

Your Credentials Are Showing  
Sermon on Philippians 3:4b-14 Preached at Highland Park UMC  
Sunday, March 25, 2007

Some guys are impressed by sports statistics. They know everything about RBI's and total yards rushing and points per game. Other guys are impressed by cars, things concerning torque and MPG's and suspensions. I was always impressed by degrees. When I was applying for colleges and later for graduate schools, I would pore over universities' catalogs, learning where professors had gone to school and the type and number of degrees they had earned. For me, degrees are like chocolates: you can never have too many. In my small, intellectually-oriented world, a college degree is the basic credential, a diploma the telling mark of someone who has earned all the "honors, rights, and privileges thereunto appertaining." Those who earn a master's degree have obtained a further credential, and the doctorate, especially the Ph.D., is the consummate credential.

If first-century Judaism had been a university, the apostle Paul would have been its valedictorian, Rhodes scholar, Phi Beta Kappa, and Ph.D. all in one. And first-century Judaism, like all universities, had rival departments. At some schools it is the chemistry vs. the religion department or the psychology vs. the philosophy department. In the Judaism of Paul's day, it was those who followed Jesus vs. those who didn't. Paul the star student was one of the latter. Of course, Paul had heard about Jesus and his movement, the people who had followed him, believing that he was the Son of God. According to what Paul thought he knew, this Jesus was a blasphemer, a rebel, a destroyer of everything that was holy and good and pure about the Jewish faith. And so Paul, like many a student who believes deeply in a cause, began to work actively and violently against followers of the Way of Jesus, gathering intelligence on them, turning them over to the authorities, even giving his approval to their deaths.

Then something amazing happened. As he was on his way to Damascus, perhaps to cause further distress to the young Christian community there, Paul had a vision of Jesus himself. Jesus seemed to know everything about Paul, who he was and what he was doing. Jesus had plans for Paul, plans that involved Paul becoming his most successful spokesman. Paul believed Jesus and came to acknowledge that he was indeed the Lord he claimed to be, the Son of God sent to earth for the salvation of all humanity. So changed was Paul by this experience on the Damascus road that he began to travel, preaching the message of Jesus and starting churches.

It is this Paul, a completely changed and totally transformed Paul, who is writing to the church at Philippi, a church he had started as a missionary and one of his most successful ventures. But now this young church faced the threat of backsliding. After he had left Philippi to start other churches in other places, certain missionaries had appeared teaching a different message than the one Paul had preached. These missionaries were newly minted graduate students in religion and full of the idealism possessed by every first-year teacher. They taught the Philippians that converts to Christianity had to obey the law of Moses in order to be saved. They demanded that converts be circumcised and keep other commandments of the Jewish law if they were to be truly saved and belong to the people of God. Circumcision and keeping the law were ways of gaining credentials with God, of proving one's worth—one's fitness for belonging to the people of God. These outward signs could give one confidence of one's salvation.

Well, said Paul, if they think that outward signs like circumcision or human efforts at keeping the law are reasons for confidence, I have more. And then Paul proceeds to list his credentials: He was circumcised on the eighth day, that is, as a child and in accordance with the law, not as an adult convert as his opponents had been. As a member of the people of Israel, Paul was native-born into God's people, not some Johnny-come-lately or Israelite-by-choice. He

was descended from the tribe of Benjamin and thus had a family with a pedigree, not just a certificate of circumcision. He was a Hebrew born of Hebrews, that is, a Jew who grew up speaking the language, learning the faith, immersed in all its customs and habits. (Native Texans know what I'm talking about.)

And if that weren't enough, how about three more professional credentials? With respect to the law of Moses, Paul was a Pharisee, meaning someone who had devoted himself to fully obeying both the written and oral law as a means of loving God. With respect to zeal for his native religion, Paul had "an overwhelming passion for the cause of God and a determination to stamp out [God's] enemies,"<sup>1</sup> and thus he persecuted the church of Jesus Christ. And with respect to righteousness, he was without rival or peer. Paul had a spotless, indeed a matchless, record when it came to keeping the law.

You would think with credentials like that and a record like that, Paul might have been on top of the world. Religiously speaking, Paul had it made: he came from the right family, had attended the right schools, had made the right friends, had taken the right job. But it was all wrong. "[W]hatever gains I had," the older, transformed Paul wrote his young students, "these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ" (3:7).

With this one sentence, Paul puts his past, present, and future in perspective. Using the language of accounting, the language of gain and loss, Paul tells us that in Christ he both lost the things he thought mattered and yet gained everything that truly matters. In Jesus, all his credentials—established family, solid education, good job, zeal for his religious work—amounted to nothing, or really *worse* than nothing. All that was rubbish, garbage, waste, filth—things to be got rid of and written off as liabilities. And yet with the loss of these seeming assets came the gain of everything in knowing Christ Jesus as Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Marshall, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Epworth Commentaries (London: Epworth Press, 1992) 85.

To know Christ as Lord is not simply to be acquainted with Jesus or to know about him. To *know* Christ is to have a personal relationship with him, as spouses know one another or as parents know their children. To know Christ is to commit oneself to him in trust and faith, to go where he goes and to do what he does. To know Christ in relationship with him means “knowing both the (present) power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, thus being conformed to *his death* so as to realize the future *resurrection from the dead*.”<sup>2</sup>

Most of us want to know other people because they have certain credentials: they are attractive or smart or funny or adventurous. Sometimes we want to become like those whom we admire: we dress as they do and speak as they do and imitate their mannerisms. For Christians, becoming like Christ involves not being attractive or smart or funny but willing to suffer. Paul says that he wants “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death” (3:10).

As Lent began, we received on our foreheads the sign of the cross, imposed in ashes. That ashy cross reminds us of two things: not only are we made from the dust of the earth, to which we shall return at our death, but also that in dying we find true life. Life is not found in the accumulation of worldly credentials, for all of that is rubbish, filth, loss. Life is found when we are willing to become Christ-like, when we are willing to take up our cross and follow him. It is when we suffer with Christ and die with Christ that we, too, know the power of the resurrection, for the Christian life is one “of resurrection in the midst of crucifixion.”<sup>3</sup>

So as we approach Easter, and the celebration of God’s resurrection power, “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, [we] press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (3:13-14).

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<sup>2</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Philippians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999) 142.

<sup>3</sup> Marshall, 93.