

Forget the Baloney

Aiming Higher . . . Pressing Onward, Part 2

Philippians 3:4-9

I was sent a clipping from a devotional recently and it stayed on study desk at home for several weeks . . . just waiting for the right opportunity to serve as just the right introduction.

Today is the day.

It goes something like this: “I remember those Sunday school picnics back before the days of indoor air conditioning. Every summer we’d meet at Sycamore Lodge in Shelby Part at 4:30 on Saturday. The orders always remained the same – you bring your supper and the church will furnish the ice tea. Maybe you did the same thing I did one year – when it came time to pack my picnic lunch, all I could find in the refrigerator was one dried up piece of baloney and just enough mustard at the bottom of the jar to spread – although I got it all over my knuckles trying to get it out of the bottom of the jar. And then all the bread I had left was stale to go with it. Never mind – I made my baloney sandwich and went to the picnic. I made it to a crowded picnic table where I emptied my brown paper bag and spread out my sandwich. The lady next to me had spent all day preparing – she unpacked fried chicken and baked beans and potato salad and homemade rolls and sliced tomatoes and mounds of pickles and olives – and two homemade chocolate merengue pies. It was all spread out next to my baloney sandwich. She looked over at me and quickly figured out my predicament. But then she graciously said, “Why don’t we just put it all together.”

Imagine adding my baloney sandwich to that feast. But with that invitation, my sandwich was soon forgotten and I ate like a king instead.

- When you think of salvation –

- when you consider the priceless sacrifice of Christ –
- when you measure the offering of our gracious God –
- bringing anything to the table and offering it to Him is like unpacking an old baloney and stale bread sandwich next to His lavish and sumptuous feast, paid for – and offered freely – by grace.

Paul has just severely warned the believers in Philippi of the Jewish false teachers who were wanting to add to grace – it wasn’t Jesus only, remember? It was Jesus plus:

- Jesus plus circumcision
- Jesus plus baptism
- Jesus plus good works

They were trusting in the flesh. And Paul minces no words in condemning them, remember, as dogs, evil workers and ceremonialists, proud of their own picnic baskets and what they could unpack and offer God.

What Paul writes next, in *Philippians chapter 3*, is nothing less than call these religious leaders out to a show-down of religious credentials.

In verse 4 he writes, although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more.

What Paul begins to do is speak hypothetically, for the sake of effect.¹

In other words, he writes, if you really want to have a credentials contest – a battle of the resume – I mean, if you really want to compare our stuff, let me tell you what I can bring to the picnic!

Paul here rattles off seven things that all would have won blue ribbon prizes. I've divided these 7 attributes into 3 categories.

1. First, Paul begins by taking them through his pedigree.

a. Let's take them one at a time – verse 5. *circumcised the eighth day*

That's a loaded introduction to his resume.

Paul is clearly informing them that he had been born into a home that honored the Old Testament scriptures. His parents followed the law of circumcision for a Jewish baby boy, according to *Leviticus 12:3*.ⁱⁱ

Paul is also implying that he wasn't a Gentile proselyte who'd been circumcised after converting to Judaism later in life – no, he was born a Jew – and the very first requirement of the law was met by his parents on Paul's eighth day.

b. Secondly, notice next, of the nation of Israel.

Israel was the name which had been given to Jacob after that all night wrestling match in *Genesis 32*.

Whenever a Jew wanted to stress their special relationship to the covenant promise of God through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, they would refer to Jacob's new name Israel.

- The Ishmaelites could trace their descent to Abraham, because Ishmael was the son of Abraham through Hagar
- The Edomites could trace their descent to Abraham through Isaac, for Esau, the founder of the Edomite nation was Isaac's son and Abraham's grandson.ⁱⁱⁱ

Ishmael and Esau were descendants of Abraham but they were not the recipients of the covenant promises that God gave to Jacob, later called Israel.^{iv}

Paul is effectively saying, "I'm not only a descendant of Abraham, but I am a direct descendant through Jacob whom God had renamed Israel.

And by identifying himself an Israelite, Paul is stressing the absolute purity of his Jewish pedigree.^v But there's more – thirdly

c. Paul writes, of the tribe of Benjamin

In other words, I didn't just descend from Jacob through one of the 12 tribes – named after the 12 sons of Israel – I belong to the elite tribe of ***Benjamin***.

Which was another way of implying that Paul had the right to expect favored treatment.

This was the elite tribe of Israel – this was the aristocracy of the nation.

It would be like someone in America who tells you they are a descendant of one of the early pilgrims; or to be related in some way to some other famous or wealthy family – a Washington or a Kennedy or a Rockefeller's or a Davey – just checking to see if you're awake.

