

Intro: How banks make us think liabilities can actually be assets.

Billions of people around the world suffer from the same accounting error with regards to their spiritual financial statement. Thinking that they have stored up a great wealth of righteousness, they are actually bankrupt in God's eyes, and like my friend, will one day have their accounts settled. In this section of Scripture, we will see how Paul one time thought that his works of the flesh had merited him right standing w/ the living God, but now by God's grace had come to realize the *true* worth of the former confidence he once placed in the flesh. **3:1-10**

Having mentioned that Christians boast in Christ Jesus and 'put no confidence in the flesh', the apostle now proceeds to indicate what 'trusting in the flesh' means. He does this through a personal testimony, expressed by one as "one of the most remarkable personal confessions that the ancient world has bequeathed to us." Herein Paul enumerates the privileges of his Jewish descent & his personal achievements in relation to the law. Indeed, his heritage & achievements as grounds for boasting were 2nd to none. But as we will see, the moment Paul caught one glimpse of Christ's glory, all that he once regarded as treasure is now reckoned as trash. What was once his reward had now become his refuse – in comparison to the surpassing worth of an intimate relationship w/ his Lord, Jesus the Messiah.

Rather than writing a systematic theology lecture to refute the heresy that the Judaizers were trying to inject into the church, he instead gives us one of the greatest treatises on justification by faith by reflecting upon his own personal testimony, reminding us that true

theology never puts a wedge between our brains & our hearts. The doctrine of justification by faith is *not* something to be discussed in a seminary classroom with an indifferent attitude. Paul would weep if he saw how so many of us treat so glorious a doctrine. No, the doctrine of justification by faith ought to arouse in us the greatest of our affections & emotions towards God in Christ Jesus. One can almost see the imprisoned apostle shaking w/ joy as he reflects upon whom he once was in apart from Christ comparison to who he now is in Christ. 'My brothers, rejoice in the Lord! To write the same things is no trouble to me, b/c all that thrills my soul is Jesus! O how marvelous, O how wonderful, and my song shall ever be!' People never tire of talking about what means the most to them. I've never met a grandma who has to be forced to talk about the joy their grandchildren are to them. Well, that is incomparable w/ Paul's joy at the thought of the boundless grace of his God in Jesus Christ. (PAUSE)

Testimonies can be a powerful thing. Why? Because they are something that others can relate to; they can see & hear & touch & smell & experience & know that the words that we speak are so much more than mere words. Our testimony trumpets out to the world, 'I have tasted the words of eternal life!' So powerful was the testimony of the conversion of the Thessalonians that Paul didn't even have to write letters to Macedonia or Achaia (1 Thes. 1:8-9). The Word of God came in such power & demonstration of the Holy Spirit that in the midst of intense persecution, they turned from their idols to the true & living God. Elsewhere, Paul told the Corinthians that they *themselves* were his letters of recommendation, to be read by all to show what

powerful changes the Holy Spirit can effect to those who hear it & receive the gospel by faith. Is your life a testimony to others of the saving & powerful grace of God that supernaturally changes lives? Do those around you see a radical difference between you & the world? May the message that we live become more & more like the message that we preach!

For those who may be wondering what it means for one to “put confidence in the flesh”, Paul gives us a concrete example of the kind self-reliance & self-trust that God detests & abhors in **verses 4-6**.

Now we must realize that Paul is opposing a group of heretical missionaries called the Judaizers. In a nutshell, these zealous opponents of Paul taught that faith in Christ was not enough for salvation. According to them, Gentile converts needed to keep such OT rites as circumcision to ‘seal the deal’ to confirm their membership as belonging to God’s covenant people. Do you see how insidious this is? They were *not* all-out denying that faith in Christ was necessary for salvation. Indeed, many even considered them to be true Christians. But what is so damning about their ‘gospel’ is that they were adding human merit to the merits of Christ’s shed blood. Are not those cults who claim to belong to Christ and yet try to add to His merits also our greatest threat today? How many Mormons & Catholics & liberals I have witnessed to would be called dogs & evildoers by the apostle here! It is not those who *deny* the truth that scare me so much as those who *distort* it.

In v.7, Paul the apostle becomes Paul the accountant, as he tallies a list of his past losses versus his present assets, or gains.

Verses 5-6 list the 7 losses that he once thought to be advantages that would merit his salvation, while vv. 8ff. show us that the *only* gain that counts is knowing Jesus Christ his Lord.

