“Loss for the Sake of Christ,” Philippians 3:1-11 (Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, July 28, 2024)

Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.

**2**Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. **3**For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— **4**though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: **5**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; **6**as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. **7**But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. **8**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 **9**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— **10**that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, **11**that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

***“This is the Word of the Lord.” “Thanks be to God!”***

One of the advantages of getting older and more established in what you do for a living is that you don’t have to worry about putting together a resume anymore. I know there are exceptions, painful ones when you get laid off or when your company goes out of business and you have to get a new job. But a lot of us, by God’s grace, haven’t thought about our resume in years.

It’s not like that when you’re younger. I had a different career before I became a pastor and in grad school, before we all got our first jobs in that field, we worked meticulously on our resumes. We even were very picky about the paper we’d print our resumes on. This was before you’d email someone your resume, certainly before LinkedIn. Instead, you’d go to the printer in town (there used to be one where The Lyric is now that I’d use), choose your paper and envelopes, and then drop them off at the career placement office at Ole Miss for them to distribute to all the firms.

Nor were we worried only about our resumes. We wanted to know what everyone else in our class had on their resumes. You didn’t talk about it too much, you knew better than to just come out and ask, but we all wanted to know everyone else’s class rank. It was, and I’m sure still is, the first thing firms look for when they decide to hire people straight out of school.

Paul, in our text for today, is giving us his resume. And for his place and time, it is a knockout resume. No one in that culture had a better resume than the apostle Paul. He was at one point in his life extremely proud of what he’d accomplished.

But by the time he writes this letter to the Philippians, Paul says in verses 7 and 8, “My resume, with all my accomplishments, all my awards … my resume, which I once treasured, I know consider trash.” The Greek word translated as “rubbish” in verse 8 means “the garbage in your house you’d throw to the dogs,” and dogs weren’t pets in ancient Israel. They were thought of the way you and I think of rats today.

Now, I never want to be more earthy than the Bible when I preach, go overboard and try to shock you just to make a point, but I never want to be less earthy than the Bible and thereby downplay something the apostle Paul emphasizes. I’m not trying to be gross for the sake of being gross but I want you to understand what Paul is saying.

My wife and I slipped away last week and went to New Orleans. We stayed at a hotel in the French Quarter, and whenever I’m in New Orleans I like to get up early in the morning and run in the Quarter and especially down Bourbon Street. Maybe I like getting up early to go to Bourbon Street because I know I’m never going down there late.

But the thing about Bourbon Street is that the city must clean it every single morning. They spray it down with this water and bleach solution because it gets so filthy from all the food and drink and everything else that’s spilled on it the night before.

Now, imagine someone scooped up a bowlful of that refuse, took it to a job interview, and said, “This right here is why you should hire me.” Only someone severely mentally ill would do such a thing, but Paul says, “That’s about what I think of my resume now. All those accomplishments, all those awards, all those the things I once gloried in … now they are worth as much to me as the stuff the rats eat on Bourbon Street.”

What would cause Paul to speak so radically? He’s not exaggerating, this is not hyperbole. Paul could exaggerate to make a point when he wanted to; this is not one of those times. Why does Paul say, “All these things I used to treasure so highly I now count as trash”?

***It’s because Paul has seen what righteousness really is.***  Your “righteousness” is, in a sense, your resume. It could be another word for “resume.” Your righteousness is that which makes you feel like you’ve earned the approval of other people, that doors are now opened to you, even to God.

Three times in our text for today Paul uses the Greek word translated in our Bibles as “righteous,” and that’s what we’ll talk about this morning under two headings: *first, righteousness is something we all know we need.* *Second, the righteousness we need is something only God can give.*

First, righteousness is something we all desperately need. Let’s see exactly what Paul’s resume was, and why it was so impressive. It’s listed in verses 5-6. Paul says he was “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; **6**as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”

We could go into a lot of detail about this, but instead I’ll try to sum it up. Every society creates its own rules for what makes the people in it “righteous.” In Paul’s society, first century Judaism, righteousness was all about religion.