Our producer at Wisdom for the Heart for many years now, Rob Lincoln, is a distant relative of Abraham Lincoln . . . I think that's pretty neat.

Well if you study the History of Israel, you discover that Benjamin was the son of Jacob's beloved wife Rachel; of all the twelve patriarchs, Benjamin was the only one who'd been born in the Promised Land (*Genesis 35:17-18*).

Paul is saying, "Look what I can unpack . . . look at these credentials."

And he's just getting started.

d. Paul adds to the list in verse 5 – a Hebrew of Hebrews

What he's pointing out here is not only the fact that he was a Hebrew boy born to Hebrew parents, but more than likely the unique fact that he spoke Hebrew.

There were millions of Jews who spoke Greek, and had long forgotten the language of their heritage.

After centuries of assimilating into other cultures, Jews had adopted the Greek language, Greek culture and Greek customs.

Paul can have his devotions – not out of the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (called the Septuagint) but directly from the Hebrew text.

I paid \$200 dollars an hour in seminary to learn the Hebrew language, and even at my best I wouldn't be able to hold a candle to people like Paul.

The truth is, most Jews in Paul's day, wouldn't be able to either.

In fact, all the way back to the days of Nehemiah, one of the problems of needed revival was the fact that the nation no longer understood the Hebrew

language well enough to read it and translate it and therefore couldn't read the Hebrew Bible.

Paul is effectively saying, "I can study the scriptures by the very language in which God originally delivered His word."

That was impressive.

In fact, there weren't many Jews living in Paul's day who could match his pedigree mark for mark.

Paul now pulls out of his impressive resume, not just his pedigree, but in this second category, his performance.

2. Paul's Performance

Notice the last part of *verse 5 – as to the law, a Pharisee.*

The Pharisees were the Olympic athletes of Jewish culture and holy living.

One author commented that the Pharisee had reached the very summit of religious experience – the highest ideals a Jew could ever hope to attain.^{vi}

Their very name – Pharisee – meant – The Separated Ones. They had one aim and that was to keep the very smallest innuendo of the law and the ceremony and the tradition of their religious system.^{vii}

Paul was among the most dedicated – in fact, he out-Phariseed all the other Pharisees – notice the last part of *verse 6 – as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.*

Paul wasn't saying he was perfect, he means that he never slacked off in his constant and conscientious observance of the Law.^{viii}

In other words, when it came to living out every tradition and every ceremony and every Jewish ordinance and observance, Paul never took a day off.

He was in rare company by the way – there were never more than 6,000 Pharisees in the land . . . frankly, there weren't many Jewish men willing to live this kind of dedicated life.^{ix}

When I was in Israel a few months ago, visiting the Western Wall – some of the lower stones dating back to the days of Herod's construction – I saw dedicated Jewish men who had come after work to spend time standing in front of that wall – commonly known as the wailing wall – and there they stood, rocking, praying, reading – writing little notes and prayers on bits of paper and sticking them in the crevices in that massive stone wall.

We walked into a building just next to it and in there were wall to wall, floor to ceiling Jewish books

and commentaries on traditions and history and rabbinical teachings and prayers – and in that large room the size of a small library, men were reading, and praying, some standing, some sitting, all of them quietly repeating over and over some phrase, some prayer, some chant. All of them entirely dedicated to what they were doing.

Were Paul living today, prior to his conversion to faith in Christ, he would no doubt live there and be the most recognized face among them.

Documents discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls – discovered in the last century – include the performance based religion of Paul's generation – in fact, every generation on the planet.

One paragraph from the scrolls reads, "By the spirit of uprightness and of humility his sin is atoned. And by the compliance of his soul with all the laws of God his flesh is cleansed by being sprinkled with cleansing water and being made holy with the waters of repentance. May he then, steady his steps in order to walk in perfection."^x

That's the religion of faith plus works.

That's a long way of saying, "Come to the banquet table of God's grace, but make sure you bring your best baloney sandwich; because you can't get into the picnic of Paradise unless you bring something . . . no matter how stale it is.

But Paul goes even further – he not only brings up his pedigree and his performance, but last and seventh in the list, he highlights his personal passion.

3. Paul's Passion

Notice the beginning of *verse 6. As to zeal, a persecutor of the church.*

In other words, I didn't just believe my religion I was willing to hunt down anybody who tampered with my religion.

Paul would travel hundreds of miles in order to find Christians, bring them back in chains to Jerusalem, and cast a vote for their death.^{xi}

Later Paul would openly confess his shame and tell the church that he had indeed persecuted the Christians. He wrote to the Corinthians, *I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God, but by the grace of God I am (today) what I am. (I Corinthians 15:9-10)*

He transparently wrote to the Galatian church, *For you have heard of my former manner of life in*

Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it; and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions . . . but God called me . . . through His grace, and was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles (Galatians 1:13-15).

