

Reading II, 5th Sunday of Lent, C

[Phil 3:8-14](#)

Brothers and sisters:

I consider everything as a loss
because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.
For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things
and I consider them so much rubbish,
that I may gain Christ and be found in him,
not having any righteousness of my own based on the law
but that which comes through faith in Christ,
the righteousness from God,
depending on faith to know him and the power of his resurrection
and the sharing of his sufferings by being conformed to his death,
if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

It is not that I have already taken hold of it
or have already attained perfect maturity,
but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it,
since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ Jesus.
Brothers and sisters, I for my part
do not consider myself to have taken possession.
Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind
but straining forward to what lies ahead,
I continue my pursuit toward the goal,
the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus.

Jerome Biblical Commentary

8. *the knowledge of Christ Jesus:* The knowledge of Christ accorded to the Apostle in the revelation on the road to Damascus inaugurated a relationship between him and Christ that far surpassed all former advantages. This knowledge will be further specified in 3:10. But it reveals the mature reflections of Paul on his former condition, recorded now some 20 years after his conversion (cf. J. T. Forestell, *CBQ* 18 [1956] 123-26). *rubbish [dung]:* A strong expression used for what Paul once regarded so highly. *to gain Christ:* The knowledge of Christ as a mere intellectual acquisition is not sufficient. Paul describes his communion with Christ as a goal to be attained—in a race still to be run (Phil 2:16; 1 Cor 9:24; 2 Tm 4:7). This communion with Christ is an identification ever to be deepened until it reaches its consummation at the parousia.**9.** *be found in him:* At the Last Judgment; cf. 1 Cor 4:2; 15:15; 2 Cor 5:3. *not having my own*

uprightness, based on the Law: The goal of his life as a pharisee was to be found blameless in the sight of God through a perfect observance of the 613 prescriptions of the Mosaic Law. *that which comes through faith in Christ:* His uprightness will be rather that which is freely bestowed by God and dependent only on man's willingness and humility to accept the fact that he must seek his salvation not in himself, but in God through faith (cf. Rom 1:16-17; 3:20-28).

uprightness from God depending on faith: The very "uprightness of God" (*dikaïosynē ek theou*) is communicated to the Christian so that he can even be said through the Christ-event to "become God's uprightness" (2 Cor 5:21; cf. Rom 5:19; → Pauline Theology, 79:94-97).**10. the power of his resurrection:** Having become *Kyrios* and "Son of God in power" (Rom 1:4) as of the resurrection, the Risen Jesus possessed a *dynamis* that is the vital principle of the new Christian life, the New Creation (cf. 1 Cor 1:18; 6:14). This *dynamis* is nothing more than his "glory" (*doxa*), bestowed by the Father (Rom 6:4); it gradually brings about the transformation of the man of faith into an image of Christ himself (2 Cor 3:18; 4:6; Phil 2:21). This influence of Christ enables man to be identified with Jesus in his sufferings, death, and resurrection.**12. not that I have already achieved it:** The goal of Paul's striving—and of Christian striving in general—is not yet attained in this life. *since I have been snatched up:* Paul probably refers to the experience on the road to Damascus. But he still is the runner in the race straining for the goal (see comment on 2:8).**14. the upward call:** The destiny of the Christian who is called is to share a life with Christ in glory (cf. 1 Thes 4:17; Rom 5:2)¹

Haydock's Biblical Commentary

Ver. 9. *I may be found in him not having my justice, which is of the law;* i.e. not pretending to be justified either by my own works or by the works of the Jewish law, but by that which proceedeth from *faith in Christ*, and by his merits. (Witham) --- St. Augustine expounds the sense thus: not that justice which is in God, or by which God is just, but that which is in man from God, and by his gifts. (lib. 3. cont. 2. ep. Pelag.)

Ver. 10. *That I may know him.* This knowledge of Christ the apostle prefers to all honours and advantages accruing from his adherence to the synagogue.

Ver. 11. *If by any means I may attain to the resurrection, which is from the dead;* i.e. may attain to a happy resurrection, when the dead shall rise again. (Witham) --- This manner of expression does not betray any distrust or fear, but merely insinuates the difficulty of the enterprise, the uncertainty of success, and the ardent desire of the apostle, who sought by every means to arrive at this happiness, either by sufferings and labours, or even by martyrdom. (St. Chrysostom; Estius)

¹Brown, R. E., Fitzmyer, J. A., & Murphy, R. E. 1968]; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996. *The Jerome Biblical commentary* (electronic ed.). Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ

Ver. 12. *Not as though I had already attained the happiness I hope for, or am now become perfect as to that perfection in virtue, which I must always endeavour to increase in; but, like a person still running a race for a prize, I pursue and run as well as I can, I stretch myself with perseverance towards[2] the mark, forgetting that part of the course which I had made.* Let all of us, though perfect as to the knowledge of the mysteries we are to believe, be of this mind, that we are still to advance in the way of Christian perfection; and if any of you be of another mind, and think otherwise, God will reveal to you and teach you this truth, that we may all continue in the same rule of doctrine and discipline. We may here take notice with St. Chrysostom that it is not enough to believe, or have the true faith, but that we must strive and labour to the end in the way of perfection; secondly that St. Paul did not look upon himself absolutely certain of his salvation: and how much greater presumption would this be in us? (Witham)

