

The Nothing That is Everything

19th Sun. after Pent. – 10/04/26 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Philippians 3:4b-14 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 7-8a, [Paul reflects upon his life before Jesus and says,] **“But whatever advantage I had, I considered as nothing for the sake of Christ. Indeed I considered everything as nothing because of the far greater value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”**

Introduction

✧ How much is “nothing” worth? I know, that’s a silly question. The answer of course is, Nothing! And how much is “everything” worth? That seems like another silly question. Everything is worth everything! Or, is it? Zeroes are worth nothing, but we would never give up those zeros when they appear on our \$20 or \$100 dollar bill.

➔ Since Isaiah 55:8 tells us that God’s ways are not our ways; nor His thoughts our thoughts, God is absolutely able to take what our earthly ways and our limited human thoughts consider to be “nothing” and turn it into what He, in His love, wants to give to us as “everything!”

➔ St. Paul wrote in his pastoral letter to the Christians in Philippi about his own personal experience with this; how in Jesus, God replaced the nothingness of self with the everything of Himself; granting Paul; granting all believers the very righteousness of Christ and all of its benefits.

I. We Strive to “Have it All”.

✧ Let’s take a step back for a moment and get a better handle on how this concept applies to us all in real life.

➔ From an early age we are taught that life in this world has one primary goal: “Having it all.” We focus on and define our lives by our possessions, experiences, and accomplishments. And for the largest majority of this world, little, if any thought, is given to a person’s relationship with God.

➔ All the way back when I was in my early 20’s, there was popular beer commercial that asked, “Who says you can’t have it all?” Parents and teachers and mentors throughout the ages have engrained this concept into us: “You can have/do whatever you set your mind on.”

➔ And so, of course, we believe that. Many people today even believe that we “deserve” to have it all. And sure, when push comes to shove; when reality sets in, we have to admit that it is an exaggerated claim. Yet it hardly slows the obsessive striving and relentless drive to achieve “everything” that our hearts dream for in this world; to “live life to the fullest” by filling it with more and more stuff, a higher position and status, etc. And that is when, according to the old beer commercial, you’ll be drinking a *Michelob Light* with your buddies, your sexy partner, and everybody who is anybody, all at the same time.

✧ Though it looked a little different, the idea of “having it all” in Paul’s world, was a very real thing as well.

➔ Just before our Epistle Reading begins, Paul gives a warning to the early Christians to “look out for the evildoers” who put their “confidence in the flesh” (Phi. 3:2-3). They were called the Judaizers. And they believed that a person’s entire worth and value was based upon whatever they could achieve under the Old Testament Law of Moses ... well, the Law as they had embellished it so that there were 613 commandments a person had to obey, to perfection, in order to be saved.

✘ And Paul shows how, as a zealous Pharisee before he encountered Jesus, he too was beaming with great confidence in this regard and therefore was no better than a Judaizer. In verse four he begins, “If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more.” Then he lists off all of his earthly/fleshly accomplishments and attributes.

➔ I know Paul’s boasting seems very different than the attitudes we see today. But off course, his world was much more “religious” than ours is today; at least on the surface. It’s just that people today deny the fact that the things we trust in and strive after “religiously” are actually still gods, when those in Paul’s day were at least honest enough to call their false and erring beliefs their “religion” or their “gods.”

✘ To them, “having it all” focused not so much on material possessions and experiences, but on a person’s relationship with his/her “God.”

➔ And just like today, it was generally presumed that, if you were “right with God,” then the proof of that would come to you in the form of material blessings and positive earthly experiences. In this way, they did at least accept the belief that every person had accountability before God.

✘ But in our far more secular world, that sense of accountability to God, or to any form of law, is harder and harder to find. So the idea of “having it all” in today’s world has almost nothing to do with any traditional sense of religion.

✘ But in the end, “having it all” in either Paul’s world, or our world today, is sinfully focused on self. Paul, as well as the Judaizers, focused on their religiously defined form of self-righteousness; how “I can, and must, earn God’s favor.” ...

➔ While our world focuses on gratifying our self-serving desires and passions through materialism and experience and status and “what makes me happy.”

II. In Both Worlds, “Having it All” is Never Enough.

✘ But as everyone who strives to live life and find a truly fulfilled life in this way finds out eventually, in seeking to “have it all” you never have enough, which means that “having it all” is not “everything” after all.

➔ Think of when you were a young child. How many toys did you believe you “just had to have”? And where are all of those toys now? Or how many items of fashionable clothing did/do we as high schoolers “just have to have”? And where are they now?

