

THE GREATEST GAIN

Phil 3.7-9

INTRODUCTION

There has been a lot of coverage in the media over the last ten days about the troubled car manufacturer, MG Rover. The weekend before last, administrators were brought in to try to assess whether the company's assets outstripped their liabilities, so the company could be saved. Accounts from Price Coopers Waterhouse have been pouring over the books to see how all the numbers stack up.

- And in the verses we're looking at this morning, Paul does something similar spiritually. The word '*consider*', which occurs three times, means literally, to count, or to add things up. And so having added up everything from his past life, and in his present life, he is able to speak of gains and losses, profits and liabilities.

He begins by outlining

1. HIS MANY FALSE ASSETS (vs 4-7) – things that at one time he set great store by.

There was

(a) his impeccable pedigree (vs 5)

- He had been born a Jew. He was *of the people of Israel*, God's chosen race from the days of the Old Testament.
- He had been born into *the tribe of Benjamin*, one of Israel's smallest, but a tribe that had remained loyal to God (along with the tribe of Judah) when the other ten tribes had deserted God for local idols of their own making. Furthermore, Benjamin had been the tribe from which Israel's first king had been chosen, and Paul had been named after him, as Saul of Tarsus.

But not only was Paul's pedigree impeccable. His upbringing was very privileged.

(b) His privileged upbringing (vs 5)

- He had had all the right things done to him as a baby. He had been *circumcised* by his parents *on the eighth day* of his life, as prescribed by the commandment God had given to Abraham, in Gen 17.12 (*For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised*). Abraham himself was circumcised in his 99th year; and his son, Ishmael underwent the ritual when he was 13 years old. Some of Paul's critics were advocating circumcision when people became Christians, in their adulthood. But Paul's parents had got it just right, bang on cue, on the eighth day of his life.
- Furthermore, they had brought him up to speak *Hebrew*, because it was the language of their home. They were people who sought to preserve the Jews' ancient language and culture. Paul's upbringing couldn't have been more privileged, from a religious point of view.

But alongside all these accidents of his birth and his upbringing, over which Paul had no control, there were all his outstanding

(c) lifestyle choices (vs 5c-6)

- He had chosen to become a *Pharisee*, the strictest of sects amongst the Jews. So he was *meticulous in observing the Jewish laws*. He had studied under the rabbi, Gamaliel (Acts 22.3), one of Israel's finest; so no one knew the Law better than Paul. His knowledge was extensive and his observance meticulous.
- He then tells us in verse 6 that he was *zealous* in the pursuit of his religion, a real enthusiast – a purist, even. He wouldn't tolerate any misrepresentation of his religion. He was a stickler for the truth; and so that's why he hounded Christians to their death. He persecuted the church to maintain the purity of his own religion. He was zealous, because he cared, even though he was later to realise his zeal was misdirected.
- And so in the rest of verse 6, he is able to claim that as far as his observance of the Jewish Laws was concerned, he was *faultless* – and that was no mean feat on his part.

So by any means of human reckoning, Paul was an outstanding individual – the equivalent of a 'Young Musician of the Year' or 'World Sports Personality of the Year' as far as his religion was concerned.

So if anyone had grounds for placing confidence in his human credentials and achievements, it was Paul. No one could hold a candle to him.

1.1 His dramatic discovery

Yet amazingly, he had come to a point in his life where he realised that all these supposed assets were, in fact, a terrible liability. They weren't simply neutral – they were a liability.

Illustrations. It was a little like the administrators going into the MG Rover car plant to look at the books and discovering that the workers pension scheme, which was their pride and joy, was a terrible liability for anyone wanting to take over the company. What the workers had placed so much faith in, turned out to be an economic black hole, a disaster area.

Whatever was to my profit, I now counted a loss – a liability, Paul writes in verse 7. But why a liability, a loss? Well, so long as Paul was relying on his human credentials and achievements to secure his acceptance by God, he would never see his need of Christ, the Saviour God had provided for him. Someone has summed it up like this (Motyer, p157-9). It's not only man at his worst, but man at his best and most religious who is unacceptable to God. ... What is it that can make a person confident before God? Undoubtedly, Paul's moral attainments were a great tribute to human endeavour; equally, they may have been a superb influence and contribution to human welfare? But of what value were they in giving him confidence to stand before God? Man at his most privileged, man at his most moral, man at his most religious, his most zealous and devoted, is not thereby counted acceptable by God. Paul was faced with no option but to add up all his supposed assets one by one, only to discover that they amounted to zero in God's sight.