His ‘losses’ column can be broken up into 2 subheadings: his ‘advantages’ that were his by birth, and those that he had attained. Here Paul shows us that he once possessed everything that his opponents were boasting in, and more. “Indeed, if orthodox pedigree & upbringing, followed by high personal attainment in the religious moral realm, ensured a good standing in the presence of God, Paul need fear no competition” (F.F. Bruce).

The 1st inherited privilege he states is that he was circumcised on the 8th day. Circumcision stands at the head of the list, for the Jew believed that it was the great sign that one truly belonged to the covenant people of God. And so the Judaizers were trying to force circumcision upon those who were being converted to Christ by faith, since they had failed to understand that circumcision was only a physical seal that represented the true reality, namely faith in God and His promises. Circumcision was meant to remind Abraham that he was saved by His *believing* in God. It was only after being circumcised in his heart by the Holy Spirit that Paul realized the folly of trusting in outward rituals to make one right w/ the true & living God.

In Galatians 6, Paul reveals that the driving motivation of the Judaizers is that they may boast in persuading others into circumcision. It wasn’t as much about doctrine as it was numbers! And what is Paul’s response: “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. *For* neither circumcision counts for anything

nor uncircumcision, but a new creation” (6:14-15). In Eze. 36:26, the new creation is an allusion to our having been given a new heart able and willing to joyfully serve Yahweh.

Taken literally, our text is rendered “w/ respect to circumcision, an 8th day-er.” In other words, Paul’s circumcision is according to the terms of God’s covenant w/ Abraham & in strict conformity to the law. Even more, he aligns himself to the chosen line of Abraham, i.e. Isaac. In Gen. 17:25, Ishmael is circumcised at 13 years, whereas in Gen. 21:4, Moses is very explicit in telling us that Isaac – the line chosen by Yahweh to bless – was circumcised on the 8th day (cf. Acts 7:8). Paul was not like a lot of the Judaizers, who, as proselytes out of paganism, were circumcised after their conversion. Paul is a ‘true’ Jew, not a ‘Johnny come lately.’ If the Judaizers had reasons for confidence in their 2nd rate circumcision, Paul tells us that he has even more reason for confidence in the flesh regarding this rite.

The next inherited privilege Paul formerly boasted of was his pedigree as he tells us “I am an Israelite by birth.” Against the possibility that he was the child of Gentiles who converted to Judaism, he mentions his direct Israelite descent. Not only is he in the line of Abraham & Isaac, but he is also from the pure line of Jacob (Israel). In Rom. 9:4-5 Paul tells us, “to the Israelites belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ is God over all, blessed forever, amen.” It’s like the story where a Rabbi and a New England minister were getting to know one another. Proudly, the minister exclaimed,

"One of my ancestors signed the Declaration of Independence." "I understand your **pride**," responded the rabbi. "One of my ancestors signed the Ten Commandments." Unfortunately, there are many people who still think that their nationality for some reason merits them favor w/ God (e.g. Dispensationalists). Little do they realize that Paul writes, “If anyone has no love for the Lord (Jesus), let him be accused” (1 Cor. 16:22). Dear listner, God is no respecter of persons!

Even more than being an Israelite, he belongs to the tribe of Benjamin. Though small, the tribe of Benjamin was highly esteemed among the Jewish nation. He was the born to Rachel, not Leah, and was the only son of Jacob born in the Promised Land. Even more, the holy city of Jerusalem and the Lord’s temple were within the borders of the territory assigned to Benjamin. Even after the split of the monarchy, Benjamin was the only tribe that remained loyal to Judah, from which the Messiah would arise.

By Paul’s day, many Jews no longer knew what tribe they belonged to. Intermarriage during the years of exile had blurred the tribal lines. But Paul’s family remained pure Benjamites, which elevated him above many of the Judaizers, who probably could not trace their tribal descent. Here we must again be reminded that one’s salvation is not derived from their parental lineage (e.g. pastor’s kids). Children, you must *personally* repent of your sins & trust in Jesus Christ, or you will forever be accursed.

