

## “So That I May Gain Christ!”

### Philippians 3:8-14

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,

In elementary school, I distinctly remember a field trip my class took to a landfill on a particularly hot day. Anyone who has been to or driven by a landfill probably knows exactly where I'm going with this; it smells so bad that even the flies hold their noses! The overpowering stench, a chaotic mix of rot, chemicals, and decay, is hard to forget. If you've never been near one, imagine sewage, rotting food, moldy leftovers, and spoiled milk all thrown together. On the bright side, I was given a small trash can pencil holder, so I could always cherish the memory of that *super fun* field trip!

#### I. “Count Them as Rubbish”

In our text for this Fifth Sunday in Advent, we examine a portion of a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to the Church at Philippi, thanking them for a gift they had sent him. In his letter, he aims to motivate them and us to strive for unity in Christ Jesus, our Lord. After several powerful expressions of joy for their prayers and partnership in the gospel, Paul begins to discuss righteousness through faith in Christ—a topic with which we are all very familiar. In verse 8, he says, “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 have counted them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.”

Our translation in the ESV of the Greek word used here as “rubbish” doesn't quite do the trick. Translators disagree on the specifics, but what Paul is really saying here is this: “For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and have counted them as dung or refuse, in order that I may gain Christ.” To add to the effect, Lenski wrote in His commentary on Philippians, “The connotation is that all Paul's Jewish excellencies were for him made and are now by him ever considered a stinking mess.”

Indeed, all the confidence we have in our own good works for salvation and all that we build up through our own efforts in this life, whether that's living life as a Pharisee or someone important, are nothing but a stinking mess, a giant landfill of putrid waste that reeks to high heaven with the stench of our sins. The pursuit of worldly success and comfort, no matter how much we accumulate, ultimately leaves us feeling empty as we constantly search for more, hoping it can somehow fill the void within. In life, we strive for more, and it is never enough. Nothing worldly ever seems to satisfy our lack of contentedness.

We may momentarily enjoy who we think we are or what we have, but this joy is fleeting and is quickly overshadowed by a yearning for something more. Without Christ, we are never satisfied or at peace with our situation or life. The desire to be someone and to accumulate more

for ourselves on earth, driven by a misguided sense of security, persists even when we recognize that these efforts are ultimately futile. The more we try to fill the void, the stronger the emptiness becomes. As the adage goes, "money cannot buy happiness," and indeed, what we gain on our own only intensifies the problem as we search for true meaning. As a landfill pollutes the air around it, our sin pollutes our lives and our thinking. It distorts our priorities and blinds us to what truly matters, causing us to seek after everything but what we truly need: reconciliation with God and the peace that comes through Christ.

## **II. "Righteousness from God That Depends on Faith"**

Paul knew this all too well. We would be doing ourselves a disservice not to speak of his conversion here. In Acts 9, Saul (who will soon be known as Paul) is on the road to Damascus to persecute Christians. A heavenly light suddenly blinds Saul, and he hears the voice of Jesus asking, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" At this moment, a profound encounter with the risen Christ marks the beginning of Saul's radical transformation. After being led into the city, Saul is visited by Ananias, who heals him, and Saul is baptized. This encounter completely alters Saul's life as he goes from being a fierce opponent of Christianity to becoming a devout missionary dedicated to spreading the gospel. The man who once sought to destroy the Church is now its most passionate advocate.

What is it exactly that changed Saul from a man intent on persecuting the people of God into a child of God himself? The answer is simple yet profound: the power of God's Word. From simply hearing the Words of the risen Lord, everything Saul had put his trust in — his Jewish heritage, his sense of security, and his personal gain from his efforts — was now seen as dung in comparison to what Christ had revealed to him. The great pride he took in his own righteousness was instantly shattered. All the efforts he believed were righteous were nothing more than a façade. His whole life was turned upside down in an instant because Saul now knew true righteousness—the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

Saul's conversion teaches us that nothing we build or achieve apart from Christ has any true worth in God's eyes. It will only bring us severe disappointment and contempt for life. You see, the filthy landfill of our sin isn't going to cut it, and it never will. In God's eyes, there is no righteousness to be seen in us, even in our best moments that are detached from faith in Christ. Our best attempts at goodness are stained by selfishness and pride, so much so that what the world might view as righteous is actually unrighteous in the sight of our Holy God. But, by the simple Words of our resurrected Lord, we are made to know Him in just the same way as Saul did.

It's not by our efforts or by anything we can boast of but by the power of the resurrection of Christ that the victory over the rotteness of our sin is won. Jesus, our great physician, has come to heal us by bringing us to contrition and faith. To know Him is to know the power of His resurrection and the significance of His cross and empty tomb in atoning for the sins of the entire world. And so, we are drawn to His cross. All this so that the inheritance Christ has won for us

may be ours eternally in the kingdom of Heaven. All this because God truly loves us. All this so that we too may gain Christ!

### **III. “Not That I Am Already Perfect”**

To gain Christ is to have it all. Gaining Him by faith is knowing that we are free from condemnation and that, despite the empty void constantly nagging at us in this life, which can never be filled by anything worldly, our hearts are filled to the brim by faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus. What a blessing it is to have this assurance!

But before we continue, we should consider the words of Paul in verse 12 of our text. He says, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”

These words remind us that God is still at work in us, purifying us. Paul here is talking about sanctified living, which is the reality that though we have already obtained all the treasures of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we still must battle against the sinful flesh that so desperately wants to return to the stinking mess. We must be ever diligent in pushing back the desire to make Christ our own in the sense that faith is not His work but rather that we have or must do something to earn our salvation.

In this new condition, where we are made new in Christ, God will increase righteousness within us. However, we must never forget that while we are still here on earth and while we live together in this life, we will inevitably make mistakes, sin against one another, and do things that are contrary to God's commandments. It's in these moments, strengthened by the power of forgiveness won in our Lord Jesus, that we join Paul in pressing on toward the goal. And that goal is one thing and one thing only: to be found in Him. To be found in Jesus.

### **IV. “Be Found in Him”**

Paul continues in verses 13-14 by saying,

“Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Since the apostle is speaking of sanctified living, the “goal” he refers to is the goal of Heaven. It is not a goal of righteousness by works or righteousness by the law as every other world religion or worldview would have you believe. To quote Lenski again, “We did not set up the prize; we did not even call ourselves to run for it. All this is of God and of Christ.”

Because our salvation is entirely a work of God, we press on not in fear but in confidence. We do not run this race as if the prize depends on our own strength, nor do we strive as though our efforts somehow secure our place in heaven. No, Christ has already won the victory for us, and it is by His grace alone that we are able to run. When Paul speaks of

forgetting what is behind, he isn't just talking about letting go of past failures—he's also rejecting any trust in his own works. Everything we might be tempted to boast about apart from Christ is nothing more than dung compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Him.

So, brothers and sisters, we run the race because Christ has already made us His own. We press on, knowing that even when we stumble, His grace lifts us up. We press on, knowing that even when the world tries to pull us back into its stinking mess, Christ has set us free. We run forward with our eyes fixed on the only thing that truly matters—being found in Him.

While the world constantly tugs at us, urging us to chase after its fleeting things to gain, none of these lead to the goal of which Paul speaks. With faith in Christ and His death and resurrection in the picture, the struggles of this life, the burdens of sin, and the trials we endure become reminders that we are not yet home. Every step forward then is a step closer to being in paradise with our Lord. As we fight, we fight with our greatest advocate, who strengthens us through His Word and Sacraments, reminding us that He is both our path and our destination. To be found in Him is to know that, no matter how difficult the race, the victory is already won.

Amen.