

Loss for Christ

Series: Philippians

Date: 14 September 2025, 13th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Psalm 63; Matthew 13:44-46; Philippians 3.1-9

About 10 years ago a new phrase entered our common vocabulary - Virtue Signalling. This means signalling to those watching that you are a good person, a virtuous person. How do we do this? We do it by indicating our sympathy or support for a particular cause or moral issue. Virtue signalling makes most sense when we understand that it is a *social* phenomenon. It is all about how *others see me*. If nobody is watching then there would be no point in virtue signalling. As such it finds particular currency on social media where everybody is watching all the time. Virtue signalling finds a ready home on social media where with just a click of a button you can show that you care deeply about the top 5 things that the people you want to like you care about. You may have picked up that it is a put down term. To say that someone is virtue signalling is to suggest that they may not really actually care about a particular cause, but they just want to be seen as a good person.

The fact that we're using the term virtue signalling says that as a culture we are increasingly anxious about being seen as good people, as moral people. We're hyper sensitive to how those around us see us. And we're afraid that if we don't signal that I am a good person then we'll be written off, excluded and shunned, especially by the tribe we want to be a part of. We all want to be seen as good people, and we want those around us to like us, but social media has amplified this natural tendency. The more you're on social media, the more your sense of self can become increasingly tied to the opinions of others. My self worth comes from a "public profile" that I need to constantly manage otherwise people won't like me anymore.

Let's take a step back from today's online culture and enter into the culture the apostle Paul inhabited. In our reading from Philippians today we encounter a world which is quite strange to us. Yet I want to suggest this text from the apostle Paul addresses the very same issues that a culture that produces virtue signalling is grappling with. And that is the question of identity. Where can we find an identity that is both authentic and sustainable in the face of social pressure? And at the same time where can we find an identity that is not based on comparing ourselves to others to our advantage and their disadvantage? Paul's answer comes in Philippians 3.1: "Further my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord!" It's in the Lord Jesus that we find this kind of secure, humble and generous identity. So rejoice in him! Paul continues, "It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you." What Paul has to say in these verses will keep us safe and secure.

Paul answers the question of identity by way of contrast - (1) **confidence in the flesh in verse 2-6 verse (2) knowing Christ**, verse 7-9. Let's look at each in turn.

Confidence in the flesh 2-6

Let's pick it up in verse 2:

Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. ³ For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh

Who and what is Paul warning the Christians in Philippi to watch out for?

The answer is Jewish Christians who are teaching that to be a Christian you had to follow all the Jewish laws, particularly the laws about circumcision, eating kosher food and keeping the Sabbath. The equation was quite simple. The Old Testament law said that the way to show you loved God was to obey his commands. Yes, Jesus was the Messiah, but to enjoy all the blessings that he had brought and to show that you loved God, you had to obey the Jewish law of the Old Testament. That's what they taught.

Circumcision, keeping the Sabbath and the food laws, were the 3 identity markers that set you apart as being one of God's people. Circumcision in particular was *the* sign of entry into God's people so that you could say God's people were the *circumcised*. These identity markers had become for the Jews a source of pride. Something that showed that as God's people they were better than the nations around them. Dogs are what they called everyone who wasn't Jewish. But these identity markers had also become a source of confidence before God. They were things they looked to to tell them they were in the right with God.

In Romans 4 Paul says that circumcision, Sabbath and kosher were not bad things in themselves. They could be for Jewish Christians a great way to express their faith and love for God. The problem that Paul highlights here is that they could be a misplaced source of confidence and pride before God and men. That is, in practice they became the things that people looked to tell them that they were accepted by God, good people who had something to boast about.

Paul employs a cutting irony critique of this teaching.

Verse 2. It's not the Gentiles but those who teach this stuff that are the dogs. Circumcision is mutilation. And far from doing good, they are doing evil.

Instead, verse 3, it's Paul and Philippians - Jews and Gentiles who follow Christ who are "the circumcision" - that is, who are God's people. It's not by observing the Jewish law that you worship and serve God, but by the Spirit.

And, here he gets to the point - *it is we who boast in Christ Jesus and who put no confidence in the flesh*.

Paul paints a contrast between boasting in Christ and putting confidence in the flesh.

There's a text from the prophet Jeremiah which helps us understand what Paul means by this contrast. Here's what he says

This is what the LORD says:

"Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom

or the strong man boast of his strength
 or the rich man boast of his riches,
24 but let him who boasts boast about this:
 that he understands and knows me,¹

The contrast in this passage is between a focus on the self and a focus on God - boasting in *my wisdom, my strength, my riches*, versus boasting that I understand and know *God*. The problem with the focus on self and on one's own power and achievement is that it forgets from whom these things come - God. He's the one who gives wisdom, strength and riches. And what's more, boasting in one's own power and achievement quickly becomes a comparison and a put down of others. Wisdom, power, achievement become instruments of exclusion, control and oppression of others. Paul calls this confidence in the flesh - not a confidence in God. The flesh is of course cutting reference to the removal of the foreskin, but it's also Paul's way of speaking about the whole of life lived apart from God.

