

Pressing On: Christ's Faithfulness and Our New Identity

Sermon on Philippians 3:4-14 (NRSVUE) for the 5th Sunday of Lent, 2025

Introduction

We are now deep into Lent, a season of reflection, repentance, and renewal. The journey of Lent mirrors Paul's words in Philippians 3:4-14—a call to leave behind what we once considered gain and press forward into the transforming work of Christ. Paul speaks with urgency, describing his former identity and achievements as "rubbish" compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ. His words challenge us: what markers of success, security, or identity do we cling to that may hinder our deeper participation in God's kingdom?

Paul's testimony here is not about personal failure or inadequacy but about discovering that the measure of true righteousness is found in Christ's faithfulness, not human accomplishment. His words are not a rejection of his Jewish heritage or a claim that he could never meet the law's demands. Instead, Paul argues that he not only met those demands, he excelled in them, but that Christ's faithfulness charts an entirely new way forward. Let us explore how Paul's transformation speaks to us as a community called to imitate Christ and press on toward the high call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul's Prestige and Accomplishment: Setting the Curve in the Wrong Class

Paul begins by laying out his credentials: “circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews.” His heritage was impeccable. He was not an outsider grafted into Judaism; he was born into it. The mention of the tribe of Benjamin is significant; this tribe remained loyal to Judah and produced Israel’s first king, Saul, after whom Paul was likely named.

But Paul’s accomplishments extend beyond his birth. He was a Pharisee, meaning he belonged to the elite group devoted to Torah observance. He was zealous, even to the point of persecuting the early Jesus movement. He was “blameless” under the law, not claiming perfection but asserting that he had fulfilled every requirement. Paul is not confessing failure; he is demonstrating that by all worldly and religious standards, he had made the grade. More than that, he had set the curve.

Yet, he came to see that the problem was not that he failed to meet God’s standards, but that he had been measuring by the wrong standard altogether. His former identity, achievements, and markers of status, once his greatest sources of confidence, were exposed as inadequate in light of Christ. This is a radical shift,

not a rejection of his heritage but a recognition that righteousness before God was never meant to be measured by status or achievement but by Christ's faithfulness.

Christ's Faithfulness as the New Standard

Paul says he has forsaken all these credentials "because of Christ." What does that mean? Some translations render verse 9 as "faith in Christ," implying that righteousness comes through our personal trust in Jesus. However, many scholars argue that the Greek phrase is better understood as the "faithfulness of Christ."

This reading shifts the emphasis from our belief to Christ's own unwavering obedience, culminating in his death on the cross. It is Christ's faithfulness, his trust in and obedience to the Father, that becomes the foundation of our standing before God.

This is a seismic shift. If righteousness is defined by Christ's faithfulness, then all human hierarchies, whether based on ethnicity, social achievement, or economic power, are rendered meaningless. Paul does not abandon Jewish law because it is unattainable; he relinquishes it because, in Christ, a new kind of righteousness has been revealed. This is why he calls everything else "rubbish" (Greek: *skubala*, a word that could be translated more crudely). In comparison to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ, all former gains become worthless.

Resocialization in the Post-Messianic Community

Gordon Zerbe describes this transformation as a process of rebirth and resocialization into the “post-Messianic community.” In Christ, we are not called to reclaim a past greatness or maintain old structures of power but to become something entirely new. Paul hints at this when he says, “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.” Perhaps he is even alluding to the story of Lot’s wife, who looked back longingly at the past rather than moving forward in faith. The call of God in Christ is not about returning to a golden age but about pressing forward into the reality of God’s kingdom.

This is particularly relevant in our cultural moment. The temptation to seek security in old hierarchies, whether ethnic, economic, or national, is strong. Some voices in our country call for a return to a mythical past when things were supposedly greater, more ordered, or more Christian. But Paul warns against this backward-looking impulse. The way of Christ is forward, into newness, into the unknown, trusting that God’s justice and righteousness, not human constructs of status, define our identity.

Imitating Paul, Imitating Christ

Paul’s exhortation is not simply about his own transformation; it is a call for all believers to follow his example. Just as Christ “emptied himself” (Philippians 2:6-11), so Paul has abandoned his former claims to status and embraced the way

of suffering love. This is what it means to be a citizen of God's kingdom: to pattern our lives after Christ, to resist false measures of worth, and to press on toward the goal.

So what does this mean for us? It means we cannot define our faithfulness by cultural dominance, social respectability, or nostalgia for a perceived past greatness. Instead, we must ask: Are we embodying Christ's faithfulness? Are we known as a community of radical love, justice, and inclusion? Are we pressing forward into the high call of God, even when it leads us into places of discomfort and sacrifice?

Conclusion: Pressing On Together

Lent is a season of pressing on. It is a time to let go of what once seemed valuable but is now revealed as insufficient. It is a time to reorient our lives around Christ's faithfulness rather than our achievements. Paul's words in Philippians 3 remind us that Christian life is not about securing a past identity but about embracing the future God is calling us into.

As we continue our Lenten journey, may we, like Paul, count all else as loss compared to knowing Christ. May we resist the temptation to find security in the old markers of power and instead press forward, together, toward the goal of God's kingdom. Amen.