizing how you give of your treasures to support the spread of the Gospel here and around our world? Is Christ worth being ready to give an answer for the hope you have when you might get laughed at or looked at funny or lose a relationship or even a job? Is Jesus worth risking everything in this life—even life itself for him and his Word? Dear friends, Jesus is your everything. So with Paul, rejoice! Amen.