

“What Really Counts?”

November 9, 2008

Scripture: Philippians 3: 4-11

A couple of years ago I decided to go back to college for a degree in ministry. The school I wanted to go to was in Rochester so I just went down and picked up an application. They wanted transcripts from my high school, a community college I went to, where I got my highest college degree and all kinds of other stuff.

Like many colleges today, this college used a point system to evaluate applicants for admission. You get points for your class rank, for your grades and performance on standardized tests. You also earn points for extracurricular activities. If you earn enough points then you get accepted.

It seems like a pretty good system and it got me thinking that maybe that's how all of life should work. What we need is to come up with a point system for ourselves and then every once in awhile conduct our own life assessment to see how we are doing.

Do you know how your life assessment would turn out? Do you know what drives you?

I started putting together a life assessment scorecard. I started with one for men. Think about each category, and then see how you would score in these areas:

- Personal life
 - You're a former Greek God: +10
 - People confuse you with Tom Cruise: +8
 - You're Cute and Cuddly: +4
 - You're a couple of pounds overweight (i.e. there's just more of you to love): +1
 - You have a face that only a mother could love: -6
 - Mother doesn't: -8
- Home life
- Spiritual life
- Work life
 - Former sports hero turned rock star neurosurgeon: +10
 - Career minded professional (e.g. doctor, lawyer): +6
 - Absent minded professional (e.g. college professor): +4
 - Junior assistant hamburger flipper in training: -1
 - Career criminal or owned your own business: -8
- Retirement life
- Your hobbies or recreational life
 - Composing symphonies, refurbishing Tudor Castles, dancing with the Royal ballet and listening to country music: +10
 - Opera, museums, fine wine, and romantic poetry: +7
 - Theater, movies, and stamp collecting: +3
 - Bowling, wrestling and tractor pulls: -4
 - Fan of the Green Bay Packers: -200
- School life
- And any number of other areas

We've put certain aspects of our lives into little boxes. But with God, there is no distinction between the different areas of our lives. God has a purpose for our life. But sadly, many of us don't have any idea what that purpose is.

In the passage that we just read from Philippians we're introduced to the ultimate high-achiever, the apostle Paul. Paul would have had no trouble scoring well on a life assessment. He had impeccable credentials. He surpassed most people in intelligence and achievement. He was a winner. In fact if you're keeping score on your own life assessment and want to get competitive, Paul is ready to match you point for point. Listen again to his resume.

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. (Philippians 3: 4-6 NIV)

Now it helps to understand Paul's resume in the context of our day and age, to think about it in terms of what his resume would look like today.

Paul starts by saying that he was circumcised on the eighth day. That means he was born into a family that did all the right things. His parents were careful to obey all the required customs and religious laws. They made sure Paul got into the best preschool and kindergarten and that he never missed a summer in Vacation Bible School.

They did all the things that most of us have tried to do for our kids. They were really good parents. This was a good family. And then he tells us that he is

of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin.

In other words, not only is Paul from a family that does the right things, they are the right people. Paul comes from what he understands to be a chosen race.

Today we might think of it in terms of aristocracy. Or it would be like saying your last name is Kennedy or Rockefeller or Gates. Paul's family was highly regarded, influential; they were special and he knew it.

Next Paul says that he was a

Hebrew of Hebrews

and a Pharisee. In other words he was well educated and disciplined. He had attended all the right schools and had diplomas from the University of Minnesota and MIT and even Harvard hanging on his walls. He was on the Dean's List every semester, graduated magna cum laude and was voted most likely to persecute the church. And he did:

³But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. (Acts 8:3 NIV)

And finally he was an over-achiever in his work. I love the words he uses to describe himself, "faultless" and "zealous." Those aren't words most of us put on our resumes. But Paul knew how to get ahead, he worked hard and people noticed. He was a mover and a shaker, someone who was going somewhere; someone with power and intelligence; someone who would make a real difference in the world.