Finally Paul’s final birth privilege was that he was a Hebrew of Hebrews. Most commentators feel that this means that Paul was brought up to speak the Hebrew language and carefully to observe the

Jewish national way of life. Not only was his bloodline pure: because he was raised by Pharisee parents, he sets himself as one of the elite of his own race. Imagine Hannah boasting one morning about how privileged she is to be pure Dutch. And then Nathan comes along & says something in Dutch to trump her. Some of the Judaizers had gone toe to toe w/ him thus far. And so he mentions that above all this, he was not like many of the Jews who had succumbed to the Hellenization of the world. He could interpret the Torah in the original language they were written in, and thus could claim a greater understanding to the original meaning (e.g. preachers, Rome w/ Latin). Do you know that many theologians who know the original languages better than I will suffer eternal torment? What good is it to know what the Greek says if you don't obey it? I could imagine pre-converted Paul rebuking a fellow Jew for not laying his sacrifice properly upon the altar, all the while he is rejecting the grace that the sacrifice points forward to. How many religious people excel in the various ordinances, and yet do not realize that such 'gains' are reprehensible 'losses' in the sight of God?

Thus, these first 4 privileges, which had once given Paul confidence before God, had to do w/ an orthodox pedigree & upbringing. The last 3, to which he now turns, focus on his own great personal achievements, which had accomplished 'in the flesh'.

The 1st of his achievements was his strict adherence to the Law of Moses: According to the law, a Pharisee. Not only did he endeavor to keep all that was commanded to Israel through Moses, but the Pharisees also added hundreds of commandments in their oral laws &

traditions, which they regarded as equally binding upon them. As a disciple of the great Gamaliel (Acts 5:34), he set himself to be the most zealous of all who kept the law (Gal. 1:14). Indeed, for many Jews, to be a Pharisee was the claim to 'the highest degree of faithfulness & sincerity in the fulfillment of duty to God as prescribed by the divine Torah.' But as we will see, one's religious status profits nothing w/o faith in Christ. All of our law-keeping and self-denial is but filthy rags unless it is purified by the blood of Christ. What a shock judgment day will be to many monks, priests, gurus, and even church leaders who appear polished on the outside, and yet remain uncircumcised on the inside, full of dead man's bones! Salvation is not earned by *traditions*!

Nor is salvation by *sincerity*. The next thing Paul says is that according to zeal he was a persecutor of the church. No doubt he was absolutely genuine in his religious beliefs. Zeal for God, His house, & for the law was highly praised in the OT, and the Jews viewed zeal as the supreme religious virtue. Though the Judaizers were ardent in their endeavors to uphold the Torah among the Christians, Paul tells us that he far exceeded them in his zeal to defend his convictions & traditions that the Christians appeared to be destroying. In terms of zeal, they only *proselytized* the church; he had *persecuted* it. His zeal for God led him to relentlessly, unsparingly, and mercilessly try to stamp out Christianity. Despite his sincerity, however, he was still wrong. The world is full of people, who, like him, are sincere in their religious beliefs & are still wrong (e.g. of Mormon guy on YouTube). It was only an encounter w/ the living Christ that made Paul realize the

folly of placing confidence in his zeal for God, as if it somehow merited him right standing on judgment day.

The 7th & final boast Paul previously put confidence in was his outstanding moral life. According to righteousness, he says, under the law, blameless. Now as we have seen in Job & the Psalms, Paul is not boasting that he lived a perfect life without sinning, for in Romans 7 he admits to being envious. However, by all *outward* appearances, Paul would have been a model Jew above reproach, much like the rich young ruler in Luke 18 who had claimed to have kept all the commandments from his youth. Similarly, Paul was only comparing his lifestyle w/ other *people*. But when the Holy Spirit infiltrates the heart, we realize that the bar is raised to the perfection of God, and all we can do is cry out, “O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24). There are many unconverted people who outwardly live a more righteous life than even believers (cf. Mere Christianity), wh/ is why this last ‘confidence’ Paul gives is perhaps the most deadly on his list, for it blinds one’s eyes to the fact that all have sinned & therefore fallen short of *God’s* glorious standard

So we see that in vv.5-6, Paul considered himself a model Jew in every way. As he says in v.4, if others had grounds for putting confidence in the flesh, then he could match them in every point. Even more, he surpassed them. In his own estimation, he had it all. If anyone was right w/ God, it had to be him. Were God to pick the league MVP, it would be him. Were God to choose the valedictorian, it would be him. It would be a no-brainer, right? Is this not how most people still think today? I challenge you to witness to 5 strangers this

week. I am quite certain that if they are not Christians, the grounds for their confidence will echo Paul’s boasts listed here. “I was born into such & such a religion” or “I’m a good person” are the 2 major responses given, and they fit nicely into Paul’s 2 categories here as well. The challenge that we face as we witness is taking them from vv.5-6 to v. 7, to which we now turn. **READ!!**

The Bible is filled w/ many instances of God demonstrating His sovereign power over His creation. In Genesis 1, He creates the entire universe by His powerful Word. We read in Exodus of the great miracle where the Red Sea is divided for His people Israel. Elsewhere we read of Him destroying large armies, shutting up the heavens of their rain, and healing all kinds of infirmities. In the N.T. we see Jesus walking on water, healing the sick, raising the dead, and multiplying the loaves & fish. What makes a miracle a miracle is that something happens that is *contrary to its nature* (the Red Sea naturally doesn’t open up for people to cross, nor does bread naturally multiply itself to feed thousands of people).