➔ And now as adults, how often do we convince ourselves that this car; that house; that trip or this special experience will finally make life complete, only to learn – sometimes very quickly – that we had set our hearts on things that have no ability at all to deliver to us lasting contentment?

✘ And in terms of human righteousness, that is, earning God’s favor by our own goodness so that we then believe that we “have it all” – whether we’re in Paul’s day or ours – is a very dangerous, self-delusional way to live.

➔ Just look at how both the Judaizers and the Pharisees had to mold and recast God’s “Law” into man’s path for earning salvation rather than God’s loving guide for those He has already saved by His grace.

➔ Look as well at how Paul had convinced himself in verses 5-6, that he, as a Pharisee excelled in righteousness before the eyes of his peers. He tells us in Galatians 1:14 that “I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.”

➔ And yet, as Isaiah 64:6, proclaimed some 600 years before Jesus and Paul, “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.”

- ✖ So, whether “having it all” means materialism and experience in our day or trying to earn personal merit before God in Paul’s time, “having it all” by this world’s definition, is never ever nearly enough.

III. Becoming Nothing and Receiving Everything!

- ✖ But, for Paul, all of that has changed, just as it has for you and me in and through Jesus, who is everything!

➔ In verse eight, Paul gives Jesus all of the credit for this transformation when he says that for the sake of Jesus “I considered everything as nothing because of the far greater value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” In fact, in verse 12 he places all the power in Jesus’ saving hands, “Christ Jesus has made me His own!”

- ✖ It was on the Damascus road in Acts 9 that Jesus undeservedly, yet graciously caused Paul, as verse 10 says to “know Him and the power of His resurrection and [to] share in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death” – even the death of the cross!

➔ For you and me, it is in Baptism, that we are intimately connected to Jesus’ death and resurrection so that, we too are united with the power of His resurrection and joined to the fellowship of His sufferings. But understand, we do not die to sin in baptism because we were able to pay for our sin. No, Jesus gives us His full payment for the sins of the entire world, as He fills us with His Holy Spirit and His saving gift of faith.

- ✖ This is how you and I are today emptied of self; of every, and any, claim that we might be tempted to attach to our own accomplishments as a means of being set right before God. No, as Paul clearly tells us in verse eight, we must be brought to “nothing” so that we can be filled with God’s grace to receive “the far greater value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”

➔ To “know” Christ, as Paul is talking about here, is so much more than just having a head knowledge that Jesus existed as a man in human history. Anyone is able to verify that fact through easy secular research. No, this is the intimate “knowledge” of a deep and saving faith in Jesus; trusting in Jesus above and beyond anything this world can produce or prove.

➔ And what is it that you and I now “know” about Jesus in faith? In verse eight, Paul puts all things in their proper order, speaking of the way that Jesus first humbled Paul, convicting him of his sin and unbelief; knowing Jesus there as the true Son of God, so that “For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish (‘dung’ in the Greek), in order that I may gain Christ.” This is what verse 10 is talking about when Paul says that we “share [Jesus] sufferings, becoming like Him in His death.” Believing in Jesus, we die to sin with Him; as He died to pay for our guilt.

➔ And then Paul says in verse 10 that we “know [Jesus] and the power of His resurrection.” You see, it is only when Jesus rose on the third day after His crucifixion that Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:26, “The last enemy,” death is “destroyed.” Destroyed just for Jesus? No way! Paul’s joy in 1 Corinthians 15:57 cannot be contained when he says, “Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

- ✖ So it is, by grace that our nothingness becomes everything! And that transforms our entire way of life from the day of our baptism for the rest of our life here on earth. As long as we remain here, Paul recognizes both our continued struggle with sin and our victory in Christ in verse 12 and he says, “Not that I have already received this” (i.e. the resurrection victory, since my body

is still living here), “but,” Paul says literally in the Greek, (and notice the present tense), “I am pursuing to lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has laid hold of me.”

➔ Indeed, the Christ-centered life keeps our focus no longer on the world or on self. That’s all behind us now. Paul says in verses 13-14, only “one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Conclusion

✧ That prize is what Jesus has already paid for and won for us. It has our name already engraved upon it, just as the names of all true believers in Christ are written in the Lamb’s book of life (Rev. 21:27).

➔ Paul speaks of it in 2 Timothy 4:8: “Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day (of Christ’s return), and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing.”

➔ That, my dear Christian; that is how Jesus turns our nothing, into everything! Amen.