- Acceptance by God can never be secured through human effort, however Herculean that effort might be.
- And acceptance by God can never be achieved through religious ceremonies, however elaborate and well intentioned those ceremonies might be.

You see, our best is never good enough, as we will see in a moment.

So let me ask each of you, “On what are you basing your confidence for your acceptance by God? What are you trusting will see you through on the Day of Judgement, when you stand before an all-knowing, all-seeing God?”

- Is it the *circumstances of your birth*? Perhaps you were born into a Christian family. That can be a great source of blessing, which should never be minimised. But if it is what you are relying on for your acceptance by God, your confidence is false. It is tragically misplaced. No one can piggyback his or her way into heaven on the back of a relative, a parent or child, an uncle or aunt.
- Perhaps you are relying on *your religious credentials*. Perhaps you were christened as a baby, or baptised as a teenager (or as an adult even). Perhaps you are good at ‘talking the talk’ because it’s what you’ve been brought up with. Perhaps you are proud of your church membership. But if your confidence is in any of these things, it is tragically misplaced.

Illustrated. My Auntie Audrey, my father's sister, once said to me, “I was ‘done as a child’ so that makes me a Christian, doesn't it?” Well, no, it doesn't, Paul would reply, from what he's written in verse 3. Those who are truly to be counted amongst God's people are characterised by three things.

- *We worship by the Spirit of God*, who came to live within us, when we first committed our life to Jesus

Christ.

- *We glory in Christ Jesus*, because we realise we owe our acceptance by God to him, and to him alone;
 - *and we put no confidence in the flesh*, that is to say, in any human credentials or achievements. We have renounced them all, as a means of our acceptance by God.

- There are some people who rely on *their supposed goodness* for their acceptance by God. They like to believe they are morally upright. “I always try to do my best,” they say, not realising that putting it like that is actually an admission of failure – because ‘my best’ always falls far short of God's ideals. “I try to do my bit,” they will say. “I always try to help other people and give a contribution to my favourite charities.” These things are all good in themselves, but they become a terrible liability if we rely on them for our acceptance by God. You see, our good is never good enough for God.

- How good does a person have to be to earn their acceptance by God? That was a question an earnest young man once put to Jesus (Luke 10.26-28): "What must I do to inherit eternal life? "What is written in the Law?" Jesus replied. "How do you read it?" The man answered: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." But who can fulfil such an exacting standard? Which of us can love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength - consistently, and guarantee to do so indefinitely into the future?

- "There is no one righteous to that extent, not even one," Romans 3.10 tells us. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, Paul adds a few verses later (Rom 6.23).

- Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it, James 2.10 tells us.

This is why our human efforts to commend ourselves to God are such a liability. They have no chance of ever being successful; and if we rely on them, we are placing our confidence in something that simply won't bear the weight we wish it to carry.

And so in verse 8, Paul turns from his many false assets that at one time he set great store by, to

2. HIS ONE TRUE ASSET (v8)

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.

Paul heaps *everything* together in verse 8 – not just the things he has mentioned in verses 5 and 6 (his impeccable pedigree, his privileged upbringing, and his lifestyle choices) – but everything else about his life: his amazing intellect, his extraordinary drive and energy, and all his worldly possessions. He adds all these things up and concludes that they are like a pile of rubbish compared with knowing Jesus Christ as his Saviour and Lord.

- There is a subtle progression of thought between verses 7 and 8, which doesn't come out particularly well in the NIV translation. Verse 7 is referring to Paul's conversion, many years in the past by the time he writes this letter. What he says literally is, *Whatever was to my profit, I counted loss for the sake of Christ.* The tense he uses suggests a one-off decisive act with on-going consequences for the present. Paul had sat down, had looked at all his supposed assets, and had come to the conclusion they were a liability, so long as they prevented him from casting himself on Christ alone for his acceptance before God.
- But in verse 8, he moves on a stage further, not just by changing the 'whatever' of verse 7 to the 'everything' of verse 8; but by referring to the *everything* as *rubbish* – something he had totally discarded, not just a *loss* or liability, something to be written off. And he moves as well from speaking with a past tense to speaking with a present tense. This was his on-going state of mind. It's as if he is saying, "Day by day and moment by moment, I am increasingly seeing that everything else in life pales into insignificance, *compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.* The privilege of knowing Jesus, God's Son, personally and intimately, interactively, is so great as to be in a class of its own." And he no longer looks for anything else in life to bring him satisfaction or acceptance before God, than he would want to go to his wheelie bin to fish out last week's kitchen waste!

To that end, he was prepared to lose everything else in his life, as gladly as we get rid of a pile of rubbish, to *gain Jesus*.

