

One of the greatest things that I enjoy about Resurrection Sunday are the baptisms. A few years back, I began to have baptisms on this Sunday. The early Church had a similar practice. It was a time where those new to the faith would be brought into the Church. Baptism, you see, is that picture of death and resurrection. Baptism isn't something that we do in isolation, but in the context of the gathered church to testify to the power of Christ. We do it together because it reminds us of our baptism (Rom. 6:1-4). We don't do it ourselves because resurrection doesn't happen by us raising ourselves, but by God who raises us. And it testifies that we consider our former way of life dead to us, our successes and achievements, and now we live for Christ. For Paul, he would say to the Philippians that he could now suffer and face trials because "to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21). What does it mean to live is Christ and die is gain?

Count Your Advantages as Loss (vv. 4-8a)

In the first sense, while Paul could speak about the reality of dying and leaving this earth to be with Christ, in another sense he could also speak about dying to all of his advantages. He listed seven advantages that he had that challenge us.

First, he lists several advantages that he experienced because of his heritage: born a pure Jew, one who had been faithfully brought up in the faith by parents who had him circumcised as the law required, from a great history. In Western society, we don't consider our position of birth an advantage. But in other cultures, your status at birth is a lot of your pedigree. Consider a traditional culture where you cannot climb the social ladder. If you are born into a family of wealth and prestige, you have gained that for your life. In Western cultures, we still feel that we have to discover ourselves even if we have received a heritage. Not so for Paul – his background ensured that he had received many privileges from birth.

Second, he lists the advantages of achievement: he was studious, a Ph.D of Ph.D's. He kept the law blamelessly – doing it with zeal and even lists his persecution of the church as one of the things that he had prided himself in. And in our culture, we can identify with most of these achievements because we are very achievement oriented when we talk about ourselves – our status is on how much we achieved: in our education, in the position of our jobs, in the wealth that we are able to secure, in the people that we know and associate with. In our society, it's about name dropping, position climbing, status-achieving.

But when it comes to considering if these things have any advantage in knowing Christ, Paul says that he counts these things as though they are like trash compared to knowing Christ. What does Paul mean by this? Does he mean that achievements and family background are of no value?

No! Paul's background would help him in many ways. But when it comes to thinking that he had received or achieved something that would make God love him more and accept him more, he had to die to these thoughts. Nothing from his background or his achievements would make God accept him.

In part, this is what we express in baptism. We go under the waters of judgment and drown the old way of thinking. We say that this kind of performative lifestyle has to die. We say that I can't make God love me by what I've done. In fact, we say that those things are a hindrance to being accepted by God. I drown my overconfidence in myself the waters of baptism.

In fact, they are a loss compared to knowing Christ Jesus. Why are they a loss? For one reason: they put confidence in my abilities instead of seeing Christ as everything. And until I come to see that my abilities are a hindrance to the love of God, I won't know what it means to...

Gain Christ and His Power (vv. 8b-11)

To live is Christ (1:21), Paul said, and now he says that it is a surpassing greatness to know Christ. We have a hard time understanding these things. But for Paul, this is a remarkable expression. First, he says that nothing compares to knowing Christ Jesus MY Lord. For Paul, dying to himself was the beginning of knowing Christ as his personal Saviour and Lord. It was not merely a religious connection, but a personal one of coming into a committed relationship with the Ruler of the universe.

Second, he says that all things are rubbish so that he might gain Christ. The former things were nothing in comparison to having Jesus as his Saviour. He knew that all of his previous successes were like rubbish. Imagine taking your greatest achievements and successes, all of your awards and prizes and having them covered in human waste. This is the strength of the force of Paul's words here. He considers all things as "dung."

Third, the reason all things are dung compared to knowing Christ is due to the fact that he is found in him. What does it mean to be found in him? For Paul, his life was hidden in Christ. When he died to his former achievements and found that Christ was enough for him, Christ became his righteousness – not based on performance (the law), but by trusting Christ.

Finally, to be found in Christ was to have his perfections accredited to his account and experiencing the power of Christ, the One who had been raised from the dead. Paul wanted to know more of this power. But what did that mean?

It meant sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. And this is the way that we experience resurrection power in our lives. We die daily. We die to ourselves. We die to our desires. You want to know his power? Then you have to die to yourself, to your way of life.

And this is what makes baptism so beautiful. On this resurrection Sunday, we witness and see someone saying, "I died to myself." And for all who have been baptized, we remember our baptism and say, "I've died, and I die daily so that I might, by any means possible, might attain the resurrection from the dead."

Do you want to know spiritual power? Do you want to know the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in your life? The way to experience this power is the same throughout the Christian life. It starts with dying to yourself and continues that way. It drowns the old way of life in the waters of baptism and remembers that it is dead. And when we face hardships, trials, and difficulties, we remember that the one who died is the one who was raised to life so that all who die to sin might be raised in faith to the power of the new life.