When Paul writes that he was “… circumcised on the eighth day …” he means, “I wasn’t a convert to Judaism. I was born into this thing.” It reminds me of the time when someone told me they were a seventh-generation Mississippian. In other words, their family has been in this state since it began. They were very proud of this fact.

When Paul says, “… of the tribe of Benjamin …” he’s telling us he was born into the tribe of the first king of Israel. It would be like being born into the Kennedy family today (or, closer to home, being born into the Manning family).

He also says he’s a Pharisee, which means he had studied the Scriptures as closely as anyone. He knew the Bible. He almost certainly had it all memorized. Paul says he was a “persecutor of the church.” So zealous was he for the law of God that he was ready not only to punish, but to kill those deemed violators of it.

And so Paul can sum the life he once had with these words: “as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” Paul is not saying that he never made a mistake. He’s not saying he’s perfect. But he is saying that he had the best possible resume anyone in his time and place could have had.

Now, what would drive a man to work so hard (and Paul certainly worked hard) to have such a great resume? He wanted to feel good about himself. He wanted to feel like he mattered. He wanted to feel like he was an important person who had the approval of others and God.

We are fundamentally just like Paul. We also want to feel good about ourselves. We want to feel like we matter and we want the approval of others.

And this striving to have a resume that impresses others and makes you feel important begins when we are very young. Why do little boys dare one another to jump off of tall things? They want to prove they are brave. It’s part of a little boy’s resume.

Greek recruitment starts up in a few weeks here at Ole Miss. For some people, it will be a positive experience. They’ll meet young men and women who will be their lifelong friends. But no one seriously thinks this is going to be a positive experience for everyone, right?

Why are some young men and young women going to be in tears on bid day (and, in some cases, their parents and even grandparents along with them!)? Because that young man or young woman was a triple legacy and they still didn’t get into that certain Greek organization and to them, it feels like a crippling and irreparable blow to their resume.

When you’re young, you feel like you have to prove to everyone else how brave you are, how athletic you are, how smart you are, what a good lover you are. Then, as you get older, you have to prove what a good businessman you are, what a good father you are, how successful you can be. Then, in your golden years, you feel like you have to prove that you have a great relationship with your children and grandchildren and pretend that everything is fine in your family, even if it’s not.

But here’s the point: it never stops. The need to prove yourself and have a resume that demonstrates your righteousness never stops. I watched some of the new Pete Rose documentary last week. Charlie Hustle is now 83 years old. In that documentary, he tells a story about his father.

Pete Rose was born and raised in Cincinnati, and so was his father, so his father would come and watch Pete play for the Reds, but he always had to leave early because he had to get up and go to work the next morning. But one night Pete was walking to his car after the game and he saw his dad leaning against it. Now, mind you, by this time in his career Pete Rose had been a major league all-star multiple times, he’d won the NL batting title, people were already talking about him breaking Ty Cobb’s all-time hits record. He was one of, if not the best baseball player in America. The only thing he hadn’t done at this point was win the World Series.

But when he got to his car his father said, “Do you remember that ground ball you hit to third in the fifth inning?” “Yes sir.” “Did you sprint that one all the way to first base?” “No sir, I don’t guess I did.” Then Pete’s father stuck his finger in his son’s face and said, “Don’t you ever embarrass me in this town like that again.” And he walked off.

You could tell it still bothered Pete Rose. His father’s been dead for more than fifty years, but for Pete Rose, you could tell a huge part of his resume was blank, because even though he accomplished so much on the baseball diamond he still wondered, “Did I only embarrass my dad?”

We all desperately need righteousness, we need something on the resume of our lives that makes us feel important, like we matter. And at some point in your life you will learn at least one of two things about the resume you make for yourself. I hope you learn both of the things I’m about to tell you, but you will learn one of them.

The first thing you’ll learn is that *no matter how perfect your resume is it won’t satisfy you.* Can we all agree that, for the kids who are about to go through rush, even joining the fraternity or sorority they had their hearts set on won’t satisfy them the rest of their days? Fifty years from now no one is going to say, “I still can’t believe I got in. Best thing that ever happened to me. My life has pretty much been on a downward spiral since bid day but it doesn’t matter because I got in!”