Before Paul came to faith in Christ he would have been called in today's vernacular, a Jewish extremist – willing to put to death anybody who abandoned the Jewish faith and followed this Jewish carpenter/criminal and what would become a Christian.

This is like a Muslim Jihadist today who trusts in Jesus Christ as his Savior and then becomes a testimony of the gospel back to his own people; which is happening today by the thousands, by the way.

That would have been Paul to his world. And the Jewish leaders will then try and kill *him* – just as Paul had participated in the murder of Stephen, one of the early Christian deacons (Acts 7).

This was Paul at one point in his life . . . and he had quite the past.

But in terms of being a good and devout and faithful and zealous Jew, Paul topped just about everybody.

And what Paul is saying to these beloved and potentially misguided Philippian Christians is the gospel – and he's using himself as the hypothetical illustration.

He's saying, "Listen, if being good, decent, diligent, devout, law abiding, dedicated to what you believe – enough to put your life on the line, Paul says, "If that's what it takes to get into heaven, then I would have been going to heaven riding first class."^{xii}

- I'm zealous to put down anyone who disagrees with or tampers with my religion
- I'm a faithful Pharisee
- I know the native Hebrew language;
- I belong to the elite tribe of Benjamin;
- I'm a descendant of Jacob;
- I'm related to Abraham;
- when I was 8 days old, even, I was marked as a member of the Jewish covenant

If there was a religious pedestal nearby, Paul deserved to stand on it!^{xiii}

Nobody had a bigger trophy case than Paul.^{xiv}

I was sitting on the platform of a commencement exercise not too long ago and one student just kept winning one award after another – scholastically, academically, leadership – I leaned over to the chairman of the board and whispered, "This guy is going to need a wheelbarrow to get out of the auditorium." I mean, he had it all.

I'll never forget my High School award ceremony, the entire student body was there – it took place just before graduation later that weekend. Even though I was in a small graduating class of around 50 students, I knew I hadn't won anything – my friends were winning character awards and athletic awards and scholastic awards.

And then, near the end of the ceremony, my name was called . . . I really wasn't even paying attention. But I was called to the front of the auditorium. One of my friends and I had decided to take an elective typing class – guys didn't take the typing class.

Many of you don't know what a typewriter is – we were required to learn on both a manual and electric typewriter . . . some of you don't know what a typewriter is – you can thank God for that.

But just for fun, more as a prank we took the class – we were the only guys in a class of 25 girls – how bad can that be. But evidently – without knowing it – I had typed faster and better than all of the girls and now – to my great embarrassment and deep shame – I was given the typing award.

I never did live that down.

Paul here takes us into his trophy room of religion – he's won every award . . . he told the Galatians he was advancing – that is, he was moving to the top of the class . . . winning accolade after accolade . . . he's good and upstanding . . . a leader among the highest echelon of leaders.

Now with all that said, Paul gets to his point – never mind my pedigree, my performance, my passion. Let me give you my personal testimony.

4. Paul's Personal Testimony

*Notice verse 7. **But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as my Lord.***

Wow.

This is what one author called Paul's accounting reversal.^{xv}

Paul slips into accounting terminology. The term he uses for *gain* (κερδος) is the accounting term for something in the profit column; the term he uses for *loss* (ζημια) is something you record as a loss.^{xvi}

In fact, that word was commonly used, even before the time of Paul, to refer to a commercial loss or a business loss.^{xvii}

Everything that Paul's world would have considered pluses to his account, he totals it up and says, "It comes to zero!"

Jesus Christ has become Paul's one and only credit!^{xviii}

Paul goes even further – notice the last part of *verse 8* where Paul adds, ***I count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ.***

Now he doesn't mean that he's got to earn Christ – what he simply means is that he can't trust in his nationality, his tribe, his language skills, his religious devotion his adherence to Jewish tradition and at the same time trust in Christ for salvation.

To put it simply – forget your baloney sandwich . . . you don't bring that to the table and expect God to include it with the menu of grace.

Paul says, all of my trophies that I thought were really important are really rubbish in terms of winning Jesus Christ as my Savior.

Is that your testimony? That nothing – nothing – in life matters more than Jesus Christ? That you are trusting nothing and no one but Christ alone for your salvation?

The word Paul uses here for *rubbish* would have made the Philippian church shiver. It's a crass word that is translated by the King James as dung.

The term (σκυβαλον) can actually refer to excrement – human waste. It can also be used for food that has been thrown away from the table.^{xix}

Basically it refers to stuff that belongs in the sewer.