The extraordinary insight that Paul gives here is that one can be the most moral and devout person and yet be placing their confidence in the flesh. Or to put it another way - the best way to avoid God is to avoid sin. So Paul says, look if you want to play this boasting game, I'll win. I've got the religious cred, I've got the social cred, I've got the racial cred, I've got the status cred, I've got the academic cred, I've got the sincerity cred, I've got the moral cred. They're all things that we peg our identity and self worth on. Verse 4:

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put 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; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

Knowing Christ

But, Paul says, verse 7,

whatever was to my profit

Whatever was to my advantage, my birth, my heritage, my education, my connections, my social standing, my sporting prowess, my looks, my intelligence, my abilities, my political party, my social standing, my reputation, my achievements at work, my successful kids and beautiful grandchildren, my lovely home, my circle of friends, my super, my health, the things I've built, my church, my ministry, the people I've converted, my generous giving to charity, the fact I've never hit my wife or cheated on my tax, the fact that I don't drink or take drugs or sleep around, that I'm conservative, that I'm progressive, that I'm a tolerant and inclusive person, that I take people as they are and don't judge, that I care for the environment, that I care about justice for refugees, the fact that I'm from Hobart and not Launceston or, God forbid, Burnie ...

_____ *whatever* was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

¹ Jeremiah 9.23-24

8 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

That word rubbish in verse 8 is the Greek word *scubala*. It could be translated as refuse or filth. They had a saying in ancient Greece, quite similar to our own: *Scubala* happens.

Ok, so they didn't really, but you get the point right?

Whatever is to your profit, by whatever you care to choose to measure yourself by is nothing, worthless, a negative on the balance sheet, *scubala* compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ.

It's what Jesus' talks about in his parables of the pearl and the treasure in the field.

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

Matt. 13:45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. 46 When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

Jesus' is the one worth giving up everything for. He's the one to stake your life on. He's the one to boast in. He's the one to put your confidence in. He's the one to find your identity in. In comparison to him everything is worthless.

The question of course is why? Why is he worth giving up everything for? Paul highlights 3 things we receive when we gain Christ - knowing Christ, being found in Christ, and being given a righteousness by God through faith.

The first goes back to Jeremiah. To know Christ is to know God. This isn't just an intellectual knowledge, although the mind is important. But rather a personal intimate knowledge of relationship. It's knowing Christ like a child knows a parent. It's knowing him like a lover knows his beloved. Isn't that kind of intimacy with God worth giving up everything for? To know him and be known by him?

Second, to be found in Christ. In contrast to all the striving to discover your true self and then all the frantic work to maintain the image that you want others to see you as this is about being given an identity that is authentically you and utterly secure because you're utterly loved by God. See when you get Jesus, in him you become a child of God. Psalm 131.2 paints an incredible picture of what it means to be a child of God -

like a weaned child with its mother,
like a weaned child is my soul within me.

What's a weaned child? It's a child who has stopped breastfeeding. The picture then is of a child who comes to her mother, not because she wants something to eat, but just because she wants to be held and to feel her mother's love. It's a picture of utter contentment and security. That's what it is to be found in Christ - to be held by God. That's a security that will

allow you just to be yourself the person God created you to be without the need for anything like virtue signalling. Do you think it's worth giving up everything for?

Finally, why is Christ worth giving up everything for? Because in him you get a righteousness, not of your own, but from God by faith.

Now, I'll admit that doesn't sound that compelling on first blush. But stick with it for a moment. What does the word righteousness here mean? The righteousness of my own sounds more like the self-righteousness of the Pharisees. In contrast, what is the righteousness that comes from God? Simply put, it's being in the right with him. It's right relationship with him. It's being accepted and loved by him. The key thing here though is that this right standing is *from* God. It's not our natural place nor something we deserve. It's his *gift*. It's his grace. We receive it by faith.

It's a huge call to give up everything for the sake of Christ. It seems outrageous to consider everything worthless in comparison to him. But he's worth it. He's the pearl of great price. If you get that, it won't matter what he asks you to give up. And what's more, he's not asking us to do something he has not done himself. See he gave up everything for you. That's what Philippians 2 was all about - he who was in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but made himself nothing, humbling himself even to death on a cross. He lost everything, the riches of heaven, his place in the palace, the smile of his Father, he lost it all for you, for your sake that he might gain you. Will you trust him when he says he's worth giving up everything for?

Let me finish with this quote from C.S. Lewis

Even in social life, you will never make a good impression on other people until you stop think about what sort of impression you are making. Even in literature and art, no man who bothers about originality will ever be original whereas if you simply try to tell the truth (without caring twopence how often it has been told before) you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it. The principle runs through all life from top to bottom, Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. ... Nothing that you have not given away will be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself and you find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with him everything else thrown in.²

² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* 226-227