Illustrates. It reminds me of the parable Jesus told about a pearl merchant (Mat 13.45-46). The merchant had spent his whole life scouring the world's markets for the finest of pearls to add to his collection. But then, one day, he came across an absolute stunner, a pearl so beautiful as to put the rest of his collection completely in the shade. And so he sold his entire collection, built up over countless years, to gain this one absolute stunner. That's the way Paul was with Jesus. He got rid of absolutely everything he had

built his life on hitherto, to gain Christ, because he saw he was so stunning, so valuable, so worth knowing.

Jesus had just told a similar parable about a man digging in a field. His spade had hit a hard object. It wasn't a rock, but a wooden chest full of priceless treasures. It had probably been buried in the ground during a time of war by a family having to flee their ancestral home. Sadly, they never came back to claim their property. But one day this man stumbled across it by chance, and seizing his opportunity to gain untold riches, he sold everything he possessed to purchase that field, and with it its treasure (Mat 13.44).

It begs the question, doesn't it, "What are we prepared to let go of, to gain Jesus?" If everything else in life is like so much garbage, we must be prepared to jettison it to take hold of Christ.

- It might be our *self-confidence* that we need to let go of, that innate belief, so deeply ingrained in the human psyche, that we can go it alone. We're strong enough and resilient enough to manage by ourselves. We don't feel we need any outside help. It would be to admit defeat. It would smack of weakness on our part.
- Or perhaps it's our desire for *self-determination* that holds us back from taking hold of Christ as our Lord. We want to make our own decisions, without anyone us telling us what to do. "No one's going to run my life for me, thank you very much" people say. Self-determination, of course, was the original sin in the Garden of Eden – Adam and Eve deciding they would prefer to do their own thing, rather than living by God's rules.
- Behind both of these attitudes is human pride, an assumption of *self-sufficiency* that reckons we don't really need God. "I'm good enough the way I am. I like the way my life is. I can manage on my own."

The Scriptures teach us that *God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble* (1 Peter 5.5). It's why all the things in life that we could potentially be proud of are such a liability to us:

- our intellectual prowess, or knowledge;
- our educational qualifications, or our practical skills;
- our family background, or our upbringing;
- our social skills, or our ability to make money;
- our capacity we have to talk our way out of trouble, or excuse ourselves;
- even our religious observance: our church attendance, or baptism, our Bible knowledge or church attendance; our spiritual gifts or positions of responsibility.

Whatever it is we are relying on, not just to secure our acceptance by God, but to see us through life, if our confidence isn't in Christ, and in Christ alone, it's a liability, the thing we're relying on.

Let me ask you if there is anything you are clinging on to, that's preventing you from really taking hold of Christ. 2.6 reminded us that Jesus let go of everything in order to take hold of us. He didn't try to cling onto all the trappings of deity that were rightfully his from eternity past. He let go of them to take hold of us. What must you let go of, to take hold of him?

- To know Jesus, God's Son, personally and intimately, is worth more than anything else in the world. In fact, it's worth more than everything else put together, Paul tells us. How could anything else compare with the privilege of knowing God's Son, personally and intimately, interactively, as our guide and companion for life? It's the essence of what the Bible calls *eternal life* (John 17.3) – *life in all its intended fullness* (John 10.10). It's to enjoy life from the realms of eternity, the kind of life that can never die, for it's God's very own life. What it means in practise, we will look at more closely in two week's time, when we get onto verses 10-11.

But before he gets to verse 10, Paul explains in verse 9 why gaining Christ is all-important.

3. IT ALL ADDS UP (v9)

When we gain Christ, we find ourselves

3.1 Wrapped up in him, as it were. Paul speaks about us being *found in Christ*, completely enveloped by him, so that our eternal destiny is utterly secure. *My sheep listen to my voice*, Jesus explained in John

10.27-28; *I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.* There is complete security for those who are ‘in Christ’. *The Lord Jesus is such an attractive dwelling place, that Paul cannot bear the thought of being away from such a home,* someone has said (Motyer, p164). *All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away,* Jesus explained in John 6.37-40. *For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."*

Furthermore, when we have gained Christ, we find that with him we are

3.2 Counted righteous in God's sight

- *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,* Paul writes. There are two ways of trying to secure a righteous standing before God. One is through

(a) our own efforts – by trying to be good, keeping God's laws as best as we can. But we can never become good enough in God's sight by this route, because he is perfect and we too often fail. It's what Paul had to spell out to the Galatians (2.16; 3.10). *We know that no one is justified by observing the law but by faith in Jesus Christ.... All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law."*

There are three problems with every attempt at trying to secure our own righteousness before God.