However, greater than all these miracles is the miracle that we just read, for the depraved heart is more resistant to God’s Word than the raging waters of the Jordan could ever be. Indeed, it is more natural for a shadow to move backwards than it is for a depraved man to love God w/ all his heart, soul, mind & strength. Have you ever tried to erase a permanent marker with a pencil eraser? Impossible, right? Imagine now that every single person ever born into this world has the word “me” written upon his or her heart w/ a permanent marker. No matter how good Paul looked on the outside, no matter

how prestigious his religious resume was, his heart was still uncircumcised; it still bore those two black letters upon it. And if you are sitting here this morning and are wondering why you do not love Christ the way the others do, it is b/c your heart has not yet been circumcised by the Holy Spirit. You need a new heart w/ “Christ” written upon it.

So great was the miracle of conversion, or re-creation, that it radically changed Paul’s heart from serving his *self* to serving his *Savior*. When someone is truly converted, not only is the “me” erased from our hearts; even more “Christ” is now indelibly stamped upon our hearts. Previously, everything we ever did was for our own glory, and was tainted w/ our sinful imperfections, thus nullifying any sacrifice offered. But now, we are enabled by grace to work & to will for God’s good pleasure, having our offerings not tinged w/ our filth, but rather w/ the precious blood of Christ, which makes even the foulest offering acceptable to God.

So radical was Paul’s conversion that all the things he had once counted or reckoned as ‘gain’ for him now occupied the ‘liabilities’ column for things that he believed made one right w/ God. What made the difference? In **v. 7 we read** he counts all things as loss:

“For the sake of Christ.” Christ, the person of supreme worth & affectionate love, had become the center of Paul’s life, and now for Christ’s sake he has and will forever regard all of his former privileges as *one* big loss. If God took away everything you had, but left you w/ Christ, would you be satisfied? If God took you from your esteemed position in the world to make you the scum of the earth, could you still rejoice if you had Christ? It’s like the Puritan who sat down for lunch

of only bread & water. “What!” he explained, “all this & Christ too!” This is what makes Philippians the letter of joy: Christ with us! Our hands were created only to grip onto one thing: Christ! Oh for grace to let any privilege that loosens our grip on Him. Take it Lord & give us more of Christ. Take all our losses & give us gain!

Lest anyone think that salvation is a one-time decision¹, Paul informs us in v.8 that his decision to count his former gains as loss was no impulsive act of breaking w/ his past. No, his decision to follow Christ was a deep-seated resolution that he had not regretted. Here he tells us that not only does he count those things in vv.5-6 as loss, but now he counts “everything” as loss for the sake of the incomparable value of his personal relationship w/ Jesus Christ his Lord. Paul has *willingly* sustained the loss of all things for Christ’s sake; indeed, he has come to regard them as nothing more than dung, since they take away from the only thing that now matters to him in life.

By comparing one’s self-righteous efforts to dung, Paul is intentionally trying to shock his readers by showing them the best thing that the flesh can produce of itself. Elsewhere Isaiah tells us that our righteousness is nothing more than an unclean menstruation rag (i.e. a used tampon). If this is what the Bible teaches us concerning our good works, why would we choose them over the free righteousness that God offers in His Son? Is this not the epitome of insanity?

¹ Note how he uses the perfect (h[ghmai) in v.7, and the present (h` gou/mai) in v.8.

