

Learning How to Count

Sterling UMC

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Philippians 3:4-21

Back in the year 2000 there was a movie in theatres called *The Family Man*. The movie had a tried but true plot. You see, the story is sort of a combination of *It's A Wonderful Life* and *A Christmas Carol*. It starred Nicholas Cage as Jack Campbell, a very prosperous investment banker. He's single, successful, and very rich. He owns a huge, luxurious condo in downtown New York drives a Ferrari sports car, and has a closet full of \$3000 suits. Beautiful women vie for his affections. He does **WHAT** he wants **WHEN** he wants. He eats at only the finest restaurants and is the CEO of one of the most powerful financial firms in the world and is constantly involved in exciting business transactions worth billions of dollars. I mean, any way you **TALLY** his assets...Cage's character was a **VERY** successful man.

Now, the film also reveals that 13 years earlier back when he was a poor young college graduate looking for work, he was deeply in love with a girl who is played by Tea Leoni. There's a big scene at the airport as he leaves for London to accept a job that he sees as his big break. Taking this position will mean that he and his girlfriend will be separated by the Atlantic Ocean for several months, but Cage **PROMISES** to keep in touch. He'll call. They'll write. They'll see each other as often as they can...and this job is only temporary, of course. Well Leoni's character begs him not to go, telling him that she has a feeling that he will **NOT** return. Call it feminine intuition or whatever but she just **KNOWS** that if he gets on that plane their relationship will end for good. He assures her she's wrong and gets on the plane anyway...but her premonition turned out to be accurate. They fall out of touch, get involved in their own **NEW** lives...and never see each other again.

Well, then the movie flashes back to the present when, on the way home from work late on Christmas Eve, swinging single Cage does something brave and selfless and as a reward of sorts God sends an angel to give him a glimpse of what his life would have been like if he had **NOT** gotten on that plane to London all those years ago. He wakes up to find that he and Leoni are married. They have two beautiful children, as well as a mortgage, and very little money since in this time line he uses his marketing skills to sell tires. Instead of a Ferrari he drives a mini-van that never starts.

At first he balks at this and tries to get his old rich swinging single life back **BUT** as the weeks go by the scales fall off his eyes so to speak and he discovers that all these years he has in essence been **COUNTING** wrong in life. That is to say, he has been ascribing **GREAT VALUE** to things that are really **WORTHLESS**. He comes to see that his fancy condo, his expensive sports car, his rich, swinging single lifestyle-all these

things that used to be so precious to him-are not near as valuable as a committed relationship with a loving wife and two children.

I thought about that movie this week as I reflected on our Scripture passage for today. You see in this portion of Philippians Paul tells his of OWN experience of learning to COUNT correctly. As you heard it read a moment ago maybe you were able to see what I mean.

Now, as I said a moment ago, the thing that motivated Cage's character in the movie to re-evaluate his life was the appearance of an angel, who provided him with a glimpse into what might have been. The thing that motivated Paul to do his own self-evaluation was the APPEARANCE of some rather critical people. He mentions them in verse 2. "Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh."

Paul was speaking about the arrival in Philippi of a group of people known as judaizers. They were teaching that you couldn't be a Christian unless you were first a Jew which meant you had to be circumcised. These judaizers were hyper-legalists who taught that salvation is the result of something WE do rather faith in what GOD has done.

You see, these Jews believed that righteousness was something which could be obtained from the outside in - that good works on the outside would make a person pure on the inside. They taught that obeying the laws, especially those that concerned circumcision, would somehow make them sinless in God's eyes. And that is the problem with legalism. It appeals to people because it makes religion easy by appearing to be hard. It makes salvation difficult but do-able on our own.

Well, it was these attacks from the Judaizers that caused Paul to take a walk down memory lane. It provided HIM with a glimpse back into his life to recall how he had changed the way he looked at life. The key word in these first several verses of chapter 3 is COUNT which is also translated evaluate or assess. Paul did exactly that here and in so doing he reminded the Philippians that he had once been like those judaizers.

There was a time when Paul valued the things they valued-COUNTED on the things they COUNTED ON. Let's review them with him.