And that sounds like a lot of people we know doesn't it? And maybe, if we're really honest, it even sounds something like how we might want to see ourselves. So it's important that we listen carefully to what Paul says after presenting this story of his life. He looks at all he has accomplished and announces:

Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss... (Philippians 3:7 NIV)

It's a twist that most of us wouldn't have seen coming. Most of us live and operate in a world where things like influential families and impressive degrees and career achievements count for something. In the world most of us are a part of, we count on these things to help us earn points and get ahead, these are the things we're counting on to see us through life.

And so it's a surprise to discover that the very things most of us consider to be assets, and many of us work hard to achieve, Paul says he now counts as loss. In fact later, in verse 9, he refers to all his achievements with the Greek word "skubala," which most English translations politely render as "rubbish" or "refuse". But the word Paul uses is a word much stronger than that. Paul chooses very strong language, because that's how intensely he feels, as he considers the value of his past achievements. Literally the word "skubala" means dung. And what do you do with dung? You flush it.

Now I need to be clear, Paul isn't saying that there is anything wrong with coming from a good family or getting a good education or working hard. But what he is saying is that if we were somehow counting on those achievements to provide us with confidence and security for life, well it just isn't going to work.

And so now when he looks at all he's accomplished, the very things he once considered as profit, he now counts as loss. What used to look like a point in his favor, turns out by comparison, to be worthless ... and so he's throwing it all in the trash.

My wife used to be a garage sale junkie. What always amazes me most, is that for the right price, she'll buy just about anything, even worthless stuff that doesn't work. Stuff that other people were planning on throwing away or want to get rid of. Sometimes I wonder, when she gets home does she realizes what she bought is junk. One year we had to rent a dumpster to get rid of all the stuff she bought.

In a sense that is what Paul has done. He's come to realize that all the things he thought were really the most valuable, aren't; and he's tossing them all in the trash. Just imagine basing your entire life on accomplishments and achievements ... and then in an instant flushing them all away.

Paul put it like this:

The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I'm tearing up and throwing out with the trash—along with everything else I used to take credit for. And why? Because of Christ. Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung. I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him. (Philippians 3: 7-9 MSG)

It makes you wonder doesn't it? What is it that brings someone to the point where they are throwing away everything that they'd always banked on, the very things that define who they are?

Sometimes in a passage we find a hinge verse that's the key to understanding the text. In this passage from Philippians the hinge verse is verse 7; it's the turning point of the text:

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.
(Philippians 3:7 NIV)

And the key words are the last five:

for the sake of Christ.

What changed Paul's perspective was that he began to see his life as one to be lived for the sake of Jesus Christ. You see, the problem with living our lives for our achievements is that eventually our achievements begin to define who we are. We live for the sake of earning another degree, or closing the next deal or adding to our net worth. And those things won't really see us through life.

That's what Paul had been doing. He was getting ahead in life; doing all the right things, impressing the right people — until one day he came face to face with Jesus Christ.

That encounter turned his world upside down, changed his life forever — changed his perspective so that when he looked at all of his accomplishments all he could see was how meaningless they were in comparison with knowing Jesus.

I've seen that happen time and time again in the lives of men and women who come to the realization of the joy that can be found in living our lives for the sake of Christ. A joy that is much more rewarding than anything else.

These people have realized that only in Jesus Christ do we find the meaning and purpose of life. The English golfer Bernhard Langer said in an interview:

The lifestyle we (especially sportsmen) are leading — it is all about money and who you are and who you know and what you have, and those things aren't really the most important things. I think people who have all these things, they realize that even when they have achieved all the goals they wanted to achieve and they have all the millions of pounds they wanted and all the sports cars and the places they wanted to go to — there is still something missing in their life. I believe that's Jesus Christ.

