

Philippians 3:7-11

Dear Friends in Christ,

When we preach and believe Christ Crucified we get a different perspective on what is profit and what is loss.

Before Paul came to faith he saw the cross as a loss. To him, a crucified Christ was a false Christ. He believed this so strongly that he became the leader of those who were working as hard as they could to completely wipe out Christianity. To him, anyone who believed in Jesus of Nazareth had a loss, a huge negative in his ledger sheet with God.

Before Paul came to faith he thought he had accumulated a pretty good balance on the profit side of his ledger sheet. Earlier in this chapter he lists some of the things he had put in his profit column. He was one of the chosen people, a real live descendant of Abraham. He was from the same tribe as his name's sake, Saul, the first king of Israel, the tribe of Benjamin, whose territory encompassed the city of Jerusalem and the Temple of God. His parents were faithful Jews, at least outwardly, and had him circumcised on the 8th day as the Lord had commanded. When he was old enough, he had joined the strictest, most conservative sect within Judaism. He became a Pharisee, and not just an ordinary Pharisee, a leading Pharisee who studied under one of their greatest teachers of all time, the Rabbi Gamaliel. As far as God's law was concerned, you weren't going to find any skeletons in his closet. He could have joined the Pharisee in the temple in Jesus' parable and bragged about how often he fasted and how faithfully he tithed everything he had. He was convinced that the profit side of his ledger with God added up to far more than anything that might appear on the loss side of his ledger with God.

Paul thought that he was in the black with God until that fateful day he was traveling on the road to Damascus to add some more to his profit column by persecuting any Christians he might find there. Then it happened. Jesus appeared to him as he traveled on the road. Suddenly it became clear to him that Jesus wasn't a false Christ, that he really was who he claimed to be and that he must have risen from the dead because there he was talking to him, asking him why he was persecuting him. Suddenly his balance sheet with God didn't look so good. He had put persecuting Christians on the profit side thinking he was doing God a favor, but now he saw that he was guilty of a terrible sin. He had put calling Jesus a fraud and a false teacher on the profit side of his balance sheet with God, but now he saw that he was totally wrong. These things that he had considered profit were now a loss, a liability that far outweighed any profit, any positive balance he thought he had with God. He saw that he was doomed, that there was nothing he could do to make up for his sins. He must have expected Jesus to condemn him to Hell right there and then. But he didn't. After a few days he sent a man named Ananias to baptize him and assure him of his forgiveness.

Paul wasn't the only one who needed to get a different perspective on what is profit and what is loss.

Think of Judas in our Lenten reading. He thought that money was profit. The Bible tells us that he was the treasurer for Jesus and the other disciples and was guilty of embezzlement. Why he betrayed Jesus, whether he had become disillusioned with Jesus or thought that Jesus would use his power to escape, we don't know; but we do know that he betrayed Jesus for money, 30 pieces of silver. He thought that was profit for him, until he saw that Jesus was condemned and then he considered it a loss, even returning the money before he despaired of forgiveness and took his own life.

Think of Peter. He thought that it was profit not to be identified with Jesus; after all, he might be arrested and put on trial with Jesus. But, when he heard the rooster crow and made eye

contact with Jesus he quickly realized that what he thought was profit was really loss. He went out and wept tears of shame.

Think of the Jewish leaders. They thought it was profit to get rid of Jesus. Caiaphas had even said so. He is the one who had said that **it would be good if one man died for the people**. If they got rid of Jesus before he could cause an uprising the Romans wouldn't come and remove them from power or end up executing anyone they thought were involved. They were so convinced of it that they were willing to say, **let his blood be on us and on our children**. But Peter would later remind them that God had sent them the Messiah they were waiting for and they crucified him. And many listening to Peter's speech felt like Paul did on the road to Damascus—they were cut to the heart as they realized that their profit and loss statement with God was so far in the negative that they could never make it positive again.

The same is true of each of us. We are constantly tempted to think that we have a positive balance with God. Like Paul, we have a heritage with God. We've known God all our lives. We were baptized as infants, at least most of us were. We were brought up in a Christian family. We know the commandments of God by heart. We have a church habit, we hardly ever miss. We support God's work with our time and our treasure. We're moral people. And these are all good things, but not if we try to put them on the profit side of our ledger with God thinking that they help us get to heaven.

Like Paul; like Peter; like Judas; we need to be brought to see that whatever our sinful nature considers to be profit, whatever the world considers to be profit, is really a loss. Like them, we need to come to the realization that just one sin gives us a debt with God that we can never repay no matter how hard we try. We need to see that even our righteous acts are like rubbish, like stinking, rotting garbage in God's eyes. We need to despair of our own righteousness and say with Paul, **whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him.**

By God's grace Paul came to see that Jesus, the one he had considered a lost cause, the one he was persecuting, the one he had rejected because he had been crucified, was his only hope. By God's grace Paul came to see that his own righteousness was worthless, on the loss side of the ledger instead of the profit side. Now, instead of persecuting Christ he wanted to be found in Christ, **not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ--the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith**. He finally realized that the only profit that we have in God's ledger is that which is credited to us by God, the righteousness Jesus won for us by his perfect life and innocent death. It's the gift of righteousness that God offers to you and to me and to all when he points us to the cross and says, "this is how much I love you. I punished Jesus in your place. Christ was crucified for you." And then he works faith in our hearts so that we are moved to say, "Thanks Lord, that's just what I needed. Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling."

After his epic failure in the courtyard of the High Priest, where he denied even that he knew Jesus, not just once, but three times; after the resurrected Jesus appeared to him and assured him of his forgiveness; Peter got a different perspective on what is profit and what is loss. When he actually was arrested and threatened by the Sanhedrin and ordered to stop preaching about a crucified and risen Christ he didn't back down. He didn't deny his Lord. He no longer considered losing his life for Jesus a loss. He saw it as a gain to share in Jesus' suffering.

And Paul lived up to his words as well. Like Peter, he too stood firm in the face of persecution. He too was willing to suffer for preaching Christ Crucified. He too gave up everything, even his life, because he knew that Christ Crucified was more precious than life. He trusted that Jesus' righteousness credited to his account was all he needed; that because of what Jesus had done for him God would raise him up on the last day, that he would not only share in Jesus' suffering but he would also share in Jesus' resurrection.

It's tough to think this way, to have God's perspective on profit and loss. It's the opposite of what our sinful nature and the world tells us. Having riches and fame seems like profit, but it is loss if it replaces Jesus in our lives. Doing our best to serve God seems like profit, like it should be what gains us a share in Jesus' resurrection, but if that's why we are serving God, it's really a loss.

In the cross, God gives us a proper perspective of profit and loss. He helps us see that whatever the world says is to profit, whatever we think we have done to make ourselves righteous before God is really a loss, just so much stinky, rotting garbage. He helps us look at the cross and see in it God's gift of forgiveness and the righteousness we need to stand before God. When we see that, we know the power of Christ's resurrection and can endure all things, even death, to be found in him.