1. First of all he writes that he had once counted on His RACE or family heritage.

In verse 5 Paul says, "I was circumcised the EIGHTH DAY" just as God had commanded Abraham. He stresses the fact here that he had been BORN into the Jewish faith and had known its privileges and observed its ceremonies since his birth for only pure-blooded Jews, like Paul, were circumcised on the eighth day. And not only was he a pure-blooded Jew, but he also came from the RIGHT JEWISH FAMILY. This is what he means when He says he was of the nation of ISRAEL, of the tribe of Benjamin. This was meant that Paul belonged to the ELITE of Israel because the tribe of Benjamin had a SPECIAL PLACE in the aristocracy of the Hebrew nation.

He goes on to say that he was a Hebrew of the Hebrews. That is, his family retained its Hebrew culture and continued to speak the Hebrew language. Paul's family wasn't like other Jews of the Dispersion who, in a foreign land, had forgotten their own language. So, Paul states that he had the right bloodlines. He was a product of the right family. He had all the advantages that accompany such a position of importance. Not only was he a Jew, He was the best of the best when it came to the Jewish race.

2. The second thing he once counted on was HIS RELIGION.

In verse 5 Paul says I once was a Pharisee. Now, usually WE associate negative thoughts with that title but they didn't do that in Paul's day. No...Pharisees were admired. One reason they were is the fact that they went to only the finest schools. Another thing that made being a PHARISEE a big deal is the fact that there were not very many of them. Think of them as religious marines for they were few and they were proud. Their name means The Separated Ones and they had separated themselves off from all common life and from all common tasks in order to make it the one aim and duty of their lives to keep every smallest detail of the Law. So it is Paul's claim that not only was he a Jew who had retained his ancestral religion, but he had also devoted his whole life to the most rigorous and unbending observance of that religion.

3. The third thing he lists among those things he used to count on was His REPUTATION.

I mean he wasn't JUST a Pharisee. He was very good at being a Pharisee, very gung ho at doing his job. We see this in verse 6 where Paul says, "...as to zeal: persecuting the church..."

You know, in every group, some people are outstanding in their field while most of us are more average in our achievement. It was the same way with the Pharisees. Some were at the top level while most performed on a lower level. The top Pharisees were those who not only followed the law of God, but also relentlessly eliminated anything which challenged their understanding of the law of God. Paul says, "That was me. I was a HIGH ACHIEVER. And he was. He militantly opposed any threat to the Hebrew faith. Remember...he helped in the stoning of Stephen. He also sought out, arrested, and imprisoned or executed Christians who in his Pharisaical mind set were disobeying or threatening the Law of God. He was VERY zealous in doing his job.

He had a spotless reputation. The actions of his life were so closely aligned with the expectations of the law that he could be called blameless. His legalistic walk matched his legalistic talk. He knew the law-every jot and tittle (even the man-made parts)-and he obeyed that law.

So...when Paul evaluated his life from the perspective of the world, he focused on his race, his religion, and his reputation. And he had, a marvelous record, scoring 100 -A+- in Judaism...So in today's terms you might say that proud Pharisee who had been known as Saul of Tarsus won all the marbles: the Pulitzer, the Medal of Honor, the Most

Valuable Player, the Heisman Trophy, The Gold Medal...the Super-Bowl Ring. I mean. No one's Judaic trophy case was bigger than Paul's. AND THEN AT THIS POINT IN THE TEXT A LITTLE THREE LETTER WORD POPS UP. In verse 7 Paul says, "BUT..."

In other words something had happened in Paul's life to change his way of COUNTING. And that something was Paul's experience on the road to Damascus when he first met Jesus Christ, and learned firsthand what God's righteousness REALLY looked like. BEFORE that illuminating encounter, Paul had thought that he attained righteousness by keeping the law just like those legalistic judaizers. But when he saw Christ and got his first glimpse of truly, PERFECT righteousness...he realized that all the things he had counted on were worthless. Paul says, "Whatever things WERE GAIN to me...those things I have COUNTED as LOSS for the sake of Christ." (vs. 7 NAS)

At that point, Paul re-evaluated the things his world considered important-his pedigree, his credentials, his success, his legalistic lifestyle and he decided these had no real value at all.

On that road to Damascus Paul suddenly realized how poor and wretched he really was. His entire frame of reference was altered. His whole perspective was changed. He saw the futility of the Jewish religion as he was practicing it. In essence he discovered that he had to LOSE his religion to FIND his salvation.