Paul's purpose in life was to know Christ and to make Christ known to others. Paul put it like this:

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:10-11 NIV)

Notice Paul didn't say he wanted to know about Christ. He said he wanted to know Christ. It's an interesting word in terms of relationship. Relationship, when used in the Bible, refers to the intimate knowledge that a husband and wife have of each other.

Paul's desire is for a deep level of intimacy with Christ. He wants to know Christ spiritually, the same way that spouses know one another physically and emotionally.

Let me give you picture of what that might look like. I met my wife, Joan, at college. She was on a date with another guy I knew and I was out with my buddies. I went up and talked with her date but didn't really remember meeting her. One day she came up and introduced herself and that's how we met. Later on we'd see each other around campus

and at parties and got to know each other a little bit. I learned some things about her; she grew up in New Jersey, liked to dance and was majoring in math.

I learned enough to get me interested and so I began to ask my friends and her friends questions about her, trying to learn as much as I could about her, and little by little, I gained more information, but I still didn't really know her.

The turning point in our relationship came we had our first real date. You see, up until then I'd been learning a lot of things about her, but it wasn't until we began dating and spending lots of time together that I really began to know her.

Then I thought to myself, 'This is the person I want to marry.' There is a big difference in my state of mind before we started dating – intellectually convinced that she was a wonderful person – and my state of mind now after the experience of many years of marriage that allow me to say, 'I know she is a wonderful person.'

Now I'm not suggesting that you need to begin to date Jesus...well maybe I am. You see the turning point in our relationship with Christ begins when we decide that we want more than merely knowing about Him, but instead want to know Him personally.

That's only going to happen if we will commit to spending time with Him—getting to know Him intimately. And I know that might sound a little too simplistic, but the simple truth is knowing Jesus, really knowing Jesus, is the key to everything else.

The point of this message is really quite simple: If you want to learn how to thrive in life, it begins by knowing Jesus.

There is nothing wrong with coming from a good family or getting a good education or having a successful career. As long as we don't let those accomplishments define who we are. As long as we don't count on all those things to somehow carry us through life.

Because at the end of the day, the only thing that matters in our life journey, is our relationship with Jesus Christ.

- It's the only thing that will see us through the challenges in life
- And knowing Jesus is the only thing that will empower us to be the "difference makers" that God has envisioned for His church.
- And after everything else, when all of our accomplishments and achievements have faded away—our relationship with Jesus Christ is the only thing that will last.

In the end, after it's all been said and done, the only thing that really matters — is knowing Jesus.

And so here's the question the text presents to you and to me. Do you know Jesus Christ ... or merely know about Him? Have you only read about Him and heard other people talk about Him ... or is He a reality in your life? And if you know Him, are you growing in your knowledge of Him? Is He right there in your day-to-day living? Are you paying attention to what He's doing in even the most trivial of circumstances and making new discoveries about how much He cares for you?

Do you know Jesus? Do you really know Him? If you don't, do you want to?

Here's what it might take for some of us.

First, we need to let go of the idea that our achievements and accomplishments will somehow carry us through this life and into the next. We need to set them all to the side, so that we can focus ourselves on knowing Jesus Christ.

And secondly, for that to happen we need to commit to spending more and more time with Him, getting to know Him through His word in scripture, and through prayer, and through His daily presence in our lives.

If you already know Him, then the challenge for you might be to go a little deeper. And I know that some of you are seeking. If you are, then I'd encourage you to keep seeking, keep asking questions and finding answers. Don't stop until you know Him.

And so let me ask each one of us to just take a moment and think about all the things we've been counting as profit. What have you been banking on to see you through life? What is it that gives your life value and meaning and purpose?

Now compare all those things with knowing Jesus, really knowing Him.

- Knowing His presence and peace in times of difficulty.
- Knowing His power to resist temptation and to transform our lives.
- Knowing the security of a love that sets no limits and no requirements. That picks us up every time we fall.
- Knowing the love of a Savior who would give up His life just to have a relationship with us.