- The first is its **uncertainty**. Paul speaks about the need to continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law if we're attempting this route to acceptance by God. Even if our life has been perfect up until now, there is no guarantee we can keep up our level of perfection until our dying day. It's like someone in the Olympics competing in the archery competition. At the halfway point of their competition, they may have scored a perfect set of marks, a bull's-eye with every pull of their bow. But that's no guarantee they will be able to keep up that standard until the end of the competition.
- Then the do-it-yourself approach to righteousness also involves **self-commendation**, because it relies on our own self-assessment, which almost inevitably will be flawed. Think again of the Olympics, and this time the diving competition. You are up there on the high board, and launch yourself into a triple backward somersault, with a double twist in the pike position before you enter the water. You reckon you've done brilliantly. But it's not up to you to judge your own performance and award yourself the gold medal on the basis of your own self-assessment. There have to be independent assessors, and the same assessors for all the competitors. And it's like that with us and God. Only he can pronounce us good enough for his heaven. *Of what value is a certificate of good behaviour that we've written out for ourselves,* someone has asked (Motyer, p165).
- For, thirdly, any attempt at securing our own righteous is doomed to failure, because our best efforts will always be woefully **inadequate**. There's a great craze for DIY programmes on television. "You can do it with B&Q it," screams the advert. But when it comes to securing our acceptance by God, any reliance on our human credentials or human achievements is woefully inadequate.

The only way for anyone of us to secure a right standing before God is through him

(b) gifting it to us.

And that is what he does when we put our *faith in Jesus*. *We reach our goal not by climbing a set of stairs, for that way we could never reach the top,* someone has said. *We reach our goal by catching a ride in the lift God has let down to us, and that lift is Jesus* (Motyer, p166). Faith is putting ourselves on board the lift, for God to carry us up to himself. *Gone are the exertions of law keeping; gone are the disciplines of asceticism and legalism; gone is the anxiety that having done everything we could, it might not have been enough. Putting our faith in Jesus means abandoning every attempt to try to commend ourselves to God through our own efforts, or achievements, or credentials. ... Christ doesn't become ours by our own efforts, but by us renouncing our own efforts. No one had ever striven for righteousness as*

Paul did; and yet he doesn't see Christ as the prize standing just above the top rung of the ladder of self-advancement. He cannot gain Christ until he has totted up all his own efforts at commending himself to God and admitted they amount to nothing except a pile of garbage. Christ isn't gained by religious rituals either. His circumcision couldn't save him, even though it was a rite initiated by God. And the story of Simon the Sorcerer in Acts 8.13-21 shows us that baptism cannot save any of us, even though it was instituted by Jesus. Even our confidence in God-given rites and rituals must be jettisoned if we are to gain acceptance by God, through our trust in Jesus alone (p159).

So how does this way of us gaining acceptance by God work?

- In 2 Cor 5.21, Paul speaks of a great transaction that takes place when we put our trust in Jesus alone for our acceptance by God. *God made him who had no sin [ie Jesus] to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* Let me unpack that verse for you.
- When Jesus died on the cross, he became our sin, as it were. He answered up for our shortcomings and failings, our waywardness and rebellion against God. And he experienced God's just condemnation against all our sin, in his body. He died the death sentence our sins deserved. He was cut off from his Father God as he suffered on the cross for our sins. He tasted hell for us.
- And he was only able to do so because he himself was wholly without sin. He is the only human being to have lived a perfect life here on earth in the eyes of his Father God. He was able to claim something no other human being has been able to claim. *I always do what pleases my Father*, he said in John 8.29. And this wasn't a form of self-assessment, because his Father God had already declared both at his baptism and on the Mount of Transfiguration, *This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased* (Mat 3.17; 17.5). God has never said that of any other person who has walked this earth.
- And so God is able to make an incredible transaction for us. All of our sin is placed against Christ's account; and all of his righteousness is credited to our account! Our account is striped of all its liabilities – our sin and shortcomings, our faults and failings – and filled to the brim with Christ's righteous. And that's how we gain acceptance before God – and it's the only way. And this is why gaining Christ is something it is worth giving up everything else for, because nothing is more vital than securing our acceptance before God. It's the one great essential of life, and in death. *Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death*, Proverbs 11.4 reminds us.
- And this is what it means to *glory in Christ Jesus* (v3). *“All personal merit, all human efforts to attain righteousness, all that would be to man's glory is gone. Christ stands alone on the stage as the exclusive object of man's worship – the one in whom we exult to the exclusion of everyone and everything else”* (Motyer, p160).