We all know that certain things on our resume won’t satisfy us very long. We’ll need something else to come along to make us feel good about ourselves. For a lot of us it will be our career. Now, I love my career. I can honestly say that right now I’d rather be the pastor of Grace Bible Church of Oxford than any other job I can think of.

But I don’t think that on my death bed I’m going to say, “I wish I spent more time alone in my study writing sermons,” as important as it is. I don’t think I’m going to say, “I wish we’d spent more time in elders’ meetings.”  
  
No one on their death bed ever said, “I wish I spent more time at the office.” “I wish I’d called on more clients.” “I wish I’d won more sales awards.” “I wish I’d written more journal articles.” No one is even going to say, “I wish I’d made more money.” Those things will not ultimately satisfy you, and you will find that out.

Now usually when someone like me says, “No one on their death bed is going to say, ‘I wish I spent more time at the office,’” they’ll follow it with, “They’ll wish they had spent more time with their family.” And that would almost certainly have been a good thing. Family is a wonderful blessing from God. We all probably should spend more time with our families.

But your family can’t be your righteousness. They can’t be the entirety of your resume, because even your family won’t ultimately be able to satisfy you.

There’s a Jason Isbell song where he writes about all the things about the woman he loves that take his breath away. But he says that ultimately it’s not her beauty, or kindness, or the romance, or even her wisdom. It’s knowing something about their relationship. He writes, “It’s knowing that this can’t go on forever; likely one of us will have to spend some days alone. Maybe we’ll get forty years together, but one day I’ll be gone, or one day you’ll be gone.”

You can have the best family in the world. And some of you feel like you do, and God bless you for that! But the fact remains that your family as your righteousness can’t satisfy you, because one day one of you will be the last one standing over the grave of the next-to-last one, and if your family is your righteousness, if it’s the most important thing on your resume, then on that day you will despair.

Everyone will learn that about the resume we construct for ourselves. If you don’t know it now, if you don’t believe me now, one day you will.

But it’s the second thing about your resume that it’s not guaranteed you’ll learn. The Bible says this truth is spiritually discerned, and not everyone has the power to discern it. And the second thing is this: *your resume, your righteousness, will not only fail to satisfy you; more importantly, it will fail to satisfy God.*

You see, all this trying to prove ourselves that we do, this trying to make ourselves feel like we matter, it’s not really about us. It’s about God. We all know deep down that there is a God and we desperately need his approval. And this isn’t a Christian notion. Psychiatrists know this. Psychoanalysts know this. They just don’t call it God. They call it your subconscious, or the collective unconscious, or internalized peer pressure.

But deep down (often so deep we don’t even know it’s there) we know we need the approval of the God who made us. We know deep down that we aren’t on this planet by accident. We know there is a creator. And the only thing that’s ever going to satisfy you is to see him look at you one day and say, “Well done. Well done. I am so pleased with you.”  
  
Friends, all of our striving, all of our working, all of our resume building, is in the hopes that one day we can see our God smile on us. *But, my friends, you will never get it through your resume.*

God is too perfect for your resume. There is never going to be anything you can do to earn his approval. You can’t be righteous enough for God. In fact, Isaiah 64:6 says even our most righteous acts, even the best things we could possibly put on the resume of our lives, are in God’s eyes only filthy rags. And again I don’t want to be more crass than the Bible but I don’t want to be more genteel than the Bible either. Literally, the Hebrew translated as “filthy rags” in Isaiah 64 means “a used menstrual cloth.”

Can you imagine taking one of those to someone and saying, “Here! This is why you should accept me. This is why you should let me into your club”? Can you imagine taking the late-night sweepings off of Bourbon Street, putting into a bowl, and coming to the Lord God omnipotent and saying, “Here! This is why you should love me. This is my resume”?

That’s what Paul is saying he’s learned in Philippians 3. His resume, as perfect as it was in the eyes of man, when it is presented to God as your righteousness, is worthless, rubbish, excrement. Paul’s learned that, and I hope you learn it, too. It’s not guaranteed that you will, but I pray God will open your eyes and see that your resume cannot save you.

