

INTRODUCTION

In our upbringing we gradually realize that there is no free lunch. Life is a matter of give and take. More than ever we have to lose something first to gain something of greater value later. For example, if you keep eating too much you will only gain the weight you do not want, and eventually you will lose your health. In order to maintain a good shape, you have to torture yourself with exercise to lose a few pounds. Many of us like to shop at a store like Costco. To get the benefit of lower prices you have to pay for a membership first. To get back your membership fee you apply for a store credit card, then keep spending until the rebate you earn offsets the fee. For the men among us when you were dating your girl-friend you lose your time and money. Finally, you married your dream-lover, only to find out that you will lose your freedom for the rest of your life. Once you have your own children you recognize that you will continue to lose everything for your family! God is gracious. Many of you can testify that having a family brings much fulfillment. What you will gain is well worth the cost. In our passage today, Paul told us that the same principle applies to our spiritual growth too. We must be ready to lose all that we have in order to gain Christ. The key is to understand God's wisdom on what to let go of and what to hold onto.

EXPLANATION

1. 虛假的虔誠 Fake Piety

Paul told us that the first thing we must lose is our fake piety. Let us look at **verses 2-3**: 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. Paul described those people who showed fake piety in three ways. He called them “dogs.” They are not your puppies at home. Paul was thinking of some strayed beasts who were ready to bite you. Paul also said they “do evil.” Those people thought that they were doing righteous things but in fact they stumbled others. Then Paul also depicted them as “mutilators of the flesh.” The word “mutilate” means chopping things into pieces. The word is in sharp contrast to “circumcision” in verse 3. Circumcision is the removal of the foreskin on the male organ. Those people who displayed fake piety emphasized on circumcision. But in Paul's mind they were just chopping meat. Paul summarized that they put “confidence in the flesh,” meaning that they took pride in something external as the basis for their relationship with God. Who were those people? They were some Jewish Christians who insisted that a person had to become a Jew before he could become a Christian. In the book of Acts when the gospel spread out from Jerusalem gradually some Greek people came to know Christ. The Jews called them Gentiles. Church leaders debated whether those non-Jew believers had to follow the Old Testament traditions before they could be saved. Therefore, they held a meeting in Jerusalem. **Acts 15:5** records: Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.” After some discussion the apostle Peter proposed a resolution in **verse 20**: “Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat

of strangled animals and from blood.” The decision was agreed by all the leaders and was communicated to the churches in Gentile cities. The problem seemed to be solved. But some Jewish Christians still clung onto their tradition and forced their beliefs to their Gentile brothers. Paul was quite upset, so much so that in the book of Galatians he called such doctrine “a different gospel.” He gave a strong warning in **1:8** of the book: But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! A gospel different than salvation by grace through faith alone is no gospel. Those people who showed fake piety thought that they could achieve salvation by observing the Old Testament Law. They took pride in what they did. Paul stated in many of his letters that any attempt to achieve salvation by men’s effort is completely fruitless. People often rely on something external to give themselves a peace of mind. The ladies among us may not like to hear this. The Federal Drug Administration (FDA) said it many years ago that there is no conclusive evidence that any of those so called anti-wrinkle cream can smoothen your skin. Yes, you have been fooled all these years. But I know you will still buy those lotions if they smell good. Hope that all the money poured into research can one day come up with a miracle formula. There are many other things we do in life that only make us feel good but do not accomplish any result. We fall into the trap of fake piety if we think that salvation is obtained through Jesus Christ plus something else. As humans we like to take pride in that “something else.” We mistakenly believe that we are saved because we followed a certain prayer, or only after we received baptism or completed some training programs. The Bible tells us clearly that salvation is exclusively based on God’s mercy and grace on us. All that we can do is to respond by faith. By the way, even that faith is not from us, it is from God. Is there anything we can boast about? We should forever be grateful to God’s love for us. Everything we do after we are saved is to live out our new life in Christ. We spend time to read God’s Word and attend church meetings to build up our relationship with Jesus. We offer money and serve in ministries to express our love for God.

2. 過去的驕傲 Fading Pride

Paul told us that we must be ready to lose all that we have in order to gain Christ. We have to let go of any fake piety. Paul also said that we must remove our fading pride. He shared his own experience in **verse 4**: Though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more. Paul meant that if anyone could boast about him/her credentials he could easily beat them. Following in verses 5 and 6 Paul listed seven outstanding areas on his resume. The first category includes the things that Paul was born with. Paul said that he was “circumcised on the eighth day.” Paul immediately countered those who took pride in their circumcision. Paul was saying: “I was circumcised too, and I did it the right way prescribed by the Law.” Paul was also “of the people of Israel.” He was not adopted into a Jewish family. He was a born Jew. Next, according to his genealogy Paul belonged to “the tribe of Benjamin.” People could trace back his family roots. Then Paul was also “a Hebrew of Hebrews.” He was not a child from mixed marriage. Both of his parents were Jews. Paul did not have to do anything to achieve those four things. The next category contains Paul’s success in life. Paul was a Pharisee. Pharisees were the Old Testament experts and Bible teachers among the Jews. In today’s term, Paul was a top scholar graduated from a renowned university. Moreover, Paul defended his religion. He was active in “persecuting the church.” To the traditional Jews, Christianity was a deviation from their doctrine. They could not accept that Jesus was God who came into the world to die on the cross for the sins of mankind. Finally, Paul