Ver. 13. *I do not count myself.* That is, I do not suppose that vain security is sufficient to put my salvation out of doubt, and that Christ having died, nothing remains for me to do. No; I consider myself as a wrestler at the games, uncertain of success. (Calmet)

Daily Study Bible Series (non-Catholic)

THE WORTHLESSNESS OF THE LAW AND THE VALUE OF CHRIST

Philippians 3:8, 9

Yes, and I still count all things loss, because of the all-surpassing value of what it means to know Jesus Christ, my Lord. For his sake I have had to undergo a total abandonment of all things, and I count them as nothing better than filth fit for the refuse heap, that I may make Christ my own, and that it may be clear to all that I am in him, not because of any righteousness of my own, that righteousness whose source is the Law, but because of the righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, the righteousness whose source is God and whose basis is faith.

PAUL has just said that he came to the conclusion that all his Jewish privileges and attainments were nothing but a total loss. But, it might be argued, that was a snap decision, perhaps later to be regretted and reversed. So here he says, "I came to that conclusion—and I still think so. It was not a decision made in a moment of impulse, but one by which I still stand fast."

In this passage the key-word is *righteousness*. *Dikaiousune* is always difficult to translate in Paul's letters. The trouble is not that of seeing its meaning; the trouble is that of finding one English word which covers all it includes. Let us then try to see what Paul thinks about when he speaks about righteousness.

The great basic problem of life is to find fellowship with God and to be at peace and in friendship with him. The way to that fellowship is through righteousness, through the kind of life and spirit and attitude to himself which God desires. Because of that, righteousness nearly always for Paul has the meaning of *a right relationship with God*. Remembering that, we try to paraphrase this passage and to set down, not so much what Paul says, as what was in his mind.

He says, “All my life I have been trying to get into a right relationship with God. I tried to find it by strict adherence to the Jewish Law; but I found the Law and all its ways worse than useless to achieve that end. I found it no better than skubala.” Skubala has two meanings. In common language it was popularly derived from kusi ballomena, which means *that which is thrown to the dogs*; and in medical language it means *excrement*, (*dung*, as the Authorized Version translates it). So, then, Paul is saying, “I found the Law and all its ways of no more use than the refuse thrown on the garbage heap to help me to get into a right relationship with God. So I gave up trying to create a goodness of my own; I came to God in humble faith, as Jesus told me to do, and I found that fellowship I had sought so long.”

Paul had discovered that a right relationship with God is based not on Law but on faith in Jesus Christ. It is not *achieved* by any man but *given* by God; not *won* by *works* but accepted in *trust*.

So he says, “Out of my experience I tell you that the Jewish way is wrong and futile. You will never get into a right relationship with God by your own efforts in keeping the Law. You can get into a right relationship with God only by taking Jesus Christ at his word, and by accepting what God himself offers to you.”

The basic thought of this passage is the uselessness of Law and the sufficiency of knowing Christ and accepting the offer of God’s grace. The very language Paul uses to describe the Law—excrement—shows the utter disgust for the Law which his own frustrated efforts to live by it had brought him; and the joy that shines through the passage shows how triumphantly adequate he found the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

WHAT IT MEANS TO KNOW CHRIST

Philippians 3:10, 11

My object is to know him, and I mean by that, to know the power of his Resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, while I continue to be made like him in his death, if by any chance I may attain to the resurrection of the dead.

PAUL has already spoken of the surpassing value of the knowledge of Christ. To that thought he now returns and defines more closely what he means. It is important to note the verb which he uses for *to know*. It is part of the verb *gin skein*, which almost always indicates personal knowledge. It is not simply intellectual knowledge, the knowledge of certain facts or even principles. It is the personal experience of another person. We may see the depth of this word from a fact of Old Testament usage. The Old Testament uses *to know* of sexual intercourse. “Adam *knew* Eve his wife; and she conceived and bore Cain” (Genesis 4:1). In Hebrew the verb is *yada* and in Greek it is translated by *ginoskein*. This verb indicates the most intimate knowledge of another person. It is not Paul’s aim *to know about Christ*, but personally *to know him*. To know Christ means for him certain things.

(i) It means to know *the power of his Resurrection*. For Paul the Resurrection was not simply a past event in history, however amazing. It was not simply something which had happened to Jesus, however important it was for him. It was a dynamic power which operated in the life of the individual Christian. We cannot know everything that Paul meant by this phrase; but the Resurrection of Christ is the great dynamic in at least three different directions.

(a) It is the guarantee of the importance of this life and of this body in which we live. It was in the body that Christ rose and it is this body which he sanctifies (1 Corinthians 6:13ff.).