Illustration: Imagine for a moment that one day you are sitting at home when all of a sudden your mom calls to wish you a happy anniversary, only to realize that you forgot to pick up the love of your life's present; and she'll be home any minute. But then in sweet providence, you hear the doorbell ring, along w/ 2 men dressed in suits arguing over something. You open the door up to find out they're not Mormons, b/c they have no elder tags, nor do their ties match. Immediately, they both identify themselves as sellers of high quality paraphernalia. "Well" you say, "I definitely need something to impress the lady, and I'm willing to pay any price." Well, says the 1st, I have something just for you. Though it might cost you a great deal, I am certain that the lady will never reject you once she catches one whiff of what I have for you. Eager w/ anticipation, you watch him reach into his briefcase, only to pull out what looks like a dirty diaper. He mistakes your look of confusion as interest, and tells you that it is by far his biggest seller among the middle & upper classes. "When she realizes that you've paid all that you have for this, she'll definitely love you." Bewildered, you ask the other salesman for his pitch, telling him that cost is no object. Well, he says, I too have something that will cost you a great deal, and I am certain your wife will accept you when you present it to her. Excited, he too reaches into his briefcase only to pull out what appears to be a used menstruation cloth. "What makes you think my wife will want this if I myself find it repulsive?" you remark. "Obviously you don't understand a good deal when one comes your way," they reply. Realizing they're going nowhere, they decide to inform you, "You'd be surprised how many suckers actually pay all

they have for these things." Amid much consternation, you hear the doorbell ring once more. This time, however, there is a different salesman, clothed in white. As you open the door, he says, "I couldn't help but overhear that you have counted what those wicked men are trying to sell you as filth & dung. Well, what I have for you to offer you costs you absolutely nothing. But there's a pitch. When your wife is pleased w/ your offering & accepts it, you must give me all the credit." Absolutely desperate, you've come to an end of yourself, and realize that you must trust the free gift of another to make you acceptable in her sight this day.

This is precisely what happened to Paul on the road to Damascus. For years he had been buying the Devil's lie that his righteousness would be acceptable before his God. But by grace, his eyes were gloriously opened to see all that he formerly put his confidence as God did: as dung. Dear listener, is this how you see your good works, your religiosity, your spiritual pedigree? Oh, accept now Christ's free gift of perfect righteousness, the only gift the sovereign God of the universe will ever accept. The pitch: boast only in Christ Jesus (v.3)

Finally, we see why Paul was counted everything as loss: "b/c of the incomparable value of knowing Christ." Paul wanted more than just the righteousness of Christ imputed to him. Salvation is more than just a ticket out of Hell. What makes salvation so sweet? Is it the mere avoidance of punishment? No, what makes salvation so glorious is knowing Christ! It is not to be compared w/ anything this world can offer you. Piper is right: "*God is the gospel.*" Is the resonant song in

your heart, “All that thrills my soul is Jesus, He is everything to me”, or “You can have all this world, just give me Jesus”? If so, I am certain you are His.

Here, Paul is using the common OT designation for knowledge, which is more than just reading a systematic theology textbook. No, to know God is to have close fellowship w/ Him. Knowing *about* Christ & knowing Christ are not the same. Oh how passionate was the apostle for his Lord & Savior! Paul *willingly* gave up all those things that the world so desperately holds onto for life for one thing: a personal relationship w/ Jesus Christ. I call this ‘giving up to gain.’

It is only when one wants Christ more than anything else that they are ready to suffer the loss of anything that interferes w/ that intimacy. Brothers & sisters, is there some kind of sin that is keeping you from that sweet communion w/ Christ that you so desire? One true look at His beauty will not make throwing aside your beggarly clothes seem so burdensome. Your hands were not made to cling to anything but Christ.

Whose righteousness are your hands clinging to: your own or Christ’s? Do not lean upon the broken reed of your own tainted righteousness. Trust in the living God, who promises to give His righteousness to all who lean wholly upon His Son. Isn’t that what faith is. A missionary was translating the Bible into a tribal language and was having trouble trying to find a word for “faith.” Suddenly one of the natives, fatigued to the point of exhaustion, came & asked if he could lean upon him & his strength for repose. Dear tired listener, here stands Jesus, ready to be your refuge & repose. Quit trying to

walk in your own strength & merits & simply lean upon His everlasting arms.

To close: One day an evangelist, while witnessing to a self-righteous moralist in downtown Denver used the following illustration to show him of the helpless estate he was yet in. Drawing a rectangle on the sidewalk, he explained how it represented the state of Colorado. He then went on to explain how there were 3 men in this state. One lived on top of Pikes peak (14 110’), another at sea level, and the last 1000’ below in a mine. Yet all three were living in the same state. So it is in the state of unregeneracy, said the evangelist. One might live on the mountain of morality, the other an average life, and another in the deep darkness of a wicked life. Yet all are unregenerate & in need of Christ’s white robe of righteousness.

Brothers & sisters who live in the state of regeneracy, make it your aim to lose more & more of yourself & gain more & more of Christ. This is the *only* way true joy is found!