claimed that he was “faultless” as far as observance of the Law was concerned. He did everything required by the Law. Paul had the best background and he maintained a spotless record. Except for the part about persecuting Christians, there was nothing wrong about Paul’s qualifications. However, those good qualities could easily become stumbling block for Paul to seek Christ. Fading pride causes us to boast about what we have and what we do. We Chinese folks love to play the comparison game. We compare what we have with others: income, size of our house, school district, extra-curricular activities our kids have, awards from competitions, colleges they attend, and everything else. We feel good about ourselves in the areas that we outperform others, but we chew on sour grapes in other areas that we are inferior. Fading pride is detrimental to our spiritual life because we put the focus on our performance. What is the antidote to our fading pride? We have to consider our Lord. Remember we studied Philippians chapter 2 a few weeks ago? Paul said in **2:5** - Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. What was Christ’s attitude? Jesus could have hold onto His glory as the Lord of lords. But He willingly put them aside and became a man like you and me. Jesus gave up His honor and even His life for us. In the classical hymn “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” composer Isaac Watts wrote: “When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died, my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride. Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, save in the death of Christ, my God! All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them through his blood.” We can become humble when we shift the focus from ourselves to the cross. You may have a good family background. You came from a big city. You are an obedient child in the family. You have good grades in school. Your parents are key coworkers in our church. You are a morally upright person all your life. Those are all good qualities. But those things can easily become our fading pride. We can never be good enough to earn our salvation. It is God who saved us. But even after we became a Christian we may still cling onto our fading pride. Do we somehow feel that God owes us a favor because we serve diligently in the church or offer more money than others? God will not listen to our prayers or love us more because we are better than others. God treats us with grace regardless of our performance.

3. 首要的追求 First Priority

We must be ready to lose all that we have in order to gain Christ. We have to get rid of our false piety and our fading pride. Paul’s life goal was no longer seeking after his own glory. Instead, his first priority now is to know Christ. Paul shared in **verse 8**: ... 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. The glory he took pride in before he knew Christ now looked like rubbish. The word can refer to the stuff we flush down toilet or throw into trash can. By knowing Christ, Paul was not talking about the head knowledge acquired by study, but it is the kind of knowledge obtained through experience. Paul mentioned a few things he wanted to experience through knowing Christ. First, he wanted to be assured of his salvation. Look at **verse 9**: And be found in him, 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. In the past, Paul found confidence in what he had and did. But now, he knew that God accepted him because of a personal relationship with Christ. The second thing Paul wanted to experience was to identify with Christ in His suffering. He said in **verse 10**: I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. Paul went through suffering from preaching the gospel. He was

despised by his fellow Jews, beaten, and now imprisoned, and eventually died for his faith. The more he suffered the more he experienced the resurrection power of Christ in him. He shared in [2 Corinthians 12:10](#) that: That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. It was not that Paul enjoyed suffering. However, when he was the weakest he felt the power of Christ in him all the more. Also, through all the adversity he faced Paul could identify with Christ's suffering. That helps us find fresh meaning in our own suffering. We can get a little taste of what Christ had gone through. Also, we can encourage others to draw strength from the resurrection power of God just like we do. Comparing to knowing Christ, Paul saw everything he used to have as garbage. Anything that hinders us from pursuing our goals can become a burden. Have you ever paid attention to the outfit of those 100-meter runners? They wear the lightest clothing and shoes to make them sprint faster. I have never seen a female athlete on the race track putting on high heels and carrying her favorite handbag over the shoulder. Those accessories they love will slow them down. Is there anything in our life that we need to give up to enable us to know Christ? Do you devote too much time to your career, or even a second job, that coming to church becomes a hassle? Or it may be sports or TV drama? Or is it a relationship with a friend? Between the stuff you love and Christ, what will you choose? Paul's desire was to know Christ. Sometimes we have a bigger interest to know other things than Christ. I know a sister who posts WeChat messages multiple times a day. Every morning she shares what she has for breakfast. She talks about her kids and her cat, church life and Christian music, and she also re-directs articles people sent her. Sometimes I peek at the photos she includes, and other times I just skip her messages altogether. I agree that social media is a convenient way to exchange information. But are we curious about what happens to our friends, but show no desire to know Christ? I feel ashamed that I do not spend enough time and effort to know Christ. Of course, I read the Bible. But the Lord knows how much Bible I read besides preparing sermons or Bible studies. He also knows how much time I spend meditating on His Word and in prayer. May the Lord give us a greater appetite to know Him.

CONCLUSION

In this passage, Paul told us that we must be ready to lose all that we have in order to gain Christ. Life is a matter of investment. Some people seek after instant return, while some others look forward to long-term dividend. In our spiritual pursuit, if we know that God will give us eternal blessings, then our temporary loss becomes insignificant. I remember a scene from the third installment of the Indiana Jones movie. Jones and the Nazi Germans were racing to find the Holy Grail. It was said to be the cup which Jesus used at the Last Supper. The legend had it that it could bring everlasting life. Remember it is only a movie! There is no Biblical support to that claim. After overcoming much challenges, Jones found the cup in a temple. The knight who had been guarding the grail for the past several hundred years told Jones that the cup could not be taken out from the temple. The main actress Elsa ignored the warning. On their departure the temple began to tumble. Elsa was hanging over a crack while holding onto Jones' hand. Elsa saw the grail within distance. When she tried to reach for it, she lost her grip on Jones' hand and fell into the chasm. Today, we are so tempted to hold tight onto the things that may look important, while neglecting eternal things that only God can provide. May the Lord give us wisdom to make the right choice that pleases Him.