Second, the good news: the righteousness God will give! It’s sounds harsh, doesn’t it? “You’ll never be good enough for God. Your resume will never satisfy his exacting judgement!” Some of you hear a preacher like me say something like that and think, “I am never coming to a church that talks about God like that again.”

But wait a minute. Hold onto your judgment. When the Bible says, “Your righteousness, your resume, is filthy rags in God’s sight,” it’s not saying that God doesn’t care about you. It’s only saying that God is far more glorious and beautiful and loving than you will ever be.

I have some friends that are really into flashlights. These are the powerful little flashlights that I’m pretty sure you can see from outer space. But you wouldn’t be insulting the owner of one of those flashlights to tell him that flashlight, as expensive and as nice as it is, will never be as powerful a giver of light as the sun is.

God loves human beings. That’s not the question. The question is will we recognize that we are only little flashlights compared to him, the sun, the giver of life!

Paul says that he finally figured that out. We are never on our own going to shine brightly enough for God. That’s why he considers his resume rubbish and that why he says in verses 7-11: “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. **8**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 **9**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— **10**that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, **11**that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” Philippians 3:7-11.

It is not that God doesn’t love you and so you’re going to have to work harder on your resume. No, the Bible simply says that you’ve got to stop trying to earn God’s love through your resume and recognize that God has provided the perfect resume for you in Jesus Christ. God became a man in Jesus Christ and ***he did it!*** He compiled the perfect resume; total righteousness under the law. In Jesus Christ God became the perfectly loving human being. He never did a single thing out of selfishness, fear, or hatred.

And all you’ve got to do to become a Christian is recognize that your resume won’t satisfy you, it won’t satisfy God, and ***it doesn’t have to.*** Because if you trust in God through Jesus Christ you get handed to you on a silver platter and perfect resume, and because of it you will one day hear God say, “Well done. I’m so proud of you. Welcome home!” And you will never hear from God, “Don’t you ever embarrass me like that again.”

Do you know who a Christian is? A Christian is something who doesn’t only repent of his sins, who doesn’t just say, “I’ve got to stop drinking so much. I’ve got to stop lusting after women. I’ve got to stop telling so many lies and being stingy with my money.” A Christian doesn’t just repent of his sins; he repents of his resume. A Christian says, “I was looking to my athletic skill, my grades, my looks, my success, my family to prove I was worthy. But now, compared to Jesus Christ, it’s all rubbish. I’m looking only to Jesus as my resume, and now the pressure is off and I can live freely and totally and do everything out of love, all for the sake of Christ.”

As we close, one application: *in light of Jesus Christ’s righteousness being applied to your life, how do we relate to the good things on our resume?* Paul, when he calls his resume “rubbish,” is not saying that there’s no worth in studying the Bible like he did. He’s not even saying that there’s nothing good about being born into the world as a Jew. He’s only saying that when it comes to trying to earn God’s approval, the things on his resume are worthless.

Many of us have good things on our resume: family, career, education, friends, money, a last name passed down to us through the generations. There’s nothing wrong with any of those things, don’t get rid of them or be embarrassed by them, ***but don’t let them become your righteousness.***

How can you do that? Relate to them *with gratitude, not pride.* Be thankful for the gifts God has given you. You can be sure you’re relating with gratitude when you look to the things God has blessed you with on your resume and you enjoy them but you never look to them as a reason to feel good about yourself or exclude others.

For example, I hope everyone that goes through rush gets the bid they want. That would be great. But for those who do, my prayer is they would say, “Thank you God for this blessing. Help me to enjoy it. Never allow me to base my self-worth on this chapter, but only on the righteousness you’ve given me through Christ. And help me work not to exclude people, but to somehow use this opportunity to draw people in and love them in the name of Jesus.”

On October 23, 1740, in Middletown, Connecticut, a farmer named Nathan Cole left his field to hear the great evangelist George Whitefield preach. Thousands would flock to hear Whitefield in those days. Mr. Cole was a religious man. He was a hard worker, a provider, a man of his word. He was a good man, but his encounter with George Whitefield changed all that. Later on, Mr. Cole wrote an account of that day, and at the conclusion he said, “[M]y hearing him preach gave me a heart wound, and by God’s blessing my old foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me.” Only a Christian can write something like that. PRAY