(b) It is the guarantee of the life to come (Romans 8:11; 1 Corinthians 15:14ff.). Because he lives, we shall live also; his victory is our victory.

(c) It is the guarantee that in life and in death and beyond death the presence of the Risen Lord is always with us. It is the proof that his promise to be with us always to the end of the world is true.

The Resurrection of Christ is the guarantee that this life is worth living and that the physical body is sacred; it is the guarantee that death is not the end of life and that there is a world beyond; it is the guarantee that nothing in life or in death can separate us from him.

(ii) It means to know *the fellowship of his sufferings*. Again and again Paul returns to the thought that when the Christian has to suffer, he is in some strange way sharing the very suffering of Christ and is even filling up that suffering (2 Corinthians 1:5; 4:10, 11; Galatians 6:17; Colossians 1:24). To suffer for a faith is not a penalty, it is a privilege, for thereby we share the very work of Christ.

(iii) It means to *be so united with Christ that day by day we come more to share in his death, so that finally we share in his Resurrection*. To know Christ means that we share the way he walked; we share the Cross he bore; we share the death he died; and finally we share the life he lives for evermore.

To know Christ is not to be skilled in any theoretical or theological knowledge; it is to know him with such intimacy that in the end we are as united with him as we are with those whom we love on earth and that, as we share their experiences, so we also share his.

PRESSING ON

Philippians 3:12–16

all complete but I press on to try to grasp that for which I have been grasped by Jesus Christ. Brothers, I do not count myself to have obtained; but this one thing I do—forgetting the things which are behind, and reaching out for the things which are in front, I press on towards the goal, in order that I may win the prize which God's upward calling in Christ Jesus is offering to me.

Let all of you who have graduated in the school of Christ have the same attitude of mind to life. And if anyone is otherwise minded in any way, this too God will reveal to him. Only we must always walk according to that standard which we have already reached.

VITAL to the understanding of this passage is the correct interpretation of the Greek word *teleios* which occurs twice, rendered by the Revised Standard Version as *perfect* in verse 12 and as *mature* in verse 15. *Teleios* in Greek has a variety of interrelated meanings. In by far the most of them it does not signify what we might call abstract perfection but a kind of functional perfection, adequacy for some given purpose. It means *full-grown* in contradistinction to undeveloped; for example, it is used of a full-grown man as opposed to an undeveloped youth. It is used to mean *mature in mind* and therefore means *one who is qualified in a subject* as opposed to a mere learner. When it is used of offerings, it means *without blemish* and fit to offer God. When it is used of Christians, it often means *baptized persons who are full members of the Church*, as opposed to those who are still under instruction. In the days of the early Church it is quite often used to describe *martyrs*. A martyr is said to be *perfected by the sword*, and the day of his death is said to be the day of his *perfecting*. The idea is that a man's Christian maturity cannot go beyond martyrdom.

So when Paul uses the word in verse 12, he is saying that he is not by any means a complete Christian but is for ever pressing on. Then he uses two vivid pictures.

(i) He says that he is trying to grasp that for which he has been grasped by Christ. That is a wonderful thought. Paul felt that when Christ stopped him on the Damascus Road, he had a vision and a purpose for Paul; and Paul felt that all his life he was bound to press on, lest he fail Jesus and frustrate his dream. Every man is grasped by Christ for some purpose; and, therefore, every man should all his life press on so that he may grasp that purpose for which Christ grasped him.

(ii) To that end Paul says two things. He is *forgetting the things which are behind*. That is to say, he will never glory in any of his achievements or use them as an excuse for relaxation. In effect Paul is saying that the Christian must forget all that he has done and remember only what he has still to do. In the Christian life there is no room for a person who desires to rest upon his laurels. He is also *reaching out for the things which are in front*. The word he uses for *reaching out* (*epekteinomenos*) is very vivid and is used of a racer going hard for the tape. It describes him with eyes for nothing but the goal. It describes the man who is going *flat out* for the finish. So Paul says that in the Christian life we must forget every past achievement and remember only the goal which lies ahead.

There is no doubt that Paul is here speaking to the antinomians. They were those who denied that there was any law at all in the Christian life. They declared that they were within the grace of God and that, therefore, it did not matter what they did; God would forgive. No further discipline and no further effort were necessary. Paul is insisting that to the end of the day the Christian life is the life of an athlete pressing onwards to a goal which is always in front.

In verse 15 he again uses *teleios* and says that this must be the attitude of those who are *teleios*. What he means is: "Anyone who has come to be mature in the faith and knows what Christianity is must recognize the discipline and the effort and the agony of the Christian life." He may perhaps think differently, but, if he is an honest man, God will make it plain to him that

he must never relax his effort or lower his standards but must press towards the goal, until the end.

As Paul saw it, the Christian is the athlete of Christ.

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²*The letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*. 2000, c1975 (W. Barclay, lecturer in the University of Glasgow, Ed.). The Daily study Bible series, Rev. ed. The Westminster Press: Philadelphia