

Righteousness that Depends on Faith

Lent 5

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Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

St. Paul has said that according to Pharisaical law, he had enough righteousness to get him into heaven. He wrote: “If anyone else thinks he has reason for 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; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”

Having come to faith in Jesus, he does not consider any of these worthy of getting him into heaven. What is more, even the good work he had done in evangelism and building churches, traveling throughout the known world, refuting those who spoke against the pure Gospel of Christ, all this he would also write is of no regard when it comes to getting into heaven.

Yet Paul wrote to the believers in Philippi to “press on toward the goal,” that is, continue in the Word and in sharing in the sufferings of Jesus.

Verse 1

“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 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 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

Again, Paul wrote that whatever gain he had as a Pharisee he counted as loss for the sake of Christ. But on top of that, he counted “everything as loss.” The only thing of worth is knowing Christ Jesus the Lord.

Paul did not claim a righteousness of his own that came from the law, and neither should we. As we well know, it is impossible to attain perfection of the Law. And without perfection in it, if we rely on our ability in the Law to save us, we will not be saved. We do not have a righteousness of our own according to the Law—you are not righteous according to the Law.

So we are saved in Christ Jesus and trusting in His righteousness rather than our own—end of story, right? Not quite; Paul doesn’t leave it there. He doesn’t end his letter to those at Philippi on this point. He continued writing to them that by having the righteousness of Christ by which he might know Christ and the power of His resurrection, he, Paul, would “share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible, [he might] attain the resurrection from the dead.”

In our baptism, yours and mine, we were connected to Christ and His righteousness. At our baptism, we were brought into a life of repentance and salvation—constantly drowning the Old Adam and trusting in Christ for all good things. We were brought into this new life which includes sharing Christ’s sufferings. What does it mean to share Christ’s sufferings? It is “to share in the suffering that is required to accomplish tasks of the most fundamental and eternal importance (ESV Study Bible, p.2037).” This means that, like in many children’s shows today, we stand up for what is right. And, like in those children’s shows where the lead character may get made fun of or bullied for standing up for what’s right, we, too, will suffer for standing up for what’s right—not because it isn’t what is right, but because we will be standing up against the tide of sin in this world.

Verse 2

“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. 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 calling of God in Christ Jesus.”

Paul wrote in these verse that he had not yet obtained perfection; and using the same Greek term, he wrote that Christ had made him his own. Using this play on words, Paul described the baptismal life, recognizing that human beings never obtain perfection in this life, but that they still pursue it because they themselves have been obtained by Christ Jesus at their baptism.

So what about repentance? Does Paul mention the baptismal life as one of repentance? He does in so far that he wrote about “forgetting what lies behind.” He had left behind his life of Pharisaical attempts to earn heaven through his own works. He had left behind sinning against the Church.

Does this mean Paul no longer sinned? Well, no. Several years after being baptized, Paul would write in his letter to the Romans how he continued to desire to do what was right, but that so often he would do the thing he didn’t want to do. He concluded that passage asking who could save him from, as he put it, “this body of death”? His answer: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Paul would also write “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Paul did not rely on his own righteousness—either that of a Pharisee or that of a baptized Christian to save him. He knew and wrote and taught others that it was Jesus alone who had saved him and would save him by Jesus’ righteousness alone. Yet until he had been saved from “this body of death,” this body which continued to sin, he had to repent of his sin, receiving absolution and thanking “God through Jesus Christ our Lord[.]” That’s all Paul had to write about Justification, either in text from Philippians or from Romans—but just as he did not stop there in our current text from Philippians, he didn’t stop there in his writing to the Romans, either. After concluding his writing about Justification and how it was only by Jesus’ righteousness that he would be saved, Paul wrote several more chapters, including chapter twelve, which is all about living the new baptized life in service to others. He wrote: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

The baptized life, then, is one of service to others as well. It is certainly a life of repentance, “the renewal of your mind,” but it is also certainly a life of service, which is “the will of God.”

Paul, then, was writing to his hearers—and to us—that the baptismal life was one of repentance and service. Paul no longer looked back at his life as a Pharisee or a sinner, and we should not look back at our lives and desire to go back to sin. Instead Paul wrote that he was “straining forward to what lies ahead...the prize of the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus.”

Here, too, one might be tempted to look at what Paul wrote as a work, hearing that Paul strained forward and pressed on. The temptation was always there for Paul to consider his work his own, except that he knew the calling he had received was not one of his own, but of “God in Christ Jesus.” In this way, Paul showed that

it is not the work of any human being in getting the upward call, but was totally the work of “God in Christ Jesus.”

Paul knew that he was going to heaven—not based on his own righteousness either before or after coming to faith, but based on Jesus’ righteousness. For that reason, he strove to make this baptismal life his own—yes even this life of sharing in Christ’s suffering.

We, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, have received that same upward calling to heaven at our baptism. We have also received Jesus’ righteousness so that we need not and dare not lean on our own, either our righteousness before coming to faith or our righteousness after coming to faith—but solely trusting Jesus’ righteousness by faith.

Because we know by faith that we are going to heaven, we, like Paul, live our lives in service to others. We strain forward to what lies ahead, not being conformed to this world, but being transformed for a life of service by hearing God’s Word and receiving His sacrament, for the strength we need to believe and live this baptismal life. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.