

Finding God's Peace in Tumultuous Times: A Pandemic Devotional from the New Testament Book of Philippians

Devotional 6

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Crap. That's not a very nice word, but it is appropriate to translate a Greek word used in this passage of Scripture. This is the Apostle Paul writing this word in the Bible! Actually a better translation of the word Paul uses would probably be one that would not be appropriate to write in this devotional. Here's a hint: it starts with the letters "sh".

The word is *skybala*. This is gross so get ready. According to *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*, the word means: "Refuse. It refers to such things as a half-eaten corpse; filth, like lumps of manure or human excrement; the portion of food rejected by the body as un nourishing; or to the scraps or leavings of a feast, the food thrown away from the table."



What do you consider crap? Perhaps you think of a pet you have and the crap that must be cleaned up. This word can also mean "garbage". When we moved from seminary to begin ministry in my first ordained position at a church, we had a lot of crap that we threw away. During the five years in seminary and through the early years of our married life, we accumulated a lot of stuff. When we got ready to move, we realized that there was a lot of crap that needed to be cleaned out. We left an embarrassingly large pile of garbage for pickup when we moved. (That picture to the left is not our pile of garbage though.)



But think metaphorically. What have you read or seen on television or in the news that you consider crap? There might be political statements you consider crap. There might be news analysis you consider crap. You might consider something someone did to you lately crap. You might be taking the lockdown time to clean out some crap from your home to throw away.

As you think about evaluating things in your life right now, perhaps the pandemic has given you a different perspective. Might there be things you once considered of value that you now find to be less important? Are there things or people you neglected that suddenly seem more important? Can you think of things in your life that at one point of time you valued highly that you now consider to be more or less crap?

Many of the things that once seemed so important to me I now consider less important – I'm not sure I would call them crap. But in today's passage Paul does something rather remarkable. He lists his achievements. He has quite a resume for a first century Jewish religious leader. He has quite a pedigree. He was part of the "in" group for the religious elite. He had the right lineage. He had the right education. He had a great deal of energy, grit, and determination. He worked hard and was passionate about ensuring religious purity.

Then he says in effect, "You know what? That and everything else in my life, I now consider crap! They are worthless now that I have found the surpassing greatness of Jesus Christ." Paul is now considering what is of lasting value. What he championed to "sell himself" to others before, he now discredits. He has become much more concerned about loving God and loving others than he is about self-aggrandizement.

How can one come to such a radical transformation of outlook? Only when one finds something of such incredible worth and value – that everything else pails in comparison. Paul has found what Jesus talked about as the “pearl of great price”. (See Matthew 13:45-46) That is the one thing so valuable, so beautiful, so wonderful, that it is worth selling everything else to attain it. For Paul that pearl of great price, that one thing that makes everything else seem worthless, is the surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ.

As you seek the Lord in the study today, consider the things in your life. Consider your relationship to Jesus Christ. How might that relationship become something of surpassingly greater value to you – perhaps even something so incredibly wonderful that everything else pails in comparison?

Read, Reflect and Apply** –Pray and ask God to speak to your heart and directly into your life. Ask the Holy Spirit to come upon you and well up within you. Listen for His voice as you read.

**Questions preceded by two asterisks indicate application relevant to your life.

Read Philippians 3:1-11 and then consider these questions.

Verses 1-3

Beware of Those Who Put Their Confidence in the Religious Act of Circumcision

*How does Paul describe those who promote circumcision?

*What do you understand about circumcision for Jews of the first century? Why did they do it? Why was it so important to them?

Apparently, some Jewish converts are running around the ancient world insisting that non-Jewish converts to Christianity must be circumcised first.

*Why is Paul so vehemently opposed to this? What is at issue?

*How can Paul say “we” who worship by the Spirit of God are the true circumcised?

*Why might Paul refer to Christians as those who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus in this section? (Before he has called them “saints” or “beloved” or “partners in the gospel.” Why the change here?)

*What is Paul emphasizing?

*What does Paul mean that we “put no confidence in the flesh”?

The word in Greek for flesh here is *sarx*. The New Bible Dictionary talks about this word and the biblical concept of “flesh” this way: “[*Sarx* describes] the fleshy part of the body or whole body, the earthly part of man. It has its ‘lusts’ and its ‘desires’...The flesh in this sense denotes the whole personality of man as organized in the wrong direction as directed to earthly pursuits rather than service to God.”

*How are those who insist on circumcision putting confidence in the flesh?

Circumcision is commanded in Scripture. These people are trying to please God with their religious practice. Which means that any religious practice has the potential of starting out with good intentions but then become unhelpful or even dangerous.

**What examples can you think of in our own day of people putting too much confidence in certain forms of religious practice?

**Are there aspects of your ‘religious’ practice that you might be putting a little too much confidence in or emphasis on? These could be things that involve church, worship, and liturgy – or they could be things more focused on personal religious acts like a daily Bible reading, witnessing, or prayer. Any of these things can be good and helpful if they lead us closer to God. But they can also become dangerous if we place our confidence in them – in any of the things or activities of this world, rather than in Jesus Christ.

**How might you be putting too much confidence in the “sarx/flesh”?

v. 4-11

The Transformation of Paul’s Confidence – What He Has Come to Value and What He Considers Rubbish

*Make a list of Paul’s impressive reasons he could join those insisting on circumcision and put his confidence in the flesh. What is Paul’s resume here? Why might each item be held in esteem by those who take the circumcision-for-Christians outlook?

*How does Paul say he used to view these things? (see esp v. 7)

*How does he view them now? (see esp. v. 7)

*Why does he view them differently now? (still in v. 7)

**What things in your life used to be things you considered important that you now view as less important or unimportant? How has being a follower of Jesus Christ changed your outlook?

*Paul goes on to verse 8 and there is the word – *skybala*. What does Paul consider *skybala* or crap? But how can he say that??? Really? Think about what you know of Paul – is this true for him?

**How has knowing Jesus Christ changed your view of the things in this world? How do you view them differently now because of your relationship with Jesus?

**Should all Christians strive to be like Paul and count ALL THINGS as crap – except for knowing Christ?

**Do you think that’s Paul’s point – is that why he says that everyone should have this outlook? What does he say is the result of having this kind of an outlook? (see esp. the end of v. 8 and v. 9)

*How might this statement from Jesus in Luke 9 relate to what Paul is saying here?

“²³Then Jesus said to them all, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. ²⁴For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. ²⁵What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?”

*In verses 9-10 Paul is talking about being made right with God by means of faith in Christ. How might those who are insisting on circumcision be trying to suggest a different way to be made right with God? What insight does this give into why this is so important and why Paul’s words about this are so strong, harsh, even extreme?

**In what ways might you be trying to “save your life” right now? How might Jesus be calling you to consider “losing your life” for His sake so that you can save it?

**Can you trust Jesus Christ with this? Talk to Him about what issues these considerations raise for you.

Paul counts all things loss, placing no confidence in the flesh, trusting in no righteousness that is derived from earthly origins. Rather he reckons all things loss in comparison with the all-encompassing goal of His life – knowing the surpassing greatness of Jesus Christ.

*Paul sees this as leading to certain results for him now and in the future. What are they?

**How have you longed for these things in your life?

Closing Application and Prayer

**Paul’s example is challenging. What challenges you about Paul and his outlook on life? What value do you see in living his living the way he does? How might it be consistent with the teachings of Jesus? Talk to God now about the implications for your outlook on life. You might ask Him to help you discover in your own life what Paul is talking about here: the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus Christ.