Somebody might say, "Well Paul, you're being a bit rash here – a little over the top – you need to think it through."

Paul anticipates that criticism – and so he effectively says, I didn't arrive at a snap decision here – notice again in *verse 8*, ***I have counted them but rubbish.***

The word for *counted* (ηγεομαι) again is an accounting term for carefully adding everything up. I have carefully looked at what I had to offer God.

Or in the words of our opening analogy, Paul says – I've looked inside my picnic basket and I've taken stock of what I have – I once thought it was really something, but in comparison to Christ, all I have is stale bread and old baloney . . . it isn't worth anything in terms of salvation but to be thrown away from the table . . . to be tossed into the sewer.

You see, Paul adds to his personal testimony – here's what I've learned; ***verse 9. I don't have a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.***

This is what theologians call imputation. It means "to put to someone's account."

In other words, Paul looks at his life ledger and recognizes that he's actually bankrupt. And then he looks at Jesus Christ's ledger and sees nothing but perfection. And then by faith he believes in Christ and God the Father puts Christ's righteousness to his bankrupt account – and then writes his sinful record into the account of Christ, for which Christ suffers and dies and pays for . . . giving to Paul – and every believer – imputing, depositing – the righteousness that He alone can give.^{xx}

And you claim this righteousness of Christ for yourself – notice *the last part of verse 9. Which comes from God on the basis of faith.*

- And it isn't faith plus ceremony.
- faith plus faithfully attending Mass as a Catholic;
- faith plus being baptized in water as a Protestant;
- faith plus zealous devotion to your religion.
- Faith plus keeping the golden rule or making sure you don't commit the dirty dozen.

Listen, don't misunderstand – it's a wonderful objective to be good and upstanding and moral.

But, as Spurgeon once put it so well, good morals can keep a person out of jail, but only Jesus Christ can keep a person out of hell.^{xxi}

Here's the gospel – ***For by grace you have been saved through faith – not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8-9)***

Salvation is a gift from God – a gift of grace. And you accept it, by faith – by believing that His gift of grace is for you.

Paul did . . . and it changed everything for this former Pharisee who had devoted his life to earning God's acceptance and favor. And then he discovered it had nothing to do with his trophies and his awards . . . it had everything to do with the risen Savior and the gift of grace.

In biblical terms, grace includes forgiveness from God that is undeserved, unearned, and unrepayable.^{xxii}

- If you deserve it, it isn't grace.
- If you can earn it, it isn't grace.
- If you can repay it – it isn't grace.

Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "***We have been redeemed through His blood . . . according to the riches of His grace which lavished upon us.***" (Ephesians 1:8)

He lavished His grace upon us.

I like to think of grace is gift-giving that can hardly wait.

God isn't doling out His grace to us with resentment . . . or reluctance . . . He loves to lavish it upon us. And He does it every day in so many ways we're not even aware of.

Not because our baloney sandwich finally met the standard – but because His Son did.

Gifts of grace are evident at birthdays, aren't they? I mean, do your kids actually deserve any of those gifts? No, but it's their birthday and that matters more.

A couple of weeks ago I had a birthday – the exact number of candles no longer matters. But if I learned how to type on a manual typewriter, you can only guess.

I received some cards from folks . . . some were mailed . . . some were dropped off . . . but listen, every one of them – just about every single card I got – had a picture of a cat on the cover.

I mean it just warmed my heart.

One person actually sent me a paperback book of cartoons; here it is – the book title caught my attention; "101 Ways to Use a Dead Cat".

That's just out of line . . . that's just out of line . . . I read it! For devotions . . . it was great.

Birthday cards and anniversary cards and Christmas gifts – whatever; you don't list all the merits of your children or family members – and at the bottom write; "Because you deserve it, you are now receiving this gift from me."

That's not grace . . . and according to Paul, that's not salvation either.

Paul effectively writes here in his personal testimony:

- I had nothing to offer God, of real value or true righteousness,
- when He opened my eyes on that Damascus road
- all of my accomplishments . . . all my proud efforts . . . became like plastic trophies . . .
- old rubbish that I had once listed as plusses . . .
- I gladly erased them all – and I put it in the empty column of my life's ledger –
- I wrote into the column the only thing worth mentioning . . . the name of Jesus Christ my Savior and my Lord.

Who offered me, in place of my stale bread . . . and old baloney . . . a lavish, free, satisfying banquet of forgiveness.

And by faith – trust in His invitation – I took my seat there and soon forgot about my stale sandwich and began to feast at the table of grace.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 6/7/2015 by Stephen Davey.

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iii William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 58

iv Ibid

v Ibid

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