Now, how could he have been so mistaken? How could an educated guy like that have made such a big mistake when it comes to evaluating the things of life? Well, the answer is he was using the wrong measuring stick.

Like the rich young ruler in Mark 10, Saul of Tarsus was looking at the outside and not the inside. He was measuring his progress by the standards set by men, not by those set by God. He was comparing himself to other sinners and according to that comparison He WAS righteous. But when He met Jesus; when He compared Himself to the Holy, blameless Son of God, he realized how UN-righteous, how hopelessly sinful He really was. He then saw that all the things he HAD valued were worth no more than rubbish.

After his encounter on the Damascus road Paul realized that the ONLY THING that had true value was KNOWING Jesus Christ. In verse 8 (NAS) Paul says, "I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."

Now, do you realize we can know a person in four ways?

- We can know them HISTORICALLY. We know Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, and Shakespeare in this way. All our knowledge of these men is drawn from history.
- We can know a person CONTEMPORANEOUSLY. We know our President or the most popular entertainer or athlete in this way. These people live contemporaneously with us. New facts are being uncovered about them every day. But all of our knowledge of them is drawn from a distance.

- We can also know a person CONTACTUALLY. This is how we relate to the teller at the bank, the clerk in the store, and many of our neighbors. We have contact with these people; our lives touch, and we talk with them, but our relationship never moves beyond a surface kind of experience.
- Finally, we can know a person EXPERIENTIALLY. We know our husbands and wives, children, family, and special friends in this way. This is that deep kind of knowledge that comes out of personal experience and intimate communion. And THIS is the kind of knowing Paul had in mind when he repeatedly refers to the KNOWLEDGE OF CHRIST. This is a knowing that comes from a very close relationship.

You know, unfortunately there are a lot of people out there who know ABOUT Jesus; I mean He is a very popular individual. But there is a great difference between knowing ABOUT Jesus and KNOWING Jesus: talking to Him...relating to Him...listening to and obeying His voice. This relationship...this kind of KNOWING...has infinite value. Paul had discovered that his friendship with Jesus provided him with TRUE righteousness, for through His death on the cross Jesus took our sinfulness on Himself. This is what Paul was saying in 2 Corinthians 5:21 (NIV), "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."

The thing that Paul says HE MOST VALUED was this RELATIONSHIP with Jesus, the day-to-day FELLOWSHIP he shared with our Lord. None of the glittering jewels of his race, religion, or reputation could compare with this. Having met Christ...having given his life to Christ...having walked through the past few years WITH Christ...Paul had seen the infinite value of that relationship. Knowing Jesus, relating to Him, had become the consuming ambition of his life...the focal point around which his world turned.

What about you? If you were to evaluate your life; if you were to look back and list those things you COUNT as being valuable what would they be?

- A respected position in the community...a nice-sounding job title?
- A good salary with enviable perks?
- The fact that you attend church every Sunday?
- Growing popularity among your peers?
- A wall in your office covered with awards?
- A fine automobile
- A wardrobe full of elegant and stylishly expensive clothes?
- A nice home-maybe a summer place as well?

Now, granted those are all wonderful things but they don't fill the emptiness and loneliness that all people feel who don't KNOW Jesus experientially. And none of those things on this list prepare a person for eternity.

Nearly two years ago, as many of you know, Robin lost her dad. He was a good man. He was a highly decorated athlete, a successful coach, a respected banker and business man, a great golfer, a loving husband and devoted father. His sudden death was and is still difficult for us to fathom. But his one asset that turned his funeral into a

service of hope and even joy was his relationship, his friendship with Jesus Christ. I mean no one said, He died...but that's okay because he had a great basketball career and is in the ODU Sports Hall of Fame. None of his friends or family comforted themselves with the knowledge that he was a vice president of a local bank, or that he had 5 hole-in-ones. No the one fact we all clung to was the fact that He KNEW Jesus personally. You see death changes the calculation. Whatever seemed so important during life; job or money or house or success, none of these things matter when life ends. At that point all that COUNTS is whether or not we knew Jesus Christ. Only that relationship has eternal value.

What are you counting on?